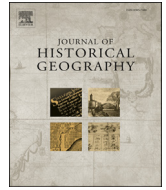




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Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg



Historical Geography at Large Colston falling

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 July 2020

Accepted 31 July 2020

ABSTRACT

On June 7th, 2020, the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol City Centre was pulled down by an anonymous group of Black Lives Matter protestors following a global uprising against police brutality in the wake of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. This article combines a first-person account of the build-up to the statue falling and its aftermath with reflections on some of the broader debates, historical and current, around public monuments, state violence, and collective life.

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Crowding

**GEORGE
FLOYD
RIP¹**



in scrubbed-out black letters on Colston's plinth on the way to the demo, 12.48pm. We meet, a group of four, with face-masks and lockdown-tired greetings. I'm the first there and the railings by the cinema are warm. Today is one of those days when you encounter space boldly, when the city isn't a collection of sites to go towards or return from. We're in a terrain of temporary holding places. So many hundreds are passing us by, heading up the hill. We are anxious and unsure of each other's boundaries – is this ok? Here? 1pm. We start with a silence. Far back, behind the trees, it looks like everyone is wearing black. Up ahead, Palestine in two red-white-green-black flags. Knees to the ground, fists pushed forward, and silence.

I UNDERSTAND

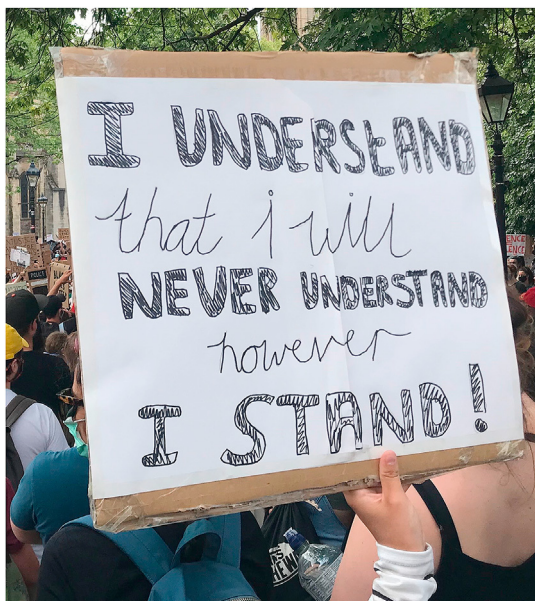
that i will

NEVER UNDERSTAND

however

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¹ Graffiti on the Edward Colston Statue, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 12:48pm. Associated image from author, used with permission.

I STAND²

College Green is concrete poetry on cardboard signs. We have not been this close to so many others since the middle of March. My breath gets caught in small currents behind a blue and white surgical mask.

We don't need words, we need action.

We hear bursts of speeches from up ahead, past the trees. Three of us move closer; one of us stays back. The speakers are low down, invisible from here. We cannot see their faces. Jade says, 'I am nervous. I need to start again'. She talks about Ghana and protecting the living, 'single mums and Black babies and grandmas and grandads'.³ Someone moves back and forth behind big speakers: 'John, ACAB'.⁴ 'Why isn't anyone helping get the cop off him'. 'Remember Mark Duggan, we remember'. 'Will there always be war?' John turns to the crowd and helps us catch our breath:

I love you I love you I love you I just intuitively do.

We are more proximate than the economy of discretion. Forty thousand dead by June. Someone is never coming back.

I am not thinking about the making of public memory. I am thinking about the sun and the mass, turning back to see where our friend is, trying not to look too hard at other people's faces. We are not supposed to be here so close together, but no one is stopping us. In London, the Met charged protestors on horseback. Someone said that it was a shame that someone tried to hurt a horse with a bicycle, and didn't it undermine the movement. In Houston, Black folks in masks arrived to the BLM demo on horseback. I cannot share this image with everyone.

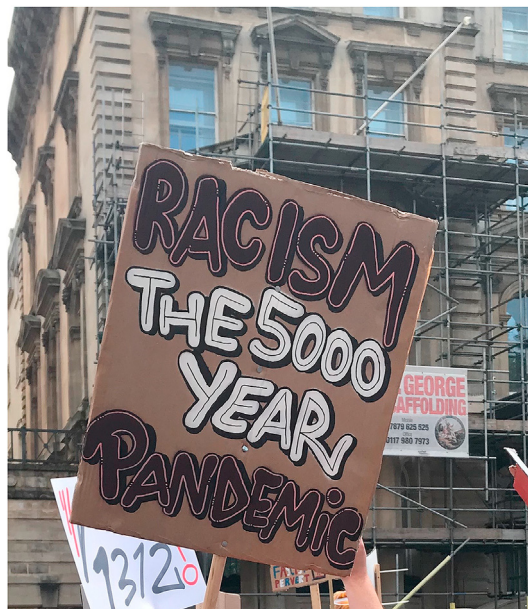
I am not thinking about the making of public memory, but it is happening.

² Placard on College Green, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 2:08pm. Associated image from author, used with permission.

³ Jade, 'Speech on Black Lives Matter', *Bristol Black Lives Matter Protest*. College Green, Bristol, 7 June 2020. This was a public event, circulated through Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/events/college-green-bristol/bristol-black-lives-matter-protest/1240925162922800/> last accessed September 22, 2021.

⁴ John, 'Speech on Black Lives Matter', *Bristol Black Lives Matter Protest*. College Green, Bristol, 7 June 2020. John's introduction included the use of anti-police acronym, ACAB: All Cops Are Bastards.

**RACISM
THE 5000
YEAR
PANDEMIC⁵**



The crowd drops to one knee. Up the hill, pouring down from the Wills Memorial Building, people are kneeling, spilling over pavements in clusters, in pairs, alone. We have not exchanged many words since we met. We have not caught up on the last few months. We are turned outwards.

Eight minutes and forty-six seconds

There are people playing music and talking at the back of the crowd, near the cinema. Someone yells at them to turn it off and shut up. Then College Green is silent. Park Street is silent. The hum of the world is with us, a low murmur passing over hearts and lungs, pressing on ears. I can hear a ringing from somewhere at great distance. This is the freedom of breathing through throats constricted by the force of holding down tears. *I love you I love you I love you I just intuitively do*. The city centre is silent, and the anxious noise of its signs dies down: TO LET/MAURETANIA/GEORGE — SCAFFOLDING - shop, ship, construction site - written over, streets with blurring edges and filled corners. We have dropped into the crevice of another person's time.

The centre becomes a smaller space when thousands decide to become its short-term public dwellers. Meaning is on the move, down the hill. We carry the silence round a corner and past two sets of traffic lights. Someone has put a black sheet over Colston, and tied a rope around his knees. We are in a rhythm of collective silence, and he is shrouded in death. We move towards him, moving with it.

COLSTON

⁵ Placard and signage outside Bristol Marriott Hotel, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 2:11pm. Associated image from author, used with permission.

MUST FALL⁶



on white painted cardboard in black letters, underlined in gold, stuck on the opposite side to George Floyd's name. Someone is writing 'FUCK COLSTON' in dripping black ink, and someone has sprayed a Black fist.⁷ The shroud falls lightly over twisted fish, tails curling up towards him and over their huge heads, mouths gaping.

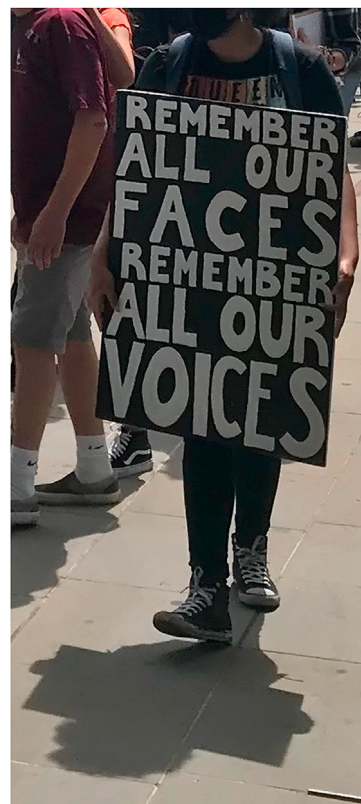


**REMEMBER
ALL OUR
FACES
REMEMBER
ALL OUR**

⁶ Placard on the Edward Colston statue, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 2:20pm. Associated image from author, used with permission.

⁷ Graffiti on the Edward Colston statue, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 2:21pm. Associated Image from author, used with permission.

VOICES⁸



Striking

Where should history take place, and how? Caroline Bressey documents her hesitation about writing on collaborations outside the academy with community scholars, teachers, archivists, heritage practitioners, and outreach workers, 'I think mainly because I assumed it would not be of particular interest to peer reviewed academic journals'.⁹ But as she also notes, most Black British history is done in spaces outside the academy. Meleisa Ono-George writes, 'Across the country, Black folks working *outside* of the institution and history departments have been at the vanguard of Black British history'.¹⁰ Departing from the premise of the power not just of knowing, but the power of the telling, Ono-George urges a consideration of the 'process and politics of its production'.¹¹

Katherine McKittrick traces Black histories through 'cartographies of struggle'.¹² The project of dismantling the manifold infrastructures of enslavement is embedded in the possibilities for doing Black history. This attends to the where and how of Black histories in the psychogeography of everyday life, commemorating plurality while breaking apart colonial foundations that have cordoned and foreclosed parameters of survival and resistance.

⁸ Placard on the Edward Colston Statue, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020. 2:22pm. Associated image from author, used with permission.

⁹ C. Bressey, Archival Interventions: participatory research and public historical geographies, *Journal of Historical Research* 46 (2014) 103.

¹⁰ M. Ono-George, 'Power in the Telling': Community-engaged histories of Black-Britain, *History Workshop* (2019) n.p., <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/power-in-the-telling/> last accessed September 22, 2021.

¹¹ Ono-George, Power in the Telling, n.p.

¹² K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Documenting memory as public history is not just a question of literacy and platform; it is fraught with policings of tone, voice, and accuracy. Toni Morrison reminds us that autobiographical narratives of the formerly enslaved were ‘frequently scorned as “biased”, “inflammatory”, and “improbable”’, and that this placed pressure on their authors ‘to appear as objective as possible – not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names’.¹³ Instead, they ‘pull the narrative up short’ rather than ‘descend deeply into the dark and noisome caverns of the hell of slavery (Henry Box Brown)’.¹⁴ These elisions of personal testimony for the sake of entrance into public history might seem in contrast to the multiple images of enslaved and tortured Black people that circulated as part of abolitionist consciousness-raising. But also obscured are Black narratives of Black interiorities, in favour of spectacles of Black pain designed to shock white audiences. Here, history-making is not the inevitable and on-going gathering of facts, but the assembly of memory into a hierarchy of polite forms: civilisation as perpetual smoothing. It is also place-making, because it sculpts the rhythms of the everyday in saying who and what is significant to gazes that sweep up and down on their way to somewhere else, in micro-moments that shape both routine and irregular journeys through public space.

Falling

We are behind him now. The clouds are roiling, passing over the sun in heavy tides. People are coming down the hill, thousands of them stopping to turn towards him. We are not being careful with our bodies and our breath is coming back steadier. A space clears. He is a shadow on pale concrete, a tall thin outline marking time. We are watching, heads turned up to the covered man, phones out. He is surrounded, and we know what is about to happen.

**SLAVE
TRADER
SCUM¹⁵**



This is a spectacle of public spectres, capital punishment for a dead man. He is captive now, and blind. From here, he looks decapitated. ‘Take him down, take him down’. For a moment it looks like everyone will watch, but people have come prepared. More ropes, and a quick scaling of the empty sarcophagus, limbs for footholds. People cheer. Someone has reached the top.

We have been waiting so long to exhale.¹⁶

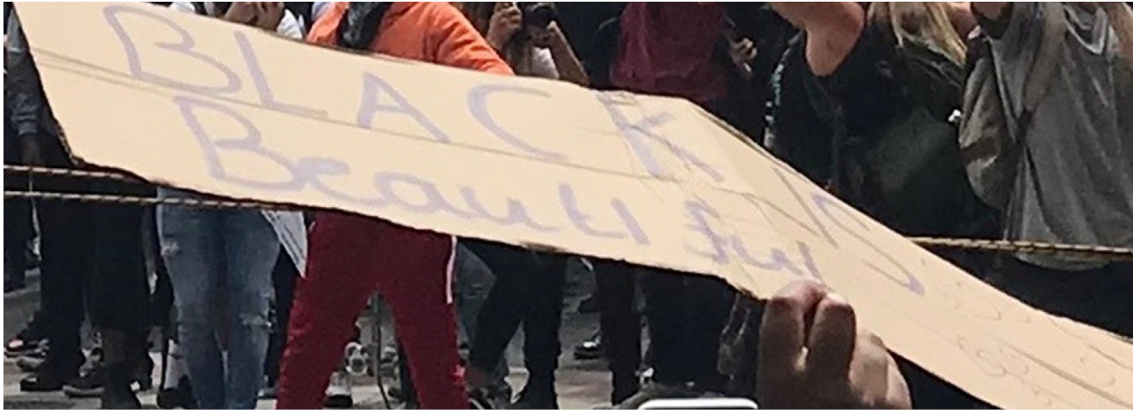
His head is lassoed now, and from the back it looks like his hands are tied in front of his body. We cannot shout properly; our throats are tight with swallowed grief. The mask catches my cries and pushes the sound sideways and back into my ears. A group of them holding the ropes: uprising as precision. A long time coming, and the only possible outcome.

¹³ T. Morrison, The Site of Memory, in: W. Zinsler (ed), *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Houghton Mifflin, 1995, 87.

¹⁴ Morrison, The Site of Memory, 90.

¹⁵ Placard on the Edward Colston Statue, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 2:24pm. Associated image from author, used with permission.

¹⁶ Nathaniel Adam Tobias C——, after Whitney Houston. Private communication with author, June 7, 2020.

**BLACK IS
BEAUTIFUL**¹⁷

When he falls, it happens and happens again, trailing through air in slow-motion over half-second time, shadows rising up from the ground to pull him low. People rush to jump, to smash, to break him down.

Standing ovation on the platform of your Neck.¹⁸

I am fixed to this bench I have found myself standing on, trying to call out, but the noise keeps getting caught in the fluid movement of his body sinking to the ground, the vast audacity, the taste of metal and salt.

Victors wish history odourless and static
but history is a sneaky mistress
moves like smoke, Colston,
like saliva in a hungry mouth.¹⁹

He is grotesque as a figure on the ground, something smaller, lighter,

and inside
nothing but air.
This whole time
You were hollow.²⁰

Participating

The chief sergeant said he'd held his officers back. He knew it was an important moment and there would have been no point in intervening. Then we learned that Simeon Francis had died in a police cell in Torquay two weeks earlier, in May: 'I can't breathe'.²¹ In late June, Bristol Police released grainy images of faces belonging to those they suspected pulled the statue down. Cycling round a

corner, one of those faces is cheered by Star and Garter regulars leaning near each other on the green between Montpelier and St Pauls, buying distanced pints through a hole in the wall.

Criminalisation as knee-jerk mourning for a fading supremacy. Releasing the photos was a ritual of vicious grief, and pulling up Colston from the bottom of the harbour an ill-attended wake for history as rational consensus.

You who perfected the ratio.
Blood to sugar to money to bricks.²²

Something isn't coming back. An archive of the event in fifteen blurred images, faces in a grid, masked and concentrating, snatched and zoomed in on. A twenty-four-year-old man is arrested.

In the eyes of the law a crime has been committed.²³

Christina Sharpe describes wakes as processes: 'through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory', currents of air and water, and promise a rising consciousness.²⁴ Public monuments are active mediations between topography and time, holding-places for participatory mnemonics. Colston faced the harbour, surveying cargo routes, commemorating the city's passage of wealth. Those watery routes bore the wakes of unmarked mass graves along the Middle Passage, sites for the production of 'blackness as abjection'.²⁵ Which of these have been sites of public memory, and what publics do they invoke? McKittrick reads a photograph of the auction block at Green Hill Plantation in Virginia as a material geography, something set apart from sketches or prints used as evidence in anti-slavery texts and pamphlets, with their images of plantations and torture.²⁶ The photograph of this empty auction block, made of stone slabs and devoid of plaques or people, 'provokes my imagination in a different way', its

¹⁷ Placard near the Edward Colston Statue, Bristol, UK. June 7, 2020, 2:31pm. Associated image from author, used with permission, cropped to protect identities.

¹⁸ V. Kisuule, Hollow. This poem was written and performed by Bristol based poet Vanessa Kisuule in response to the toppling of the Edward Colston statue. Uploaded to You Tube June 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3DKfak50AU> last accessed 23 September 2021.

¹⁹ Kisuule, Hollow, n.p..

²⁰ Kisuule, Hollow, n.p..

²¹ BBC News, Simeon Francis: Police investigated over 'I can't breathe' video, June 19, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-53108698> last accessed July 12, 2020.

²² Kisuule, Hollow, n.p..

²³ I. Braddick, Police release images of 15 people wanted over Edward Colston statue toppling, *Evening Standard*, June 22, 2020. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/colston-statue-police-appeal-images-wanted-suspects-a4475706.html> last accessed July 12, 2020.

²⁴ C. Sharpe, Black Studies: In the Wake, *The Black Scholar* 44.2 (2014) 60.

²⁵ Sharpe, Black Studies, 63.

²⁶ K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 65.

composition at a distance from more instantly visceral forms of evidence.²⁷ The block's un-occupation, its lack of immediate narratives about the people who stood on it, their names, genealogies, and personal histories, 'demonstrate the ways in which a physical geography can be mediated by the space of the subject: the body, the self, identity, and subjectivity'.²⁸ The site signals 'the ways in which physical geographies are enmeshed with social processes'.²⁹ The empty block normalises black pain, commodifies 'black working-sexual bodies', and also 'potentially motivates resistances to the naturalised place of black femininity'.³⁰ A plaque-less public monument, it commemorates what Joy James describes as the birth of 'a new nation (a nascent empire) that fed on black frames'.³¹ This history produces the undocumented and the unremembered, its 'unintentional shadow twin'.³²

The politics of participating in public mnemonics is a site of struggle. In Virginia, the auction block was a legislated and public truth. In Bristol, we gathered around a plinth that was constructed to hold an effigy and an energy, a way of being, a declaration about the world and the way we should understand our habitation within it. It had been decreed, time and time again, that the shadows that surrounded Colston should stay. These impure shades of light and dark colour a modern disposition: philanthropy and slavery, urban growth and human death.

When I was stood there on the plinth, and raised my arm in a Black Power salute, it was totally spontaneous, I didn't even think about it. It was like an electrical charge of power was running through me. My immediate thoughts were for the enslaved people who died at the hands of Colston and to give them power. I wanted to give George Floyd power, I wanted to give power to Black people like me who have suffered injustices and inequality. A surge of power out to them all.³³

Sometime early in the morning on July 15th, a sculpture of Jen Reid by Marc Quinn went up onto the plinth, made from a photograph of her standing on it on the afternoon of June 7th. Her fist is gloved and raised; her gaze rises to the middle-distance. Twitter moves to and fro: the artist is white, male, and London-based; the iconography replaces collective struggle with a solo hero; the sculpture was not made locally. For Thomas J. Price, Quinn's intervention rehearses the racialised politics of representation and access, when 'Black artists are frequently only accepted when talking about race [and] white male artists have often been afforded the freedom to explore whatever subject matter they want'.³⁴ He urges moving past the precedent of capitalising on Black pain, to supplant benevolent intentions with efforts to position 'Black voices into a genuinely powerful position to reclaim their history in an authentic way', gesturing to slower practices in collective time.³⁵

In a recent symposium on the removal of Henry Dundas's statue in Edinburgh – elevated on a plinth too tall to reach with ropes from the ground – Melanie Newton historicises the current debate

around statue removal in a longer history of contestations around public monuments in the Caribbean, which has been intrinsic to decolonisation. She draws on the example of the decapitated Joséphine, wife of Napoléon Bonaparte, in Fort-de-France, Martinique; the statue mysteriously lost its head and was daubed in red paint by *un commando anonyme* in 1999, a resuscitation of Red Terror and revolutionary violence. Newton contrasts this with a monument on the other side of the island – Laurent Valère's *Anse Cafard* (1998) – a memorial to enslaved peoples who drowned at sea, and a commemoration of the tragedy of the slave trade: 'Between these two monuments – the supposedly desecrated Joséphine and the sad monumentalism of *Anse Cafard* – we get a much richer understanding of slavery and the history of the slave trade, and what it means for us at present, than we would ever have had from a statue of Joséphine with her head'.³⁶ The reflexive state violence in response to Colston falling seeks to foreclose the revolutionary passage between these forms of history-making.

Olivette Otele reminds us of another statue: Jacky Poulrier's *Solitude* (1999) on Héros aux Abymes Boulevard in Guadeloupe.³⁷ *Solitude* was the daughter of an enslaved African woman, conceived at sea through her mother's rape by a white sailor during transport from Africa to the Caribbean. *Solitude* joined the Guadeloupean Maroons, fought alongside Louis Delgrès against Napoleon's reinstating of slavery in 1802, and was hung by the French the day after she gave birth. As Laurent Dubois notes, we know about her through a paragraph in Auguste Lacour's *Histoire de la Guadeloupe* (1855): 'Her hate and rage were explosive', Lacour writes.³⁸ Poulrier's statue shows her heavily pregnant, looking into the middle distance, hands on her hips: another modern disposition. Otele writes, '*Solitude* rebelled so many could stand proud, free, and aim high. She kept/keeps me going'.³⁹

The statue of Jen Reid stayed up for 24 h. Edward Colston stood for one hundred and twenty-four years, erected at a discreet distance from abolition, as the British Empire started to fall apart. What do these rising days do to public time?

Reckoning

Something has happened to the time of freedom: a temporality of assembling collectives re-emerges at a distance from the political evacuations of diversity-speak.⁴⁰ In conversation with the barrister Courtenay Griffiths, Paul Gilroy says that the current moment marks a widescale return to thinking about the complexity, the elaborateness, the sophistication, and the embeddedness of racist machinery:

³⁶ M. J. Newton, *The Last King of Scotland: Henry Dundas and the Empire Beneath Our Feet, A Caribbean Perspective*, *Historians on Dundas and Slavery*, panel discussion, University of Edinburgh, July 7, 2020. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/history-classics-archaeology/news-events/events-archive/2020/historians-on- Dundas-and-slavery> last accessed July 24, 2020.

³⁷ See tweet from @olivetteotele (Olivette Otele), 'Been thinking about 1st time I saw statue of black woman I loved. It was awesome woman called Solitude and I cried. She was fierce & brave. I couldn't write about her at the time. There was so much to unpack and it was so intimate', *Twitter*, July 16, 2020, 10:53pm, <https://twitter.com/OlivetteOtele/status/1283520072498270211> last accessed September 22, 2021.

³⁸ L. Dubois, *Solitude's Statue: Confronting the Past in the French Caribbean*, *Outre-mers* 93 350–351 (2006) 31.

³⁹ See tweet from @olivetteotele (Olivette Otele), 'When I became pregnant in middle of PhD, I kept thinking about her, esp when told I won't get anywhere. All rubbish. Solitude rebelled so many could stand proud, free, and aim high. She kept/ keeps me going'. *Twitter*, July 16, 2020, 11:04pm, <https://twitter.com/OlivetteOtele/status/1283522854919839744> last accessed September 22, 2021.

⁴⁰ See A. Sivanandan, *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism*, Pluto Press, 1982.

²⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 67.

²⁸ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 68.

²⁹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 68.

³⁰ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 68.

³¹ J. James, *The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal*, *Carceral Notebooks* 12 (2016), 256.

³² James, *The Womb of Western Theory*, 257.

³³ M. Quinn and J. Reid, A Joint Statement from Marc Quinn and Jen Reid, <http://marcquinn.com/studio/news/a-joint-statement-from-marc-quinn-and-jen-reid> last accessed July 15, 2020.

³⁴ T. J. Price, The problem with Marc Quinn's Black Lives Matter sculpture, *The Art Newspaper*, July 16, 2020, n.p., <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/active-statue-to-appropriation-the-problem-with-marc-quinn-s-black-lives-matter-sculpture> last accessed July 20, 2020.

³⁵ Price, The problem, n.p.

The young people who are out in the streets right now have understood this, because the penny has dropped for them that their own freedoms, their own horizons, their own hopes, their own survival, is bound up with a reckoning with this machinery. And without that reckoning, none of them will be able to be free.⁴¹

Colston falling was a moment in this reckoning. Something can never come back, and something else emerges: to mourn lives that have not been permitted to live, crowding collective life, and to

drop into the crevice of another person's time.

Lara Choksey is Lecturer in Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures at UCL English and a Visiting Research Fellow at the UCL Sarah Parker Remond Centre. She is the author of *Narrative in the Age of the Genome: Genetic Worlds* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), and has had articles and chapters published in *Medical Humanities*, the *Journal of Literature and Science*, *The Palgrave Handbook to Contemporary Literature and Science*, *Sanglap*, *Media Diversified*, and *Global Social Theory*. From 2018 to 2020, she co-facilitated the community-engaged history project, 'Windrush Strikes Back: Decolonising Global Warwickshire', working with members of Black British communities in the Midlands on the co-production of Black British history.

⁴¹ P Gilroy, host. SPRC In Conversation with Courtenay Griffiths, *UCL Arts and Social Science Soundcloud*, June 24, 2020. <https://soundcloud.com/ucl-arts-social-science/sprc-in-conversation-with-courtenay-griffiths-qc> last accessed July 22, 2020.