



Statues, History, and Identity: How Bad Public History Statues Wrong

ABSTRACT: *There has recently been a focus on the question of statue removalism. This concerns what to do with public history statues that honor or otherwise celebrate ethically bad historical figures. The specific wrongs of these statues have been understood in terms of derogatory speech, inapt honors, or supporting bad ideologies. In this paper I understand these bad public history statues as history and identify a distinctive class of public history-specific wrongs. Specifically, public history plays an important identity-shaping role, and bad public history can commit specifically ontic injustice. Understanding bad public history in terms of ontic injustice helps understand not just how to address bad public history statues, but also the value of public history more broadly.*

KEYWORDS: monuments, statues, history, applied ethics, philosophy of art, ontic injustice

Introduction

Philosophy is beginning to catch up with the popular debate on public history statues. In 2017, Joanna Burch-Brown published a paper on what is now called the question of removalism: should statues of and monuments to historically bad figures be removed? Since then, the philosophical literature has developed including prominent contributions from Helen Frowe (2019), Johannes Schulz (2019), Chong-Ming Lim (2020), Ten-Hereng Lai (2020), and Burch-Brown again (forthcoming). These papers represent a consensus that statues of morally bad historical figures (sometimes called ‘tainted commemorations’) ought to be removed, or at least recontextualized. Recontextualization in particular emerges as a way to satisfy both removalist and preservationist demands.

What I wish to do in this paper is highlight and discuss an oversight ubiquitous to the existing literature, namely, that it does not give sufficient weight to the fact that these historical monuments are, well, *historical* monuments. This is to say that there is a lack of appreciation of the role of history in these monuments and, consequently, a lack of appreciation of the role the monuments play as public history. This results in missing what is distinctive about these public history monuments, and this in turn results in misunderstanding a prominent form of preservationism and overestimating the conciliatory appeal of the popular solution of recontextualization.

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My argument proceeds across four sections. First, section 1 provides a brief overview of the current literature, including the main understandings of the wrongs of bad public history statues and how those are taken to support the approach of recontextualization. In sections 2 and 3 I provide my account of bad public history statues. Section 2 details how public history can work to create and shape public identities, and section 3 extends this account to show how bad public history statues can create a distinct, history-centered class of wrongs. In section 4 I show a further explanatory value of centering history: understanding the importance of history—and public history specifically—in shaping public identity elucidates the value of public history.

I. An Overview

Arguments concerning removalism may be sorted into one of two categories. First, there are arguments that establish the badness of a public history statue. These seek to establish the features of a public history monument that could merit its removal. The features in question determine that, in some way, the statue is causing or perpetuating a moral wrong. Second, there are arguments about what to do with statues that are candidates for removal, about when to opt to keep the statues (preservationism), remove them (removalism), or attempt a recontextualization. I address the two categories in turn.

One strategy for establishing the badness of monuments is to argue that the monuments are in some way harmful. The simplest form of the argument is just that a public history statue is psychologically harmful (Timmerman 2020: 514–15) or an ‘offensive reminder’ of unpalatable history (Demetriou and Wingo 2018: 344). More sophisticated variants focus on monuments’ ability to ‘degrade’ and ‘alienate’ people (Schulz 2019: 167). Examples of degradation or alienation include stabilizing unjust power relations (Burch-Brown 2017: 69), undermining recognition respect (Schulz 2019: 169), expressing contempt for members of the public (Bell 2018), or promoting incorrect self-understandings (Burch-Brown 2017: 68; Tanesini 2018). Altogether, this class of reasons holds that bad public history statues have a certain set of negative social effects centering on degradation and alienation, and this makes those statues candidates for removal.

Another way of establishing the badness of monuments is to argue that a monument is in some way inapt. These arguments center on the idea that monuments honor their subjects, but the subject of some particular statue ought not to be honored. Examples include Burch-Brown’s argument that some statues promote a set of public meanings related to identity and authority honoring, identifying with, granting authority to, or centering a community on a subject who has committed a grave injustice (Burch-Brown 2017: 68). The subjects having committed a grave injustice makes them inapt for these roles or attitudes, and so the statues should be candidates for removal. Frowe (2019) presents a similar argument, holding that public history statues necessarily positively evaluate their subjects, and if this positive evaluation is inapt, the statues ought to be removed.¹

¹ We might also mention the comedy television series *Rutherford Falls*, where the statue of Big Larry is targeted for removal because it is a traffic hazard.

If a statue is a candidate for removal, what should be done with it? Preservationism involves keeping the monuments in place and unchanged though most of the debate has been on the question of removalism versus recontextualization (Dan Demetriou [2019] offers a limited defense of preservationism on the grounds of ‘tribal continuity’ and civic cohesion). For the purposes of this paper, I take ‘recontextualization’ to cover all options that leave the statue in place while altering either features of the statue or the statue’s surroundings. Recontextualization is seen as carrying two main benefits over removalism. The first is that keeping the physical statue in place satisfies preservationist preferences that the statue continue to allow access to the past and, in the case of bad public history statues, an opportunity to learn from it (Lim 2020: 194, 198; Burch-Brown, *forthcoming*). The second benefit of recontextualization is that it allows a more direct confrontation with the badness represented in the statue. Recontextualizations may make the statue a focus of active contempt (Bell 2018: 13) or use vandalism as counterspeech to confront the badness of the statue (Lai 2020: 604). The two arguments for recontextualization do not apply in every case—the authors acknowledge that there will be cases where outright removal is still preferable—but they present the argument that significant good can be gained by recontextualizing rather than outright removing bad public history statues.

2. The Role of History

While the articles surveyed provide compelling cases for removing or recontextualizing public history statues, they face a significant problem. Specifically, they do not address public history statues *as history*. This has two consequences. The first is that the arguments apply to public art in general but do little to address the concerns that are specific to the statues being works of history. This means that their analyses miss a class of wrongs that are particular to the statues as history. The second, related consequence is that by virtue of not addressing the statues as history, the value of recontextualization is overstated. In fact, if the statues are properly understood as history, what has been presented as recontextualization is just another form of removal. Supporting these claims requires providing an account of how to understand public history statues as history, which I will do presently. This account has two main parts. The first is a short discussion of what it means to say that these statues are public history. The second explicates the role public history plays in shaping public identity.

History is not just the sum total of past events. Rather, it is an active process of reconstructing a particular vision of the past (Gordon 2001: xv). This involves not merely detailing these past events, but offering a way to understand them and their relationship to each other. Not just *that* something happened, but *how* and *why* it did. Public history is the history that is available in public spaces and is accessible to members of the public. Paradigmatic public history includes historical plaques, which describe some significant event or person associated with the location, and public history statues, which visually represent a significant person or event from the past (Gordon 2001: 7). Note that the statues do not

merely represent a historical past. By being part of the process of reconstructing a vision of past events, the statues are history in their own right.

Public history, as works of history, offer reconstructions of past events. That history provides particular perspectives on past events means that different works of history can present different perspectives of the same event. Importantly, this can mean evincing different attitudes. Consider the recently erected statue of John A. Macdonald in Picton, Ontario.² The statue represents a scene of Macdonald in a courtroom from 1834. It is his first time in court, and the statue presents this as the beginning of his legal career. The vision of history that the statue represents is that this is an important beginning for Macdonald's career as lawyer and statesman, giving Picton a claim to having played a foundational role in the founding and shaping of Canada. In foregrounding Macdonald's role as lawyer and statesman, the statue evinces a positive attitude toward him. However, the statue offers no indication of why Macdonald was in court. This is perhaps because his appearance was a result of his having been arrested the night before for being drunk in public. One could imagine a similar statue to the Picton statue, depicting the same events but foregrounding this fact. It could have even foregrounded his role as lawyer and statesman, but evinced a much more negative attitude: this was not the start of a glorious career but of a tragic one. Macdonald was a notorious alcoholic³ and so an arrest for drunkenness could mark the beginning of a career marked by selfishness and disregard for others. Recognizing the Picton Macdonald statue as a work of history, then, requires recognizing that it presents a particular vision of past events and evinces an attitude toward them.

That the Macdonald statue centers Macdonald's role as a statesman and nation-builder indicates the importance of public history in shaping public identity. At the simplest level, the statue defines Picton as a place that is important in the history of Canada. However, public history plays a further important role in shaping public identity. Some identities are defined, at least in part, by history. These are communal identities that persist across time, and so historical events are used to demarcate these identities' boundaries. To be Canadian, for example, involves standing in a certain relation to particular historical events, such as the British North America Act of 1867 or the Summit Series of 1972.

Public history plays an essential role in taking these identity-defining historical events and making them applicable to the public. The statues do not just represent a piece of a historical narrative, they do so at a particular location. The public history statue is situated at a public location—often somewhere important like a government building or town square—that creates a connection between the history and that location. The history is relevant to the location and the location to the history. The history then shapes the identity of the people who inhabit or

² Since the writing of this paper, the statue was recommended for removal by an expert panel; that panel's recommendations were rejected by the municipal council, and then the statue was finally removed following the discovery of an unmarked mass grave outside of a former residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia (Peddigrew 2021).

³ Shortly after moving to Kingston, Ontario, as a youth, I was told a legend about Macdonald who, having been banned from every bar in the capital for his drunkenness, bought his own and took out a wall so he could ride up to the bar rail in his horse and carriage.

frequent that location. Note that the statue can have multiple relationships to the territory in which it finds itself. The Picton Macdonald statue is relevant both to Picton as something distinct from the rest of Canada and to Picton as it is part of Canada. It helps to define both Picton and the broader Canadian identity by representing a history that makes Picton a location of a Canada-defining event.

The public nature of public history serves to create public memory. Memory, in this sense, is not analogical to individual biological memory but rather refers to what persists across time and is transmitted across generations (Nora 1989: 8; understanding memory in this way draws on the work of Maurice Halbwachs). Public history statues tend to be made of quite solid stuff, and so the statues, as physical objects, persist. Such that the statues represent histories, those histories are transmitted across generations. Such that those histories help constitute identities, the statues play a role in transmitting identity across generations. As Pierre Nora notes, public history comes to play an outsized role in public memory—and thereby public identity—as other continuities with the past are severed (1989: 12). As social change disrupts forms of living and technological changes alter urban landscapes, the self-consciously created public history becomes the main way of establishing continuity across time (Nora 1989; Connerton 2009). Accordingly, public history statues play an important role in creating and preserving a public identity that persists across time. (While I have focused on public history statues, it is worth noting that not all public statues are historical. Some are mythological or purely artistic. While my argument does not apply exactly to these cases, I believe my account of the connection between statue, location, and public is still informative.)⁴

My account of public history statues puts me in tension with Frowe's (2019) argument that there are many statues that are blunt honorifics, not seriously concerned with history.⁵ Her argument is twofold. Her first point is that because putatively historical statues underrepresent women and overrepresent men, these statues do not form a representative historical record, and therefore they should not be treated as works of history. The second point is that while some statues may include historical detail, many statues are simply blunt objects that offer nothing but a prescription to honor and admire the statue's subject. Together, these points form a challenge to my account that holds that public history statues are works of history.

I offer three points in response. The first is that there are some works that are simply blunt honorifics, and for those I may defer to Frowe at no cost. I can accept that blunt honorifics are simply not works of history and are thus beyond the concern of this paper. The second response is that Frowe's first point about the nonrepresentativeness of statues does not, unfortunately, render public statuary outside the regular practice of history, both popular and academic. While many people are taking steps to repair the elision of women, racialized people, and other subaltern people from the corpus of history, the fact is that history as practiced has focused on the stories of well-to-do white, male, nationalistic figures.

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I address this.

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Public statues' nonrepresentativeness, then, does not disqualify these statues from being works of history. Lastly, Frowe's challenge of bluntness can be addressed by noting that even the most basic statues have some historical content. Consider the statue of Jack Miner outside of the police station in Kingsville, Ontario. A masculine figure poses with his right hand on a goose and left hand in the air. Plaques on the statue's base inform that this is a statue of Jack Miner, his birth and death dates, and the parties that funded the statue's erection. There is nothing to suggest who Miner was or why he was significant. Nevertheless, some slight historical detail can be extracted. Specifically, the location of the statue suggests Miner's importance to Kingsville. 'Jack Miner lived in Kingsville and had some significance to how Kingsville is today' is a very slight history, but it is a history. The combination of figure and location present a narrative that is barely there, but is in fact there.

In this section, I have shown that public history statues play an important role in creating and sustaining a public identity. These statues represent histories that shape identities. By virtue of their public location, these statues shape the identity of the public of that location. The permanency of the statues serves to create public memory, by which the history and history-shaped identity are transmitted across generations. This means that understanding statues as public history allows identifying a distinctive class of wrongs particular to public history. These are wrongs particular to public history's identity-creating and identity-sustaining functions.

3. The Wrongs of Bad History

In the previous section, I made the claims that the existing literature on bad public history statues missed an important class of wrongs and that understanding public history statues as history allows identifying a distinctive class of wrongs particular to public history. In this section, I elaborate and defend those claims. Specifically, I argue that in the case of public history there are a class of wrongs particular to the creation and sustenance of identity. These wrongs are specifically ontic injustices, harms related to how people are categorized. I show that the concept of ontic injustice not only helps one to understand the identity-centered wrongs of bad history, but also helps to clarify, organize, and refine the wrongs identified by the consensus views. I conclude the section by showing that when accounting for ontic injustice, recontextualization approaches effectively reduce to either removalism or preservationism.

Public history helps create and sustain identities. These identities are categories that include or exclude certain people. To the extent that public history statues tie an identity to a location, these statues may include or exclude the people who live at such a location from the identity category that that statue shapes. Consider Christopher Columbus statues of the sort that are located around the United States. Many of these statues represent Columbus as a discoverer of the Americas, and so they may be considered as representing a history that presents Columbus as the discoverer of the Americas. There is a problem with this history: the Americas were populated by the time Columbus landed at Guanahani. Presenting

Columbus as a ‘discoverer’, then, sustains a public identity that excludes or otherwise marginalizes Indigenous peoples.⁶ Similarly, much Nova Scotian public history focuses on Scots and Norse history, while eliding Black or Indigenous history (McKay and Bates 2010: 11). This shapes a Nova Scotian identity that is overstatedly Scots and Norse and marginalizes Black and Indigenous people. As Ian McKay and Robin Bates note: this sort of historical inclusion and exclusion is far from anodyne. Public history is overwhelmingly interested in ‘firsts’—first discoverers, first settlers, first achievers. These firsts create a Lockean claim on the territory: the Scots or Norse settlers are presented as the first to mix their labor with the Nova Scotian land, and they are thereby granted legitimate ownership (McKay and Bates 2010: 328).

The Columbus and Nova Scotia examples show that not only can public history exclude and marginalize, it can exclude and marginalize wrongfully. There are two ways of understanding this wrongness. The first is that the identity category is shaped in such a way that it wrongs particular people. The second is that the category itself may be considered wrong. To elucidate these wrongs, I appeal to Katherine Jenkins’s concept of ontic injustice. She defines ontic injustice as follows:

An individual suffers an ontic injustice if and only if they are socially constructed as a member of a certain social kind where that construction consists, at least in part, of their being subjected to a set of social constraints and enablements that is wrongful to them. (2020: 191)

To say that a social kind consists in being subject to a set of social constraints is to say that part of what makes that kind that kind is that members of that kind are either constrained (are treated or permitted to be treated in certain ways) or enabled (can act or are permitted to act in certain ways) based on their membership in that kind. Historically informed identities are social kinds. Accordingly, to say that wrongful exclusion or marginalization is an ontic injustice is to say that public history creates or sustains a public identity that inflicts upon at least some people a wrongful set of constraints and enablements.

Excluding people from membership in a historically informed identity category can create a number of wrongful constraints. As Hobsbawm notes, nations are often considered the basic unit of a group entitled to political sovereignty (1990: 102, 163). As national identities are partially defined historically, a nation-defining history that excludes some group of people from that nation also excludes that group of people from that nation’s entitlement to their place in collective political self-determination. Consequently, someone who is wrongfully excluded from—or marginalized within—that group’s identity-defining history is wrongfully constrained with respect to their corresponding place in collective political self-determination. Following from McKay and Bates’s earlier point about public history grounding a Lockean claim on land ownership, wrongful

⁶ Columbus statues present a particularly interesting case, such that many were erected in the early twentieth century specifically to garner support of Italian Americans. The statues thereby work to specifically include Italian Americans as ‘Americans’ but at the cost of excluding Indigenous peoples.

exclusion may wrongfully constrain people with respect to the claim they have to inhabit particular territories. Put simply, group membership is about who matters, who matters more, and who matters less. Wrongfully considering someone to matter less is also a moral injury by virtue of failing to value that person as a member of a moral political community. Lastly, these wrongs are directed toward particular people, but statues can also contribute to ontic injustice by creating wrongfully exclusionary groups. As the purpose of this paper is developing an understanding of what is distinctive about public history statues and the distinctive ways that public history statues may be bad, it is a finesse worth keeping in mind.

Appealing to ontic injustice helps underline the contrast between my position and those of other writers. Alienation, as Burch-Brown and Schulz identify, is a distinctly psychological phenomenon. It is centered on promoting incorrect self-understandings (Burch-Brown 2017: 68) or denying a source of self-respect (Schulz 2019: 167). These approaches focus on felt exclusion. The appeal to ontic injustice allows my account to present a much more substantive exclusion; bad public history statues alienate by constructing a wrongfully exclusionary historically informed identity, and thereby they wrongfully constrain people with respect to rights of political self-determination and claiming territory. Understanding alienation through ontic injustice and historically defined groups also helps manage the important distinction between wrongful and not wrongful alienation. Someone committed to political membership limited by racist hierarchy may feel alienated by public history statues that incorporate antiracist and anticolonial figures into the public identity. For example, someone who defined their moral worth and political membership in terms of the greatness of the British Empire may feel alienated by the Louis Riel statue at the Manitoba provincial legislature. But the British colonial identity is one that granted wrongful enablements—of moral and political ‘mattering more’ granted by British racial identity—and so being denied those wrongful enablements is not being wrongfully constrained. Consequently, the Riel statue does not sustain a historically informed identity that wrongfully alienates the British colonial.

The appeal to ontic injustice can also speak to the relationship between bad public history statues and unjust power relations. What is at issue is not necessarily what the statues express; rather, these statues construct a whole identity by which some people matter more than others. These identities, in turn, legitimate the granting or denying of full moral and political membership and consequently the power structures that develop from that membership. This allows a further response to the idea that what is wrong with bad public history statues is that they promote incorrect self-understanding or otherwise mislead. Statues misleading is consistent with the history the statues represent being merely false. As my argument above has shown, the problem is not that the statues are wrong but that they are *bad*: they create or sustain unjust identities.

Lastly, engaging public history statues specifically as public history shows a shortcoming in the arguments that hold that the wrong of bad public history statues is that the subjects are inapt for honor. The identity-shaping role of public history statues does not appeal to the goodness of the statue’s subject. To the

extent that the statue's subject is chosen for reasons other than the subject's goodness or honorability, the argument that the subject is inapt to be honored is not very forceful (this is a useful way to understand the 'erasing history' objection, see Abrahams [[forthcoming](#)]). Rather, addressing public history statues as history requires engaging the sort of historically informed identity the statue helps shape.

So what does my argument mean for proposed solutions to the question of bad public history statues? I contend that if what is at stake is the identity shaped by the public history statue, then the proposed solutions concern either preserving or removing the history that so shapes the identity. The main consequence of this position is that recontextualization dissolves into either removalism or preservationism. If the recontextualization is strong enough to eliminate or change the statue's role in sustaining the identity it was shaping, then this is equivalent to removal because it is undoing the statue's identity-sustaining function. If the recontextualization is not strong enough to eliminate or change the statue's role in sustaining the identity it was shaping, then this is equivalent to preservation because it is preserving the statue's identity-sustaining function. Put simply, either an intervention changes who the statue presents as mattering or it does not. Unfortunately for the view that recontextualization presents a good compromise between removalists and preservationists, preservationists committed to preserving the statue-shaped identity would not be satisfied just because the literal material of the statue remained; like a work of art, it is not the rock that is valuable but what that rock achieves. And to the committed removalist, an intervention that does not undermine a statue's shaping of an unjust identity is mere window dressing.

3.1 Examples

I now examine two cases for the purpose of supporting my argument. They are the decapitation (and alternate-world theft) of the Egerton Ryerson statue in Toronto and a proposed modification to a Nazi-era soldiers' memorial in Düsseldorf. They are used as examples of putative recontextualizations that keep the physical stuff of the original history intact, yet nevertheless qualify as removal because they no longer fulfill their identity-sustaining function.

In the summer of 2021, a statue of Egerton Ryerson, one of the architects of Canada's residential schools system, was toppled and decapitated outside of the Toronto university that bears his name (at time of this writing, the university's board has announced its intention to rename but not what that new name will be). The statue was decapitated, and its head was twice relocated: first to 1492 Land Back Lane and then to a Mohawk institute named The Mush Hole, located in a former residential school (Morritt-Jacobs and McDougall, 2021). This is a very blunt recontextualization, but it serves as a good starting point to examine the connection between the statue's material, its location, and its identity-sustaining function. Ryerson's head on a stick on unceded territory is evocative: it turns the statue from one representing a colonial history (in the model of Canada's British-derived, colony-to-nation national narrative) to one representing that history's repudiation. (Perhaps significantly, despite the territory of Land Back Lane being unceded and sovereign, Canadian property developers

have bulldozed some of it in an attempt to build cottages and other vacation homes.) It is not just Ryerson who fell, but the land that Ryerson held (by virtue of his place in Canada's nation-defining history) has been stripped from underneath him. At The Mush Hole, Ryerson's head gives a history of the defeat of the residential schools system he helped bring about.

Imagine now a similar case where the Ryerson statue, instead of being decapitated, had been taken in its entirety, plinth and all, and been relocated to Land Back Lane and then to The Mush Hole. In this case, the literal material of the statue has been fully preserved, but I argue its identity-sustaining function is still undermined. My account of public history has given a significant role to the connection between statue and territory, and the move of the Ryerson statue from a downtown Toronto institution bearing Ryerson's name to unceded land is significant. The connection between Ryerson and Canada's metropole is severed. Outside The Mush Hole, the identity the Ryerson statue supports is one that triumphed over Canada: here is who used to rule; here is who was defeated.

The full Ryerson relocation case is somewhat similar to statue solutions that relocated statues to museums. However, the Ryerson case can be tweaked again to keep a tighter connection between the statue and the territory it initially inhabited. Imagine if, instead of the full statue being relocated, it was still at its original location. However, in this case, Skyler Williams is hoisting the statue above her head. In such a case the material of the statue is intact, and it is still at its original location in downtown Toronto. However, the identity-sustaining function is still undermined. The disruption at least partially severs the connection between the statue and the territory. Importantly, by the statue being held aloft by a person who rejects its authority, the statue's claim over the territory is undermined; rather, the statue's placement is now shown to be entirely contingent and at the mercy of people who reject it. Importantly, this means that this is no longer Ryerson's public. If this is not Ryerson's public, then Ryerson's claim on the public identity is undone.

Even in this last, hypothetical, Ryerson case there is still some measure of destruction as the statue is held aloft. To examine a case where the original public history is left entirely in place I turn to the proposed work 'The Who Have Crossed' (TWHC). TWHC is a proposed addition to a 1939 Nazi-era soldiers' memorial in Düsseldorf. The original memorial is designated a protected historical structure, and therefore any proposed alteration must leave that original structure intact. According to the city council, the goal is to undermine and eliminate the original memorial's claim on the public space of Reeser Platz (Düsseldorf-39er Denkmal Reeser Platz). The proposed addition is a steel-plated bridge, beginning on a hill well behind the original monument and continuing over the top of the monument. This bridge achieves the alteration of the memorial's claim on Reeser Platz in three ways. The first is that it allows a connection between the green space on one side of Reeser Platz with the cityscape of the other side, a connection that completely bypasses the soldiers' monument. This creates a sense of public space over which the soldiers' monument has no claim. As the proposal puts it, this dissolves the materiality of the monument (*'Ihre Materialität wird zugunsten einer Leichtigkeit aufgelöst'* [*'Düsseldorf - 39er Reeser Platz'* n.d.]). The second is that

the bridge both precedes and exceeds the original monument, and thus the bridge is what onlookers will experience first. This allows the bridge to dominate the soldiers' monument and thereby to have priority in determining the public space. The third way that TWHC alters the soldiers' monument is that by passing over the monument, the bridge recasts where the past expressed by the soldiers' monument is in the historical narrative. The war dead are recast as victims of German militarism, the role in German history not as glorious creators of the modern Germany but rather as people who were sacrificed on the altar of nationalism and militarism. In all, despite the literal substance of the soldiers' memorial being untouched, the bridge completely alters (and undermines) the memorial's role in sustaining public identity. To the extent that the preservationist is motivated by the desire to preserve the soldiers' memorial as a work of history—as something that fosters, shapes, and sustains a public identity—she finds no satisfaction in the fact that the soldiers' memorial is technically untouched. Its hold over the public is gone. Functionally, the memorial has not actually been preserved.

In this section I have articulated and defended the claim that bad public history statues present a distinctive class of wrongs particular to these statues being public history. By virtue of history's role in shaping historically informed identities, these statues work to shape identities that unjustly marginalize and exclude people. This wrongful exclusion may be understood as a sort of ontic injustice, whereby the bad historically informed identities generate wrongful constraints for the marginalized and excluded. These constraints involve a diminished or even eliminated entitlement to membership in the moral-political community and to claims over territory. Understanding bad public history statues through the lens of ontic injustice helps organize, clarify, and refine the consensus account of the wrongs of public history statues. The upshot of my analysis is that recontextualization, a solution that has been presented as satisfying both preservationists and removalists, does not actually do so. It fails as a compromise because once public history statues are understood as public history, recontextualization dissolves into either removal or preservation.

4. The Value of Public History

I turn now to a further explanatory benefit of understanding public history statues in terms of their role in shaping public identity. Specifically, understanding public history statues in terms of their role in shaping public identity helps make sense of the importance of public history statues. This entails understanding why conflicts over public history statues are so passionate, why there was a wave of statue toppling during the 2020 protests against police violence, and why there is concern about public history statues being given too much prominence.

If public history statues shape public identity, then conflicts over public history statues are, at least in part, conflicts over the public's identity. These may be conflicts over what that identity is, but they may also be conflicts over who has power to determine what that identity is. Identities are not only valuable to people for how those people define themselves but, as I have argued, they also play an important role in establishing who matters. For example, in a nation-state where

Canadians are taken to have political entitlements that non-Canadians do not, the boundaries of ‘Canadian’ are important. Public history of this sort is particularly poignant in settler-states like Canada, where there are centuries-old contested land claims. As Thomas King (2013) notes, historical claims are used to establish settler colonial claims to the land. If ‘Canada’ begins with Macdonald, if its boundaries are defined by the many ‘firsts’ of Scottish-descended settlers, and if it claims geographical territory as its own, then that Canada-defining history is a necessary part of the claim to that land. Consequently, establishing Indigenous nations’ claims on the land requires challenging Canadian history, and challenging public history may threaten state claims on the land. A similar argument pattern may be applied to membership in and service by institutions. If Canadian institutions are meant to serve Canadians, then who counts as ‘Canadian’ is important. Contests over public history, then, are related to questions concerning who is entitled to membership in, and to be served by, Canadian institutions. Since many historical wrongs—from colonialism and slavery to segregation and assimilation—involve this sort of wrongful exclusion from moral and political membership, public history is a natural rallying point for both justice-seeking political movements and those who seek to resist them.

This account of the value placed upon public history statues helps make sense of the string of statue topplings in the middle of 2020 during the protests against police violence and state racism, which began in the United States. The protest wave began in Wisconsin with the police shooting of Jacob Blake and took as its subject both other instances of police violence against citizens as well as broader patterns of state racism, such as municipalities overfunding police forces at the expense of social services. In the midst of these protests there were a series of topplings of racist statues, beginning with the Edward Colston statue in Bristol, England, and continuing with a number of American statues representing Confederate and colonial figures. Such that the protests were against police violence, they were, in part, about the exclusion of Black Americans from moral and political membership in civil society. That they are the disproportionate targets of not just police violence but policing in general suggests an unjust exclusion from the category of people who the state is supposed to serve. Such that the police are used to control public space, the protests were also a contest over that public space.⁷

Such that the protests were over control of the public and who belongs to the category of people the state is supposed to serve, public history statues are understandable targets. As I have argued, public history statues shape public identities and can shape unjust identities. The identities are unjust in that they wrongfully exclude people from or marginalize them within identity categories, and this exclusion or marginalization results in people facing wrongful constraints. Statues like those of American Confederate figures or Christopher Columbus help shape conceptions of the public that exclude or marginalize Black and Indigenous people and other people of color, and it was those statues were

⁷ Two instructive examples here are the establishment of police-free autonomous zones in Seattle and Wisconsin as well as the Seattle police department’s decision to use teargas immediately after the mayor had announced a ban on the weapon. Both examples speak to a contest over who has control over whom.

targeted. The protests also concerned control of the public. Toppling the statues, from this perspective, may be viewed as a contest over who gets to define the public. The protesters were not just protesting the content of the public history, but the right to create public history and thereby define the public themselves.⁸


During the protests, David Olusoga (2020) wrote an editorial in the *British Guardian* that the statues should not become a distraction. My account of statues as public history also makes sense of this sentiment. The statues are important in how they contribute to defining the public and defining who matters. However, the statues are ultimately not in themselves the political systems that operate and manage the public. A just public history will not directly constrain police violence, return stolen land, or otherwise undo material inequality. Focusing exclusively on public history statues and other political symbols risks merely changing the story the unjust order uses to legitimate itself without changing the actual order. Understanding the limits of public history this way helps clarify the virtue of what Burch-Brown and Nathaniel Coleman describe as the ‘reclaiming’ approach to bad public history (Burch-Brown, *forthcoming*: 12). They suggest that more important than any one approach to what is done with statues is reclaiming the territory around the statue. I understand this as prioritizing the sorts of changes that allow people to create justice around the statue, and any approach that achieves justice is to be preferred.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for understanding public history statues primarily as works of history. History helps shape identities, and thus public history statues help shape public identities. These identities can be shaped so as to exclude or marginalize people and thereby burden them with unjust constraints. Centering public history’s identity-shaping role undercuts recontextualization as a response to bad public history statues: either interventions stop the statue from shaping identity in the way that it is, in which case recontextualization reduces to removalism, or the statue is able to continue sustaining the identity it has helped shape, in which case recontextualization reduces to preservation. Public history’s identity-shaping role also makes sense of the importance given to confrontations over bad public history statues. Public history statues are an important part of how a society understands itself. By focusing on how these statues do not just reflect identity but work to shape it, the discourse surrounding public history becomes at once simpler and more complicated. The discourse is simplified because it is clarified: what is at issue is how the people are to be understood and who is to be valued. However, this simpler question is unforgiving, thus the complication. There is ultimately no compromise available between removalism

⁸ Control over public history is not always so confrontational. In Glasgow there is the practice of putting a traffic cone on the head of the Duke of Wellington statue. The coning itself is not a grand political statement, but when the city council tried to change the statue to inhibit coning there was a successful mobilization against the change. I understand this as, in part, a citizenry asserting their control over public history.

and preservationism. Either public history is left to promote the history and identity that it does, or it is changed.

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