

# Blue Planet, Black Lives: Matter, Memory, and the Temporalities of Political Geography<sup>1</sup>

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## MONDAY, 8 JUNE 2020: WHEN BLACK LIVES MATTER MET WORLD OCEANS DAY

On Saturday, 6 June 2020, the United States saw its largest day of protest ever, when over a half-million individuals participating in over 500 Black Lives Matter events spoke up against the police murder of George Floyd and, more broadly, against systemic, ongoing discrimination and violence directed at African Americans by state and social institutions (Buchanan et al., 2020). The next day, Sunday, 7 June, the United Kingdom's Black Lives Matter movement had *its* iconic moment, when over 10,000 individuals gathered in Bristol, England in a protest that culminated with the toppling of the statue of 17<sup>th</sup>-century slave trader Edward Colston. By Monday the 8th, images from these protests were reverberating around the world. News programmes, websites, and Twitter feeds were replete with festivals of falling monuments and horrific videos of protesters being kettled, tear-gassed, and worse.

And yet, at least on *my* Twitter feed, Monday, 8 June also hosted a whole other, parallel set of posts: reports on marine research, fun facts about obscure benthic organisms, pleas for the expansion of marine protected areas, celebrations of an imminent 'blue economy', and reminders of how the ocean connects us all. Purely by coincidence, the Black Lives Matter protests' peak on the first weekend of June had coincided with World Oceans Day, a United Nations-sponsored festival of the ocean that, since 1992, has been held annually every 8 June.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, these two events – the grassroots Black Lives Matter movement seeking social justice and the top-down, United Nations-sponsored World Oceans Day celebrating ocean science and marine awareness – have nothing in common, other than shared real estate on my Twitter feed. And yet, in the weeks following Floyd's murder there were some strange and unexpected intersections between the fight against white supremacy and the celebration of the ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> This plenary address is dedicated to the memory of Lynn Staeheli. Lynn, as guest-editor of a special issue of *Political Geography*, handled my first peer-reviewed journal article (Steinberg, 1994) and thus played a significant role in launching my career as a political geographer. Although I didn't realise it at the time, she gave this rookie academic a level of care, attention, and snarkiness that went well beyond the norm. The piece that I published was on social movements, which isn't a topic I've written much about since. But I hope that in returning to a social movement here – making a full circle from Brooklyn to Bristol, as it were – I will be giving appropriate honour to Lynn's legacy, and, specifically, to the impact that she had on me and my scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> World Oceans Day began as a Canadian government-backed initiative at the NGO Global Forum associated with the 1992 Rio United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. It subsequently was endorsed by the United Nations in December 2008. Concurrently, in 2002, a coalition of ocean-oriented foundations, corporations, zoos, and aquaria began sponsoring the World *Ocean Day* campaign, which also holds annual events on 8 June, independent of official UN World *Oceans Day* programming (World Ocean Day, n.d.).

Consider, for instance an episode from the previous weekend, at the end of May, when protesters marched down Richmond, Virginia's Monument Avenue painting anti-racist and anti-police slogans on the statues of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and three of his horseback-mounted generals: Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and J.E.B. Stuart. Having defaced the likenesses of these four elders of the Confederacy, they came to a fifth statue, less obviously martial and seemingly more intellectual: a stately white man seated beneath a globe, holding a book, and identified by the marble inscription: "Maury: Pathfinder of the Seas." Even if the protestors knew that Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873), a US Navy Captain who resigned his post to fight for the Confederacy, was the 'father of oceanography', they likely were unaware that much of his oceanographic research was driven by a desire to support the expansion of the US slave economy to South America. Nonetheless, seeing Maury seated amidst the Confederate generals and politicians, the protesters correctly inferred guilt by association. Having found their way to Maury, they dabbed him with a four-word afterthought that linked him with his colleagues: "Fuck this guy too" (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Monument to Matthew Fontaine Maury on Richmond, Virginia's Monument Avenue. Photo credit: Adam H. Domy. Reprinted by permission of the photographer.

The next weekend, protesters in Bristol, England pulled down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston (1636-1721) and knelt on Colston's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the duration that Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was believed to have knelt on George Floyd's neck.<sup>3</sup> They then dragged the statue through the streets of Bristol and threw it into the harbour that abuts the city centre.

Both incidents, the defacing of Maury in Richmond and the disposal of Colston in Bristol, point toward an inquiry into how practices of racialization are intertwined with how we know and use the water that surrounds us, and this was noted by careful observers. For instance, historians of science Penelope Hardy and Helen Rozwadowski have suggested that the defacing (and subsequent removal) of Maury's statue should be taken as a mandate for interrogating historic linkages between Maury's efforts to master the seas for imperial expansion and his commitment to the mastery of African American people:

Maury's links with the Confederacy's central commitment to the enslavement of African Americans are not mere guilt by association. The ongoing protests make now an appropriate moment for ocean scientists, both in the United States and elsewhere, to take a closer look at Maury's tangled scientific and ideological legacies, both because his [white supremacist] ideology profoundly shaped his science and because his widely acknowledged role in early oceanography has implications for efforts by the oceanographic community to demonstrate its commitment to inclusion and anti-racism. (Hardy and Rozwadowski, 2020: 11)

Likewise, in the immediate aftermath of Colston's toppling British public historian David Olusoga mobilised the watery interface between the Atlantic Ocean and Bristol's Floating Harbour as a rhetorical anchor, linking Bristol's leading role in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trade with more recent moments in the city's history, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century erection of the statue by Bristol merchants to its early 21<sup>st</sup> century destruction by an increasingly multi-racial urban citizenry. As Olusoga wrote in *The Guardian* on 8 June, the day after Colston's toppling:

The historical symmetry of this moment is poetic. A bronze effigy of an infamous and prolific slave trader dragged through the streets of a city built on the wealth of that trade, and then dumped, like the victims of the Middle Passage, into the water. Colston lies at the bottom of a harbour in which the ships of the triangular slave trade once moored, by the dockside on to which their cargoes were unloaded. (Olusoga, 2020) (Figure 2)

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<sup>3</sup> After further review of video footage, prosecutors calculated that in fact Chauvin had knelt on Floyd for 9 minutes and 29 seconds (Bogel-Burroughs, 2021).



Figure 2: Sign at the base of Pero's Bridge, where Colston's statue was dropped into the water. Photo by author.

Bristol's mayor, Marvin Rees, himself a descendant of Jamaican slaves, similarly celebrated the journey of Colston's statue, from proud display on land to ignominious absorption into watery depths, as an act of 'historical poetry':

Think about some of the punishments that would have been meted out on his slaves, Africans....Thrown off the quayside where Colston's ships would undoubtedly have docked, next to a bridge called Pero's Bridge named after a Bristol slave...I mean the historical poetry of that should not be lost on anyone. (quoted in Chorley, 2020)

Popular reflections on the day's events likewise reflected on the symbolic significance of Colston's watery end. A tweet from Twitter user Michelle Mauk, published in the hours after Colston's disposal in the harbour, is illustrative:

The icing on the cake is they pushed Colston's statue into the ocean, which is also what would happen to sick or dying slaves being transported. So it lives at the bottom of the ocean now. (Mauk, 2020)

The 'historical poetry' of Colston's demise in Bristol's Floating Harbour's depths was given a meta-poetic twist in Bristol City Poet Vanessa Kisuule's 8 June tweet, where she posted a videorecording of "Hollow," a poem that she had written to reflect on the previous day's events:

I think of you lying in that harbour  
with the horrors you hosted.  
There is no poem more succinct than that. (Kisuule, 2020)

Poetic symbolism notwithstanding, Bristol's Floating Harbour is hardly oceanic. The shallow basin is, in fact, an impounded portion of the River Avon, located 11 kilometres (7 miles) inland. The river was diverted to create the harbour in 1809, so that vessels docked at Bristol could remain afloat at low tide (hence the name 'Floating Harbour'). Commercial use of the Floating Harbour ceased in the 1970s when improvements were made to the deepwater port downstream at Avonmouth. Furthermore, Colston was not dropped into the harbour proper but into a subsidiary arm, St Augustine's Reach, a 350-metre long channel that appears where the River Frome emerges from beneath the city centre before flowing out into the main channel (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: St. Augustine's Reach, bisected by Pero's Bridge, viewed from across the Floating Harbour. Prior to its toppling, the statue was situated just to the right of Beacon Tower (formerly Colston Tower), the tall white building in the centre of the photo. The statue was dropped into St. Augustine's Reach at the left end of Pero's Bridge, near the ZaZa Bazaar sign. Photo by author.



Figure 4: The view from the point where the Colston statue was dropped into the water. Photo by author.

Despite its distance from the open ocean, marine references persist in recountings of the protest because, as with Hardy and Rozwadowski's admonition to oceanographers, these references resonate with an implicitly acknowledged link between, on the one hand, our understanding of the ocean as a space of depths and forces – imagined as potent in its emptiness – on which ships can be moved and bodies can be disappeared and, on the other hand, the establishment of the racialized order that prevailed, and that continues to prevail, on land. Indeed, these linkages have been well documented over decades of scholarship exploring the role of both science and the ocean in constructing ideologies and technologies of race and empire, from mercantilist era armadas and privateers to the horrors of the Middle Passage, and on through the present use of maritime logistics to project power globally and reshape the world (e.g. Baucom, 2005; Benton, 2009; Campling and Colás, 2021; Carroll, 2015; Cowen, 2014; Driver, 2001; *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2006; Khalili, 2019; Rozwadowski, 2019; Steinberg, 2001). This critique, in turn, connects with a broader body of literature on entanglements between the discourses of science and economics that are used to order categories of nature and enlist them as discrete, bounded resources to be known, managed, extracted, and conserved and the parallel discourses that are used to order categories of people and enlist them as producers and consumers in resource-extraction complexes (e.g. McKittrick, 2021; Yusoff, 2018).

Clearly, then, there is no shortage of awareness regarding the relationship between 'mastery' of the sea – through oceanographic science, navigational knowledge, military prowess, and commercial innovation – and the 'mastery' of some people over others – through slavery, militarism, and racist ideologies. Here, though, I want to ask what links can be made in their

attendant *oppositional* practices. What productive dialogue can we have between *anti*-racism and *critical* understandings of the ocean, its science, and its history? It seems to me that there is ample work to be done here. After all, scrawling “Fuck this guy too” on a poorly understood statue or reimagining the placid waters of Bristol’s Floating Harbour as the ocean’s distant depths can take us only so far in mobilising critical practice.

In other words, I want to ask how we can approach the coincidence of Black Lives Matter with World Oceans Day not as a curious time-warp that momentarily dominated my Twitter feed but as a call to action. More specifically, how can we use the ontological challenge posed by the ocean’s materiality and the porous boundaries of marine ecologies and economies to rethink the naturalization of race and its division of humanity into discrete, hierarchically ordered categories? And, conversely how can we use the political challenge posed by the Black Lives Matter movement to question what it means for us to seek to exploit, or conserve, or even just scientifically *know* the ocean as an ordered space of nature: a space where, through hierarchical categorization, some aspects of the ocean, like some lives, are systematically constructed as ‘mattering’ more than others?

## OCEANS IN CONTEXT

Let me begin by approaching these questions from what, for me at least, is familiar ground: the ocean. It is by now a well-worn cliché in critical ocean studies (whether rooted in Geography, History, Anthropology, ecocritical literary studies, or any other discipline) that for too long the ocean has been forgotten amidst disciplinary terracentrism. It is also an oversimplification. In fact, one has never (or, certainly not in modern times) been able to tell stories of imperial expansion, or merchant capitalism, or diasporic dispersals without accounting for the social and mechanical technologies that have been used to cross oceanic divides (Steinberg, 2001, 2009). Nor can one tell the story of today’s world of global trade and refugee movements without bringing the sea into the picture. Notwithstanding the title of Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s (2010) film, the sea is not truly a *forgotten* space.

However the sea that is narrated in these stories is all too often one in which time stops. Ocean-crossing commodities and passengers temporarily fade from view while at sea, only to reemerge, unchanged, on the other side. And those that fail to reemerge on the opposite coast – cast-off slaves, provincial ideas, salt-encrusted artefacts – are understood as disappearing into the oceanic ether. In short, the problem is not that dominant historiographies ignore the ocean. Rather, the problem is that they reduce the ocean to an empty space beyond history. In classics of Western thought the ocean is seen as timeless, from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (“The magnanimity of the sea...will permit no records” (Melville, 1922 [1851]: 52)) to Carl Schmitt’s *Nomos of the Earth* (“The sea has no *character* in the original sense of the word...meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint” (Schmitt, 2003 [1950]: 42)). For these thinkers, there can be no such thing as an oceanic archive.

Contrasting this work are those who focus on the histories that are made at sea, on ships where proto-capitalist, proto-anarchist, and proto-communist communities form (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000), in the lives of diaspora thinkers whose ideas cross continents (Gilroy, 1993), in the projects of utopian – or heterotopian – urbanists who seek to leverage the ocean’s location beyond state territory to launch alternative social formations (Steinberg et al., 2012). But although, in each of these scenarios, history is made at sea and across its waters, that history occurs in spite of the ocean’s biogeophysical properties, with little regard to the water’s depths, its phenomenological affordances, its absorptive liquidity, its sonic



resonances, its blinding darkness, its incessant mobilities (both periodic and chaotic), its life-giving, and life-taking, molecular structure. The ocean in these narratives is a space where history occurs, and hence politics is made, but the history and politics that occurs there is not specifically *oceanic*. As Katherine McKittrick (2006) elaborates in her discussion of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, this abstracted characterization of the ocean may still be used to portray a specific geography of connections, betweenness, or outsideness, and thus the ocean in these narratives is not without meaning. However, I would argue that this literary use of the ocean to ground a historical or political narrative is nonetheless distinct from a direct engagement with the ocean's materiality – its depths, its mobilities, its opacities, its temporalities (Steinberg, 2013; see also Tinsley, 2008).

As an alternative, I turn here to postcolonial scholars, many of whom speak from or with the creolized African diaspora, who protest against this a-temporal, and thereby fundamentally a-spatial, view of the ocean.<sup>4</sup> The ocean is not where history goes to die. The ocean does not forget. “The sea is history,” writes Derek Walcott (1986 [1980]) with reference to the myriad stories of pain and suffering inscribed in the sea. Artefacts persist “all subtle and submarine, through colonnades of coral.” What I find fascinating is that an oceanographer studying plastics concentrations in the Pacific Gyre or a marine biologist studying heavy metal accumulations in the bodies of fish might say much the same thing. As Christina Sharpe (2016) writes, death in the ocean leaves tracings in its wake, and this is as important for students of marine ecosystems and hydrodynamic models as it is for scholars of the lives and deaths that permeate oceanic dynamics and depths.

Complementing the work of geographers including Patricia Noxolo (Noxolo and Perziuso, 2013) and Katherine McKittrick (2014), who have explored Caribbean literary and philosophical traditions to challenge received notions of race and space, I turn here to a number of Caribbean postcolonial writers and scholars who have theorised with, or from, the ocean. It should come as little surprise that the ocean plays a crucial role in the work of writers like Walcott (from Saint Lucia), Édouard Glissant (from Martinique), Kamau Brathwaite (from Barbados), and Antonio Benítez-Rojo (from Cuba). After all, in the Caribbean, perhaps more than anywhere else, the ocean is a continual reminder of the geographic limits of one's proximate ‘home’, the presence of a distant ‘home’ to which one can never return, and the persistence of forces (both social and geophysical) that have brought colonizer and colonized alike to new lands to maintain relations of symbiotic, if highly problematic and unequal, interdependency. And, of course, relations of symbiotic, yet unequal, interdependency are at the core of the postcolonial condition (Said, 1993).

Thus, the hard-bordered binaries of home and passage, root (stasis) and route (mobility), and self and other that predominate in Western, continental ontologies are challenged by a worldview based on the complex morphology of the island, the archipelago, and the interweaving temporalities of the sea, an indeterminate flux that Glissant (1997 [1990]) calls a ‘poetics of relation’.<sup>5</sup> By elevating the ocean to a pivotal role in their ontologies, these Caribbean authors also suggest nonlinear perspectives on time, as is articulated in Brathwaite's concept of ‘tidalectics’. As Stefanie Hessler summarises the concept:

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I follow Doreen Massey (2004) in holding that an a-temporal perspective on a space is, by extension, fundamentally a-spatial.

<sup>5</sup> Caribbean postcolonial island thinkers and artists have developed their work in parallel, and in interaction, with colleagues in both literature and political thought in the Pacific (DeLoughrey, 2007; Shilliam, 2015).

From a dead-calm sea to angry tsunamis, the tide never returns to the same spot twice, and its movement is affected by several forces that themselves continually change: currents rising from the deep sea, the moon, the wind, and ecological conditions that complicate any plain dialectic view. Tidalectics thus assumes the shape of an unresolved cycle rather than a forward-directed argument or progression. (Hessler, 2018: 33)

Although the ocean, from a continentalist perspective, is seen as either permanent and immutable (as the earlier quotations from Melville and Schmitt suggest) or a surface on which linear histories are enacted (as is prevalent in Western maritime narratives), tidalectics brings to the fore how the ocean is a space of unresolvable, perpetual reformulation in intersecting, but differentiated temporalities, from the random movements of molecules to the periodic cycles of waves and tides to the continuous circulations of currents and conveyor belts. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2017: 33) writes, “Unlike terrestrial space – where one might memorialize space into place – the perpetual circulation of ocean currents means that the sea dissolves phenomenological experience and diffracts the accumulation of narrative” (see also, DeLoughrey, 2010; Tynan, 2010). Put another way, “The ocean suggests that we think with a different, nonlinear, nonmeasurable notion of time” (Steinberg and Peters, 2015: 255).

As the postcolonial Caribbean writers and their interlocutors into geography suggest, an oceanic perspective also suggests that we think differently about *space*. As islands, waves, and tidal cycles all repeat amidst ongoing differentiation, space is continually remade, relationally, through lateral movements but also through churning, turbulence, and the formation of invisible maritime and submarine routes that sediment out of human and non-human interactions (Chandler and Pugh, 2021; Lehman et al., 2021; Pugh, 2013, 2016; Stratford et al., 2011). Furthermore, the materiality of the ocean confounds modernist distinctions between human, nature, and environment. Consider the case of sargassum, an entangling (and entangled) substance that is simultaneously an outlier in the (liquid) oceanic environment, a constitutive component of the oceanic environment, a product of that environment, and a catchment for pollutants from beyond the oceanic environment (Pinnix, 2019). As Leslie Acton and colleagues have elaborated on in this journal, sargassum defies the modernist impulse to border (Acton et al., 2019).

Delving further into the way that the oceanic destabilises modernist divisions of space and time, foreground and background, and inside and outside, consider literary theorist Christina Sharpe’s meditation on marine nutrient recycling, following a conversation that she had with marine geologist Anne Gardulski:

Because nutrients cycle through the ocean...the atoms of [slaves] who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. (Sharpe, 2016: 40-41)

The slaves’ history thus becomes the ocean’s history. And, because we are apex predators who consume bioaccumulated marine organisms, it also becomes our *human* history, a part of our bodies, even if we never set foot in the sea. The ocean and its history pervade, outside us and within us, establishing a common condition of vulnerability that links humans across its destabilising nature and its tortured politics (Gilroy, 2018) and foregrounding the otherwise

hidden through-lines that connect the bodily interiors of humans and other creatures with their surrounding worlds (Neimanis, 2017; Probyn, 2016).

This geography interrupts the nationalist narrative of history finding its apogee in the bounding and consolidation of a sovereign territory, a narrative that celebrates the triumph of a territory's 'people' or 'race', with its concomitant story of progressive 'man' dominating a static 'nature' and subordinate, or subhuman, 'others'. As Glissant (1997) elaborates, the 'transparency' that characterises modern narratives of progress, universality, and omniscience are confounded by the 'opacity' of the ever-fragmenting, ever-absorbing oceanic environment, a point that is elaborated on by McKittrick (2007) in her call for a Black methodology that re-routes notions of place, process, and progress (see also, McKittrick, 2006, 2021). This point is also advanced oceanically by scholars such as Sharpe and Astrida Neimanis (2020a, 2020b), who dig deep into the geophysical properties of submarine molecular dispersion to illuminate how oceanic histories and counter-histories, including those introduced by land-based societies, persist even amidst the ocean's opacity. DeLoughrey (2017: 33) further proposes that this "discourse of oceanic submersion in the Caribbean [that] articulates a submarine temporality in which linear modes of time are distorted and ruptured" is particularly appropriate for understanding the complex relationalities of the Anthropocene, suggesting that this oceanic reorientation of time and space has implications extending beyond the ocean's watery limits (see also, Peters and Steinberg, 2019). Far from being a space without history, the ocean is a space where history is *never finished*.

### THE SEA IS HISTORY (AND GEOGRAPHY)

So my question, then, is: How can we employ this oceanic reorientation of time and space to engage with the political critique posed by the Black Lives Matter movement? To consider this further, let us return to 7 June 2020, the day before World Oceans Day, when over 10,000 Bristol residents gathered in the city centre, toppled the statue of slave trader Edward Colston and, 83 minutes later, dropped him into Bristol's Floating Harbour. As I have already noted, Black Lives Matter protesters, and those who celebrated the event after the fact, have drawn liberally on our imagination of the ocean as a place where things go to die, where life is robbed of humanity. Colston's 'drowning at sea' was applauded because he appeared to finally be meeting the same fate as those he murdered: disappearance from Earth, erasure from history, submersion in the deep, dissolution in the abyss.

However, 7 June was just one day in a long history of Bristol reckoning with its entanglements with the slave trade and, specifically, the legacy of Edward Colston. The statue of Colston, erected in 1895, had been a gift to the city by Bristol businessman James Arrowsmith and partially paid for with funds raised from the city's Colston societies, a network of four societies that were founded in the decades following Colston's 1721 death to raise charitable contributions from the city's elite.<sup>6</sup> Membership in the Colston societies, in turn, was (and remains) significantly intertwined with that of the Society of Merchant Venturers, the 13<sup>th</sup> century guild that, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was given monopoly rights to trade from Bristol Harbour and that, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has repurposed itself as a charitable

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<sup>6</sup> The original Colston Society, founded in 1726, disbanded in 2020 amidst "widespread re-examining of places, schools and organisations associated with the slave trader" (Cork, 2020a). The other three societies – the Dolphin Society (founded 1749), Grateful Society (founded 1759), and Anchor Society (founded 1769) – continue to operate.

organisation operating local educational institutions and care homes (Dresser, 2009, 2020; Steeds and Ball, 2020). The statue of Colston was adorned with a plaque reading, “Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city, A.D. 1895” (Figure 5). By the statue’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1995, though, Bristol residents were questioning whether Colston’s legacy was worthy of such honour, and whether Bristol’s elite, led by the Society of Merchant Venturers which at that point still had not admitted a single female or non-white member, was really positioned to define ‘virtue’ and ‘wisdom’ for the citizens of Bristol (Steeds and Ball, 2020).



Figure 5: Colston’s plinth (after the statue’s removal). Photo by author.

Around this time, voices emerged advocating removal of the statue and the renaming of several public and private buildings that had been named after Colston. In 1998, someone spray-painted “Fuck you slave trader” on the statue’s plinth and, some years later, a replica of a slave’s iron collar was placed around his neck (Dresser, 2016). In 2015, the anti-Colston movement solidified with the formation of the Countering Colston campaign. In 2017, the board governing Colston Hall, the city’s premier performing arts venue, announced that it would be changing its name following a major renovation and, in that same year, an online petition was begun urging the statue’s removal. In 2018, as the controversy around removal of the statue heated up, the Bristol City Council proposed that a second plaque be placed beside the original one, with text highlighting Colston’s role in the slave trade and in the deaths of tens of thousands of Africans. By the beginning of 2020, however, haggling between activists, the Society of Merchant Venturers, and their respective allies on the Council over wording had brought proposals for the second plaque to a standstill, and the

question of the statue's future was left unresolved (Cork, 2020c).<sup>7</sup> Thus it was unsurprising when, in late May 2020, as the Black Lives Matter movement blossomed following the murder of George Floyd, the Colston statue became a focal point for Bristolians seeking racial justice and new narrations of the city's history. Between 1 June and 5 June, the number of signatures on the online petition that had lay dormant since 2017 skyrocketed from 50 to 10,000 (Cork, 2021a). The city was thus primed when the statue came down on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

Perhaps because of this drawn-out build-up, once the statue fell the Council almost immediately sought to frame the event not as a wanton act of vandalism nor as an assault on the city's glorious heritage but as a watershed moment in the evolution of Bristol's reckoning with its tainted maritime past. The event of the toppling, *itself*, was to be memorialised. Bristol's enlightened confrontation with its history was to be celebrated. To this end, on the morning of Monday the 8<sup>th</sup>, just 16 hours or so after the statue came down, Council employees were dispatched to recover over 500 cardboard protest placards that had been left around the plinth when Colston was dragged to the harbour, so that they could be safely stored and ultimately incorporated into a museum exhibit commemorating the toppling of the statue (Coles, 2020; Cork, 2020b, 2020f). Three days later, at 6am on Thursday the 11<sup>th</sup>, Council employees retrieved the statue from the water and removed it to a workshop where it could be prepared for exhibition.

In the meantime, and consistent with the Council's celebratory perspective on the event, accusations regarding its criminal nature were kept to a minimum. Although the Labour-led Council eventually bowed to pressure from the national media and government, who were intent on launching a 'Culture War' against supposed efforts to 'cancel' Britain's imperial history, councillors attempted to avoid responsibility for lodging the complaint that was necessary to precipitate an investigation (Norton, 2020). The police, in turn, were almost apologetic about having to carry out an investigation. As Detective Superintendent Liz Hughes explained to the media, "In the eyes of the law a crime has been committed and we're duty-bound to investigate without fear or favour" (Cork, 2020d). Ultimately, ten activists were charged, but an offer was made to drop charges in return for payment of a £100 fine, two hours of community service, and submission of a letter responding to the Council's We Are Bristol History Commission's call for suggestions regarding how the city's history could be confronted and interpreted (Cork, 2020e). Six of the ten individuals charged accepted this offer. The trial of the other four is scheduled for December 2021.

Having chosen to narrate the toppling of the statue and the 'drowning' of Colston as a historical event to be celebrated, the Council was faced with a curatorial dilemma: How could this story be told in a way that would evoke what Mayor Rees called the 'historical poetry' of the event? How could it be told in a way that would link Colston's disposal in the Floating Harbour with the oceanic deaths faced by the slaves cast off his ships? How could a solid artefact – a bronze statue forged out of land, on land – be mobilized to tell a story whose pathology runs through the water, with crimes and deaths constructed through waterlogged interactions? Harkening back to the Caribbean scholars and their interlocutors discussed

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<sup>7</sup> The proposed text for the second plaque went through several revisions but the initial version, proposed early in 2018, read, "As a high official of the Royal African Company from 1680 to 1692, Edward Colston played an active role in the enslavement of over 84,000 Africans (including 12,000 children) of whom over 19,000 died en route to the Caribbean and America. Colston also invested in the Spanish slave trade and in slave-produced sugar. As Tory MP for Bristol (1710-1713), he defended the city's 'right' to trade in enslaved Africans. Bristolians who did not subscribe to his religious and political beliefs were not permitted to benefit from his charities." (Cork, 2020c)

earlier, how could the story of all these bodies of/in water – the bodies of cast-off slaves, the body of Colston’s statue, the water bodies that cascade between scales from the Atlantic Ocean to the Floating Harbour – be mobilized in critique of the racializing foundations that underpin both historic and contemporary Bristol? Or, as Christina Sharpe might ask, how can the oceanic undercurrent be mobilised to site Colston’s demise within the residence time of the slave trade? How can oceanic memories of death be made to live?

For some on the left, these were the wrong questions to ask. After all, there is a long history in progressive thought of understanding the ocean as a deathscape, from historical scholarship on the Middle Passage through contemporary necropolitics-informed scholarship on the deadly passages of Mediterranean migrants (e.g. De Genova, 2017).<sup>8</sup> Implicitly working from this perspective, Ameya Tripathi wrote on the British anti-racist, anti-imperialist website *Novara Media*:

Just fishing Colston back out of the water has already done the damage. For those whose ancestors were bound in chains, there is something permanent and irretrievable about the loss of thousands of slaves in the Middle Passage or on the Bristol quayside. They could not buy themselves absolution and did not have the privilege to have their history told as individuals cast in metal. Why should Colston be able to? (Tripathi, 2020)

Tripathi’s perspective, though, is dependent on understanding the ocean as a space where history stops, where bodies, memories, and ideas die. And yet, as scholars from Walcott to Sharpe assert, the sea is history, the ocean leaves a wake even in its mortality. Water’s opacity should not be mistaken for erasure. History continues.

Having retrieved the statue from the harbour and chosen to display it in a manner that would memorialize not just Colston (critically) but also the historic moment when he was rejected as Bristol’s iconic benefactor, the Council faced a number of practical decisions. Several of these were addressed in a press briefing held by the Council’s Documentation and Conservation Manager, Fran Coles, who was tasked with conserving the battered statue so that, once the Council had decided on the next steps, it would be suitable for display:

Considering his journey to the harbour, he’s actually in pretty good condition. You can see the scrapes and scuffs of him as he was being rolled to the harbourside, but they are clean and stable....

Overall he’s structurally sound, and our main concern is making sure that we can conserve the paint, the graffiti that’s on him now, because that’s actually become the most fragile part of the sculpture. (quoted in Cork, 2020f)<sup>9</sup>

But, tellingly, Coles adds:

When he came out of the harbour he was full of mud and sediment from the harbour floor, so we were quite keen to remove that very quickly in case that had any effect on

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<sup>8</sup> That said, even in these traditions there has been a turn away from absolutist understandings of the ocean as a deathscape (e.g. Heller and Pezzani, 2019; Mbembe, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Notable graffiti includes the letters ‘BLM’ (for Black Lives Matter), the word ‘Prick’, and dabs of red paint on his face (Cork, 2020f).

the statue itself or on the paint surfaces that are now on the statue. (quoted in Cork, 2020f)

Coles' programme for stabilizing the statue echoes the position articulated by Tripathi: history stops at the water's edge. Residue from the statue's time on the harbour floor is seen as an unwanted contaminant, notwithstanding the intensely maritime nature of Colston's, and Bristol's, history. Stray remnants from the harbour – mud, sediment – must be washed off so that the history of land-based struggle – spray paint, scratches, dents – can be preserved (Figure 6).



The underlying problem here, and one that, in a sense, applies to all attempts at achieving memorialisation through preservation of an object, is that the evocative meanings that we attribute to a space don't always align with the dynamic materialities of the object that we seek to stabilise in order to achieve a linear narration. This is exacerbated when the history being narrated spans two different spaces that are characterised by divergent temporalities: the solid space of land, where we expect to find stable objects that communicate stories of discrete events like human enslavement, urban development, and social protest; and the liquid, voluminous space of the harbour (and the ocean beyond), where this linear history of events and objects is replaced by a non-linear history of forces, flows, and shape-changing processes.

Mud, the 'memory' of the harbour that adheres to solid objects even when removed from liquid, potentially could bridge this gap between the solidity of land and the fluidity of water. However, as Coles noted during her press briefing, mud can also corrode, hiding one story

even as it tells another (see also, Davies, 2021; Whitt, 2018). Furthermore, efforts at restoring objects are always partial. When stabilizing an object so that it provides a lasting memory of a specific time, the life of the object and the way that its liveliness came into being through interactions with the world around invariably will be diminished. Restoration involves making difficult choices to tell incomplete stories based on frozen moments in time (Spelman, 2008). And as Karen Till (2012) stressed in her *Political Geography* plenary lecture over a decade ago, traumatic events, which refuse fixity in time, are particularly challenging to memorialise.

This doesn't mean that, in an instance like this, we should abandon references to the physical properties of the spaces within which history occurs. But it does mean that we should remain cognisant that spatial metaphors are powerful as rhetorical tools *because* they are partial, aligning imperfectly with both matter and meaning. Deploying a spatial metaphor thus forces us to think about what is, what is not, and what can be, and as we work through their imperfections we are led to draw out connections, constraints, and possibilities that might not otherwise be visible. Or, as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley has written with specific reference to the oceanic:

My point is never that we should strip theory of watery metaphors but that we should return to the materiality of water to make its metaphors mean more complexly, shaking off settling into frozen figures. (Tinsley, 2008: 212)

This invocation of the power of a spatial metaphor's partiality should not be news to geographers. Michael Brown (2000) elaborated on this point over twenty years ago in his work on the spatial metaphor of the closet. Moving closer to the subject at hand here, Paul Carter (2019) has more recently stressed a similar point with reference to the archipelago. Even more relevant is Angela Last's (2015) work on geopoetics in the work of Guadeloupean writer Daniel Maximin. As Last discusses, Maximin's contribution is not that he proposes a new essentialism based on a unique 'Caribbean' materiality, but that the turbulent materiality of the Caribbean can be used to destabilise the assumptions about static nature upon which statist, and racialised, order is based, a perspective that, again, resonates with that of McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter (McKittrick, 2006, 2014). In other words, spatial metaphors and the materialities that ground (and unground) them do not, in themselves, tell political stories, but they are ripe with potential for unleashing political thinking.

This takes us back to the dilemma faced by the statue's conservator, Fran Coles: how to communicate the maritime (or even riverine) 'historical poetics' of Colston's demise when the submarine matter that adhered to the statue would render it unsuitable for preservation or, ultimately, presentation. Coles adopted a novel solution to this problem:

The other thing that we have preserved is the bike tyre that came up with him. It's just such an iconic image, such a historic moment that as he came out of the harbour, there was a tyre stuck hanging from his coat tails. It seemed appropriate that we preserved that as well. (quoted in Cork, 2020f)

Along with the bicycle tyre, Coles also applied her conservator skills to a number of other supplementary objects: the placards from the protest; the ropes used to bring the statue down; a rolled up newspaper, dated 1895 and signed by several of the workers who built the statue, which was found sealed inside the statue's hollow body (Coles, 2020). Each of these supplementary objects gives context to the story of the statue by referencing a specific



moment in its life-cycle: From its construction, to its toppling, to its retrieval from the harbour.

This effort to preserve (and, eventually, present) these objects as props that contextualise the statue is consistent with its designation as an object of social history. Months later, when reflecting on her work with the Colston statue at a professional seminar sponsored by the Institute of Conservation, Coles contrasted her approach with the one that she would have taken if the decision had been made to treat the statue as an object of fine art:

Public perception of me as a conservator was that I would just want to make the statue shiny and new, and there were tens of messages asking me if we would be keeping the graffiti, and a lot of happy surprise when I said that yes we would be because it wasn't just a piece of public statutory anymore; it was telling a story of the events of that day and that graffiti was part of that story. (Coles, 2020)

This positioning of the statue as an object of social history, accompanied by supplementary objects and exhibiting the marks that history has left on its surface, adds historical depth to the story that will be told when it eventually is re-displayed. However, although this presentation would extend the narrative backwards in time to the statue's construction and forwards to its defacement, disposal, and resurrection, it would not change the fundamental framing of the narrative, as the story of an object (and its associated objects) proceeding along a linear movement of time marked by specific events. In short, the history told by this constellation of objects would be not only linear but *landed*. The temporalities of the ocean and their resulting opacities – the imperceptible decay of rust, the forces that connect distant lands even as they divide them, the residence time that connects the traumas of past crimes with ongoing patterns of death and dehumanisation – are pushed out of the story, literally washed off of the objects whose stability they might contaminate and whose transparency they might occlude.

### THE COLSTON STATUE: WHAT NEXT?

In the months immediately after the Colston statue was toppled and subsequently retrieved, the We Are Bristol History Commission began meeting to consider its future, as well as that of the plinth on which it previously had stood. Already at the Commission's first meeting, in September 2020, the group settled on the strategy of holding a temporary exhibit at M Shed, Bristol's Council-run local history museum, to seek public input regarding the statue's ultimate disposition (We Are Bristol History Commission, 2020). The resulting exhibit, *The Colston Statue: What Next?*, opened in June 2021, timed to coincide with the first anniversary of the statue's toppling. Although the exhibit contained a small section on Colston the man ("Who was Colston and why did he have a statue?") the focus was on Colston the *statue*: its history, the decades-long controversy over its disposition, the events of 7 June, the passionate opinions of pro-statue and anti-statue advocates, and the question of its ultimate disposition (Figure 7).



Figure 7: A museum visitor views the Colston statue at the *Colston Statue: What Next?* exhibit. Photo by author.

In addition to the statue itself and the brief history of Colston, key aspects of the exhibit included a detailed timeline of the statue (from 1867 when Colston Hall opened through the December 2020 charging of the ‘Colston Four’); a number of placards from the 7 June protest; the results of a survey conducted on the *Bristol Post*’s website 5 days after the statue came down (56% supported the statue’s disposal in the harbour, 20% said the statue should have remained standing, and the other 24% took intermediate positions); a series of projections displaying Bristolians’ divergent responses to questions about the power of statues, the function of memorialisation, etc.; and projections displaying rotations of news articles about the protest (Figures 8 and 9). At the end of the exhibit, visitors were invited to visit a website where they could offer their opinions regarding the fate of the statue and the plinth. The statue itself was displayed in as neutral a manner as possible: a solitary, prone object that had become an unexpected focus of conflict, and whose historical and symbolic significance was explained in the accompanying signage that chronicled (and sought to advance) the debate over its future.



Figure 8: Several aspects of the *Colston Statue: What Next?* exhibit, including the statue, citizens' comments (projected on the wall), news stories (also projected on the wall), a pie-chart displaying results from the 12 June *Bristol Post* public opinion survey, and a sample of the 500 placards recovered from the area around the plinth. Photo by author.



Figure 9: The Colston statue timeline at the *Colston Statue: What Next?* exhibit. Photo by author.

In a blogpost on the website of the Bristol Radical History Group, published just days after the *What Next?* exhibit opened, Randell Brantley (2021) took issue with the exhibit’s near-exclusive focus on the statue. He noted that most of the effort of the Countering Colston campaign in the years leading up to 2020 was directed not toward the statue but toward other Bristol institutions that bore the slave trader’s name, including Colston Hall and a number of schools that, unlike the statue, were still being actively supported by Bristol’s elite. Brantley suggested that the focus on the statue allowed the exhibit organisers to avoid confronting how the veneration of Colston is still being reproduced by key local institutions, including the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Colston societies, and the Church of England. By focusing on the statue, and by devolving the question over the statue’s ultimate disposition to a debate “posing angry *Bristol Post* letter writers versus Black Lives Matter protesters,...the people really with the power over the legacy of Edward Colston, the Society of Merchant Venturers, remain in the shadows” (Brantley, 2021).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Although steering clear of any direct indictment of Bristol’s elite institutions, Mayor Rees also has argued that the debate over the symbolic meaning and disposition of the statue should not be allowed to distract from efforts to address the ongoing inequalities that it symbolises: “Yes, it was symbolic, but no one turned up to my office the next day with a memo telling me anything had changed on [the topic of] school exclusions, criminal justice, poverty, mental health, educational outcomes, unemployment levels - nothing. So, again we have to always be careful that the symbolic - particularly when it’s really dramatic - does not consume the whole bandwidth for the conversation because otherwise we think ‘Oh, well we did this amazing thing and nothing changed’ - yeah, nothing

I wish to take Brantley's critique one step further. Not only does the focus on the statue allow Bristol's 21<sup>st</sup>-century elite to escape unexamined; it also allows contemporary Bristol more broadly, as a city with a web of past and present maritime entanglements, to avoid critical scrutiny. Even as the temporary exhibit in one corner of the M Shed museum interrogated Colston's ethics, the permanent collection left his, and Bristol's, imperial legacy unquestioned. For instance, the permanent collection features an exhibit on Bristol's neighbourhoods, where elderly residents from the inner suburb of Bedminster nostalgically reminisce about how their community was bound together by the mills where 13,000 neighbours laboured together to process tobacco grown on overseas plantations. Another section of the museum, focused on Bristol's contemporary industries, lauds the Rolls Royce plant in suburban Filton, boasting in particular about the jet engines that are manufactured there for the Eurofighter Typhoon. Yet the museum passes up opportunities to connect Colston's slave trading and, perhaps more importantly, his more recent veneration, with these and other ways in which Bristol's economy is entangled with more contemporary ways in which militarised power is used to extract labour value and extract commodities from overseas destinations. Whilst the removal of Colston's statue from the Floating Harbour may have been necessary for curatorial purposes (as well as to remove a potential navigational hazard), the museum exhibit also removes the Colston story from Bristol's larger maritime context. Echoing Hardy and Rozwadowski's (2020) call for interventions in the debates surrounding the veneration of Matthew Fontaine Maury, this lacuna in the museum's presentation of the Colston legacy – separating mastery of the sea from mastery of overseas peoples and places – creates an imperative for critical scholars to use the conflict over Colston as a foundation for exploring how Colston and subsequent captains of industry have mobilised overseas empire in ways that are not just horrific but normalised. The first step in this effort must be an acknowledgment that the maritime is not just a historic curiosity or scientific puzzle but a material environment that makes the production and projection of power possible. In other words, the maritime must be *spatialised*.

### THE 'HISTORICAL POETRY' OF THE OCEANIC

In practice, spatialising the ocean would mean taking a different approach to curation, using the elemental properties of water, and the alternative spatialities and temporalities they suggest, to bring out these connections, and this brings us back to the Caribbean postcolonial scholars discussed earlier. This likely would mean directly engaging the materiality of the river and the ocean, even if retaining bits of mud that were stuck on the statue is not an option. It would mean situating the statue's three-and-a-half days on the river bottom amidst an elaboration on the currents and tides that bring molecules – including some that can be traced back to cast-off slaves – to the Floating Harbour. It would mean evoking the terror of the depths: the darkness but also the unlocatable noises, the crushing pressures, the disorientation, the buffeting currents. It would mean a collapsing of time, elaborating that Colston's story is the slaves' story is Bristol's story is today's story. It would give resonance to the geographic imagination revealed by Michelle Mauk's tweet: When one thinks oceanically, or, one might say, tidalectically, the Floating Harbour – in its history, its economy, its ecological connectivities and vulnerabilities – *is* the ocean, and its residents –

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changed because we pointed [out the] symbolic act rather than the absolute substance" (quoted in Cork, 2021b).

white and Black, living and dead, famous and anonymous – exist in the wake of countless oceanic voyages and circulations.

One place to start in operationalising this vision would be the growing body of scholarship on literary and artistic depictions of submarine histories and futures (e.g. DeLoughrey, 2017, 2019; DeLoughrey and Flores, 2020). As just one example, consider Jason deCaires Taylor’s underwater installations in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico that DeLoughrey describes as seeking “to *rematerialize* the ocean and, by life-casting local people for submersion, to enable sea ontologies, rendering uninhabitable space in anthropomorphized place” (DeLoughrey, 2017: 36, emphasis in original; see also deCaires Taylor, n.d.). For DeLoughrey, who draws heavily on Glissant, deCaires Taylor’s installations demystify the shared experience of the oceanic unfamiliar, a move that is at one and the same time creepy and comforting, encouraging viewers to see themselves in a deeper sense of intertemporal, interspecies, and interelemental relationality. DeCaires Taylor’s installations do not directly reference the Middle Passage, suggesting instead a broader provocation to see with “the ocean as [a] medium [that] can symbolize the simultaneity or even collapse of linear time, reflecting lost lives of the past and memorializing – as an act of anticipatory mourning – the multi-species lives of the future of the Anthropocene” (DeLoughrey, 2017: 36). However, DeLoughrey acknowledges that the installations are often read as evoking the Middle Passage, particularly when, as in the Caribbean (or Bristol), that is a dominant narrative for understanding the intersections of livelihoods and submergences at sea. DeCaires Taylor’s installations suggest one way how situating histories in/of the ocean’s immersive materiality can engender our appreciation of the lives that persist in the wake of past and future oceanic passages. This immersion allows new stories to be told, or old stories to be told in new ways. Imagine, for a moment, if the remains of Colston’s likeness were placed amidst the anonymous souls of deCaires Taylor’s submarine lifescape, strangely alive in their stillness, making history, together, even as they walk, alone, into the abyss.

Or imagine, as an alternative, if Colston’s statue were installed at Avonmouth, gazing approvingly at the infrastructure of the global trade network that has evolved from the 17<sup>th</sup> century triangular trade and looking longingly at the ocean that continues to make this economy possible. At first glance, the statue would appear celebratory. But oceanic forces would soon darken the celebration, much as Colston’s ships were beset by frequent disruptions when undertaking the Middle Passage. According to climate change modelers, there is a high likelihood of catastrophic flooding in coastal southwest England by 2050, and Avonmouth is in a particularly precarious location (Brock, 2020). By relocating Colston’s statue to Avonmouth, the ocean, a site of opportunity and empire, would simultaneously be recast as a site of vulnerability and death.<sup>11</sup>

In one sense, if one were to display the statue this way the message would be much the same as if Colston had been left in the Floating Harbour; the ‘historical poetry’ referenced by David Olusoga, Mayor Rees, Vanessa Kisuule, and Michelle Mauk would be mobilised to condemn Colston to a fate evocative of the slaves whom he drowned. And yet, by subjecting Colston to a slow, yet visible decay that highlights the ocean’s unpredictable, non-linear forces, contemporary viewers would be interacting with the statue not only as an illustrative object with a history marked by specific events (the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century slave trade, the 19<sup>th</sup> century veneration of one of its leaders, the 21<sup>st</sup> century repudiation of his crimes) but also as an icon of the oceanic forces and resonances that, on the one hand, continue to shape our

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Jenny Williams for suggesting this presentation of the Colston statue.

lives, as global consumers with complex identities, but that, on the other hand, may well subsume us, whether through extreme weather events brought about by industrialisation-induced climate change or through social dysfunction brought about by capitalism's excesses. Ultimately, coastal erosion would advance to the point where Colston is inundated by the industrialised ocean that, if one goes back far enough, is of his making, revealing to Bristolians how, even today, they both live and die in the slave trade's wake.

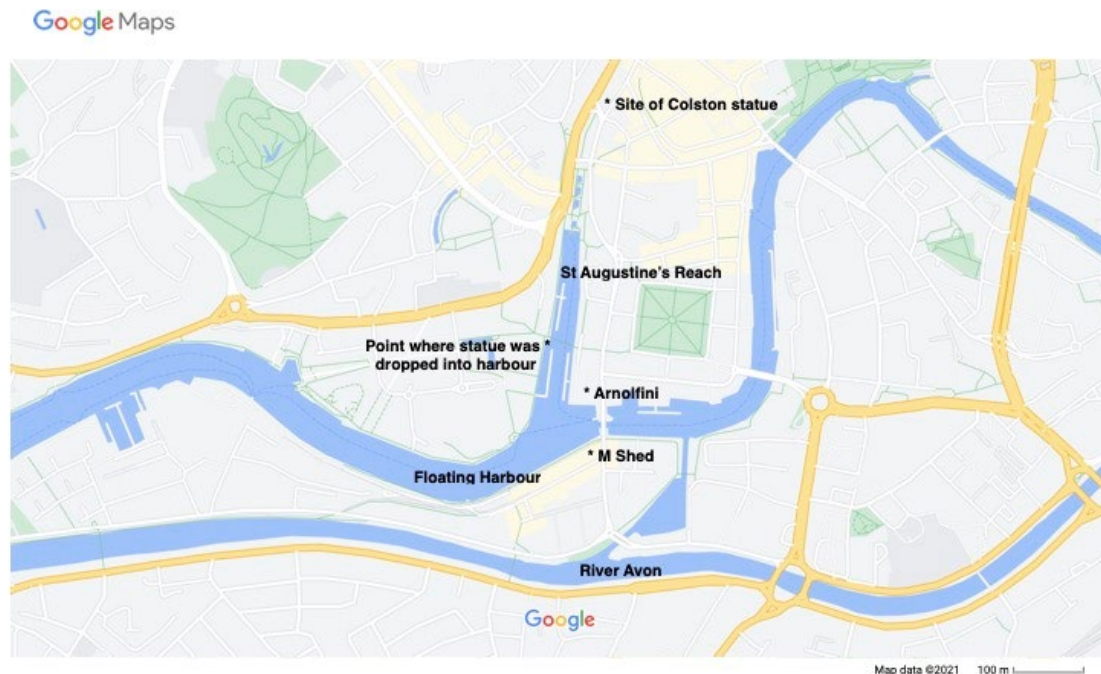


Figure 10: Bristol's Floating Harbour and environs. Base data by Google, annotations by author.

But that leaves me to ponder whether, if we seek to embrace the oceanic to interrogate a relational world, memorialisation, even critical memorialisation, with its focus on linear histories of individuals and objects, can ever be up to the task. To pursue this question, I want to conclude by crossing the Floating Harbour to the Arnolfini, Bristol's contemporary art museum, which was hosting an exhibit featuring recent works by Guyanese-British artist Frank Bowling – *Land of Many Waters* – at the same time that the Colston statue was on display 100 metres away at M Shed (Figure 10).<sup>12</sup> Water is central to Bowling's highly abstract landscapes, not as a static visual referent in the classic tradition of landscape art (many of his works favour brooding greys and hot pinks rather than maritime blues and greens) but as a shape-changing (yet adhesive) material that seeps, stretches, disappears, and congeals, above and below layers, giving his paintings a sticky, viscous, water-marked feel. Bowling's works "bleed and sweep and swirl, as colour washes into colour – or 'wet-into-wet' as Bowling puts it" (Brace, 2021: 20). His paintings are, at the most basic level, studies in form – in the interplays of light and colour, surface and depth – mediated through the interface of different conditions of liquidity. They are, in a sense, the opposite of a static, solid, representational statue.

However they also reference specific spaces and histories, not through direct representation but through indirect allusion: a washed-out outline of a map, an embedded portrait of a

<sup>12</sup> Although the two exhibits were entirely independent of each other, at unrelated museums, they were largely concurrent. *The Colston Statue: What Next?* ran from 4 June – 5 September 2021 and *Frank Bowling: Land of Many Waters* from 3 July – 26 September 2021.

relative, a title referring to a friend's visit. An excerpt from an essay in the exhibition catalogue, where Bowling's son and grandson discuss his paintings' Guyanese references, is illustrative:

He makes reference to his birthplace in *Bartica Born I* (1967), *Barticaflats VII* (1979), *Barticabush* (2010) and more recently in *Essequibo Dawn Just Above the Equator* (2020). Many of his zipper paintings from 2009 – such as *Kitty* or *Lichfield* – are named for the towns and villages on the huckster's route that earned him his passage to England. For Frank, however, these are resolutely *not paintings of, or about* Guyana; they are paintings about *paint itself*. (Bowling and Bowling, 2021: 74, emphasis in original)

Okwui Enwezor, curator of several recent Bowling exhibitions, has taken this further, suggesting that Bowling's deep dive into the material properties of paint, in which "form...precedes content," permits him to present art as a "non-linear and polyphonic phenomenon" in a manner that, for Enwezor, resonates with the work of Caribbean writers including Walcott, Glissant, and Brathwaite (quoted in Brace, 2021: 17).



Figure 11: The *Frank Bowling: Land of Many Waters* exhibit. Photo by author.

This begs the question, though, of why Bowling inserts banal, almost uncomfortably familiar references to people, places, and events – the portraits, titles, and maps, as well as found objects like shirt collars and plastic insects – into paintings that are, otherwise, abstract meditations on form and matter. Eddie Chambers, curator of one of Bowling's early solo exhibitions in the UK, succinctly points to an answer: "There [is] an almost bewildering range of stories and considerations, taking their places alongside Bowling's multiple



relationships to paint and to painting” (Chambers, 2021: 53). Indeed, stories, relations, and individual objects tend to emerge and dissolve as one views Bowling’s works. The ‘placed’ objects and events are anchors that viewers can employ in constructing their own narratives, but they also serve notice that there are further narratives known only to the artist. Bowling’s paintings thus invite not *curation*, but *co-creation*.

Bowling uses water, in all its various forms and evocations – as material, as metaphor, as a force that transforms other material, as landscape feature – not to present an absence of narrative but to allow the viewer to construct multiple narratives, many of which can only be ‘felt’ rather than articulated (Gould, 2021). To be clear, Bowling’s paintings are no more *about* water than they are *about* Guyana. Rather, through manipulations of paint’s (and canvas’) material properties, and through attentiveness to the painting’s formal properties, Bowling mobilises the ambiguities of water’s sticky liquidity (including as it is encountered in paint) to spur us, the viewers, to think about the histories that we make, and that are made for us, in and across space. In focusing on water, and yet peppering it with references to places and events, Bowling takes us beyond the modern notion of timeless, shapeless fluidity that so often serves as a counter-narrative to land-based, place-based histories and instead leads us toward something more textured and texturing, along the lines of the ‘wet ontology’ perspective on thinking oceanically that I have been developing with Kimberley Peters (Steinberg and Peters, 2015; Peters and Steinberg, 2019), or the invocation of fluid landscapes in the work of Bowling’s fellow Guyanese, the author Wilson Harris (Noxolo, 2016). Here, too, Bowling’s reflection on his practice’s connections to Guyana are revealing:

Whether sand or mud, [Guyana]’s a place where it’s always muddy. There’s this bright light but the feel is always muddy because it rains a lot. The land of water, as it has been remarked by so many different people (most of whom have never been there!), but it’s known as land of water and it’s muddy. I was fighting with the idea of silt and concrete and being undermined by water and the road always cracked and always muddy. I was struggling with it being pinned on me by art critics that I was attracted to bright colour and yet my memory of what was underfoot, of what you touched, was that if you had to lean on something for support you’d lose your balance because Guyana was always slippery, fluid. (Whitley and Bowling, 2021: 29)

In referencing Guyana’s muddy, shifting, ‘slippery’ landscape as a space where stories are continually being made rather than recounted, Bowling’s paintings resonate not only with Glissant’s work on the power of narrative opacity but also with recent scholarship on marronage (Winston, 2021; Wright, 2020; see also, King, 2019). Willie Jamaal Wright (2020), in particular, links the indeterminacy of marronage – where the maroon exists in a state of tenuous but glorious freedom, simultaneously uprooted and rerooting – with the indeterminacy of the paradigmatic maroon landscape: the muddy, waterlogged swamp. For scholars of marronage, the opaque morphology of the maroon landscape mirrors the opacity of maroon life itself, where the very act of being alive is both overdetermined by and undermines dominant, linear histories of objects and events.

Bowling’s experimentation with the narrative power of muddy, watery landscapes thus brings us back to the question asked by the *Colston Statue: What Next?* exhibit: How can a single object – the statue – be narrated in a manner that excavates the depths of Bristol’s maritime history, a history that is intimately tied with the reproduction of white supremacy both at home and abroad, in the past and the present. Here, Bowling’s embrace of the generative power of mud stands in marked contrast with the conservator Fran Coles, for whom mud is

seen as a source of obfuscation and decay. These differences in perspectives reflect not just different perceptions of matter and objects but also different perceptions of time and space and different theories of narrative. If the point of an object (such as a public statue) or an event (like its toppling) is to root a story in place and extend its narrative across (linear) time, then transgressive material, whether liminal and promiscuous like mud or unknowable and unpredictable like the ocean, becomes a hindrance. Such matter must be washed away or, perhaps, incorporated into the story through the inclusion of supplementary, representative objects (e.g. the bicycle tyre, in the case of the Colston statue) or events (e.g. the history laid out in the *What Next?* exhibit's timeline). If, on the other hand, the point of an object (like a work of abstract art) is to spur generative thought where the observer *constructs* stories across time and space, placing oneself in an imagined environment of land and water, then the muddiness that occludes perception and that obscures boundaries – between object and object, between object and observer, between object and environment, between land and water – is to be embraced.

### CONCLUSION: DISSOLVING HISTORIES

The formalist modernism of Bowling's work would appear to take us far from the debates over the Colston and Maury statues, or the intersection of Black Lives Matter and World Oceans Day. However, if our goal is to interrogate how the vicissitudes of water – including the complex interconnectivities of oceanic matter and forcings and the ways that they are perceived, encountered, utilised, and transformed through history – can inform geographic thinking and political analysis, then Bowling's work is productive because it is so *opaque* with regard to history and geography. History and geography – events, places, and people – are present in his works, but in ungrounded ways that reflect the watery matter (not the watery representations, but the watery *matter*) of his paintings. They are resolutely liquid, suggesting liquid narrations of peoples, places, and histories, in ways that reproduce neither the static presentation of a statue nor the imagined timelessness of ahistoric flow.

That said, a good argument can be made that a more linear and geographically specific understanding of water and watery spaces is needed if we are to mobilise its evocations in struggles for spatial, and racial, justice. Although the materiality of water can inspire political thought, it cannot, on its own, *resolve* it. Engagements with histories of bodies of/in water are needed as well, to direct water-inspired thinking toward the political. That is why, in the 'wet ontology' project, Kimberley Peters and I have proposed thinking with a geographic concept – *the oceanic* – rather than the elemental category that underpins it – *water* (Steinberg and Peters, 2019). Fortunately, though, the subdiscipline of political geography is big enough to accommodate a multiplicity of approaches. In the end, the best solution might be a dialogue between the one strategy – telling the stories of objects in place in order to unearth a space and the social relations and histories that underpin it – and the other – thinking through liquid matter to destabilise the very notion of bounded space and linear time as tools (and representations) of social power. At the metaphorical mid-way point in the Floating Harbour, we can orchestrate a meeting between Black Lives Matter and World Oceans Day, between the M Shed exhibit and the Arnolfini, between the contested, linear history and geography of the Edward Colston statue and the elided, non-linear history and geography of Frank Bowling's paintings. From this meeting point, the ocean's 'historical poetry' can be put to work to reveal hidden histories *and* suggest new geographies.

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