

# Removal



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Heritage practices in the mode of 'Removal' are, at core, characterized by an openly articulated desire to be rid of, eliminate or finally leave behind the colonial past. As such, they are a highly politicized mode of colonial heritage management. The colonial past is no longer covered over, silenced, marginalised or ignored, rather it is dragged out into the open with the intense hope of once and for all being able to expel it. Such gestures and performances of removal can take many forms. Most spectacular is perhaps the removal – or calls for removal – of statues or monuments which have been a feature of many struggles for independence, such as the large-scale removal of statues of Marx and Lenin from various sites in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. But monuments can of course become focal points of protest, even long after political independence is achieved. For example, demands for the removal of a monument in the Namibian town of Swakopmund to

German soldiers who helped to crush the Herero revolt against German colonial authorities only emerged in 1917 in the context of ongoing talks between Germany and Namibia regarding recognizing the defeat and subsequent wilful elimination of the Herero as a genocide. Likewise, the conflict around the removal of Confederate statues in the Southern States of the US – most notably that of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville – is of course embedded in wider societal struggles and conflicts, as became tragically clear in Charlottesville.

But removal need not be reduced to a politics of monuments; the attempt to eliminate the use of certain (often derogatory) terms, insofar as this is done in an attempt to free language and communication from colonial echoes, is also a form of removal. But one of the most basic forms of linguistic removal is simply the practice of renaming sites, streets, cities or countries in an act of discarding significations which either directly or implicitly signal colonial domination. Of course, such renaming has been integral to most postcolonial spaces, but in Europe too controversies about streets bearing the names of notorious colonialists have emerged. In Berlin, for example, it has thus been suggested that streets in the 'African Quarter' should be renamed to bear the names of opposers of colonialism, rather than of those who oppressed them.

Removal is therefore not to be conceived of as a heritage practice employed exclusively by the formerly colonized against the former colonizers. Just as formerly colonized societies can sometimes be party to heritage practices under the mode of [repression](#), so colonized societies are not barred from engaging in removal. Indeed, European societies might be said to be presently engaged in large-scale removal through the increasingly tenacious attempts to eject their 'colonial' citizens, and thereby entertain a fantasy of returning to a state of communal (and ethnic) authenticity – even if the extent to which this is removal, rather than [repression](#), depends on whether the colonial past is politicized or silenced in the process.

Thus, while removal certainly, unlike [repression](#), succeeds in politicizing and articulating the colonial past – invoking the ghosts all the better to exorcise them – it remains in the same binary imagination as repression. As already argued by Fanon, in order to mobilize political energy to reject colonialism, the rejecting community needs to constitute itself in clear opposition to, and as ultimately separate from, the foreign elements to be removed [Fanon 1990]. Therefore, in heritage practices of removal, it is often not far to at least a 'strategic essentialism' [Spivak 1987], if not to a fully-fledged nostalgic fantasy of returning to an original and authentic form of communal life.

It is not my intention here to simply condemn heritage practices of removal for their essentialism. Indeed, it would seem both just and obvious that formerly colonized societies are in no way obliged to tolerate the monumental presence of their former oppressors in their urban environments. Rather, as Frederick Cooper rightly points out, the essentializing of original or traditional culture, as a response to the overbearing narrative of European modernity, is a social mobilizing strategy which has proved successful in many decolonial struggles, but also one that has often underpinned subsequent postcolonial dictatorships [Cooper 2005]. Indeed, Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship in Zaire formulated an official policy of *Authenticité* aiming to return the nation to its 'authentic' form. Likewise, more intellectual endeavours in this vein, such as Ngugi's engagements with the project of 'decolonizing the mind', certainly do not fall back on simple essentialism, but none the less do manoeuvre within the basic dilemma that a complete rejection of the colonizer's knowledge, and the heritage of this long historical relationship, does imply that the colonized community can fall back on or find its way back to a 'pure' place and time before becoming entangled in European colonialism [Ngúgí 1981].

### **Matters of Mobilization**

Removal as a mode of heritage practice and management is, as such, often associated with activist mobilization. If repression discretely

enforces a social hegemony, then removal instead energizes and focuses a political struggle. The practices in this mode tend to be more unitary and directed, often simply because they crystalize around the specific demand that a particular object or practice be eliminated. But in analyzing such practices it is crucial to maintain that they are not reducible to the object, site or practice against which they are aimed. Rather, these are materialities which become something akin to 'empty signifiers' [cf. Laclau 1996], in which the entirety of the grievances and hopes of the decolonializing struggle is condensed. I emphasize this not only to make the perhaps banal point that such struggles are always about more than, for example, the concrete statue around which they coalesce, but also because it means that the source of the immense political energy which sometimes emerges in such struggles should not be explained solely in relation to the ultimately arbitrary materiality in which it finds its empty signifier. Ultimately, the removal of heritage signifies a political desire to change the community's past, i.e. to shape or order it into a form worthy and amenable to a re-imagined future – sometimes itself imagined as a 'return' to a past stage of authenticity. To explore heritage practices of removal is therefore not simply to take an interest in what is to be removed and why, but to seek to get at the communal imaginaries – nostalgic, activist or utopian – which find an anchoring point and a place of iteration in these struggles.

## **The shadows of Empire**

A prominent example of a heritage practice of Removal is the 'Rhodes must fall' movement in South Africa, which finally succeeded, in that the statue of Cecil Rhodes was removed from its plinth on the UCT Campus in Cape town on 9 April 2015. This example, however, also amply illustrates the dilemmas of such practices and their possible resolution. Because almost as soon as Rhodes was gone the vacant space left behind itself threatened to become a ghostly presence. Indeed, there were those who had specifically argued that the statue should not be removed because its physical disappearance from the public space would only serve to petrify the illusion of a false liberty – given that the wider social injustices that the movement articulated in and through its fight against the statue would remain unchanged [Goodrich and Bombardella 2016]. As Knudsen and Andersen argue, this hardly amounts to a convincing argument for conserving such oppressive monumental heritages [Knudsen and Andersen 2018]. Yet, it does point to a crucial aspect of heritage practices in the mode of removal, namely, the potential disappointment that these might encounter at their very moment of victory, because the materiality around which the struggled has been crystalized does not translate into the social issues which it sought to articulate.

Ultimately, removal is therefore plagued by a haunting of its own. While these practices are different from [repression](#) in and through their insistence on dragging the ghosts into the light, what nonetheless likewise haunts them is the lingering suspicion that the binary imaginary of removal will also, ultimately, be frustrated by such spectres. The ghosts might be out of the shadows, but the imagined exorcism fails to dispel them. One suggestion for what should be done with Rhodes' vacant plinth seems to embody and aesthetically realize the persistent absence-presence of the ultimately indestructible and immobile [entanglements](#) of past and present, colonizer and colonized. The proposal was simply to paint the shadow of the absent statue on the ground next to the plinth, simply and elegantly implying Rhodes' ghostly remainder.

Indeed, in this gesture, even if it is embedded in a removal practice, the artist seems to arrive at an understanding of the at once necessary and limiting character of a binary imagination, thereby transcending the logic of mobilization inherent in treating concrete materialities as empty signifiers, and instead self-reflexively appreciating that decolonizing universities, not to say societies, is not achieved solely through weeding out their monumental representations. Indeed, it might point exactly towards the insight that such clean breaks are ultimately illusory and should in the end be re-oriented towards modes of [reemergence](#) which

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admit and invite the complexity of continued [entanglements](#); which neither ignore nor seek to exorcise the ghosts of this past, but instead attempt to grant them an agency in relation to a common future.



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