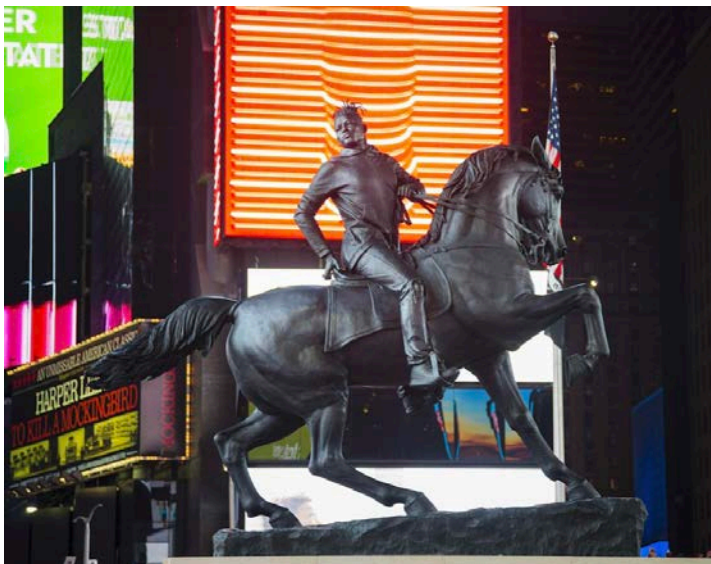


Iconoclasm



Questions of Veneration, Destruction and Power

The Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, June 2020

Part of the *Current Issues in Anthropology Series*



MAXWELL
MUSEUM
OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Introduction



An image of George Floyd is projected on the base of the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue, Monday, June 8, 2020, in Richmond, Va. The statue has been the focal point of protester over the death of George Floyd. Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam has ordered the removal of the statue. Image: Steve Helber/ Associated Press

(Audio of cheering crowd) That was the sound of a cheering crowd of protestors in Bristol, in the United Kingdom, as they pulled down the statue of seventeenth century slave trader Edward Colston, on June 7th, 2020.

Welcome to the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology's exhibition, *Iconoclasm: Questions of Veneration, Destruction and Power*

As long as humans have created symbols, others have sought to destroy them, creating cycles of veneration and destruction. Iconoclasm, the destruction of sacred images or representations, is so relevant to the work we do in anthropology museums, where a large part of what we do is preserve objects of cultural or ideological significance. This exhibition investigates current debates about iconoclasm.

Introduction



Protest for George Floyd, the widely hated statue of former mayor Frank Rizzo covered in graffiti, Philadelphia, PA, May 30, 2020. Photo Credit: Joe Piette CC BY-SA 2.0

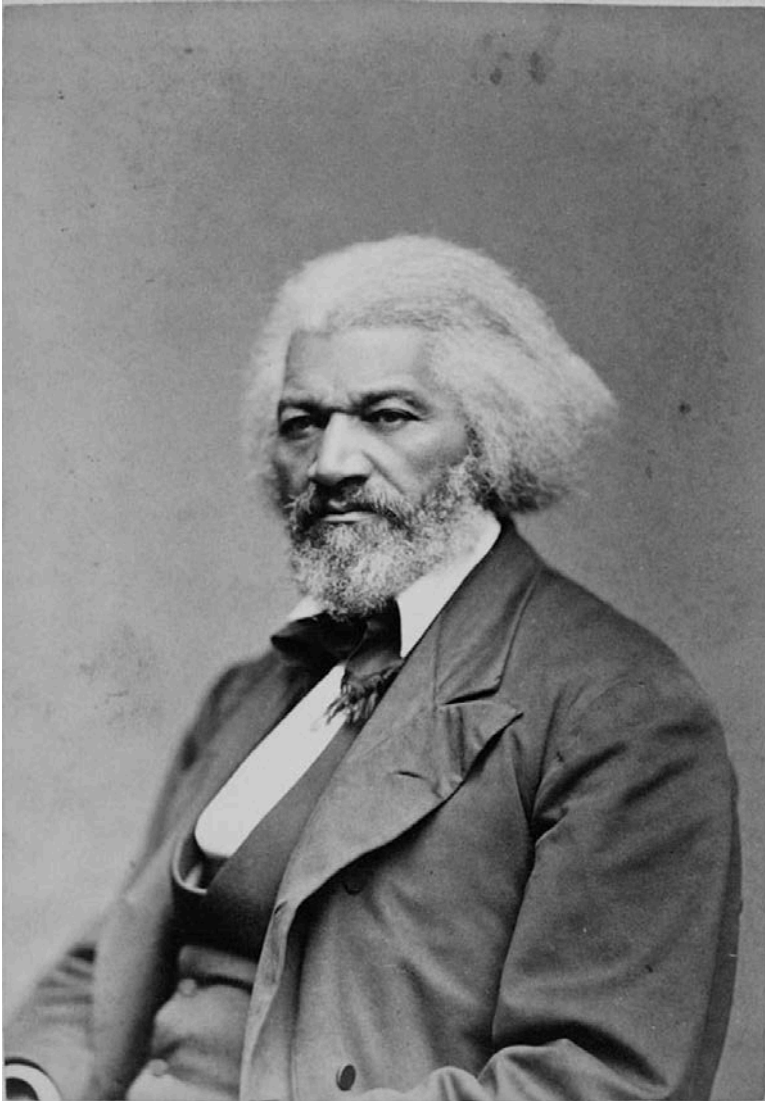
This exhibition was displayed in the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology in 2018 as part of our *Current Issues in Anthropology* series. We have created this online version in June 2020 with the ongoing protests in response to the killing of George Floyd in mind. We are in turbulent times and join you in reflecting on them. The Maxwell Museum also joins so many in expressing our anguish and frustrations in these times of unrest and a global pandemic.

Some of the images and text in this exhibition have been updated.

We begin with the words of Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie Bunch, who on May 31, 2020 in a statement he made, quoted Frederick Douglass. Douglass said:

The Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, The University of New Mexico, June 2020

Introduction



Frederick Douglass, ca 1879. Image Credit: (558770), National Archives, Frank W. Legg Photographic Collection of Portraits of Nineteenth-Century Notables Collection FL

‘Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground.... The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle.’

Iconoclasm



Khludov Psalter (detail), 9th century. The image represents the Iconoclast theologian, John the Grammarian, and an iconoclast bishop destroying an image of Christ. Image Credit: State Historical Museum, Moscow

Iconoclasm is the destruction of sacred images or representations. Originally iconoclasm referred to the destruction of actual *icons*, as major religious leaders and their followers sought to ban the veneration of sacred images (images representing Christian saints, the Virgin Mary and Christ) during Byzantine and Protestant Reformation eras.

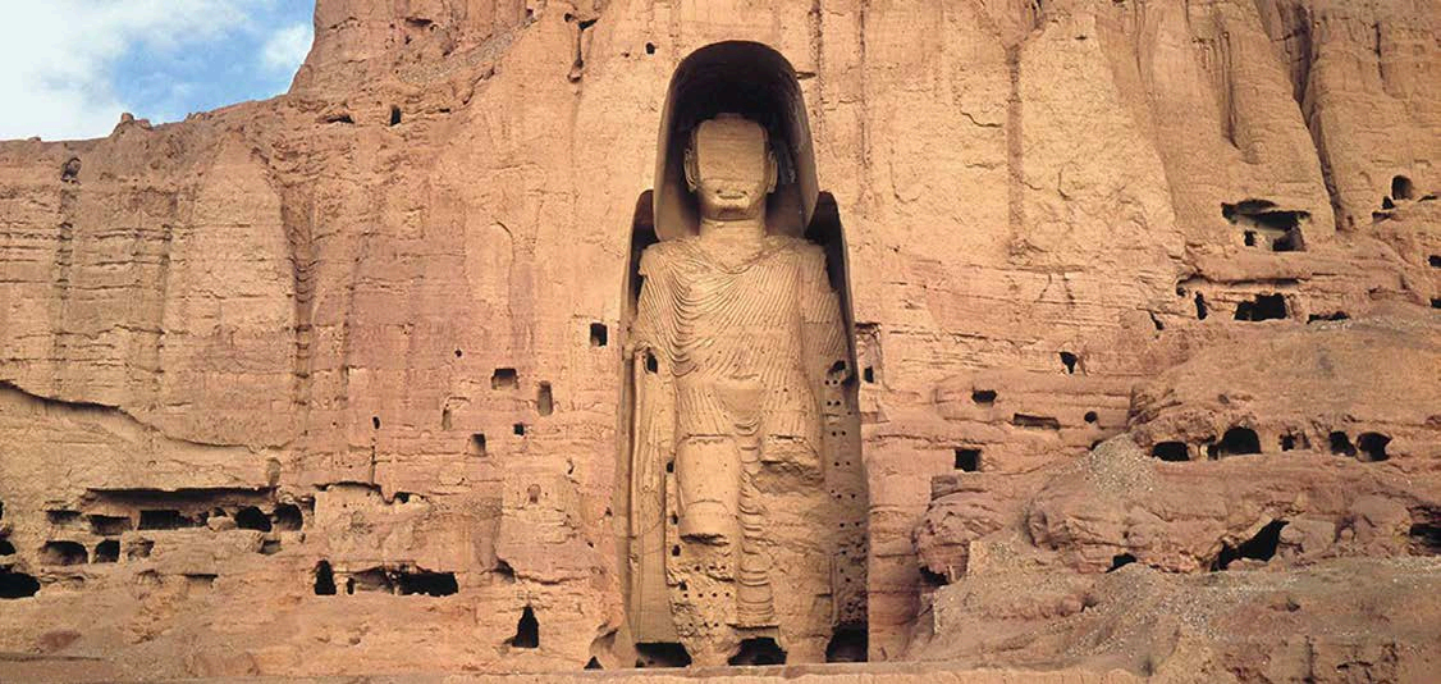
Iconoclasm



Pulling down the statue of George III by the "Sons of Freedom," at the Bowling Green, City of New York, July 1776 / painted by Johannes A. Oertel; engraved by John C. McRae, ca. 1875. Image Credit: The Library of Congress

Over time the term has expanded to include destruction of symbols of cherished beliefs, people, or institutions such as public statues of political or military figures.

Iconoclasm



One of the 6th-7th century Bamiyan Buddhas of Afghanistan (West niche), before destruction by the Taliban in 2001. Photo Credit: Afghanistan Embassy

As long as humans have created symbols, others have sought to destroy them, creating cycles of veneration and destruction. Religious zealots have destroyed the “idols” required by other forms of worship, or even their own religion’s icons.

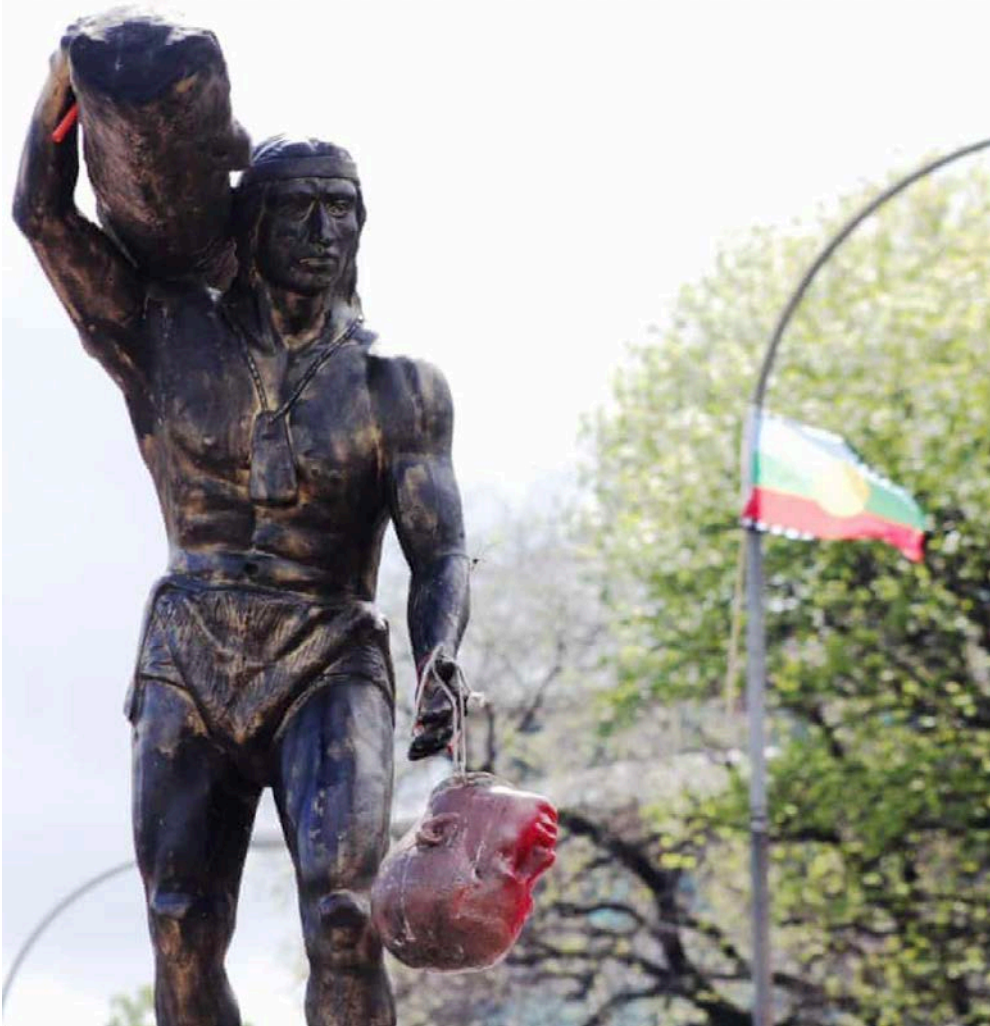
Iconoclasm



(Still from video) Second tear gas fired at the Admiralty Protest Zone, Hong Kong, December 2019. Much property was defaced or destroyed during the Hong Kong protests, including sites reflecting Chinese history and governmental ties, such as the City Legislature. Photo Credit: Studio Incendo, CC BY 2.0

Colonizers have destroyed the sacred sites and other rallying points of peoples they sought to conquer. As political regimes defeat rivals, they also remove or transform the symbols that represent the former order. Erecting or destroying monuments doesn't just reflect authority but is a way to promote or change it.

Iconoclasm



The head of Dagoberto Godoy hangs from a statue of the indigenous Mapuche chieftain Caupolicán after protesters decapitated a statue of the Chilean air force pilot in Temuco, November 2019. Photo Credit: Paulo Quintana/Araucania

In some instances, both in the United States, and around the globe, Indigenous communities, groups or individuals and those that support or sympathize with their plight, have inverted the script on the colonial narrative, taking down or vandalizing public works that honor colonists, colonization or other odes to empire. Just one such example is the decapitation of a statue in Temuco, Chile, of the Chilean military aviator Dagoberto Godoy (1893-1960). His head was hung by protestors from the arm of a statue of the Mapuche warrior Caupolicán – now also holding the Mapuche flag, or *Wenufoye*.

Iconoclasm



The activist group Culture Beyond Oil protesting in front of the Hoa-Haka-Nana-Ia in the Living and Dying gallery at the British Museum, July 2010. Photo Credit: <https://weareculture24.org.uk>

Iconoclasm deeply interests anthropology museums, which preserve objects of cultural or ideological significance. However, removing objects from their original contexts can be part of the destruction of cultures and assertions of political power. Can the collection of objects from other cultures be a form of iconoclasm? It is not just the display of images or objects of veneration that correlate to questions of power, but also the contexts in which they are displayed.

Iconoclasm



Brass (copper alloy) plaque/waist pendant, pre-20th century, Maxwell Museum of Anthropology collection, 2014.17.4. Made by the Edo (Bini) people of the Benin Kingdom of modern-day Nigeria. Previous to coming to the Maxwell Collection, the plaque was part of a collection from a recently closed museum in Hawaii, perhaps the Kamuela museum. Photo credit: The Maxwell Museum of Anthropology

So, for example, in addition to being ritual objects, works of art, and historical documents, Benin bronze plaques also serve to document historical interactions between the Benin Empire and Europe. Those stories, however, may be fragmented, owing to the manner in which the plaques were removed from their original context. Britain's Punitive Expedition of 1897, which destroyed and looted the Kingdom's capital Benin City, (an act of iconoclasm?), scattered many of these plaques into new networks of circulation, including into museum collections, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, the British Museum and, the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology. The display of Benin plaques in Western museums tells a different history of the Kingdom of Benin than the royal history of its Oba (King).

(this text has been adopted from the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology 2015 exhibition SA'E Y'AMA: The Power of Brass in the Kingdom of Benin)

Iconoclasm: The National Debate



A protester kicks the toppled statue of a Confederate soldier after it was pulled down at the old Durham County Courthouse, August 14, 2017. Photo credit: Casey Toth for the Herald Sun

Many current debates about iconoclasm in the United States center on the memorials of colonists, particular political figures and Confederate soldiers, whose venerated status is increasingly a matter of sometimes-violent disagreement. In 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia became the epicenter of the national debate on race.

Iconoclasm: The National Debate



Torch-bearing white nationalists gather around the base of a statue during a demonstration Friday night in Charlottesville, VA, August 11, 2017. The statue they are gathered around is a statue of Thomas Jefferson not the statue of Robert E. Lee proposed for removal. The group of White nationalists gathered there to surround a small group of counter protesters who positioned themselves at the base of that statue. Photo Credit: Edu Bayer for the New York Times

On August 11, 2017, white nationalists descended on Charlottesville, Virginia and on the University of Virginia for a “Unite the Right” rally protesting the plan to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. During the violence that erupted, counter-protester Heather Heyer was killed. The confrontation was covered widely on national news and inspired further acts of vandalism and iconoclasm focused on monuments that nominally honor the Confederacy. (Opponents of the monuments argue that many were erected to legitimize continued white dominance of Southern society.)

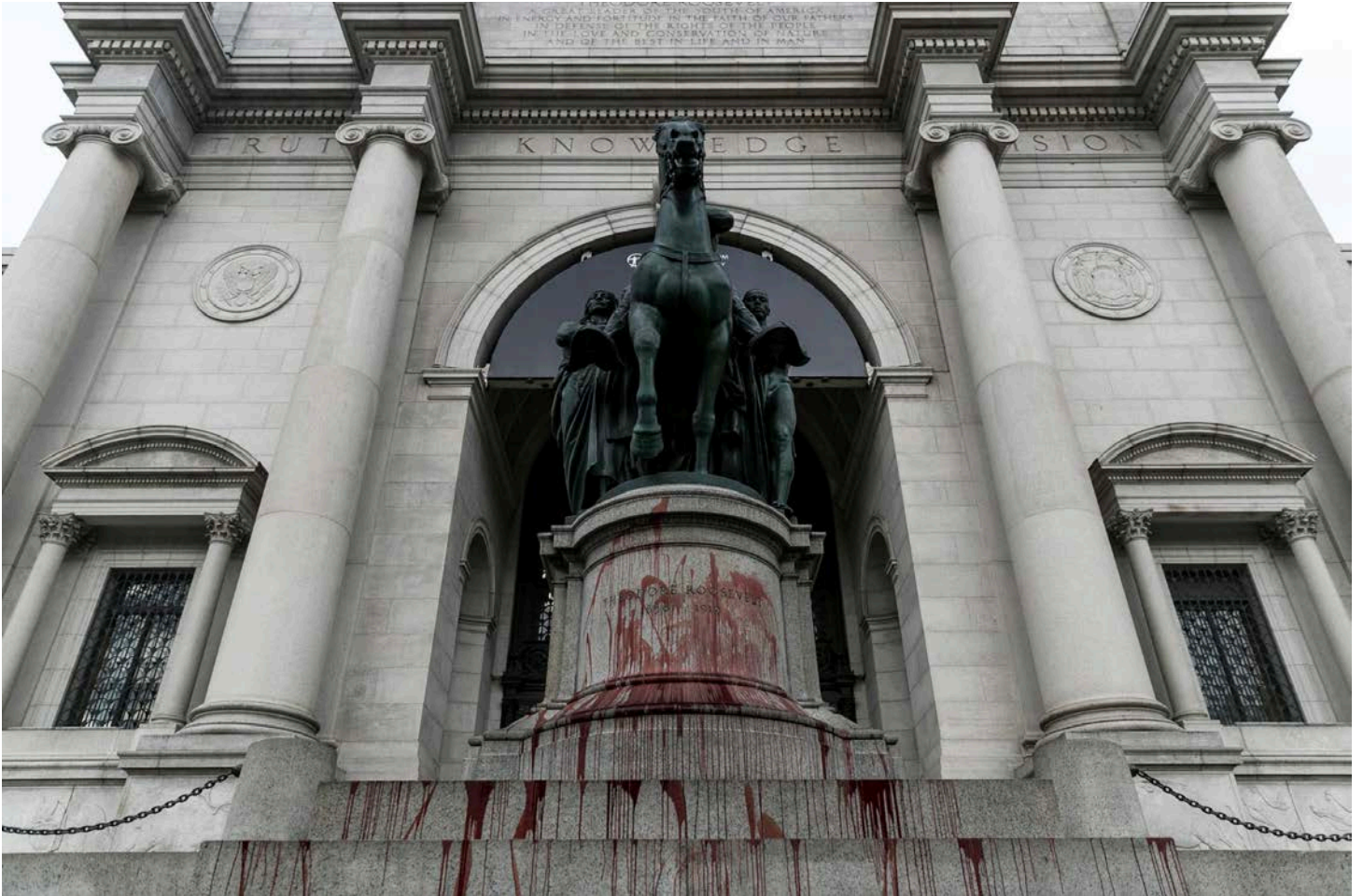
Iconoclasm: The National Debate



A Christopher Columbus statue in Central Park was vandalized on October 3, 2017. *Photo Credit: Christen Clifford*

More recently, protests against Columbus Day have been accompanied by acts of iconoclasm aimed at representations of Christopher Columbus. Many opponents of Columbus Day believe that it should be replaced with Indigenous Peoples Day, to recognize the violence inflicted on the original inhabitants of the Americas by Columbus and later colonizers.

Iconoclasm: The National Debate



The Theodore Roosevelt statue outside the American Museum of Natural History, vandalized, October 26, 2017, New York City, NY. Photo Credit: Jeenah Moon for the New York Times

Museums are not spared such responses. In 2017, an organization calling themselves “The Monument Removal Brigade” splashed a red liquid on a statue of Theodore Roosevelt, in front of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. A published statement released by the group on the internet called for the removal of the statue as an emblem of “patriarchy, white supremacy and settler-colonialism,” as they asked the museum to “rethink its cultural halls regarding the colonial mentality behind them.”

Iconoclasm: Regional Debate in New Mexico



The man who 20 years ago, said he cut off the right foot of the Don Juan de Oñate statue in Alcalde, N.M., 2017. Photo credit: Adria Malcolm for The New York Times

On September 30, 2017, the front page of the *New York Times* highlighted the saga of the statue of Spanish colonizer Juan de Oñate erected in 1993 in Alcalde, New Mexico. In January 1998 the statue's right foot was removed. The act recalled the 1598 battle between Oñate's Spanish forces and the village of Acoma. After winning the battle, Oñate severely punished the people of Acoma. Many Acoma men over the age of twenty-five had one foot cut off and then were forced into twenty years of penal servitude.

The individuals who anonymously removed the foot from the statue sent photographs of it and the following statement to local newspapers:

Iconoclasm: Regional Debate in New Mexico



A red tinge remains from recent vandalism to the left boot of the Don Juan de Oñate equestrian statue in Acalde, NM, September 2017. Photo Credit: Eddie Moore for the Albuquerque Journal

“We invite you to visit the Oñate Distortion Museum and Visitor Center. Located eight miles north of Española. We took the liberty of removing Oñate's right foot on behalf of our brothers and sisters of Acoma Pueblo.”

The people who originally commissioned the statue subsequently had a new foot made. In 2017, the statue was once again vandalized, when the right foot of Oñate was painted red in advance of a protest held in Santa Fe on September 8 of that year. The protest, organized by Native American activists, disrupted the “Entrada,” the annual reenactment of the 1692 return of the Spanish to New Mexico after the Pueblo revolt of 1680.

Postscript: Rio Arriba County removed this sculpture June 15, 2020.

Iconoclasm: Regional Debate in New Mexico



Indigenous activists at the end of an anti-racist rally held on the Santa Fe Plaza, August 14, 2017. Photo Credit: Aaron Cantú for the Santa Fe Reporter

Other New Mexican acts of iconoclasm have focused on public monuments and traditions, particularly in the state capitol of Santa Fe. One such event occurred on the Santa Fe Plaza, in 2017, led by a group of Indigenous activists participating in an anti-racist rally. As the crowd for the rally thinned, a small group of activists took to the stage while others positioned themselves in front of the monument pictured here. They begin chanting, "The Entrada is racist," a reference to the Entrada de Don Diego de Vargas (which celebrates Spanish colonists' return to Santa Fe in 1692). When the monument was erected in 1868, the phrase "To the heroes who have fallen in various battles with savage Indians in the Territory of New Mexico" was inscribed on its marble base. In 1974, an individual illegally chiseled out the word "Savage." The word was never restored. In 2019 the Entrada was abolished.

Iconoclasm: Regional Debate in New Mexico, Epilogue and Prologue



Sculpture of Juan de Oñate being removed 'temporarily', June 15, 2020, Acalde, NM. Photo Credit: Eddie Moore for the Albuquerque Journal

In recent turns of events, on June 15, 2020, Rio Arriba County removed the sculpture of Don Juan de Oñate, not in response to protests, but rather to protect it from protestors, who were scheduled to protest its removal later that day – the protest did go forward, the fate of the sculpture remains a question.

On the same day, a man was shot in Albuquerque, he was peacefully protesting for the removal of the monument called “La Jornada”, which features several sculpted images including Juan de Oñate leading oxen drawn carts and families involved in the Spanish colonization of the southwest in 1598. The monument was located on the property of the Albuquerque Museum, in Tiguex Park. Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller had the monument removed, stating “the City will be removing the statue until civic institutions can determine next steps.” Police took into custody several members of a right-wing militia group “The New Mexico Civil Guard” and Stephen Ray Baca has been charged with the shooting.

Iconoclasm: Regional Debate at UNM



Nick Estes, a University of New Mexico student activist, leads a group of protesters burning copies of UNM's official seal. The seal contains an image of a conquistador and a frontiersman, which some students say is racist, April 29, 2016. Photo Credit: Marla Brose for the Albuquerque Journal

In Albuquerque, home to the University of New Mexico campus, similar protests and acts of iconoclasm have taken place. After student and local protests, the city of Albuquerque now recognizes Indigenous Peoples Day, and UNM has stopped using a seal that celebrates Spanish and Anglo colonists while ignoring Native Americans.

Iconoclasm: Update



Ballerinas Kennedy George, 14, and Ava Holloway, 14, pose in front of a monument of Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Richmond after Virginia Governor Ralph Northam ordered its removal, June 5, 2020. Photo Credit: Julia Rendleman/Reuters

George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American, was killed on May 25, 2020. He died with his hands handcuffed behind him while a white police officer, Derek Chauven, of the Minneapolis police, knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. In the days and weeks that have followed, numerous and ongoing protests have been taking place: over his death, over police brutality, and over the history of racism in the United States and around the globe.

Iconoclasm: Update



A Statues of two Confederate generals, Robert E. Lee, pictured here, and Albert Sidney Johnston, and the Confederate cabinet member John Reagan, were removed on August 21, 2017. They followed the removal of a statue of Jefferson Davis in 2015. Photo Credit: Eric Gay/Associated Press

These protests, as well as others that have been growing over the last couple of years, have pushed many protesters and local, regional and national authorities to take action.

Iconoclasm: Update



A statue of Edward Colston, a late 17th century slave trader, being pushed into the river Avon, Bristol, UK. Photo Credit: Giulia Spadafora/NurPhoto via Getty Images

This has resulted in the removal of public statues and monuments that have honored colonists, purveyors of the slave trade, and other notables from history who are also known racists, who have nevertheless been honored and commemorated with such public tributes. However, even those who agree that removing statuary that honors those who represent oppressive or racist views and actions, have argued that such actions run the risk of removing reminders of a troubled history that we would do well to remember.

Iconoclasm: Epilogue and Prologue



"Rumors of War", by Kehinde Wiley, on temporary display in Times Square, New York City, New York, September 2019. The sculpture depicts an African American man in dreadlocks, a hoodie, ripped jeans and Nike hightops, but takes the form of the heroic equestrian statues of Confederate generals in Richmond, Va. Photo Credit: My Modern Met

The response to that is to put up new monuments that acknowledge the troubled past while acknowledging new icons. In turbulent times of rapidly changing public opinion and politics, it remains to be seen what previous symbols remain or are subjected to acts of iconoclasm, and what new icons are given public space.

Acknowledgments



Muriel Bowser, the Mayor of Washington D.C., renamed a street near the White House "Black Lives Matter Plaza", and had muralists paint "BLACK LIVES MATTER" in roughly 50-foot-wide yellow letters on a section of 16th Street that sits just in front of Lafayette Park, June 5, 2020. Lafayette Park, sits directly across from the White House, named for a French hero of the American Civil War, the Marquis de LaFayette. The parks, sometimes referred to as "the people's park" was created by Thomas Jefferson, and is iconic both for its location, and for the celebrations and protests it has hosted over the centuries. Photo Credit: Unknown

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The New York Times
The Santa Fe Reporter
The Albuquerque Journal
The Herald Sun
The Red Nation
Reuters
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My Modern Met

Audio Clip:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/video/2020/jun/07/cheers-as-bristol-protesters-pull-down-statue-of-17th-century-slave-trader-video>