

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 30) Philosophy		
Title of case study: Is it wrong to topple statues and rename schools? Shaping institutional responses to contested heritage in Bristol, the UK, and internationally		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Joanna Burch-Brown	Senior Lecturer	2012-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Dr Burch-Brown's research has informed local, national, and international measures to address legacies of slavery and racism in public spaces. Her research contributed to the success of a major grassroots campaign (Bristol's campaign over Edward Colston), which gained an international stage and galvanised national reflection on the history and legacies of Britain's role in transatlantic slavery. The campaign prompted dozens of institutions to take steps to rebalance colonial iconography and acknowledge links to slavery and contemporary legacies of racism, bringing these topics to the forefront of national debate. Burch-Brown's research has helped institutional, governmental, and political leaders to recognise responsibilities, design strategies, navigate reputational risks, and understand issues from multiple perspectives. Her innovative model of research and teaching has empowered young people in Britain and the US to develop their own initiatives addressing concerns in their communities.

2. Underpinning research

In recent years, campaigns around the globe have called for the removal of objects symbolic of white supremacy. Dr Burch-Brown's research has examined the ethics of removing such objects. Do these strategies sanitise history, destroy heritage and erase local identities? Or are they important steps towards historical justice and reconciliation?

Burch-Brown has approached these questions through action-based, interdisciplinary philosophical research based in collaboration with leading grassroots activists and institutional and political leaders in Bristol, England, a city which has been at the forefront of Britain's debates over contested heritage. Burch-Brown's research has focused on: analysing key arguments on opposing sides [3.1, 3.2], examining intergroup dynamics and their ethical implications [3.1, 3.2, 3.3], providing philosophical frameworks through which to understand responsibilities [3.1, 3.2] and developing guiding principles and examining their application [3.2]. Burch-Brown published one of the first academic philosophical papers on the ethics of removing Confederate statues and colonial iconography [3.1]. This paper critically outlines three arguments for removing problematic commemorations. First, commemorative practices confer honour and esteem. It is wrong to honour people who have carried out grave injustices. Thus, if figure x carried out grave injustices, it may be right to remove commemorations. Second, commemorations can lead a community to underestimate its own role in historic injustices. For instance, commemorating Colston sends the signal that injustices in which he participated are outweighed by the good he did. Removing commemorations can prompt wide rethinking of the history and its current significance, potentially prompting people to take reparative action. Third, removing honours can be part of symbolic reparations, expressing a) condemnation of a past injustice, b) rejection of its underlying rationale, c) commitment to telling the truth about this in the future, and d) commitment to preventing ongoing harms that are legacies of that injustice. Having outlined these arguments, Burch-Brown goes on to charitably articulate counterarguments, giving particular weight to the concern that removal may create unnecessary polarisation and entrench intergroup hostilities.

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Burch-Brown is one of the first academics in any discipline to apply UN Guidelines on Transitional Justice to the case of Confederate statues and colonial iconography [3.2]. Transitional justice is the study of what justice requires in societies coming to terms with a history of mass human rights abuses. UN guidelines hold that transitioning communities have rights to a) justice, b) truth, c) symbolic and material reparations, and d) guarantees of non-recurrence. Burch-Brown examines four strategies – preserving, removing, recontextualising, and reclaiming contested objects – asking of each strategy whether it can be consistent with the UN rights. She argues that all four strategies are potentially consistent, depending on how they are enacted. She draws on sustained experience in Bristol to reveal how each strategy may succeed or fail to meet these rights. Burch-Brown's work on contested heritage has also been informed by her earlier social psychological research on religion and reducing prejudice [3.3], in which she hypothesises a number of mechanisms through which religious communities can increase or decrease prejudice amongst their members. Her research on reducing prejudice has informed her thinking about intergroup attitudes, and thus about dynamics of contestations. An important part of Burch-Brown's work has been developing novel, adaptable methodologies for public philosophy. She has developed methods for 'ground-up' or 'grassroots-led' philosophical research, in which the themes and focus of research emerge through collaboration with practitioners. This distinctive approach has resulted in philosophical work closely connected to and in service of efforts towards social aims.

3. References to the research

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- 3.1 **Burch-Brown J** (2020). Should slavery's statues be preserved? On transitional justice and contested heritage, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12485>
- 3.2 **Burch-Brown J** (2017). Is it wrong to topple statues and rename schools?, *Journal of Political Theory & Philosophy*, **1.1**, pp.59-88 [Available on request]
- 3.3 **Burch-Brown J & Baker W** (2016). Religion and reducing prejudice, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, **19.6**, pp.784-807, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1368430216629566>

Funding information

Burch-Brown J (PI) and Stephenson B (CI), *Contested heritage reviews: Guidance for policy-makers*, Research England Quality-related Research Strategic Priorities (QR SPF), 2020, GBP15,900

4. Details of the impact

Between 2016 and 2020, Burch-Brown's research [3.1-3.3] contributed to the success of a major grassroots campaign challenging the memorialisation of Edward Colston in Bristol, which drew international attention, bringing major changes to Bristol's memorial landscape and galvanising wider conversations about identity, belonging, colonial legacies, and equality in the UK. The changes to Colston's memorialisation have been highly controversial, dividing opinion across the country, bringing underlying differences to the surface and both revealing and generating political fault-lines. Since 2016, Burch-Brown has supported leaders of key institutions locally, nationally, and internationally as they navigated this highly polarised debate.

Informed successful campaign for the renaming of Colston Hall, prompting similar campaigns in Bristol and nationally

Burch-Brown was one of seven founding core members of Countering Colston (2016-2020). In April 2017, the campaign prompted Bristol's premier concert venue Colston Hall to announce its renaming, the first decision of its kind in the UK. It was renamed Bristol Beacon in September 2020. From 2017-2020, at least 20 more institutions followed Colston Hall's lead, taking steps to rebalance colonial iconography or address histories and legacies of racism, including schools, Universities, places of worship, cultural venues, and a mainstream newspaper. Burch-Brown's research [3.1-3.3] contributed to the success of this campaign in three ways. First, the core campaigners worked together as a research team, publishing short-form research in mainstream regional press, in order to stimulate and inform public discussion. Burch-Brown contributed to

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this short-form research base, for instance through a 2017 article addressing the 10 most common objections to renaming Colston Hall [5.8], and through the creation of a database analysing 55 of the hundreds of letters published in the *Bristol Post* opposing Colston Hall's renaming [5.7], identifying 27 arguments of 6 main kinds. This analysis gave campaigners a clear understanding of key arguments to address. She shared this analysis with many institutional leaders and journalists. Second, she contributed to campaign media, including interviews or input on stories with Reuters, Sky News, ITV, the Spectator, BBC, Financial Times Magazine, the Guardian, the Telegraph, Turkish Radio and Television Cooperation, Mauritius Times, BBC Scotland, South African Broadcasting Corporation and CNN. She advised BBC Scotland's programme 'Scotland's Hidden Shame' with David Hayman, and a 2019 Reuters article featuring an interview with her was published in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, US Metro, and US News [5.10]. Third, Burch-Brown contributed to the success of the campaign by supporting institutional leaders across the city, including leaders of Colston Hall (now Bristol Beacon), Bristol Cathedral, Colston's Girl's School, Colston's Primary School, the University of Bristol, Bristol Museums, and the Mayor's office.

Burch-Brown played a lead role in supporting Colston Hall (now Bristol Beacon) as it navigated public controversy around the renaming. Communications Lead and Head of Special Projects writes: "This has been an incredibly emotive and complex issue and one that we were scared of addressing...we were met with negative feedback and ...a lack of support from organisations who we felt should be stepping up to help. One of the people that did step up was Dr Burch-Brown...It is no exaggeration to say that [Joanna's] help and supportive ear were vital to how we reacted to our situation. Dr Burch-Brown discussed her research around the [popular] arguments she had found for why a name change would be wrong and put these in a wider context for us, so we could think about the wider, societal and historical implications of what we were doing". She concludes that: "As a result of Dr Burch Brown's help, I believe our name change has struck the right note between looking forward and looking back" [5.1].

Shaped editorial strategies at Bristol Post Newspaper

Since 2018, Burch-Brown has helped shape editorial strategies of the *Bristol Post*, Bristol's mainstream media outlet. She has worked closely with the editor, who writes, "I doubt there are many editors who have brought philosophers into their editorial meetings. But these were extraordinary times for a city which was becoming increasingly uneasy with facing up to its past...I was trying to steer the Bristol Post's editorial decision-making through what felt like a city-wide existential minefield." He describes the polarised debate as "brutal", with Bristolians feeling like they had to choose to be on one side or the other of a binary argument. He wanted the newspaper to be on the right side of history, but was "concerned that by putting the *Post* firmly on one side of the debate, the paper would lose touch with a large chunk of the Bristol population, who would wrongly assume that we 'betrayed' their views... in short, I was looking for a way to bring everyone along with the change – while fearing that it was impossible". Collaborating with Burch-Brown led him to believe that bringing the city along was in fact a realistic possibility. "Joanna's non-partisan approach changed my view. She brought width and depth to the argument. She introduced the concept that philosophy can be used to undermine and disarm a polarised argument". He cites Burch-Brown's "many-voices approach" in his decision to carry out a poll of public opinion after the fall of Colston's statue. This poll showed a majority opposed to prosecution, and he states: "That influenced my editorial thinking when the police sought to prosecute those involved [in toppling Colston's statue] and asked us to publish pictures to try to identify them. I refused and wrote, with Joanna's approach in mind, an editorial trying to explain why I made the decision...The decision was...based squarely on the philosophical thinking which Joanna's advice had brought to my editorial decision-making." [5.1].

Enhanced Bristol Cathedral's understanding of the issue of slavery and its legacies

Burch-Brown has contributed to the transformation of Bristol Cathedral's memorial landscape and influenced its practice as a visitor attraction which highlights issues of slavery and justice. The current Dean of Westminster testifies to Burch-Brown's contribution in 2017, during his time as Dean of Bristol Cathedral: "I was plunged into a complex and, at times, highly emotive debate about the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade...Dr Burch-Brown was one of the few individuals I encountered in that long and occasionally weary debate who had the intellect and experience to command the immense amount of academic and popular literature on the subject and

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generosity of spirit to engage as a critical friend. Her work commanded respect, her commitment was exemplary and her grace in discussion was refreshing. The issues she examined are still of the utmost importance ... Joanna has helped me understand issues that still shape my working life and significantly shifted my engagement with the debate in Bristol.” The Dean later added a prayer honouring those harmed by transatlantic slavery beneath the stained-glass Colston window. He has gone on to be an important voice on these issues within the Church of England, from his role at Westminster [5.1, 5.10]. Burch-Brown later supported the Cathedral’s interim Dean in responding to Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, by recommending and explaining the UN Guidelines on Transitional Justice and Six Elements of Social Justice Pedagogy. This enabled the Cathedral to root its response to historic slavery in its desire for justice in today’s world. The Cathedral subsequently applied and was successful in receiving a grant [GBP150,000] from the Church Commissioners to appoint a Visitor Experience Director for three years. Part of the appointee’s work is to tell the story of the slave trade in Bristol, the people involved in it, and how that influences our thought and actions today. The Dean states: “the Cathedral now has the funding to make a difference to the welcome it will offer to visitors, both for the local community and farther away” [5.1].

Influenced processes of memorialisation and navigating contentious histories in Bristol and Oxford

Burch-Brown’s research [3.1, 3.2] has informed creative and curatorial practice aimed at inter-community understanding and dialogue. In 2019, she worked with poets and activists to create a pop-up exhibition on Race Equality in Bristol, accompanying Yoko Ono’s show at the Georgian House Museum. This exhibit has since begun touring Bristol sites and has been used for teacher training and cross-curriculum workshops with the whole school at Bristol Cathedral Choir School [5.5]. In 2020, Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees asked Burch-Brown to join the Bristol History Commission, established after the fall of Colston’s statue. In this role she is now co-chairing the commission’s first round of work on the question ‘What have we remembered?’ and advising on the curatorial strategy for exhibiting Colston’s statue. Mayor Rees writes, “I personally invited Joanna Burch-Brown to join because of the relevance of her expertise. She brings a deep understanding of the way communities navigate contentious histories” [5.1]. An Oxford historian and curator writes that Burch-Brown’s arguments helped her make a powerful case for the first ever community co-curated programmes at the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers Museums in Oxford (‘Nice cup of tea’, 2018-21), and first dual-language Arabic and English exhibit at Ashmolean (‘Owning the Past: From Mesopotamia to Iraq’, 2020-21), co-curated with African Caribbean and Middle Eastern community leadership respectively [5.2].

Informed international policy debates on contested heritage in public spaces

In March 2019, Burch-Brown was commissioned to submit a case study on Bristol [5.9] to the Task Force on Contested Histories in Public Spaces, a project of the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (The Hague), the Salzburg Global Seminar (US & Austria) and the International Bar Association (IBA) – the world’s leading association of legal practitioners. The case study and recommendations were presented at All Souls College to an audience with Runnymede Trust; Historic England; English Heritage; Pitt Rivers; Ashmolean Museum; French policy makers; and the High Commissioner on National Minorities from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Former speechwriter and Director of Communications for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, writes: “we have reviewed some exceptional work, but Dr Burch-Brown’s... is among the most innovative, balanced and insightful approaches we have seen.” [5.3] Burch-Brown’s recommendations to the IBA, together with her research [3.1, 3.2], have been adopted by a UK-based policy-making consultant, who is developing guidelines on how to conduct reviews of contested heritage, with partners including the Greater London Authority and Local Government Association. He writes: “it is fair to say that Burch-Brown’s articles have provided the foundation for my policy work in this area” [5.2].

Influenced changes to organisational practice and recognition of intangible heritage at Historic England

The All Souls Task Force meeting (see above) sparked a lasting relationship between Burch-Brown and the Head of Diversity and Inclusion from Historic England, leading to new methods to recognise the intangible heritage of less wealthy and powerful communities that is not recorded

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in the built environment. She writes: “Our conversations have been hugely important to my thinking. Before we met, I would not have had the courage to speak up publicly on contested heritage. But since we met, that’s completely changed”. She has used Burch-Brown’s arguments to support innovative programming on place-making to strengthen the connections between places and their communities: “Drawing parallels from your argument helped me think much more precisely about the problems with the *practice* of listing only tangible heritage...If we could develop practices for recognising *intangible heritage*, we could start representing many more communities and their history, as part of the whole country’s heritage”. Historic England has successfully drawn on these arguments to support the development of a ‘place-marker scheme’ through which they are now able to recognise intangible heritage. [5.2].

Informed changes to recruitment and risk assessment practices at DEFRA

Burch-Brown’s expertise across the linked domains of social justice and environment has helped shape central government policy. In September 2020, Burch-Brown delivered a keynote talk for the DEFRA team responsible for chemicals. This led them to adopt new recruitment policies that are already proving successful in supporting applicants from under-represented groups [5.4]. Burch-Brown served as panellist for HM Government Roundtable on Emerging Technology Assessment on Engineered Biology, resulting in the first UK HMG Emerging Technology Report (ETAR), a report to the National Security Advisor and No. 10, informing discussions of how to pursue tech advantage in post-covid19 redevelopment. Burch-Brown’s recommendations led to reframing how the assessment modelled risk, a change that DEFRA Futures lead stated would be implemented across the whole programme of Emerging Technology Assessment design [5.4].

Empowering students on the international Fulbright Summer Institute

Burch-Brown’s research [3.1-3.3] formed the basis for US/UK Fulbright Institute’s most popular summer school, on ‘Arts, Activism and Social Justice’, which she has directed since 2018 and which has attracted more than 300 applicants annually and rated by 100% of alumni as “outstanding”. British and American students design social justice initiatives, through workshops with Burch-Brown’s collaborators. One student reports that it “truly changed my global perspective” while another called it a “life-changing opportunity”. Another said, “I’ve learned a lot about how I want to conduct myself in my life after this.” One student says, “It has empowered me ... I know I can make a difference” and another says it was “an incredible experience which allowed me to make long lasting friendships and experience the world in a new way while becoming a more informed artist, activist, and scholar.” Burch-Brown’s students have since launched initiatives across England and in at least 7 American states, including projects on gun violence, immigration, political campaigning, and literacy in prisons [5.6].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Bristol Testimonies: Bristol Cathedral, Bristol Post, Colston Hall, Bristol Mayor, Bristol Museums (January 2021)
- 5.2 National Testimonies: Historic England (March 2019), BACS consultants and Oxford Arts Consultants (January 2021); Historic England schools resource, *Difficult Histories*
- 5.3 International Testimonies: All Souls (April 2018), Institute for Historic Justice and Reconciliation and Salzburg Global Seminar (January 2021)
- 5.4 Testimonies from Head of Futures and Senior Policy Analyst on chemicals team, DEFRA (January 2021)
- 5.5 Bristol Museum exhibit 2019-2020 (PDF of exhibit, press, Twitter, Arts Council report)
- 5.6 Fulbright Summer Institute 2019 (Ujima radio, student testimonials)
- 5.7 Database / analysis of 55 letters to Bristol Post on renaming of Colston Hall (compiled in 2017)
- 5.8 Short-form articles in popular press (April 2017, May 2018, June 2020)
- 5.9 Case study and recommendations for Task Force on Contested History (August 2020)
- 5.10 Press coverage sample: The Spectator, Financial Times, Reuters, Westminster (2017-2020)