Représentations dans le monde anglophone
ISSN : 2552-1160
Publisher : UGA éditions

28 | 2024
The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth *suivi de* Autour du fonds Léonie Villard

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« Lorsque le colosse de Cecil Rhodes a un pied au Cap et l’autre à Oxford » : la post-vérité dans les réactions politiques à la contestation des monuments impériaux britanniques

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https://publications-prairial.fr/representations/index.php?id=1037

DOI : 10.35562/rma.1037

Electronic reference
Gilles Teulié, « “When Cecil Rhodes’ Colossal Statue Has a Foot in Cape Town and the Other in Oxford”: Post-Truth Political Reactions to Contested British Imperial Monuments », *Représentations dans le monde anglophone* [Online], 28 | 2024, Online since 16 décembre 2024, connection on 16 décembre 2024. URL : https://publications-prairial.fr/representations/index.php?id=1037

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OUTLINE

TEXT

1 When Percy Fitzgerald wrote about statues in an art journal in 1914, he emphasised that a people’s memory is “embalmed” in statues (Fitzgerald 338), pointing out that the memory of a person is forever captured by monuments dedicated to that person. Referring to the 19th-century statues on the banks of the Thames, he also suggested that there were statues depicting people who were unknown to the public and who thus became “bronze enigmas”, that aroused no interest, kindled no emotion and “might as well be away”. But on the other hand, Nelsons, Wellingtons, Pitts, Foxes, Queens, Kings, and the like, “all spoke in a language of their own to the crowd” (Fitzgerald 338), highlighting a sort of social dialogue between the audience and the monuments, even though there may be different interpretations of such dialogue (Marschall 2010, 296). For Fitzgerald, important and famous figures were interestingly associated with British expansionism: “All this holds more particularly in a great capital like London, in which no obscure or mediocre men should have place, and only those who have done vast service to the empire” (Fitzgerald 338). The erection of monuments, especially statues, serves to honour people who have rendered outstanding services to a

community. No wonder Cecil Rhodes had so many statues and memorials (plaques) erected to commemorate him. Alluding to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Rhodes Colossus, a huge statue of the god Helios that stood at the entrance to the port of Rhodes on the island of the same name, Edward L. Sambourne played with the diamond magnate's name in a political cartoon published in *Punch* magazine on 10 December 1892 (p. 266) under the title "The Rhodes Colossus: Striding from Cape Town to Cairo". Cecil Rhodes is depicted as a giant in colonial dress, with a pith helmet in one hand, standing on Africa, one foot on Cairo, the other on Cape Town, and stretching a telegraph wire from one city to another. He is so tall that his head is floating in the clouds. The cartoon was published after Rhodes had mentioned that he wanted to lay the telegraph wire from northern to southern Africa, crossing only British territory, and therefore this cartoon carries an ironic undertone.

2 The unveiling of monuments is a way of shaping a cityscape, but also of making an occupied territory visible, a way of saying: "This is our land". Space and place are therefore what statues are about, as Tim Cresswell says: "place is central to forms of struggle and resistance too" (Cresswell 3). As symbols, statues are thus targets for resistance or opposition movements that expressed their anger through destruction. The toppling of statues is therefore not new, as we know that the Roman Senate officially instituted damnatio memoriae to attempt to "erase" someone from history, as with the toppling of the statues of Poppaea and Nero. Since ancient times, many monuments have been desecrated, temporarily but more often permanently (King George III in New York in 1776). Therefore, it is not surprising that the statue of slaveholder Edward Colston in Bristol had been targeted through petitions or vandalised since at least the 1990s before it was thrown into the river Avon in 2020 (Rengel 66), while in New Zealand some have noted that changing values have led to statue wars, which could be read as part of a "long-standing New Zealand tradition" of attacking statues of royalty, colonial rulers and military leaders amounting to 23 % of statues having been vandalised in one form or another since the 1930s (Ballantyne 2). In the context of the Black Lives Matter movement following the tragic death of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, which triggered a wave of demonstrations, riots and the desecration of monuments in

many places in the USA, attacks on monuments multiplied. Many monuments that could be associated with racism were attacked and desecrated in one way or another. Other victims of racism echoed the reactions of Black people, such as the Native Americans who on 12 October 2020 had an obelisk in the plaza of Santa Fe, New Mexico, torn down because they found it offensive as it paid homage to "the heroes who have fallen in the various battles with savage resilient Indians in the territory of New Mexico" (the original word "savage" had been deleted a few years before the monument was toppled and the word "resilient" was added instead). Indigenous Canadians and sympathisers joined the process by removing about fifteen statues between September 2020 and April 2022, including statues of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1 July 2021) and of many prominent white Canadians such as the "founder" of Canada, six-time Prime Minister John A. Macdonald. Indigenous Australians also took up the fight with slogans such as "White Australia has a Black History", "Change the date. No pride in genocide" or "Aboriginal Lives Matter", Maoris performed a haka at BLM protests in New Zealand, while statues of Sir George Grey, Zealandia, James Cook and Colonel Marmaduke Nixon were defaced. David Olusoga, a historian at the University of Manchester, pointed out that the era of engaging with a one-sided Western history was coming to an end: "These are the history wars we are having… Statues have become lightning rods for a struggle we are going to have about our history" (Olusoga n.p.). Historiography is also about the people who witnessed the events and talk about their involvement (Price, Chikane, Habib). Yet, one important element to consider in this fight over commemoration is the "post-truth context" in which these fights take place. Myriam Revault d'Allonnes reminds us that post-truth politics are not to be opposed to "democratic politics devoted to the respect of truth", but rather to a form of "indifference to truth", a "divide now considered inessential between true and false" and an ultimate confusion between truth and opinion (Revault d'Allonnes 34–35, my translation). The post-truth era thus offers an opportunity for many to challenge official (and historical) narratives with a distortion of truth as was the case with the Brexit campaign or Trump's speeches prior to the 2016 presidential elections. But it can also alert citizens to the possibility of critically assessing official and institutionalised history by providing another (post-colonial) perspective as "the

visibility of a monument is in fact entirely contingent upon the debate concerning the reinterpretation of history at moments of social and political transitions” (Coombes 12).

3 This article aims to come back on the episodes of the removal of the statues of Cecil Rhodes by anti-racist and anti-colonial activists and the political reactions they provoked. By comparing two statues of Cecil Rhodes, one in Cape Town and the other in Oxford, the difference between the monuments remaining in the former colonies (South Africa) and those erected in the metropolis (England) will also be analysed to determine how important the local context is and whether the imperial legacy is perceived differently.

Memory wars from South Africa

4 A decade before the “Rhodes Must Fall” tsunami, Paul Mayham wondered in the preface to his book on Cecil Rhodes why this “arch-imperialist sustained so much attention in the century after his death”, noting that because of his aggressive imperialism, there was little coverage of the centenary of his birth in 2002, Rhodes scholarship in 2003, and Rhodes University in 2004 (Mayham). Perhaps one of the explanations for the afterlife of the image of Cecil Rhodes is that he is often referred to as the archetype of the Victorian imperialist, whose pillars were capitalism and expansionism:

> For a brief, brilliant moment the activists of #RMF found a language and a form of protest that was able to haul this legacy into focus. In doing so, I believe that they were aided by the form of the Rhodes statue itself, which so powerfully summarized this deeply inscribed coloniality, as well as by the sheer intensity of the surrounding symbolic and memorial landscape. (Shepherd 79)

5 In 2015, South Africa is a post-apartheid country struggling with the legacy of officially introduced racial segregation. Since the African National Congress Party’s victory in South Africa’s first multicultural elections in 1994, frustrations and tensions had grown with the government, whose task of providing a better life for 55 million people (blacks and whites alike), far more than the pro-apartheid National Party (which was only concerned with the welfare of

5 million whites) was daunting. Dealing with the legacy of apartheid was on the government's agenda, which also meant dealing with the symbols of segregation, such as the statues and busts of white leaders like Paul Kruger, J. B. M. Hertzog, D. F. Malan, J. G. Strydom or Hendrik Verwoerd, which were removed from public places. Other apartheid symbols had become a point of contention—the springbok on the national rugby team's jersey versus the protea, the new symbol of South African sport, or the changing of names: Street names (Voortrekker Street became Steve Biko Street in Pretoria), airports (Ian Smuts International Airport in Johannesburg became Oliver R. Tambo International Airport) or cities (Pietersburg became Polokwane, Port Elizabeth became Gqeberha, while Pretoria became Tshwane, probably the most controversial change)… When it was accepted that "white" memorials should not be destroyed (The Afrikaner Voortrekker memorial in Pretoria or the English Anglo-Zulu War memorials in Isandlwana), "black" memorials were erected alongside them to achieve a more balanced representation of the South African commemorative space (Teulié). These are the more visible aspects of the legacy of apartheid and colonial rule, along with all the statues erected to the heroes of the anti-apartheid movement, including Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Vusumzi Saul Mkhize or Steve Biko but also victims of the apartheid police, such as the Gugulethu Seven, the Craddock Four, etc. But what sparked the memory wars on a larger scale were the slow, less visible advances in the social agenda. One of these was access to education and the curriculum, which was seen as too European and not African enough. In 2015, most academics in South Africa were still white. The priority given to education by Nelson Mandela was slow to bear mature fruit, as a whole generation of young freedom fighters had given up school to fight against apartheid. The gap between the generations has therefore not yet been bridged.

6 The #Rhodes SoWhite movement (later #Rhodesmustfall) began on 9 March 2015, when Chumani Maxwele, a UCT student with a placard on his chest "Exhibit White @ arrogance UCT" threw human excrement at the statue, stating that he wanted to bridge the gap between black and white students at UCT and move the university away from its Eurocentricity (Pitso and others). The movement gathered momentum from then on, a large rally took place on

12 March to debate the issue among students, then a march was held. The pressure increased when on 20 March students stormed the UCT administration building and occupied it for several days. On 8 April, a UCT board meeting was disrupted by students allegedly chanting "One Settler, One Bullet", giving the movement a pan-Africanist undertone. On 27 March 2015, the UCT board voted to remove the statue, which was done on 9 April with a huge media coverage.

7 On Monday, 31 October 2016, the permanent removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue was approved by the University of Cape Town Board of Governors. Four proposals were made to host the statue, one in the USA and three in South Africa (in 2021, the statue was still in the care of UCT). During the demonstrations, many slogans were displayed, such as: "Make Rhodes History", "All Rhodes lead to colonisation of the mind" and the sign at the base of the statue pedestal read "F. Your dream of empire". The "dream" of Cecil Rhodes was obviously featured in the famous *Punch* cartoon "Rhodes Colossus" of 1892 mentioned earlier. If we imagine that the UCT Statue symbolically represents one foot of the "Rhodes Colossus" in South Africa, while the other foot is embodied by the Oriel Statue of Cecil Rhodes erected in Oxford, we can conclude in both cases that the "colossal" statues of Cecil Rhodes (by the standards of media coverage) are only standing on feet of clay. The movement was then exported to Britain.

8 The Oxford Movement followed on from the UCT Movement and continued the social media firestorm that had popularised Cecil Rhodes for many people around the world (Calderisi 14). In June 2015, a black South African student from KwaZulu-Natal, Ntokozo Qwabe, who had received a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University in 2013, became the co-founder of the movement at Oxford (#RhodesMustFallOxford) with the slogan stated on their Facebook page: "an organisation determined to decolonise space, curriculum and institutional memory and fight intersectional oppression" (RhodesMustFallOxford). Ntokozo Qwabe, a law student at Keble University, justified the modernity of the movement by emphasising that the legacy of imperialism was still present: "When people talk about colonialism, they often think of a past event that happened. They don't think of it as something that manifests itself in the daily life of institutions like Oxford" (qtd in Rhoden-Paul). The student

movement demanded the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the facade of Oriel College in Oxford, along with a decolonised curriculum and the banning of racist attitudes from the institution. Debates were fierce and pressure groups organised to support or attack the movement. Oriel College had long debates about the issue, while the student movement never stopped through demonstrations, boycotts, art exhibitions (dance), social media and maintaining links with the original movement in South Africa, such as marching in Oxford in 2021 to commemorate the 1976 Soweto Uprising (RhodesMustFallOxford). One of the main arguments of opponents against the removal of the statue was that the Rhodes Scholarships, which enable 100 non-English students to study at Oriel each year and which were funded by Cecil Rhodes, himself a former student at Oriel, should be returned by those who criticised the diamond magnate. This was the case of Joshua Nott, a white South African, son of a wealthy lawyer, who actively campaigned for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town and then applied for and received a Rhodes Scholarship to continue his studies at Oxford in 2017 (BBC reporter). This was also the case of Ntokozo Quwabe, who was criticised by the British press and on social media for accepting his Rhodes scholarship. Both Nott and Quwabe were called hypocrites. Both responded that free speech cannot be silenced by money and that one can criticise the institution from within.

9 The movement continued with less press coverage but flared up again in June 2020 following the death of George Floyd and the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which quickly spread around the world. The debates were also revitalised in academic circles by the support of the movement by some Oxford University professors. The Vice-Chancellor Louise Richardson was criticised for not complying with the demand. Student pressure mounted and on 17 June 2020, Oriel College accepted the idea of removing the statue, but had to have the public's wish confirmed by setting up an independent commission of enquiry. Anyone could write to the commission and make their views known. The 144-page report was finally published in April 2021, without deciding for or against the statue, but with an assessment of the situation quoting students and relying on the survey of secondary school students to shed light on the state of

reactions to the statue. The recommendations on the monument state that whatever decision should be made, it should be placed in context (Oriel College, *Report of a Commission of Inquiry*, 10–13).

10 The Oriel College board eventually decided not to take down the statue for cost reasons and wanted to focus on the commission's recommendations. Perhaps pressure came from the city council, which had a say in the matter as the building is a Grade II listed building. Oriel College cites compliance with government guidelines, stating on its website that in a letter to the DCMS (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) Arms Length Bodies in September 2020, the Culture Secretary expressed the government's expectations in relation to controversial heritage assets: no action must be taken that is "motivated by activism or politics", otherwise there was a threat that funding would be withdrawn: "It is imperative that you continue to act impartially, in line with your publicly funded status and not in a way that calls it into question" (Oriel contextualisation). The threat that the funders would pull out if this happened must also have played a part in the decision. The protesters were dismayed: "No matter how Oriel College tries to justify its decision, leaving the statue standing is an act of institutional racism" (Race). The British government responded to the various movements and adopted a policy to preserve the monuments, known as the "retain and explain" policy, leaving controversial historical statues in place with added context, such as the monuments to William Beckford and John Cass, politicians associated with the transatlantic slave trade (Gershon).

11 In October 2021, Oriel college installed a modern explanatory plaque on the heritage of Rhodes at the foot of the façade where the statue is located (Oriel contextualisation). It became highly controversial because Rhodes was labelled a "committed British colonialist" and opponents felt the text did not address his legacy. Social media became a battleground, with both opponents as exemplified by Nigel Gardiner who wrote on 10 October 2021: "As an @OrielOxford alumnus, I am dismayed by the snivelling cowardice shown in the face of the left-wing mob. Like many other Oriel graduates I am grateful for the education I received at Oxford in large part due to the generosity of Rhode's bequest" (qtd in Gershon). On the other hand, Dan Hicks noted on 11 October 2021 that "the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign did not, from memory, call for the erection of a

third college memorial to Cecil Rhodes. The small metal sign is an embarrassment and reveals the incoherence and futility of the ideology of 'explain and retain'" (qtd in Gershon). Oriel College added a URL on the Rhodes plaque that provides access to the college official website to further contextualise the statue without downplaying Rhodes violent legacy (Beinart).

12 The ideology behind the statues in the settler colonies may be different from that which was erected in the metropolises. The struggle for spatial memory is more topical when the right to land is contested, as in South Africa, where land restitution is still an issue in the South African elections in May 2024, 30 years after the first multicultural elections. Sabine Marschall (2017, 671) reminds us that the erection of public monuments concludes the struggle for land. She recalls the first such monument, Vasco de Gama's 1497 Portuguese stone cross in Mossel Bay (a replica of which was sunk in the Indian Ocean before it was recovered). Similarly, Annette Hamilton argues that settler colonies are littered with monuments that are particularly important "since the significations and authorising narratives of the pre-colonial period are incomprehensible or contradict the historical meanings new settlers need to impose" (Hamilton 104). This balance of power between settlers and colonised populations could explain why the UCT Rhodes statue could not remain, as the former colonised population now holds power, whereas this is not the case with the Oriel Rhodes statue. For the defeated (indigenous) populations radical iconoclasm and the abolition of culture means the restoration of the myth of origin, to "restore the prime African land, erase all traces of domination foisted on them by force" (Marschall 2017, 674). This is the root of the war memories, because if the descendants of the settlers can return home (i.e. to the metropolises), as the French did from Algeria in 1962, there is a way out. But if Afrikaners (as a minority in their country) or white Australians and New Zealanders (as a majority) consider the land their ancestors migrated to (and conquered) as their home, there seems to be no solution other than trying to find a balance between the multicultural groups living on the same soil: "Empire-building and colonialism produce stark inequalities and deeply-felt pain. Those are the central facts of New Zealand history and they are profoundly troubling. Removing

statues to agents of empire will signal an important shift in our values." Ballantyne adds: "But we must recognise that we cannot undo the past, nor can it be wished away. There is no easy way of settling our history or coming to terms with it" (6–7). Yet dealing with a violent legacy can be therapeutic, as the example of an interactive course engaging South African students with the pros and cons about the fate of statues shows that it enabled the realisation that the damage and destruction of statues can both highlight an unresolved psychological trauma of South Africa's past and be cathartic (Masters 175). Mandela explained that with the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the time had come to heal the wounds. Coming to terms with colonialism and apartheid meant bridging the gap between generations, defining today's values by understanding the context of that time, because today's truth may not have been the truth in the past or in the future (D'Ancona 2017a, 19), so should we judge former communities by modern standards? This is what historians call "presentism", when people from the past are judged for living in history in their own time and criticised for not living in our time (Haperin). Examining the erection of a statue can also shed new light on the monuments that we assume were unanimously accepted when they entered the public sphere, therefore it is important to recognise the mixture of resistance and support what surrounded their erection, rather than simply accepting their seemingly hegemonic and uncontested physical reality (Watts 24).

13 Bitter comments were made when the British government intervened in the debate with its policy of "retain and explain". Kim Wagner, professor of imperial history at Queen Mary University of London, said: "Cecil Rhodes has become a rallying point for imperiophiliacs, and the slogan to 'retain and explain' is just part of the ongoing effort to whitewash his legacy and that of the empire more generally. Luckily, most of us don't get our history from statues or plaques" (qtd in Hall Rachel). Historian Hannah Woods said Rhodes was a controversial figure in his day and puts things into perspective when she adds: "It is deeply depressing that amid our current culture wars we seem even less capable of critique than Britain's 19th-century imperialists themselves", adding that it is ironic that Rhodes enjoys more favourable coverage in parts of the British media today than he

did in his lifetime (qtd in Hall Rachel). But alongside the historical debate, there are also the political reactions to the movement, which like all debates about society and historical legacy elicit different responses.

The South African and British political agenda

14 Statues are pretexts for the expression of political and/or ideological ideas: "[…] Confederate statues offer pre-existing iconography for racists. The people who descended on Charlottesville last weekend were there to make a naked show of force for white supremacy. The Robert E. Lee statue is a clear symbol of their hateful ideology" (Christian 47–48). But if the monument is a symbol, it goes hand in hand with a discourse that serves an ideology. The discourse may or may not be based on facts, and this is why the wars of remembrance clash between those who believe that the truth is established once and for all and cannot be changed, and those who see factual truth as something to be brushed aside when it goes against their interests (Brahms 3). The same is true for the supporters of these political and ideological groups who may or may not accept the lies as in a sense, the lies of politicians should be the least of people's concerns; in the post-truth era, it is people's participation and degree of complicity in those lies that is at stake (D'Ancona 2017a, 18). As some have pointed out, social media has favoured the recent explosion of the post-truth era (Revault d'Allonnes 32). It is what D'Ancona calls "the digital bazaar" (D'Ancona 2017b, 46). Lies have always been part of human rhetorical tools, what makes post-truth new today is technology (Brahms 3). Nevertheless, social media can be seen as positive in this context, as it allows people to access the debates and thus enrich history (Rengel 68).

15 Since the Rhodes Must Fall movement began in South Africa, Julius Malema, an ANC dissident, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters, a left-wing South African political party, has repeatedly stated that he was in favour of the removal of the statue and also supports a movement against white supremacy. On 22 March 2015, he called for the removal of all apartheid and colonial symbols. In the following weeks, many "white" monuments were attacked (both British and

Afrikaner). The ANC government was opposed to the #RhodesMustFall movement, as expressed by the Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, who denounced a political bias in the movement, that he said was manipulated by the EFF and aimed at the ANC government to try and achieve through violence what it could not achieve through elections. Monuments were protected, such as a human chain surrounding the statue of Paul Kruger in Krugersdorp, which was painted red in April 2015 or taken away to avoid being destroyed, while RMF supporters advocated for further destruction. Monuments to Cecil Rhodes became important targets that were regularly defaced. The RMF movement was thus a tool used by the EFF for publicity.

16 Julius Malema gave a speech at the EFF Student Summit at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (29 March 2015). He stated that the movement was no small thing, but "an onslaught against white supremacy" (qtd in Nkosi), because in his opinion the statues have the negative effect of reinforcing white people's sense of superiority. He added that if the symbol was destroyed, people would start talking to each other as equals and whites would understand that they are not superior to other people. Equality (at least as partners) is the watchword: "We ought to teach them that they are not superior, neither are they inferior. We're equal partners. We seek a better world that is characterised by friendship and peace. But there will never be friendship and peace if the other think he is superior to the other one" (qtd in Nkosi). Therefore, like Mandela before being jailed, he emphasised that white supremacy should not be replaced by black supremacy and that they were there to liberate black people so that they could have access to the rights and freedom enjoyed by all. But even if this was not the martial language Malema is used to, he took a swipe at the ANC government with the movement: "The ANC wants to perpetuate illiteracy because it benefits from it. If people are illiterate, the ANC benefits from it" (quoted in Nkosi). His lieutenants were more aggressive, such as the MP for the Nelson Mandela Bay area Bo Madwara, who threatened to throw the Port Elizabeth (Anglo-Boer War) Horse Memorial into the sea if it was re-erected after it had been taken away for protection. EFF spokesperson Mbuyeseni Ndlozi stated on 9 April 2015 that the party was in favour of removing the statues, not destroying them.

Nevertheless, on Tuesday, 21 April 2015, he, Julius Malema and the deputy chairperson of the EFF in Tshwane Moafrika Mabongwana were prohibited by a court order from calling for the destruction of monuments.

17 The deputy chairperson of the Afrikaner Solidarity Movement advocacy group, Johan Kruger, filed an application in the North Gauteng High Court (Pretoria) against the EFF for inciting the removal and vandalisation of statues. He stated that the EFF's reckless incitement was always followed by the defacement and vandalisation of statues. Each time, the EFF took responsibility, knowing full well that it was a crime. This incitement by the EFF had to be stopped (qtd in Matlala). EFF leader Julius Malema, while denying any responsibility of his party, responded: "There is no court that can stop the will of the people. It is not us who are tearing down the statues. It is the people. We are not going to waste our time opposing this" (Matlata n.p.). Pretoria High Court judge Eben Jordaan was receptive to the Solidarity Movement Trust's argument that the EFF's incitement to vandalism was dividing South Africa into pro and con and was therefore detrimental to national cohesion (George Herald). The EFF admitted to being responsible for the attacks on some statues such as those of Louis Botha, Paul Kruger, Queen Victoria (by 24-year-old white EEF activist Paul "WeZiswe" Walsh) and the Anglo-Boer War memorial in Uitenhage (George Herald). The EFF had to issue a statement if its supporters were not responsible. But it continued to capitalise on black anger at these statues.

18 In May 2018, EFF leaders changed their target to the statue of Paul Kruger, president of the Transvaal from 1883 to 1900, and threatened to destroy it themselves if the DA (Democratic Alliance)-led Tshwane (Pretoria) Municipality did not do so itself (Andersen). Since then, the EFF has been listing the removal of the offending statues as part of its agenda, as can be seen in the party's election manifesto (accessed online on 19 May 2024). In the "Cultural Heritage" section, point 49 reads: "The EFF Government will remove apartheid statues and take them to a dedicated apartheid museum under the theme: NEVER AGAIN". Interestingly, it only talks about "apartheid statues" and not "colonial" statues, even though we can assume that this is the same thing in the EFF's rhetoric. Point 51, however, is about changing names that "have a direct or indirect reference to the colonial or

apartheid era by the end of 2029" (EFF). Interestingly, this perspective is quite different from that of concerned British people, as it is their heritage which is at stake.

19 With migration at the heart of Brexit, it is understandable that the question of Britain's imperial past is of great interest to people in the UK. A poll conducted by YouGov on 17 and 18 January 2016 concluded that Rhodes should not fall, as shown by the responses to the question: "Do you think the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University should be taken down?" 11% answered that it should, 59% that it should not and 29% did not know. Furthermore, when asked "Was the British Empire a good thing or a bad thing?", the answers were 43% Good, 19% Bad, 25% Neither; and to the question: "Is Britain's history of colonialism something to be proud of or something to regret?", 44% should be proud, 21% should regret it, 23% neither (Dahlgreen). However, despite this conservative attitude, it seems that the landslide victory of Black Lives Matter gave new impetus to anti-racist movements and revealed to people who were less aware of racist attitudes that post-imperial racism still runs rampant throughout the Western world. Statues were once again the visible symbols of this sense of racial superiority, according to some. Once again, there was an important link between the RMF movement in South Africa and the movement in Oxford, expressed by the former (and last) white president of South Africa, Frederik W. de Klerk. In a letter to the director of *The Times*, published on 26 December 2015, he commented on the fate of the Cecil Rhodes statue at Oriel:

> It is regrettable that the 'Rhodes Must Fall' folly has spread from South Africa to Oriel College. My people—the Afrikaners—have greater reason to dislike Rhodes than anyone else. He was the architect of the Anglo-Boer War, that had a disastrous impact on our people. Yet the National Party government never thought of removing his name from our history. (De Klerk)

20 He then broadened the perspective by questioning the act of toppling statues and wondered what would result if the political correctness of today were consistently applied, very few of Oxford's great figures would stand up to scrutiny. George Washington—another Oriel graduate—certainly would not. How many statues would there even be left in Britain? and then added: "We do not commemorate historic

figures for their ability to measure up to current conceptions of political correctness—but because of their actual impact on history" (De Klerk). Interestingly, an Afrikaner was defending Rhodes, which might be surprising if one did not know that in South Africa, the UCT statue of Cecil Rhodes has been contested, as have many Boer and Afrikaner monuments that characterise the South African memorial space. Defending the British imperialists thus also meant protecting the visibility of Afrikaners in history as Rhodes had influenced history for better or worse, so had Boer leaders and heroes. It is striking that De Klerk rails against students, by which he probably means not only Oxford students, but also South African students who have put South Africa in a difficult position with their demonstrations, riots and destruction of historical artefacts. These students probably reminded him of the heyday of South African resistance to apartheid, such as during the Soweto Uprising in 1976. But he was also eager to fight the British in the form of a symbolic 'the Empire strikes back' (perhaps with the Second Anglo-Boer War in mind): "Students have always been full of sound and fury, signifying very little. However, one would have expected an institution as venerable as Oriel to be a little more gracious in its treatment of its most generous benefactor." And further adding: "If Oriel now finds Rhodes so reprehensible, would the honourable solution not be to return his bequest, plus interest, to the victims of British imperialism in southern Africa?" (De Klerk).

21 The defence of British memorials is also the position of the Conservative British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who expressed his opinion about the Oriel statue bluntly in 2020: "I'm pro-heritage. I'm pro-history, and I'm in favour of people understanding our past with all its imperfections…" Using humour he stated: "I want to build people up, not tear people down. If we go around trying to bowdlerise or edit our history in this way, it's like some politician sneakily trying to change his Wikipedia entry" (qtd in Howe). The PM also stated, "We cannot now try to edit or censor our past. We cannot pretend to have a different history (qtd in Walker / Howe). He added that the preservation of the monuments is also a tribute to past generations who should not be forgotten and that they had different perspectives, different understandings of right and wrong. But these statues teach people something about the past, with all its faults.

To tear them down would be to lie about our history and impoverish the education of future generations (qtd in Walker / Howe). In this sense, he agrees with a young Zulu, Awelani Mdawu, who argues in favour of keeping the Paul Kruger statue in Pretoria, as it is a tradition for young Zulus to walk with their elders who point to something to explain to the young what they should learn. If the statue is taken away, the grandparents have no way of explaining colonialism and apartheid. In Zulu it says: "Indlela I buzwa kwa Ba Phambili" ("You ask for the way of those who have gone before you") (Quartz).

22 An interesting question is, who decides who is good or bad? It is a slippery slope, said Tory MP Ben Bradley (Brown and Camber), while on the other side Sadiq Khan, the Labour Mayor of London, declared: "The statue of slave trader Robert Milligan has now been removed from West India Quay. It's a sad truth that much of our prosperity comes from the slave trade—but this does not have to be celebrated in our public spaces" (qtd in Brown and Camber). Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party from 2015 to 2020, stated that Cecil Rhodes was "racist" and "subjugated and killed large numbers of people in what became Rhodesia and eventually Zimbabwe and Zambia, and made a great deal of money out of diamond mining and others in South Africa" (Mills), adding that he sees no need to honour his life. He mentioned Cecil Rhodes to illustrate the need to contextualise history and historical figures more thoroughly: "I think [statues] are important as symbols. But what's more important is the teaching of history, and how we have an understanding of colonialism" (Mills). On the other side of the spectrum, more conservative people abhor chaos and destruction with the old dichotomy that the 'civilised' builds while the 'savage' or 'barbarian' destroys. Vandalism is therefore disliked by many who do not like revolutionary radicalism: for those mainly on the political right and in the pro-Colston camp, the empty plinth as it stands today in Bristol city centre represents loss, criminal damage and the scars of violence (Rengel 68). Another example can be found the day after the movement against the Rhodes statue in Oxford began, when two journalists wrote in the *Daily Mail*, a right-wing British tabloid: "So what next? Ban all books mentioning Rhodes? Burn them?" (Brown and Camber).

23 They added that the denial of history does not help the cause of the minorities these protesters claim to represent. Rather, it hinders the efforts of those working within the system to bridge educational and income gaps (Brown and Camber). Similarly, in 2016 in South Africa, 75 'imperial' artworks were removed by UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price, from UCT offices and halls, after 23 were vandalised by students. There was an outcry as he was accused of pandering to a minority group. When Vice-Chancellor Price's book about his experiences during the Rhodes Must Fall movement at UCT, *Statues and Storms*, was published, there was commentary on the movement, such as from a social media user named Gavin Williams, who wrote on 3 October 2023 that there were precedents in Germany for the burning of books and the destruction of "decadent art". British historian and specialist of Southern Africa, Donal Lowry, emphasised that it was striking "how far this worldwide iconoclasm has diverged from a long-standing, if somewhat whiggish tradition, of reconciling and incorporating opposing, even bloody, elements of history in a seemingly organic continuity" (Lowry). He also argued that Britain was pursuing a policy of "symbolic synthesis" in relation to commemorations, seeing public spaces as inclusive rather than exclusive: "A short distance away, in the centre of London, we have statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Field Marshal Jan Smuts, who fought against the British Empire before becoming a champion of the Commonwealth that succeeded it." He added that there are also "statues of deposed King James II and American revolutionary George Washington nearby. Surely there is no other former imperial capital that combines such contradictions" (Lowry). He also linked South Africa with the example of what he calls the oxymoronic association of the "Mandela-Rhodes Foundation", which was supported by Mandela who wanted to bridge the gap between blacks and whites.

24 The Conservatives' stance on the memory wars was questioned in an unflustered manner. Sathnam Sanghera, author of the bestselling book *Empireland*, tweeted, "Why govern when you can just play in the culture wars?" (qtd in Hall). Indeed, reference is made here to a memorial plaque to Cecil Rhodes, unveiled in King Edward Street in 1906 on the front of the house where Rhodes lived in 1881. The plaque was protected by the government by being granted

Grade II listed status by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission, on 21 July 2022. This sparked another wave of protests against the protection of imperialist memory, such as that of Professor Kim Wagner, who said of the UK Culture Secretary: "This is simply what one would expect from Nadine Dorries and a discredited government, which has nothing left but the pursuit of its inept culture-war project" (qtd Hall). The point being made here is that the Conservative government is pursuing a policy of "divide and rule" around the "memory wars". Cultural manipulation has become the bugbear of this policy, which is based on the simple proposition that history cannot be erased or rewritten. To which historians like Charlotte Lydia Riley responded: "Historians are not too concerned about the threat of 'rewriting history' because rewriting history is the historian's profession, their professional endeavour. They are constantly engaged in reassessing the past and reinterpreting the stories they thought they knew" (Riley). She adds that history is not just about how things happened, but also about what relationship we have to that past and how we want to represent it. Talking about the past sheds light on the present: "The past may be dead, but history is alive, and it is constructed in the present" (Riley), which is echoed by Rahul Rao when he emphasises that statues have more to do with the present than the past (Rao).

Conclusion

25 Referring to the 2020 Covid Pandemic Myriam Revault d'Allonnes underlined that what upheld the French government's policy was the trust in scientific analysis of the situation but added that contesting scientific evidence started to spread in social media. One of her conclusions is that to discredit science is to destroy the common basis that allows humans to debate (Revault d'Allonnes 138). With this in mind we may understand that human sciences such as History can be all the more contested as "historical truth", if such a thing exists (not factual accuracy), is the result of a precarious balance between the historian's place in society and their point of view on the one hand and the historical material they will have to interpret and partly shape themselves, as shown by the popular sentence "history is written by the winner" or alternatively "What can historians do, when

newspapers and politicians tell people we cannot be trusted with history?" (Woods 118).

26 On a broader perspective the future is at stake as "This is not a battle between liberals and conservatives. It is a battle between two ways of perceiving the world, two fundamentally different approaches to reality: and as between the two, you do have to choose" (D'Ancona 2017b, 4). On 15 March 2024, the M Shed Museum in Bristol included the toppled statue of Edward Colston in its permanent collection "Colston, What Next?" in the "Bristol People Gallery" along with exhibits of the poster used by the protesters who threw the statue into the river Avon. The statue lies (Colston is no longer standing) and still bears the different coloured graffiti that was written on it before it was sunk (McConnelle-Simpson). The option of dismantling (not destroying) the statue and displaying it in a museum with explanations to help people reflect on the story was adopted here. UCT's Cecil Rhodes statue was also dismantled but kept out of reach of the public. Another option is to place a plaque on the statue, leaving it where it is (Oriel College's Rhodes statue). But if the colonial transgressions of Cecil Rhodes are now widely recognised, his legacy could be transformed into something more positively philanthropic. In 2003, the Rhodes Trust celebrated its centenary and established the Mandela Rhodes Foundation to provide scholarships to African students pursuing postgraduate studies at South African universities. In Mandela's own words, this is a way of bridging the gap between whites and blacks, which he continued to emphasise until his death: "We see the Mandela Rhodes Foundation as an important initiative within the efforts of South Africans to take responsibility for the transformation of their society, so grievously skewed by a history of colonialism and apartheid." He then added: "We shall once more take hands across historical divides that others may deem unbridgeable" (About us). People did not react to the Rhodes-Mandela connection at the time because, as the foundation's website says, it was a way "to return some of Cecil John Rhodes's wealth to its origins in Africa" (About us). Dealing with the legacy of colonialism and apartheid was thus postponed in order to support the process of "healing the wounds" propagated by Mandela, until Rhodes Must Fall addressed it two decades later, which led Rahul Rao to state: "I mention this not as an alibi for our inaction, but to recognise that South Africa has been

the epicentre of this movement. Everything else is a reverberation." The hashtag "Something or Someone Must Fall" does indeed originate from South Africa (Rhodes MF, Fees MF, Zuma MF) and has led to references being made to it when other "falls" are desired, such as in "Oxpol", the Oxford University politics blog, where Richard Elliott wrote on 8 July 2016, "Brexiteers Must fall: why liberals and the Left must combine forces to Confront the Cecil Rhodes of the twenty-first century." Cecil Rhodes continues to be what he was, at least in the last years of his life: the archetype of the imperialist who today metonymically embodies all Western countries with an imperial and colonial legacy. Referring to Eastern European countries grappling with the monuments of their Soviet past, Charles Merewether explained that we live in what might be called an age of commemoration. On the one hand, new monuments are being erected to remember and scrutinise the violent events of the past; on the other, monuments are being destroyed to symbolise the end of an era. Their destruction symbolises the desire to leave the past behind. But he wonders whether this is possible (Merewether 183). But what has changed? According to Sabine Marschall, very little: "After rushed debate, the Rhodes statue was indeed removed on 9 April 2015, but the predicted 'statue revolution' hardly took place" (Marschall 2017, 671). She then added that the other attacks on statues in South Africa were without consequence as the monuments were cleaned up and repaired and very few were removed. The example of the Cecil Rhodes statues, whether an exception or something that can become a pattern, shows that in a former settler colony, the imperial statue could not stand for long, while in a metropolis like England the Oriel statue remained. Is there a pattern here? Did the British authorities protect their monuments well enough or was it only the threat of Oriel College's wealthy donors to withdraw their financial support that saved the Oriel statue? Is it a broader problem linked to the presence of minorities in Britain which originate from the former Empire? It should be noted, however, that South Africa is now governed by the descendants of the formerly colonised populations, while Britain is governed by those who promoted the British imperial project. The project of decolonizing the mind, the museum or the curriculum which accompanied the toppling of statues is still active even though some words have too strong a connotation and maybe should be changed as they are used as fear-

mongers, often understood as erasing the colonial past and heritage and turn some people against post-colonialism. For this reason, Sathnam Sanghera argues for a "*widening* of the curriculums" rather than their decolonisation (220). In that perspective, one but can only agree with Sabine Marschall when she states that "The dramatic expression of discontent with the continued presence of these symbolic reminders of the past suggests that the reconciliatory strategies and negotiated solutions of the immediate transition period may need to be revisited" (Marschall 2022, 28).

27 A cartoon entitled "Cancel Culture" by Gary McCoy summarises the difficulty of finding common ground for commemoration, because one man's hero is another man's villain. A group of three hooded and masked individuals are about to topple a massive rectangular marble stone while a sculptor is in the process of carving it. The sculptor says: "Can't you at least wait and see who it will be first?" One of the three activists replies: "No! We're already sure it's going to offend us!" (McCoy).

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ABSTRACTS

English

If many monuments inspired by Greco-Roman statuary have been destroyed in the history of humanity, it is because their aesthetics, their closeness to reality and above all their symbolism have made them, and still make them, prime targets for conveying political messages, without the need for direct attacks on human beings. This radical iconoclasm was magnified in South Africa in 2015 by the debate at the University of Cape Town (UCT) when some students demanded that the statue of the tycoon Cecil Rhodes be taken down because, they said, it was a daily offence when they walked past it, reminding them of the days of colonisation and apartheid. As the movement gathered momentum, the debate shifted to another statue of Rhodes, this one in Oxford. The aim of this article is to try to understand the phenomena at play in this period from 2015 to 2024 by comparing the treatment of two statues of the same figure but located in different memorial spaces, namely a former settlement colony and what used to be its metropolis, in an attempt to understand the imperial legacy.

Français
Si de nombreux monuments, inspirés par la statuaire gréco-romaine, ont été détruits dans l'histoire de l'humanité, c'est que leur esthétique, leur rapport avec la réalité et surtout leur symbolique en ont fait, et en font encore, des cibles privilégiées pour véhiculer des messages politiques, sans que pour cela, on ait besoin de s'en prendre directement à des êtres humains. Cet iconoclasme radical a été amplifié en Afrique du Sud en 2015 par le débat qui a agité l'Université du Cap (UCT) lorsque certains étudiants ont demandé que la statue du magnat Cecil Rhodes soit déboulonnée, car, disaient-ils, elle était une offense quotidienne lorsqu'ils passaient devant elle, leur rappelant les jours de la colonisation et de l'apartheid. Le mouvement ayant pris de l'ampleur, le débat s'est déplacé vers une autre statue de Rhodes, érigée à Oxford celle-là. Cet article vise à essayer de comprendre les phénomènes en jeu dans cette période de 2015 à 2024 en comparant le traitement des deux statues d'un même personnage mais situées dans des espaces mémoriels différents, à savoir une ancienne colonie de peuplement et ce qui fut sa métropole afin d'essayer d'appréhender l'héritage impérial.

INDEX

Mots-clés
statues, guerres mémorielles, Rhodes (Cecil), Rhodes must fall, Afrique du Sud, Oriel College, UCT, Université d'Oxford, post-vérité

Keywords
statues, memory wars, Rhodes (Cecil), Rhodes must fall, South Africa, Oriel College, UCT, University of Oxford, post-truth

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IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/053300947
ISNI : http://www.isni.org/0000000052811666
BNF : https://data.bnf.fr/fr/13596303