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## On Disruption

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The Prime Minister's tweets last month in response to the toppling of Edward Colston's statue into Bristol Harbour epitomise a simplistic viewpoint that conflates disruption with destruction. "We cannot pretend to have a different history", he wrote. "[T]hose statues teach us about our past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history and impoverish the education of generations to come" (@BorisJohnson). In fact, it is such statues themselves that whitewash history, honouring a certain stratum of society that profited from Empire, without acknowledging any of its glaring "faults", such as slavery and racism. In reality, it is our education system that lies by omission and has already impoverished the education of generations by failing to tell the full story about this nation's prosperity.

The Jamaican poet Kei Miller sees the statue's toppling more positively, suggesting that the protests allow us to expand the narrow definition of art represented by statuary:

... was the statue even 'destroyed'? By changing its location, those protesters profoundly changed the conversation and made it resonant and dynamic and meaningful in a way it hasn't been for years. And all of it – the statue's initial placement, its disturbing history, the petitions to have it removed, its eventual displacement, its assignment to water, the sudden deep echo of history, all of that is the art... They did not destroy Edward Colston's statue. In a strange way, by drowning the art object, they brought it roaring back to life.

Another creative practitioner, the artist Anthony Schrag, champions "the understanding that tension is what gives culture structure," whereas funding bodies all too often "wish... to see art projects as a way of erasing difference and multiplicity" (92). Dr Schrag's interest is in the productive role of conflict in the context of public and participatory art, but in the academic context, he has also suggested that 'disruption' should be as valued as the metrics 'engagement', 'participation' and 'impact'.

During the UCU strikes over the past academic year, Edinburgh students demonstrated the creative potential of disruption in academia. Members of the Staff-Student Solidarity Network occupied buildings including the David Hume Tower (which they renamed after the Gaelic poet Màiri Mhòr nan Òran), and staged a series of 'teach-in' events addressing issues as urgent and diverse as mental health advocacy, the ethics of the climate strikes, and the commodification of student lifestyles. Student journalists have also been at the forefront of

investigating the labour conditions of PhD tutors, reaching the damning conclusion that “tutorial leaders are systematically exploited” (Alford et al.).

It remains to be seen whether universities will welcome the transformative possibilities of the current crisis to effect real change. The University of Edinburgh’s statement in response to the death of George Floyd is encouraging, though its promise to “seek to pluralise teaching and learning” remains somewhat vague and tentative. Will universities, including Edinburgh, use post-Covid restructuring as an opportunity to attract and advance BAME students and staff, as a matter of urgency and in the long term? Will the financial shock disproportionately affect staff and students who identify as BAME, women, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds – or will universities instead rethink the marketisation and casualisation of teaching that has caused precarity for increasing numbers of staff? Will universities see the shift to online teaching as an opportunity to decolonise curricula and to redesign exclusionary and ableist teaching methods? Can the monolithic structures of the ancient universities emerge from this period of unprecedented disruption to come roaring back to a new kind of life?

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## Author Biography

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Dorothy Lawrenson is co-editor of *FORUM* and is completing her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh, having earned an MFA from Texas State University. Her critical research explores how formal features depend on context to influence tone and thereby voice and meaning in the work of TS Eliot, WH Auden and Louis MacNeice. Her poetry is concerned with landscape and especially with rivers, estuaries and shorelines. Her poems have appeared in anthologies including *Best Scottish Poetry*, *A Year of Scottish Poems* and *Best New British and Irish Poets 2019*. She writes in English and in Scots.