

OHCHR-SR truth - calls for inputs

From: Joanna Burch-Brown <J.Burch-Brown@bristol.ac.uk>
Sent: 12 May 2021 22:54
To: SR truth - calls for inputs
Subject: [External] UN report - input
Attachments: japp.12485 (2).pdf; IBA case study on Bristol, England.docx; Joanna Burch Brown impact case study_final (2) JBB edits.docx; Colston letters analysis (version 2).xlsb; Appendix 1 Citizen Panels and Street Level Voting.docx; BURIIWv1 (1).docx

Greetings,

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity to feed into the Special Rapporteur's 76th Report to the UN.

I am a philosopher specializing in transitional justice and contested heritage, with a focus on legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism.

I have been involved in Bristol's debates over Edward Colston, at grassroots and institutional levels, and in debates over slavery and contested heritage at local, national and international levels. I'm currently co-chairing the Bristol History Commission, set up by the Mayor of Bristol after protesters toppled Edward Colston's statue in June 2020. The remit of the History Commission is to 'help the city understand where we have come from, so we are better equipped to decide where we want to go'.

My comments below primarily address the question concerning symbolic reparations (linked of course and mutually supporting acknowledgment, truth, guarantees, justice). In my view, amongst the most important questions in this area are:

- Which of the possible courses of action are consistent with recognising communities' rights to justice, truth, repair and guarantees of nonrecurrence?
- Which of the possible courses of action best enable communities to step out of the 'Ethos of Conflict' (Bar-Tal and Halperin) - destructive and polarising loops, where each side is in a reactive negative state and frames its worldview in opposition to the other? Which paths enable them to step into states of positive creativity, growth and mutual understanding?

Those questions have motivated most of my work, and I offer several resources that I hope will be of interest.

The most important point I would like to make is that although the report asks for us to identify measures to address each of the four rights (justice, truth, reparations and guarantees), it is **at least as important** to identify measures that lay the right groundwork for such measures. In other words, measures that help mature a community's conversations are at least as important, because they will help other measures become lasting positive changes.

Another key point to make is that the dynamics of these contestations depends very much on the structure of civic society. A society where there are many points of contact between diverse political groups will have much better ability to absorb any social tensions and use them fruitfully. By contrast, a society with few points of contact between diverse groups will struggle to absorb tensions fruitfully. In both cases, it is of great importance to build links between networks before attempting (or at least alongside) making big symbolic changes.

I hope the following resources will be helpful and thought-provoking.

1) Bridging Histories global learning resource

In my role with the Bristol History Commission, I am currently developing a global learning resource for communities dealing with contestations over heritage, called **Bridging Histories: Learn, make, share.** This curriculum is based on Bree Picower's 6 Elements of Social Justice Pedagogy. The background idea is that when educating for social justice, we often dive straight into the most difficult topics. This can be effective, but also tends to backfire, leading many to become defensive, reactive, rigid, etc. Picower says that in addressing these issues, we should not dive straight into the most difficult topics but should instead go through a journey involving 6 elements. Start with activities priming people for self-love and respect for others - i.e. start with priming for 'positive distinct identities'. Only after this do you move to element three, which is to look at something difficult from history. The fourth element is to look at how everyday and iconic people came together to overcome that historic conflict or injustice. Then you look at a contemporary issue, and you finish by doing something active to make a positive difference in the present.

I believe this model applies at the societal level, not just in the classroom. Campaigns for justice often dive in at step 3, without the preparatory ground of getting groups well resources and affirming distinct identities.

In the Bristol History Commission I have therefore asked: how can we structure public engagement so as to take the *whole* public through Picower's 6 elements (without using these terms). I believe if we can take enough people from different social locations through this journey, it will lead to a maturing of public dialogue, and many conflicts that appeared intractable will be resolved quickly and easily, given our capacities for creativity from positive states.

In the Bridging Histories project, we will be getting people across Bristol's communities to join in six activities:

- 1) write an 'I am from' poem, where every line begins with 'I am from'
- 2) share a recipe and a story to go with it
- 3) learn about the history of your street. Then learn about the history of a street in part of town you've never been to
- 4) learn something new about your family history
- 5) be a Monument Detective and then make your own memorial
- 6) be a changemaker. Do something simple to make a positive change in yourself or the world around you.

Whatever people create they can share on our social media channels, forming a public library of positive content connecting people across diverse walks. We hope to also have a Summer Stars competition, where people of diverse backgrounds will be hosted to share what they have made in conversation with each other; and a Changemaker competition, in which the best proposals for community change are supported with mentorship and seed funding.

Within the 'Monument detective' section we include several activities. a) The Monument Toolkit is about how to 'read' a monument. b) The Four Truths toolkit invites you to read a monument through the framework of the Four Truths. This is the idea that every history event has a forensic truth (facts about what happened), a personal truth (what this history and memorial means to me), a social truth (the tapestry of meanings across a society) and a healing truth (truthful insights that help us grow and heal from the past).

c) The 'Monument dialogues' activity is based on a set of dialogues that I had the privilege of writing to be displayed above the Colston statue in Bristol Museums starting at the end of May 2021. These dialogues present two imaginary figures exchanging three ideas, and then asks a rhetorical question. The three-part dialogue structure enables a different 'side' to have the 'final say' each time, and then hands the question back to the reader to think for themselves. It is a respectful way of acknowledging and examining multiple views in public without judgment or endorsement. In the activity pack these are then accompanied by further questions, namely 'what did you assume about each of the speakers?' 'How does your thinking change if you imagine somebody else saying these things?' And 'Extend the dialogue. Can these speakers come to an understanding?' The hope, informed by findings from studies of prejudice reduction, is that this will stimulate more complex thinking, and will have a prejudice-reducing effect as people gain more comfort in the idea of conversation across political outlooks.

Since the above activity is linked to the Bristol Museum display of Colston's statue, it is worth saying something about the journey travelled in creating that display, since it may be instructive for others. Many people are calling for statues to be moved to museums. However, a great deal of art must be exercised in determining how to contextualize these statues within museums. In the Bristol museum's first draft proposal for the display, the Colston statue was surrounded by BLM placards, with life-size photos of the protest projected on the wall above the statue. I argued that this was too much of a dominating image and would be very upsetting for people attached to Colston. This initial idea was set aside and replaced with the idea of a neutral space around Colston, with open, rhetorical questions. A similar journey was taken with choices about how to present the opposing political views. The initial model had a series of paired, opposed quotations. This would have given an impression of two fixed stances without movement. The dialogue structure instead shows that ideas can be exchanged, and there is a sense of possibility of movement. **I hope that other museums who are now becoming responsible for contested statues will also experiment with this 'dialogues' form.**

It is important that the Bridging Histories project does not stop at monuments, but concludes by asking people what changes *they* would like to see (whatever their political outlooks) and encouraging them to think their ideas through and then go and create those changes.

My belief is that the Bridging Histories structure overall offers a gentle route into topics of contested heritage, that is respectful to all and allows people to choose their own points of entry and depth of engagement. The stories generated will help bridge between communities that currently don't understand each other. The activities are designed to let people start with their own experiences and interests, but also prompts them to find things they didn't set out looking for.

We will launch the Bridging Histories project in Bristol in June 2021. I'm sure we will learn quickly from what happens, and my hope is that it will get picked up and refined in communities across the globe facing difficult contestations. Please do keep track of what we are doing and if it seems to be effective **I hope you will help promote the method across other communities.**

2) A process for deciding on street renaming: Citizen Panels + Street-Level Voting

In an attached document, you will find a proposed model for deciding whether to rename streets. The model involves a combination of Citizen Panels (formed and operating like a jury, but with powers limited to recommending rather than determine outcomes) and voting by residents of the street. The model could also be adapted to other objects like statues or plaques, or indeed to adding new memorials. **This is a process we are considering in Bristol, and we would welcome feedback beforehand. We would like to hear from others who have tried similar processes. We also encourage other communities to experiment with this process and let us know how it goes.**

3) 'Should slavery's statues be preserved? On transitional justice and contested heritage' (academic paper)

I recently carried out an analysis of transitional justice and contested statues, which may also be of interest.

I asked: which ways of handling contested heritage objects are consistent with rights to justice, truth, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence? The most important take-away messages from this paper are as follows.

- Each of the strategies of preserving, removing, recontextualizing and reclaiming statues can in theory be consistent with the 4 rights (justice, truth, reparations and guarantees), if the surrounding circumstances are right and the methods well crafted.
- In other words, we shouldn't get fixated on a sole correct path. There are many paths to virtue and this is good news, because it gives us options.
- However, it depends on exactly how they are enacted. There are pitfalls associated with each strategy.
- I notice that people tend to underestimate the moral complexity of each of the strategies. And they tend to underestimate the complexity of recontextualizing, in particular. Adding layers is often seen as a middle path and less divisive. But if recontextualizations significantly change the meaning of the object, they may be just as polarizing as removal. If they are modest enough to gain political approval, they often fail to address the issue.

In my paper (attached), I give lots and lots of examples, and outline in detail some of the opportunities and pitfalls of each strategy for handling contested heritage.

4) Other documents of potential interest attached here:

- popular press articles

<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/defenders-colston-ones-airbrushing-past-40454>

<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/toppling-colstons-statue-right-must-4232905>

- Academic article: 'Is it wrong to topple statues and rename schools?'
- A case study on Bristol drafted for the IBA and Institute for Historic Justice and Reconciliation
- An impact case study report, which gives more sense of my work in Bristol
- An excel spreadsheet analysing the arguments of letter-writers to the Bristol Post (regional newspaper) at the time of the renaming of Colston Hall.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute, and I wish you all the best with this important report.

With best wishes,

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Recently published:

['Should slavery's statues be preserved? On contested heritage and transitional justice'](#) in *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 20 Nov, 2020.

You might also enjoy reading this op-ed:

["It was right for Colston statue to fall but let's embrace friendship across our differences"](#) (*Bristol Post*, June 2020)

Office hours: Thursday 12:30 - 1:30 and Friday 1:30 - 2:30

Location: JBB's Zoom personal meeting room: <https://bristol-ac-uk.zoom.us/j/7616282409?pwd=V21WeGR6dDZXdWpKeVFRcGZkc0NUUT09>