Counter-Monuments and Community Voices: Reimagining Public Spaces in the Wake of the Black Lives Matter Protests

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Abstract:
This paper explores the implications of statues and public monuments associated with colonial legacies in the context of societal change, particularly in light of the Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the death of George Floy in the US in 2020. It focuses on the case of the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, England, and its subsequent replacement with a temporary installation titled 'A Surge of Power'. The study employs sentiment analysis on a sample of 370 publicly available Facebook comments to gauge public perceptions regarding this act of defiance against historical symbols of oppression. The findings reveal a significant negative sentiment (64.3%) towards the installation, indicating widespread discontent among Bristol's citizens concerning how these issues were addressed, reflecting broader societal tensions around race and history. The paper argues that 'A Surge of Power' has served as a counter-monument, which can facilitate collective reflection and reimagine public urban spaces to align with demands for fairer social representation. It discusses the concept of the 'right to the city', emphasizing the public's desire for urban landscapes that reflect their aspirations for freedom, equality, and justice. Furthermore, the protests challenge the glorification of historical figures associated with colonialism and slavery, contributing to a growing discourse on the negative legacies of European colonialism and systemic racism. Ultimately, the paper highlights the discomfort experienced by both critics and activists regarding the toppling of Colston's statue and the unauthorized installation of 'A Surge of Power', suggesting that these events have sparked significant controversy and divided opinions within the community. Through this analysis, the paper advocates for a rethinking of public spaces to better represent diverse community voices and more egalitarian societies.

Keywords: *sentiment analysis; public urban spaces; counter-monuments; transatlantic slave trade; BLM*

I. Introduction

It is consolidated knowledge that 15th - 18th-century European colonialism has left numerous negative legacies such as enduring systemic racism, discrimination, and social marginalization of ethnic minority individuals (e.g., Blacks and indigenous communities) all across North and Latin American countries as already addressed in the literature (e.g., van Dijk, 2005; Golash-Boza, 2010; Wade, 2010; Sue and Golash-Boza, 2013; Telles and Bailey, 2013; Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar, 2015; Gordon-Reed, 2020).

Within that, a distinctive facet of the colonial legacy comprises an array of symbols strongly associated with that period, such as certain flags, terminologies, street names, sculptures, statues, and public monuments. In the case of flags regarded as strongly racist and disrespectful by the organized Black movement in the US, the Confederate Flag represents the most iconic symbol of white supremacy and object of strong criticism (Forman Jr., 1991; Holyfield et al., 2009).

As with the array of terminologies considered colonial racist legacies, the list is immense and includes for example: a) master bedroom, b) blacklist/whitelist, c) the masters' tournament, d) ghetto, e) peanut gallery, f) blackball, g) sold down the river, h) black magic, i) black market, j) black sheep, k) black humour, among many others (e.g., Barford, 2016; Coughian, 2016; Andrew and Kaur, 2020; Motala, 2021; Tayiana, 2022; May, 2023).

Having said that, what can be observed is the fact that the brutal assassination of George Floyd in the US in May 2020, has triggered a series of street demonstrations not only across the US but also in several other countries protesting against systemic racism and police brutality (Bennett et al., 2020; CNN, 2020; Goyette, 2020; Shubber, 2020; Pousadela, 2021; Shahin et al., 2021).

In many cities, the main target of protests comprised statues and public monuments strongly associated with enslavement of African people and European colonialism. The list of cities around the world and their respective historical figures object of protests is large, as displayed in Table 01. Briefly speaking, this array of historical figures shares a common trace of strong links to the transatlantic slave trade, exploitation of ethnic minorities and original peoples, extermination of indigenous communities, violent conquest of territories under the justification of bringing 'civilization' to them, and several other abuses.

Table 01: Global list of statues and monuments bearing historical figures object of protests

#	Country	Cities	Controversial Historical Figures
01	Argentina	Buenos Aires	Christopher Columbus
02	Belgium	Antwerp	King Leopold II
03	Bolivia	La Paz	Alonso de Mendonza
04	Brazil	São Paulo Salvador	Manuel de Borba Gato Antonio Dias de Oliveira Joaquim Pereira Marinho
05	Canada	Winnipeg	Queen Elizabeth II
06	Colombia	Barranquilla	Christopher Columbus
07	England	Bristol Dorchester Liverpool London Oxford Plymouth	Cecil Rhodes Edward Colston John Gordon John Hawkins Robert Milligan William Beckford William Gladstone
08	Scotland	Edinburgh	David Hume
09	USA	Boston Portland Richmond	Christopher Columbus George Washington Jefferson Davis Thomas Jefferson
10	Wales	Cardiff	Thomas Picton

Source: the author, based in a selection of several news articles

Nonetheless, what is relevant to discuss in the context of the present study, is the fact that these demonstrations have contributed to a growing reflection regarding the role played by statues and public monuments of historical figures linked to the enslavement of African people across North and Latin American countries between the 15th and 18th century. Protesters were expressing their disagreement with those symbols of glorification of historical figures deemed as oppressors. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to the understanding of the embedded meanings of discussions manifested on social media sparked by these street demonstrations.

To do so, the paper first provides a theoretical overview of the role played by statues and public monuments through the review of previous studies addressing this subject matter. Next, it introduces the case of the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, England, and its replacement by a temporary installation entitled 'A Surge of Power'. Then, it has been developed a sentiment analysis in a sample of publicly available 370 Facebook comments to gauge people's predominant perceptions about the activists defying act, and a critical reflection about the predominant themes emerged from the thread of comments. The Concluding Thoughts section weaves together the key findings revealed in the study, in combination with the arguments raised in the critical analysis.

Consequently, what is advocated in this paper is that 'A Surge of Power', which can be characterised as a 'counter-monument' as conceptualised by Young (1993), can become a powerful vector for societal change, collective reflections, and reimagining of public urban spaces in alignment with people's demand for fairer and more meaningful social representation.

II. The Role Played by Statues and Public Monuments

The literature reveals that, from a historical perspective, statues, sculptures, and public monuments erected on squares, parks and other public spaces, have served as powerful symbols of national identity, heritage, and collective memory. They are usually created to celebrate or praise influential historical figures or significant events, embodying societal values and political ideologies nurtured by certain social groups (Little, 2013; Deegan, 2018).

In fact, there are authors who argue that statues and public monuments are not merely passive markers of history, but rather active agents in shaping how societies remember the past. Besides, Nora

(1989) also advocates that they play the role of anchoring collective memory in physical space. They are imbued with cultural and political significance, as they reflect the values of the time in which they were created and, usually, also the power dynamics that influence what is worth to be remembered and praised, in opposition to what is better to be forgotten.

If we consider, for example, the era of modernity during the late 19th century and early 20th century, when several countries were building their national identity, it was normal for the ruling elite to praise historical symbols associated with their ideas and perceptions of progress and success. Then, this contributes to our understanding of the erection of statues and monuments of several of the historical figures listed in Table 01, given that from the perspective of the elite, they embodied such values.

However, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and across the globe sparked by the assassination of George Floyd in 2020, it has also emerged a collective sentiment of questioning the meaning of statues and public monuments praising historical figures strongly associated with oppression and brutality. Thus, in the same way that the assassination of George Floyd embodied the struggles and suffering of Black people and other ethnic minority groups around the world, the historical colonial figures represented in statues and public monuments embodied the ultimate symbol of the oppressor.

Among the different forms of protests, the most iconic and representative has been the act of taking down several of these statues and public monuments, as widely covered by the international press (e.g., BBC, 2020; Langfitt, 2020; van Hensbergen, 2020; Mohdin and Storer, 2021). Besides, what is also interesting to observe is that many years before these episodes, other iconic events have also triggered similar demonstrations. In this context, when the former Soviet Union's regime collapsed in November 1989, people took to the streets of Berlin to take down the wall dividing West Germany and East Germany, which used to represent the ultimate symbol of the Cold War era (Duffy et al., 1989; BBC, 2019).

Subsequently, there were also street demonstrations, for instance, in Bucharest in Romania in 1990, and in Vilnius in Lithuania in 1991 to take down the statues of Vladimir Lenin as a way to express their desire to break the ties with the old Soviet regime (Times, 1990; LRT, 2021). Likewise, in April 2003, after Saddam Hussein had been overthrown from power in Iraq, people mobilised to take down his statues given that they represented an idea of tyranny (von Tunzelmann, 2021). More recently, in December 2024, there were street demonstrations in Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, and Hama in Syria to take down the statues of former president Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez al-Assad, brutal, and oppressive, whose administrations have been deemed abusive (BBC, 2024; France 24, 2024; Guardian, 2024).

Thus, it can be observed that the combination of this sample of events, is in alignment with a phenomenon known as 'the right to the city', as coined by Lefebvre (1968), meaning peoples' right to shape and reimagining urban spaces in ways that reflect their needs, desires, and aspirations (e.g., demands for freedom, justice, or more meaningful social representation displayed in public spaces).

Consequently, although several critics have argued that the protests sparked by the death of George Floyd might represent an effort to rewrite history, the phenomenon can be seen from a diverse perspective. It can be considered that the demonstrators' aim was more towards challenging the legitimacy of having common public spaces praising figures strongly associated with oppression, brutality, abuse, land invasion and possession, and violation of human rights. In this context, it can be observed that Nasar (2020) argues that, in the case of the toppling of Edward Colston's statue, it has offered a unique opportunity for Bristol, and the UK in general, to meaningfully confront and understand its own history.

III. The Case of Bristol's Edward Colston's Statue

Edward Colston was a 17th-century British merchant, whose immense wealth was largely derived from his direct and active involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. His statue was erected in 1895 as a remembrance and praise of his philanthropic gestures, which had been considered to represent significant contributions to Bristol's development. Nonetheless, for a long time, his statue has been the subject of contention in the city due to Colston's tainted biography. For many years, activists and other influential voices in Bristol have been calling for the removal of the statue, since they argue it represents a glorification of a man whose wealth was built on the suffering and exploitation of enslaved African individuals (Nasar, 2020; Moody, 2021).

Then, what has turned the case of Bristol's Black Lives Matter street demonstrations quite unique in comparison to many others around the world, comprises the fact that it did not involve just the toppling of Colston's statue. In fact, in the aftermath of the statue's removal, the Londoner artist Marc Quinn installed an unauthorised statue entitled 'A Surge of Power' (see Figure 01).

Figure 01: Close up view of 'A Surge of Power' installation

Source: Cruse (2020)

This artwork (made out of black resin) depicted Jen Reid, a Black female activist, with her fist raised, emulating the iconic Black Power salute gesture (as originally made by Tommie Smith and John Carlos in the Mexico Summer Olympic Games in October 1968), which represents a gesture of defiance and solidarity associated with the fight for racial justice (Burke, 2023; Nittle, 2024).

Besides, it can also be noticed that on social media, Marc Quinn's installation was seen by many users as a symbolic representation of resistance and Black empowerment, intertwined with a gender dimension, particularly in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement.

It is also possible to observe that 'A Surge of Power' installation can be situated in the broader tradition known as 'counter-monuments', as explained by Young (1993). According to the author, 'counter-monuments' are deliberately ephemeral or unconventional forms of celebration that challenge the traditional role of public monuments as permanent installations meant to reinforce mainstream cultural values. In fact, not by chance, the installation was made out of resin, in contrast with Colston's which was made out of durable bronze.

Nonetheless, the installation also raised heated public debates (especially manifested on social media) regarding the role of public space, the legality of unauthorised artwork, and the extent to which such interventions resonate with the public interest.

Additionally, the role of unauthorised artwork and installations such as 'A Surge of Power' raises questions concerning the legitimacy and impact of these acts. Public art, when installed without official approval can trigger strong reactions, given that they challenge existing power structures. Moreover, they can also be considered either as a form of rebellion or vandalism, depending on the viewer's perspective (Hutton, 1993).

IV. Sentiment Analysis of Facebook Comments

Given the heated debates and controversies sparked by 'A Surge of Power' installation and manifested on social media, it has been decided to conduct a sentiment analysis over a sample of 370 publicly available Facebook comments published on 'Bristol 24/7' page, however safeguarding users' privacy as recommended in previous studies exploring social media textual data (e.g., Zimmer, 2010; Salmons and Woodfield, 2013; Kosinski et al., 2015; Trindade, 2019; 2020a). This means to say that the study does not disclose users' real names, aliases, or any form of individual identification.

Despite the unintended limitation of the study, given that this sentiment analysis may not capture the wider public opinion, even so it provides invaluable empirical data that allows a nuanced understanding of portion of community's sentiment concerning this particular event. The sample of comments covers a two-month period following the installation of 'A Surge of Power' that took place on 15 July 2020.

Following a similar approach adopted in previous studies employing sentiment analysis on Facebook posts (e.g., Pudaruth et al., 2018), the page containing the sample of comments was saved as a single 57-page long PDF file and uploaded on NVivo software for subsequent categorisation (i.e., negative, positive, and neutral). The data was then explored in an iterative process of interrogation in order to allow the emergence of the most meaningful recurring themes.

Out of the sample of 370 comments, 238 of them (i.e., 64.3%) were found to contain negative sentiments, while 69 (18.7%) were found to contain positive sentiments, and the remaining 63 (17%) were considered neutral. Thus, the sentiment analysis revealed that the negative reactions towards 'A Surge of Power' installation primarily revolved around five themes.

1. ***Illegality of installation:*** One of the most significant criticisms was that the statue was erected without proper authorization. The artist Marc Quinn openly acknowledged that he was breaking planning regulations and intended to install the statue regardless of the legal implications. This disregard for established laws and regulations was a focal point of criticism, emphasizing that no one has the right to bypass legal processes.
   In this context, a user commented: "While I understand the anger behind toppling Colston's statue, replacing it with something unauthorized is just as wrong. Who gets to decide what goes in our public spaces?"

2. ***Potential for division and unrest:*** Critics have argued that the timing and manner of the statue's installation was intended to provoke division within Bristol's community. Some believe that the act of placing the statue, especially in a politically charged environment, was a deliberate attempt to incite unrest rather than foster dialogue about racial issues.
   According to a user: "The BLM should have kept their protest peaceful, using their slogan 'black lives matter' within the boundaries of that agenda. Becoming violent and starting to push a white supremacy agenda has caused more division than it has helped to cause unity."

3. ***Comparison to previous statues:*** The installation of 'A Surge of Power' has been compared to the removal of Colston's statue, which was also controversial. Some argue that both actions have caused friction in the city, indicating that the unauthorized nature of Jen Reid's statue could lead to similar backlash and unrest as seen with the Colston statue's removal. This comparison has raised concerns about the implications of such actions on community harmony.
   In this context, it can be highlighted the following comment: "The statue was put up illegally in the same way as Colston's statue was removed, both causing friction across the city which did not exist to this extent previously. The issue is the manner in which Colston's statue was removed. If a democratic decision to remove was made then these debates and arguments would not be happening to this extent."

4. ***Public offence and backlash:*** There were claims that 'A Surge of Power' had caused offence to certain groups within the community. The potential for the statue to provoke negative reactions and unrest has been highlighted, suggesting that its presence could lead to further conflict rather than resolution of the issues it aimed to address.
   One user said: "Colston's statue had been placed there with permission, although people have claimed it was offensive. It has been illegally removed by force, which might have caused unrest. However, if you do not agree with the original statue there, you should follow the correct channels."

5. ***Questionable artistic merit:*** Some critics have questioned the artistic merit of the installation, and also that the artist Marc Quinn would not be qualified enough to create a representative piece of art to be displayed in public space (probably, unbeknownst by many critics that Marc Quinn is, in reality, a renowned contemporary visual artist).
   Within this context, it can be observed that a user has expressed a strong criticism of the work and the artist alike. In reply to some comments that have established parallels between Marc Quinn's installation and Banksy's artistic works, this particular user aggressively rebutted the comparison by saying: "The difference between Banksy and this Marxist work is, first, no one knows who this Marc Quinn is and, secondly, this Marxist crap would not be made in daylight, because people know the truth and this silly little girl (Jen Reid) does not deserve a statue."

Having said that, another interesting aspect that emerged from the thread of negative comments is the fact that, although the debates were quite intense and sometimes even aggressive, the language and vocabulary employed by users were surprisingly respectful. Running a word frequency analysis in the

negative comments, has allowed us to observe first, the absence (or minimal presence) of swear words and vulgarity. Secondly, the words most commonly used in an aggressive manner to express disagreement were: a) Marxist, b) left, c) friction, d) mob, e) anarchy, f) extreme, g) provocative, h) division, i) illegally, j) ridiculous, k) fascist, l) hijacked, and m) brainwash. However, as can be seen in Figure 02, these words are less prevalent than many other 'normal' and 'mild ones' such as: a) statue, b) people, c) Black, d) white, e) UK, f) Bristol, g) BLM, etc.

This aspect can be considered relevant because the literature reveals that oftentimes, social media users tend to employ harsh and vulgar vocabulary with plenty of swear words in heated debates to impose their views no matter what, intimidate people, and humiliate opposing voices (Moor et al., 2010; Tagg et al., 2017; Trindade, 2020b; 2024).

Figure 02: Word cloud of negative comments

Source: the author

On the other hand, what regards the comments in support of 'A Surge of Power' installation, it was possible to identify six predominant themes manifested in the thread of posts as explained below.

1. ***Art as a statement:*** Supporters have argued that the statue has served as a powerful artistic statement. It was placed deliberately to provoke thought and discussions about race and colonial legacy, highlighting the importance of meaningful social representation in public spaces. The act of placing it on the plinth under the cover of darkness was seen as a bold artistic move, emphasising the urgency of the message it conveys.

   In this instance, it can be highlighted the following comment: "This was actually a piece of art. A statement. Provocatively placed on the plinth. Expecting it to be removed. Raising awareness. For just one day. And now it will deservedly go in a museum (or be returned to its owner)."

2. ***Temporary nature:*** Many supporters have acknowledged that the statue was always intended to be a temporary installation. This aspect was often highlighted to argue that its purpose was to create a moment of reflection and dialogue rather than to permanently alter the urban landscape. The brief existence of the statue allowed it to fulfil its role as a catalyst for conversation about race and historical narratives.

   As said by another user: "The installation was not fixed on the plinth as Colton's statue used to be because the artist did not want it to be permanent. If he did, I am sure he would have cast it in bronze, rather than resin. From the start, it was meant to be a temporary statement".

3. ***Community engagement:*** The statue was also viewed by some users as a way to engage the community in discussions about racism and social justice. Supporters have believed that its presence, even for a short period of time, has enriched the lives of those who encountered it and has provided a platform for voices that have historically been marginalised.

   In this line of reflection, a user has commented: "Looks like the artist achieved exactly what was intended. A temporary art installation to encourage the debate to continue. The current thread of

comments shows how ingrained racism is in our society, with people expressing their outrage that this art has broken the law rather than commenting on the real issues of racial oppression, and supporting equality and diversity in our community."

4. **Challenging racism:** Many comments have emphasised the need to actively fight against racism, and the statue was seen as a symbol of this struggle. Supporters have argued that the backlash against the statue often stems from underlying racial tensions, and the installation was a necessary step in addressing these issues.

Within that, an interesting example of a comment has argued that: "Jen Reid's statue is an art installation that was always meant to be temporary. However, what bothers and upsets me the most is the amount of racial hatred aimed at this statue of a Black woman and that is one of the reasons we need to actively fight racism!"

5. **Historical context:** Supporters have also pointed out that the statue has served the purpose of challenging the historical narratives represented by other statues, such as Edward Colston's. By placing a statue of a Black woman in a prominent location, it has sought to rectify the historical imbalance and provide a more inclusive representation of Bristol's history.

Then, as a user has said: "Jen Reid's statue has fulfilled its purpose beautifully. It has invited us to consider how we feel about the statue of a historical figure whose wealth came from trading human lives being replaced by a contemporary piece of art portraying a Black woman asking for equality. Not reparations, not supremacy, just equality. It is interesting that to some people, the feeling is outrage and offence. The next step, which you can only take if you choose, is to ask why you find that offensive."

6. **Artistic freedom:** The argument for artistic freedom was also present, with supporters asserting that artists should have the right to express their views and create works that challenge societal norms. The act of placing the statue, despite its illegality, was framed as an act of civil disobedience aimed at sparking necessary conversations about race and history.

Then, in line with this reflection, a user posted the following comment: "The statue was made by a renowned artist, Marc Quinn, who saw the image of Jen Reid standing on the plinth and it moved him to create this artistic statement. That statement was then made more powerful by placing it in the exact spot where Ms Reid stood."

Finally, similar to what has been observed in the negative comments, the language and vocabulary employed by the supporters of the installation have kept an educated level, in the sense that it was not identified the relevant presence of swear words and neither excessively aggressive, vulgar or violent language (see Figure 03). Indeed, it was possible to identify that the predominant words comprised: a) statue, b) Black, c) white, d) people, e) Colston, f) art, g) statement, h) plinth, i) removed, j) against, k) history, l) community, and m) museum.

Figure 03: Word cloud of positive comments
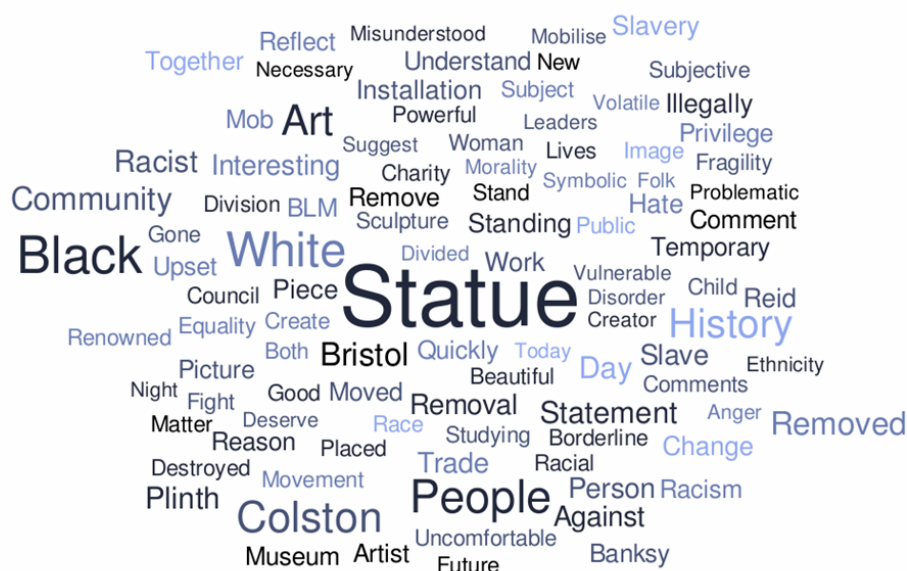
Source: the author

V. Concluding Thoughts

The study on the removal of colonial statues and public monuments provides significant insights into the ongoing debates surrounding public symbols associated with colonialism. The analysis of a sample of Facebook comments has revealed a complex landscape of public sentiment, highlighting both the contentious nature of these discussions and the underlying themes that emerge from them.

The sentiment analysis conducted in this sample has indicated that a substantial portion of the comments (64.3%) expressed negative sentiments towards the installation of 'A Surge of Power', while only 18.7% were positive. This result suggests a prevailing discontent among Bristol's citizens regarding the manner in which the matter was addressed, reflecting broader societal tensions around race, history, the rule of law, and urban public spaces.

Moreover, the data also suggests that not only the toppling of Edward Colston's statue has sparked controversies and divided opinions among Bristol's citizens, but also its replacement with an unauthorised installation (albeit conceptualised as a temporary artistic intervention). In this context, it is interesting to notice that the situation has contributed to the emergence of a common underlying sentiment among critics and activists alike: that is, discomfort.

On the one hand, activists were protesting against Edward Colston's statue because they felt uncomfortable with that visible symbol glorifying a historical figure strongly associated with the transatlantic slave trade, oppression and systemic racism. On the other hand, critics were uncomfortable with 'A Surge of Power' not only due to its lack of formal prior authorisation but also because they did not feel represented by it (or they did not feel part of its subjacent symbology).

Nonetheless, discomfort can become a powerful force to mobilise societal change. Indeed, the American writer and activist James Baldwin once said that "not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until is faced" (McIvor, 2016, p. xi). In complement to this argumentation, Ribeiro (2019) is another author who also argues that discomfort is necessary to trigger effective changes in racialised and discriminatory social settings, otherwise systems of oppression and privileges restricted to a handful of people remain permanently unchallenged.

Additionally, the study has also revealed that the toppling of Edward Colston's statue was not an isolated act in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protest, in the sense that there were similar demonstrations across several cities around the world (see Table 01), and neither the first nor last of its kind in history. There have been similar protests before the one observed in Bristol and even after that in diverse countries such as Germany in 1989, Romania in 1990, Lithuania in 1991, Iraq in 2003, and more recently Syria in 2024.

Besides, the combination of these events contributes to the understanding of two important aspects. First, these manifestations fall in the concept of the 'right to the city' as conceptualised by Lefebvre (1968), and they reflect people's desire for societal change in the urban landscape to reflect their demands for freedom, elimination of racism, and fairer and more egalitarian societies. Secondly, they challenge the line of criticism that use to claim that such acts are attempts to rewrite history, since the protesters' aim is to contest the glorification of visible symbols associated with oppression and abuse.

In conclusion, this study underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of public sentiment surrounding statues and public monuments linked to adverse colonial legacies and the importance of inclusive dialogue in shaping urban spaces. Engaging the public in discussions about these symbols can foster a more inclusive urban environment. Ultimately, the installation of the counter-monument 'A Surge of Power', despite its lack of prior formal authorisation as widely criticised and even acknowledged by the artist himself, has contributed to sparking collective reflection and debate regarding Bristol's public urban space, critical thinking about their past, and how they want to project their future.

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