



BLACKLASH

The Africana Collective

REPORT NO. 2

Perspectives on Monuments, Statutes, and Flags



INTRODUCTION

Social and news media are abuzz with images of toppling statues, graffiti on monuments, and a whole lot of people talking about these symbols, including the US and Confederate flags, from a variety of informed and uninformed positions. Mississippi intends to remove the Confederate flag from its state symbol, country pop group the Dixie Chicks will henceforth be known as simply The Chicks, NASCAR has banned the Confederate flag from its races, statues of Robert E. Lee and Columbus have come down, as well as statues of King Leopold II. What to these and similar instances mean in this moment and beyond? How do we sift through these actions and voices, and make sense of them? What ideas and possibilities are these acts and voices of protest lacking? This month, we take aim at these questions and more.

Backlash: The Africana Collective (BTAC) engages in interdisciplinary research to provide analysis and recommendations on a range of issues affecting the African(a) world—linked communities with peoples of African ancestry. Using our collective knowledge and skills, as well as our grounding as thinkers, educators, activists, organizers, and parents, our objective is to support and inform action toward safeguarded humane development throughout the African world. We are independent in our funding, research, and directives, allowing us to work decidedly in the best interests of said communities.

Each month, we consider one topical issue as a collective. In the process, we prepare individual statements, meet (virtually) to hammer out our findings, then prepare our report. That report is then shared with the African world via online outlets and through various networks a week prior to a (virtual) town hall meeting, where we invite members of the African world community to join us, debate, (dis)agree, and come away with perspectives that inform collective action. We strongly request that all attendees at the town hall read the report **beforehand**. This way, you are an active participant in shaping your own views and subsequent decisions. We encourage you to sign up, or register, for the town hall, so we may keep you abreast of upcoming events, key resources, and ways to translate the reports' ideas into collective betterment scaled to wherever you are and with whom you have to work.

In this thought paper, report no. 2, we consider the topical issues surrounding debates about the fate of monuments, statues, flags and other icons of the state, in the United States and elsewhere around the world. Join us for the virtual town hall brunch, titled "REBel TO rebel: "You got no country, you got no flag," on July 4, at 11 am EST.



PERSPECTIVE: DR. IYELLI ICHILE

As a Visiting Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University and newcomer to Richmond, VA, I was surprised at the intensity of my visceral response to having to see Confederate monuments up close, on my way to and from campus each day. I was further shocked—although perhaps I should not have been—at the apathy of both Black and white Richmonders to these heroic, public shrines to people who had committed treason against a country they claimed to love and who had fought to maintain the chattel enslavement of Africans whose blood flowed in their veins.

I wish to echo the sentiments of my fellow collective members—and many members of my community—that the act of destroying these types of racist monuments and symbols is no substitute for substantive transformation, and that destroying only the most obvious symbols of racism without destroying those whose have been more effectively cleansed of their racist meaning is disingenuous, at best. Still, I wish to point out that this same community acknowledges the psychosocial and educational impact of symbols. Of subliminal messaging. Of memetics and didactics. Those symbols which are being destroyed at the present moment are being destroyed because there is some consensus about what they mean. They should come down. AND we should be struggling for true liberation. Do both.

These monuments are not merely a form of psychic violence, as Stuart Hall and others might assert. They are shrines. They are an extreme form of ancestral veneration, which reinscribes the power of the descendants of those ancestors, simply by taking up large amounts of public space. The hovering, lofty presence of a flag or a statue buttresses the ideologies of people who use the space. It assaults and condemns the ideology of others who occupy that same space. Taking them down, burning them, smashing them, and defacing them are what some scholars might call a reclamation of power. It is not an end, but for some, it is an entry point, a touchstone, a necessary break in the racial hypnosis of (some) public monuments to white supremacy. It is seeing that first enslaved African knock the overseer off his horse, and wondering to oneself, “now if that can be done, what else can we destroy around here?”

PERSPECTIVE: DR. JARED BALL

The attention being paid by both activists and the press to removals of Confederate iconography should be of great concern. First, none of these actions are tied to policy initiatives whereby material redistribution is required of this society. Secondly, these actions rise to the level of distraction given the attention drawn away from even the symbols of genuine power and, therefore, the far more righteous target of the U.S. flag itself and its so-called “Founders.” What we are witnessing are live activist renditions of the contradictions wonderfully exposed in the film *Get Out*, only this time the hypnotism is induced not by a White woman and her tea cup but



by the allure of a preferred unsophisticated Whiteness. The problem in this country has never been the Stars and Bars; it has always and remains the Stars and Stripes.

It is easy, and has long-been encouraged by dominant media, to identify and dismiss racism as belonging if not solely then mostly to the Klu Klux Klan, the southern slack-jawed redneck, with the pickup truck, gun rack and flying Confederate flag. My generation even tolerated prime-time displays of this because no one said, “nigger,” and we got Daisy and her Dukes. But we are not encouraged to the realization that as bad as these people can be they are not now nor have ever been the source of power in this country. The Confederacy existed for 4 years from 1861-1865 and even then the Confederacy was not an exclusive or even dominant source of political power over the rest of the country. None of the enslavement, genocidal theft of land, indentured servitude, the post-Civil War “Return to Slavery” described by DuBois in *Black Reconstruction*, and of course the 13th amendment which legalizes enslavement to this day, Jim/Jane Crow, red-lining, mass incarceration, police brutality, denial of healthcare, development and imposition of ghettos, wage suppression and joblessness, the wars Black people have fought in, the assassination and imprisonment of political activists, COINTELPRO, the Patriot Act removal of all civil liberties, the current surveillance state, AFRICOM, the cyclical economic collapses which routinely wipe out whatever tiny wealth exists in Black communities, and more... all under the Stars and Stripes.

Are there enough ropes to pull down the Washington and Jefferson monuments and memorials in DC, never mind the smaller ones scattered across the land? Do we have munitions available for the 60 foot granite heads at Mount Rushmore? Those of us who have read *Forced into Glory* by Lerone Bennett want Lincoln’s head too. All of their enslavement, and that of James Madison and more, all occurred under the Stars and Stripes too. As did the Fugitive Slave Act and Dred Scott decision. In fact, the racist, pro-slavery, pro-indentured servitude Francis Scott Key wrote what is now the unsung 3rd verse of the national anthem while praising the Stars and Stripes too. Will we then be stripping that anthem, put to the tune of an old British hymn to bed as well?

And then so what? Monuments and statues are propaganda. They are symbolic and are meant to recreate mythologies. One powerful myth is that enslavement was merely a southern issue when in reality the entire country defended it, benefits still from it and only ended it so as to make even more from our exploited bodies with less risk of revolt. Hence, the allowance of symbolic removals of an approved enemy and, especially, all of which is disconnected from any material giveaway or loss.

PERSPECTIVE: DR. KWASI KONADU

Symbols as representational images matter. Whether casted as monuments, flags, currencies, or other icons of the nation-state, they shape perceptions of who we were and who we now claim to be. They always speak to us, because they are co-defendants in the myths upon which our lives (r)evolve, rotating like that hamster on the wheel in a cage. Symbols keep us on that wheel, as if we have a real stake in “our democracy,” the democracy that dispossesses those who cry out its name. Symbols matter because even if the hamster in us wants to get off the wheel, realizing its energies are spent to remain in place, there’s the cage. Scientists believe hamster are



born to run, that they truly enjoy running. And so the hamster returns to the wheel because motion is the symbol of progress. Monuments, statutes, and the like are traps, placing us on a wheel where we might think their symbolic toppling or erection marks progress, that it sets something called freedom in motion, that participating in their removal or replacement means we're finally on that yellow brick road to "free at last"—we want to believe this lap in a five-century race is different. I think we are mistaken to believe a war with monuments is a substitute for war with the myths and power platforms animating K-12/college curricula, media and museums, the decrees for work, policies, politics, and economic life. I think this scuffle is the symptom and failure of postmodernism and its sibling critical theory: they criticize, even show contributions (to profit from them), but they have neither plan nor workable vision. They live in and for the moment, for the performance. Their ideology nourishes so-called movements, fake attempts called reforms, and calls for change—the emptiest of all catch-all terms. I think most of us *don't really believe we can win*. And so we yield to the hamster in us, get back on that wheel, and feel good about the chatter of change and the symbols of progress.

PERSPECTIVE: DR. MJIBA FREHIWOT

The symbol, legacy and foothold of colonialism is often manifested systematically through the creation and maintenance of institutions that reinforce the oppression and repression of African people. The essence and form changes depending on the space and time, but the contents of the container remain consistent. In this case colonialism represents the repression or control of one country or nation or people or community by another—by brute force, ideologically, economically, or politically. Colonialism or new colonialism is represented and reinforced using flags, statues, and monuments. These symbols of oppression are used to strengthen the ruling classes' ideology and justification for the continued exploitation of the majority. This is every present in Azania/South Africa, one of the most unequal nations in the world, where the rightful (Africans) owners of the land are displaced, pushed into settlements, given little voice, lack control of their (raw and human) resources, and are at the bottom of the class ladder. In these spaces race, class, and gender intersect and drives the markers of oppression. Statues and symbols of White Supremacy and colonialism litter the landscape. One simply must travel across South Africa physically, ideologically, politically, or socially to quickly discover that these symbols of colonialism are riddled through the country and the narrative it tells itself. This narrative is often created by individuals who have a vested interest in ensuring that the race and class-based divisions stay in-tact.

The #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements in Azania/South Africa struck at its core. The call through mass protests at the University of Cape Town and the University of Witwatersrand resonated across the African continent and throughout the African Diaspora. #RhodesMustFall was a both an extension of the Black Consciousness Movement and a call to decolonize education and society in Africa. Used as a springboard the fight against Cecil Rhodes and all colonial symbols of oppression was a metaphor for a #NeocolonialismMustFall campaign that has been waged for many years across Global Africa. #FeesMustFall was a movement that spread quickly across South Africa and throughout the world as a mantra for the need for a society in which education



and access to basic human rights is not based on class and race. These vestiges of colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization are symbols that reinforce the status quo through informal political education. This political education is dedicated to ensuring that the continued social order is maintained. However, these movements and protests remind us that the masses are not interested in bowing down to Cecil Rhodes, Ghandi (as in the case of Ghana, there was a # GandhiMustGo campaign) or other colonial, American, European, or oppressive figures. It is the people's power that will drive the masses to demolish more than these statues but the very system that erected these statues.

PERSPECTIVE: DR. TODD STEVEN BURROUGHS

America, as Dr. Greg Kimathi Carr of Africana Studies at Howard University has declared, translates into irony as the term goes into Black ears. As the Fifth of July approaches, that unique brand of *invisible-only-to-them* irony finds itself formed into brass and iron, and now toppled like, well, statues of imperialists, terrorists and tyrants. Statues mean much in/to America. Clubber Lang, that N-Word *Rocky* fans love to hate, [publicly embarrasses Rock and Adrian at the public unveiling of his statue](#). Ironically, that statue was real and was a Philadelphia landmark years until, out of embarrassment, the city commissioned one for its *real* (as in Black) boxing [champ, Joe Frazier](#). Myth is inseparable from the metal. Indiana Jones—that heroic embodiment of the West, that white man who went [around the world stealing artifacts](#) from world cultures—steals again [with the justification that “that belongs in a museum.”](#) He means *his* (college's) museum, where [his department chair, Marcus Brody](#), is the purchaser. That scene is a perfect symbol for all the West's attempts at civilization. As Indy grows older, he winds up, with private sadness and without any sense of historic justice or irony, [being indirectly responsible for the beheading of Brody's statue](#). Indy finally matures and [finds his heart's desire](#)—after directly benefiting from 30 years of pillaging. The perfect metaphor for the Western man's maturity arc. Since America is too ignorant, racist and ahistorical to be trusted with managing historic symbolism, the whole idea of statues belongs in a locked museum.



TOWN HALL AND RESOURCES

Town Hall

July 4, 2020 at 11 am: <https://www.crowdcast.io/blacklashcollective>

Resources

Books

Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 2007)

James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Russel, 1935)

Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYY7AFJQY4>

Films

Get Out (2017)