

**CFP: Unwanted Histories**

**The legacies of contested monuments and objects: new homes, new interpretations, new meanings**

Conference organised by

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Location: Online  
Abstract deadline: **19 March 2021**

The toppling of the statue of Edward Colston into the River Avon in Bristol in June 2020 by Black Lives Matter protestors is symptomatic of a growing dissatisfaction with the presentation of history in public spaces. Likewise, the renaming of the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam into Kunstinstituut Melly, the Leopold Must Fall movement in Belgium and the global Rhodes Must Fall movement capture this shift in public sentiment. Within these societies, we are increasingly unified in our belief that it is time to reflect on how the legacies of colonialism and the Transatlantic slave trade are woven into the very fabric of our towns and cities. However, as the subsequent debate over Colston's statue indicates, we lack any consensus regarding how to redress these legacies. While we largely acknowledge that these histories should not be forgotten or erased, what does this mean practically speaking? What do we do with these "unwanted histories"?

This concern engrosses politicians, policy-makers, cultural heritage specialists, historians, artists, community groups and the public alike. To date, much scholarship and public discourse has focused on *why* these histories are unwanted. This conference builds on this debate to ask: what do we do once we've toppled statues? Should we leave Colston in his watery grave? Additionally, who should be responsible for these decisions? While these are, at heart, ethical questions, the increasing financial strains faced by the heritage sector frequently transform them into a balancing act between ethics and practicality. Recent responses to these questions demonstrate that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution to these concerns, nor can there be a permanent one. To date, common approaches have included removing or relocating contested objects to museums and providing new interpretative materials; replacing or accompanying them with plaques; placing them in storage; or producing new accompanying artwork. All, however, have faced significant criticism.

This one-day international, inter-sectoral online conference will explore how "unwanted histories" have been treated to date – both successfully and unsuccessfully – through individual case-studies, as well as theoretical methodologies and proposals for future projects, platforms, and digital media. We aspire to bring together (post-)colonial historians, curators, museum specialists, and others engaged with the field of "**Unwanted Histories**" to establish research collaborations by critically investigating stories of (post-)colonial heritage,

the framing of imperial history within museums and civic spaces, and how to deal with demands to change the culture of exhibiting cultural heritage both in public and private.

In light of these developments, we welcome contributions that focus on (but are not necessarily limited to) following topics:

- Histories of specific cases of how objects from colonised regions travelled and ended up in Western museums and archives (provenance)
- Histories of the actors involved: imperial agents, indigenous resistance to spoliation, NGO's
- Museology: how are colonial objects framed, styled and/or contextualised
- Histories of the critical debate concerning provenance, colonial museums, and restitution
- (Post)colonial debates Interconnectedness of identity and historical artefacts
- Examples of the reinterpretation of monuments/colonial objects in museum and civic spaces
- The production of guidance/ best-practice materials for the reinterpretation of monuments/ objects with colonial legacies
- Who is/ should be responsible for decisions regarding the reinterpretation of such monuments/objects?
- Political and legal interventions into the question of reinterpretation
- The history of toppling monuments/ iconoclasm in comparative perspective

If you would like to propose a paper for a 20-minute presentation, please send an abstract of 250-300 words to [d.m.s.m.natermann@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:d.m.s.m.natermann@hum.leidenuniv.nl) and [alexandra.ortoljabaird@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:alexandra.ortoljabaird@kcl.ac.uk). When sending your abstract, please also provide a one-page CV or short bio with details of your academic experience, affiliation, and publications. The deadline for submitting proposals is **Friday, 19 March 2021**. The selection committee will make their final decision on submitted abstracts by late March/early April 2021. Further information about the programme will be announced after that date. Based on the discussion during the conference the organisers will invite conference delegates to prepare a chapter for an edited volume or special issue of papers presented at this event.

This event is generously supported by the History Department of Leiden University.

Our twitter handle is #unwantedhistories