

Introduction

MAKING SENSE OF DE-COMMEMORATION

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If you just picked up this book and cracked it open, you likely already have some striking images emerging in your mind: Maybe you are seeing protesters hauling a statue of the slave trader and philanthropist Edward Colston into the Bristol harbor in the wake of protests surrounding the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Perhaps you imagine the crane hoisting Confederate General Robert E. Lee and his horse from their pedestal in Richmond, Virginia. Or you think of your social media feed, scrolling through the many posts that referenced #rhodesmustfall to call for the dismantling of monuments of the imperialist and namesake of important academic institutions in South Africa and elsewhere, Cecil Rhodes. The extraordinary amount of public and media attention directed toward such cases of “de-commemoration”—processes in which material and public representations of the past are taken away, destroyed, or fundamentally altered—suggests we are witnessing a pivotal moment in the global politics of memory. Could we be on the verge of the creation of a landscape of memorials that, instead of glorifying exclusivist and violent pasts, celebrate anti-racism, inclusivity, and democracy?

It certainly seems that the audience interested in de-commemoration has become much larger. Where this was previously the relatively obscure domain of a few specialized scholars,¹ government officials, and civic campaigners, a broad section of society across many different countries now displays not merely awareness of this issue but an unprecedented level of emotional engagement. In other words, debates surrounding whether to take down or leave up or reinvent a particular statue or street name seems to capture con-

cerns that strike at the heart of how we conceive of ourselves and our communities in the twenty-first century. They include critiques of structural racism, the identification of continuing legacies of coloniality, and questions surrounding the possibility of genuine inclusiveness, but also a renewed yearning for belonging and tradition, as well as a desire for clear-cut values in times that appear to be in constant flux. Thus, while the ways in which individuals and groups think about their history has always helped us understand their present and aspirations for the future, today's wave of de-commemorations puts these concerns squarely on the front pages of our newspapers and at the center of our social media algorithms. However, though de-commemoration certainly harnesses our attention, whether it has the potential to transform how we live together remains up for debate.

This book brings together experts on memory dynamics in different disciplines—including anthropology, cultural studies, geography, history, law, media studies, sociology, and political science—and from around the world to help us make sense of the current calls to dismantle statues and change place names. As editors, we decided early on not to focus primarily on the most well-known cases of de-commemoration (such as those driven by the #Blacklivesmatter or #BLM campaigns or on famous statues like Colston, “Silent Sam,” or Robert E. Lee). As you will see, these inevitably make up the scaffolding for many of our chapters because they were often a crucial mobilizing context for recent de-commemoration all over the world. However, we explicitly sought cases that provide significant insights and help us understand de-commemoration beyond the anglophone and Western (or what academics tend to call “Global Northern”) societies that dominate the newspaper headlines on this issue. By selecting a diverse set of historical and comparative perspectives, we can look beyond the current “hype” and systematically examine the motivations, actors, tools, places, time frames, effects, and importance of de-commemoration. What becomes clear is that de-commemoration is by no means a new phenomenon. For example, as Audrey Célestine and her colleagues argue, the process of toppling statues that glorify enslavers in the French Caribbean has been multidimensional and continuous, beginning as early as 1991. Here, a historical perspective enables us to identify the transformation of meaning that can be inherent even within a single case. Thus, the dismantling of a single statue can signify different political and cultural claims at different moments in time. Moreover, the de-commemorations we analyze in this book in many ways echo patterns we have seen since such iconic events in modern history as the French Revolution, and even further back to antiquity.

The purpose of this book is not to add yet another editorial on a currently controversial and en-vogue topic. Indeed, while almost all writings on recent statue and place-name removals have sought to take a particular stance in the

accompanying political debates surrounding them, we instead seek to offer an understanding based on empirical research to a larger readership. By gathering short pieces written in a clear and accessible style, we hope to give food for thought to interested observers and to allow them to build their own views of the world they live in—and of the presence of the past in that world. This book is implicitly a manifesto for the value of the social sciences and humanities to help people make sense of the world and its on-going transformations. Strangely enough, the peak of interest in de-commemoration has come at a time of government and public attacks on academia for allegedly being driven by ideological motivations or “wokeness” at its core. The thirty-seven chapters that follow prove the opposite. Each of our colleagues uses the methodological tools of their discipline to take stock of de-commemoration in its different contexts as a routine social practice without assigning to it an extraordinary or “sensational” status or predefined political meaning. In so doing, several of the case studies highlight that motivations and factors explaining de-commemoration are not always concerned either with memory or with politics. Urban planning considerations, foreign policy demands, or free speech legislation turn out to be instrumental to these processes. Researching de-commemoration not only in a historical and comparative way but also from the perspective of the social sciences and humanities enables us to move beyond viewing it as driven by a unique logic that is solely informed by how a society wants to remember (or forget) its past.

Our book thus pays attention to de-commemoration as a continuous social phenomenon and not only, or mainly, as a symbolic breaking point. This is also why we decided to use this term, which was first coined by one of us in 2020 and has since been used by other authors to make sense of national dynamics, as Tracy Adams and Yinon Guttel-Klein do to examine the Israeli case.² The term “de-commemoration” refers empirically to practices in which material and public representations of the past are taken away, destroyed, or fundamentally altered and transformed. From a conceptual perspective, the choice of using the prefix “de” and the hyphen signifies that de-commemoration is in fact a form of commemoration. And reciprocally, any commemoration is always in itself a form of de-commemoration. The use of the hyphen aims at embodying the importance of continuity and transformation to understand a social practice that is often seen only as a radical change and revolution. In the following chapters, several of our contributors additionally suggest related concepts such as “ab-commemoration” (when commemoration is displaced and made absent from its original location, as Stuart Burch explains) or “re-commemoration” (when new meaning is given to a preexisting monument, as Alison Atkinson-Phillips shows). These vocabulary variations all place words at the core of our understanding of this phenomenon: when a historical figure is celebrated in public space, it always

implies that other actors are excluded from the narrative and thereby a particular political interpretation is privileged. Commemorating and erasing the past are two sides of the same coin; the term “de-commemoration” encapsulates this.

This historical and comparative perspective teaches us that de-commemoration is not necessarily carried out only by grassroots activists working against racist and colonial legacies: the impulse to remove public symbols is the result of very different kinds of political ideologies and interests. We provide here a typology of at least five types of motivations for de-commemorative policies, and these provide structure to this book. Our contributors thus consider de-commemoration after regime change, de-commemoration and societal transformation, de-commemoration to propel change, de-commemoration as a smoke screen, and de-commemoration as a challenge to memory frameworks as such.

First, and perhaps most classically, de-commemoration is carried out to adjust the *symbolic landscape after a regime change*. Thus, when American forces removed Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, one of the first reactions was to take down his likenesses in stone and steel (figure 0.1). Similarly, when the Cold War ended and (mostly peaceful) revolutions overturned communist rule, statues of Lenin were widely carted off. Berlin and Moscow have entire museums and parks that give these statues a new home.³ These kinds of cases demonstrate de-commemoration as essentially an adjustment to a power shift that has already occurred. New government authorities (and often allied civil society) use de-commemoration to align symbols of the past in public space to the political realities—and it is not a new phenomenon. Sometimes this happens very rapidly, in a frenzy of activity. As Amar Mohand-Amer argues, both the French colonial authorities in 1830 and the new national government in 1962 immediately set about changing the toponymy of Algeria. When the Ceausescu regime was violently overthrown in 1989, monuments, place names, and symbols such as the hammer and sickle were quickly de-commemorated, as demonstrated in Mihai Stelian Rusu’s systematic survey of Romanian nomenclature. Similarly, the independence of Latvia in 1991 was symbolically cemented by the instant removal of the Lenin monument in Riga. However, as Dmitrijs Andrejevs points out in his chapter, a narrow focus on this dramatic de-commemoration masks the much more complex processes of contestation preceding the event. In other cases, the mnemonic landscape is adjusted gradually, over a long period of time. Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska, in her survey of German memorials to World War I, shows that these—though they did not cause much concern before—came to be seen as symbols of the German occupation and so local monuments were de-commemorated in various ways. Kerri J. Malloy’s chapter traces the process of erasing Indigenous place names throughout the United



Figure 0.1. The statue of Saddam Hussein topples in Baghdad's Firdos Square, 9 April 2003. Source: Unknown US military or Department of Defense employee. Public domain. Wikimedia: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SaddamStatue.jpg>.

States as a direct mechanism to consolidate settler colonial power. He also indicates how this erasure has been gradually undone through recent re-commemoration efforts. Gary Baines discusses the case of the de-commemoration of Cecil Rhodes: unlike in Zimbabwe where it came abruptly with independence in 1980, the post-apartheid government in South Africa was more circumspect. Baines explains how, twenty years later, a statue of Rhodes on the campus of the University of Cape Town became the focus on a belatedly implemented regime-change in the #RhodesMustFall campaign. Thus, even when a regime has clearly been defeated, the de-commemoration process is not always straightforward. As Dominique Colas shows in his contribution, the fact that Soviet monuments were much more comprehensively removed in Ukraine than in the Russian Federation tells us quite a bit about how deep the cultural transformation has been in both countries since 1991. The lack of a fundamental overhaul of belief systems in Russia has become devastatingly clear given the high levels of popular support for Putin's war of 2022. Francisco Ferrándiz discusses the case of the Francoist regime in Spain and its "Valley of the Fallen," demonstrating the de-commemoration after regime change must sometimes wait until the new democracy has been sufficiently consolidated to challenge entrenched elites. Ferrándiz also stresses the importance of going beyond de-commemoration to achieve resignification of pivotal memorial sites in the service of democratization.

Second, de-commemoration can be implemented *after a community has already changed its beliefs about the meaning of the past*—be it due to a gradual process or a sudden formative event. In this case, many monuments and place names are no longer in sync with public attitudes or even official policy: they are anachronistic remnants, no longer representative of the society and its values—or at least no longer in line with official policy or norms. Thus, even though the expansion of women’s rights since the early twentieth century has been represented through a whole series of statues honoring important leaders in the women’s suffrage movement, most of our statues, streets, squares, and institutions continue to be dominated by male namesakes. Activists and some municipalities have sought to address this through official and guerilla-style renaming activities, adding women to existing male location names (figure 0.2). Given the recent attention to de-commemoration it may seem curious that remnants of previous societal norms are allowed to linger for decades, as is the case with the struggle for women’s equality. One explanation for such a situation may lie in a phenomenon identified by Sarah Gensburger: a majority in any given society do not care about or may not even notice statues in their surroundings.⁴ Here we may recall the adage that “the best way to forget the past is to build a monument to it.”⁵ In other words, although de-commemoration events can result in media spectacles, sometimes they actually do not matter much to people compared to their everyday worries. Nevertheless, de-commemoration processes are often a powerful reflection of how society is changing. Taylor Annabell discusses how, alongside a shift in power in New Zealand between indigenous Māori and European settlers, the New Zealand Geographic Board undertook to reinscribe Māori place names next to colonial ones. Yuliya Yurchuk examines how the de-commemoration of Soviet symbols (including Lenin) in Ukraine after the Euromaidan protests in 2013–14 essentially completed the rejection of the Soviet regime. Vibe Nielsen offers a comparative analysis of the de-commemoration of colonialism in Copenhagen and Cape Town. She argues that the symbolic landscape of colonialism is present in both colonized and colonizer societies and that both dismantling and adding monuments can be part of this process. Kate Korycki contends that Canada is witnessing a “heating up” of memory politics surrounding the “moral valuation” of the colonial past and present. The ongoing process of de-commemoration can be regarded as a response to the important political events of the official apology to Indigenous peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, albeit one that is highly contested within mainstream Canadian society. Manuela Badilla and Carolina Aguilera, in their chapter “Killing Pedro de Valdivia Again,” investigate a mass movement against historical injustice and neo-liberalism in Chile in 2019. Though it took the form of grassroots protest, the extraordinary level of societal mobilization indicates that de-commemoration was an expression



Figure 0.2. Street renaming by feminist groups in Geneva (left: Germaine Duparc was an anthropologist) and Paris (right: Marielle Franco was a human rights activist), fall 2021. Source: Sarah Gensburger.

of broadly felt societal discontent that had been festering for years. In a contribution focused on audible national memory, Bae Myo-Jung examines the de-commemoration of the Korean national anthem (and the statue of its composer) as an example of the delegitimization of national narratives. And, as a final contribution to this section, Nicolas Moll presents the unusual case of a village in Belgium, which, after over one hundred years of commemorating a massacre that took place during World War I, decided to stop having annual remembrance ceremonies. In other words, the inhabitants' decision to de-commemorate was a way of adjusting to the decreasing importance of this event in the public life of the community.

The third type of de-commemoration happens when a specific group of actors pursues it *to propel broad symbolic change and to thus shift the opinions of the majority*. In these situations, the struggle over de-commemoration is reflective of a larger power struggle, as is the case in many states in the US South, where some local officials have advocated monument removal in alliance with civil society and #Blacklivesmatter or #BLM, while others in government continue to adamantly oppose it. In fact, de-commemoration often takes place in times of more general instability, and this may explain why the very act of taking down a statue appears to be radical and sudden—even

when activists have been working “behind the scenes” for a long time. Sarah Maddison brings us a closely related case: the effort to de-commemorate colonial statues, particularly those of James Cook and Lachlan Macquarie in Sydney, Australia, which activists demanded be removed in the wake of the #BLM wave in 2020. So far, these demands have been unsuccessful because the government in power has resisted the call for change. Tracy Adams and Yinon Guttel-Klein discuss the case of Israel, where commemoration plays a pivotal role, but we have so far not seen prominent efforts for de-commemoration. Nevertheless, the authors identify nascent forms of the practice in the shape of graffiti on burial, military, and Holocaust sites—a marginalized way of challenging dominant historical narratives. Ricardo Santiago explores the contemporary reluctance of the Brazilian state and local governments to engage with the heritage of colonialism, slavery, and violence against Indigenous people through the study of the de-commemoration claims against the statue of Borba Gato in Sao Paulo. Fabiola Arellano Cruz raises similar issues through her study of efforts to de-commemorate statues of Columbus in Madrid and Barcelona as a way to propel the decolonization of Spanish society. By studying the differential origin stories of two statues of the Colombian guerrilla leader Manuel Marulanda Vélez (a.k.a. Tirofijo) in Venezuela and Colombia, Jimena Perry highlights the variety of outcomes and changing efficiency of de-commemoration. Duane Jethro and Samuel Merrill investigate the Afro-German mobilization for the renaming of an underground station in Berlin, which was named in a racially offensive manner. In doing so, they raise the question of when a de-commemoration claim can be considered successful. In this case, the station name was changed; but while the name of a Black German personality suggested by the activists was ignored, the new name, based on a street nearby, raised new concerns regarding the antisemitic past of that namesake. Audrey Célestine, Valérie-Ann Edmond-Mariette, and Zaka Toto provide a history of de-commemoration in Fort-de-France, the capital city of Martinique in the French Caribbean. In doing so, they highlight the fact that while de-commemoration has long been seen by Martinique activists as a way to trigger social change, the nature of this change has evolved over time. Another contribution in this section reviews the de-commemoration of monuments in Great Britain as framed by the protests around #BLM. Stephen Small argues that we must pay attention to the entanglements of slavery and imperialism (and their memorialization), rather than focusing on only one or the other, in order to fully address their legacies in the present.

Often, scholarly work such as that carried out in the volume is one of the currencies used by civic organizations to accomplish de-commemoration, as Seth Levi and Kimberly Probulus describe in their chapter on the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is one of the most important

organizations in this space in the United States. In sum, the book's section on de-commemoration to propel change offers a wide variety of cases of and approaches to bottom-up iconoclasm.

While the kinds of de-commemorations we have described so far all genuinely aim to transform a society's approach to remembering the past, in the fourth iteration, de-commemoration actually functions *as a smoke screen to prevent policy or value change or to underpin a dominant memory narrative*. For instance, we have seen cases where government officials, perhaps aware of global de-commemorative trends, dismantle monuments, sometimes literally under cover of darkness. This may be done to prevent a fundamental debate about the legacies of the past from emerging and to take the wind out of the sails of activists who might utilize the existence of monuments to prove that society continues to hold on to the values symbolized by them. You might say this was the case in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where officials rapidly took down the statue of songwriter Stephen Foster (who is famous for "Oh Susannah"). Though this had been demanded by some for years, it was not accompanied by in-depth debate or much activist mobilization.⁶ We contend that when de-commemoration events happen primarily for the sake of performance—rather than with a genuine desire to change the way a community understands its history—they may in fact have a detrimental effect. This type of de-commemoration is operative in the case of the Philippines. Lila Ramos Shahani argues that in the Philippines, iconoclasm happens mostly in a top-down fashion, such as occurred in the aftermath of the Marcos dictatorship. In her analysis, there is very little genuinely transformative de-commemoration that would change the way Filipinos regard their varied and complex histories and truly challenge the legacies of colonialism. Echoing this overview, Catherine Lianza Aquino and Jocelyn S. Martin spotlight activism to have "comfort women"—victims of sexual slavery under Japanese occupation in the Philippines—commemorated. They discuss in particular one monument that honors comfort women's struggles that has been removed twice under the government of Duterte and pressure from the Japanese government. Here de-commemoration remains a tool of social control by those in power. In a similar way, Chowra Makaremi examines the complex case of Iran, where the government has strategically de-commemorated "martyred" opponents of the Shah regime in order to suppress the counter-memorial efforts of families mourning the loss of political prisoners in the Islamic Republic. Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha, in his account of the erection of and challenge to German colonial monuments in Namibia, argues that the call to de-commemorate masks the more difficult task of decolonizing society and that memorials could more productively be transformed into "inspirational tools for redressing past injustices and crimes." Vanessa Lynn Lovelace and Jamie Huff argue that de-commemoration of symbols of racism can obscure

the lack of or false commemoration of histories of Black rebellion and sites of violence that have underpinned white supremacy in the United States. To make this point, they trace how Denmark Vesey, the leader of an antislavery rebellion, has been misremembered. In the final contribution to this section, Stuart Burch examines Trafalgar Square in London as a complex memoryscape and suggests several additional prefixes to “commemoration” (such as ab-, epi-, re-) to argue that contests over statues—even in a nationally and globally symbolic space—are never enough and must be accompanied by systemic political change. In doing so he suggests that, while often important and meaningful, de-commemoration can also serve as an illusion and a way to prevent more structural transformations.

The final section presents cases where efforts to de-commemorate not only challenge the fact that particular individuals or events are celebrated in public space but *more fundamentally question the ways in which we engage with the past through physical memory*. This is based on our observation that conventionally, almost all processes of dismantling one kind of monument seek to replace it with a similar kind of commemoration. For example, the commission tasked with figuring out what to do with the statue of the brutal Belgian King Leopold the Second recommended that it be melted down and turned into a memorial to victims of colonial violence.⁷ Much less common is when activists or governments aim to truly rethink what it means to commemorate in public space and whether they can find new ways to engage with the past that may allow for changing attitudes over time or can engage new audiences. The “We Are Bristol” History Commission recommended the statue of Colston be housed in a museum and its plinth be used to display temporary artwork, with “periods of intentional emptiness.”⁸ Such an approach may facilitate a more critical interrogation of the functions of built memorials beyond particular exemplars. Along these lines, the geographers Jordan P. Brasher and Derek Alderman call on us to look beyond singular monuments and consider the reparative power of physical landscapes: “It is important,” they write, “to consider the place name not just in a vacuum, or simply which surrogate name to choose. Instead, it is helpful to consider place names as part of complex namescapes through which compounded networks of belonging are negotiated and come to matter and make sense to harmed communities.”⁹ Looking at de-commemoration from the perspective of the law also offers a new approach to the question of memory as a whole. While studies of de-commemoration have so far focused on controversies and iconoclashes,¹⁰ paying attention to the legal frameworks within which they take place enables us to see the organizational side of memory process. On this matter, Thomas Hochmann’s study of the legal status of de-commemoration in both French and US law and Tom Lewis’ reflections on the relation between international human rights law and de-commemoration

are valuable contributions to this book. Moreover, recent academic as well as media coverage of the toppling down of statues and changing of street names has largely ignored the question of the reception and the actual uses of these memory artefacts. The issue of what people “do” with memorials was one of the core reasons memory studies emerged as a field of research. The topic of de-commemoration offers an excellent occasion to ask: What and for whom is memory made? Three texts tackle this issue in different ways. Alison Atkinson Phillips draws on a diverse set of cases to illustrate her argument that we need to think beyond de-commemoration to consider whether new memorials can help transform public spaces. This also enables a rethinking of why and how “ordinary” people come to care about commemoration. Ewa Ochman’s chapter also centers on how ordinary people have engaged with processes of decommunization in post-1989 Poland by resisting dominant de-commemoration policies. She encourages us to complicate our analysis by paying attention to the complex interactions between different actors. Mykola Makhortykh and Anna Menyhért offer a practical approach to the de-commemoration dilemma, introducing us to the tool of augmented reality (AR). Using the Living Memorial in Budapest as an exemplar, they argue that AR monuments are a highly flexible way of reimagining public space, as they can be adapted to changing debates and evolving meanings. Finally, with her contribution on “De-Commemorating White Supremacy through the Act of Voting,” Lorena Chambers offers an outside-the-box reading of electoral power as acts of remembrance and thereby calls into question the tools that memory studies commonly employs. In sum, these final chapters are concerned with legal, political, and technical frameworks, and so they allow a rethinking of the meanings and new potentials that are inherent in de-commemoration processes.

As all our authors show, de-commemoration is often the culmination of complex processes of agitation and negotiation, as well as the starting point for further debate. The in-depth analyses presented in this book allow us to see beyond the spectacle journalistic coverage tends to gravitate toward. The point of this typology of de-commemoration is to begin a more systematic examination of these processes and to suggest that even when we perceive an unprecedented “wave” of de-commemoration, it does not necessarily signal a progressive norm shift—in fact something much more complicated is happening.

Our authors use a variety of methodological approaches to analyze both discourses and practices: from Chile, the Philippines, and Iran to Latvia, Spain, and the United States, our colleagues carefully trace which actors drive de-commemoration and how. Their contributions show that mobilization of memory activists or memory entrepreneurs does not always fully explain why a monument is dismantled. The state and governmental institutions can

also be crucial proponents of de-commemoration. The variety of our contributions also illustrates that the tools of de-commemoration themselves are diverse. Examining different devices, including law, virtual reality, renaming, or displacement, these chapters study in depth and in highly original ways how de-commemoration is implemented or prevented. Our attention to the instruments of de-commemoration enables us to link it to other sectors of public action or activism. In doing so, we meet the challenge of considering de-commemoration as something that is not only about memory or politics. Moreover, understanding the toppling of statues and the changing of street names must also include an account of the timeframes of de-commemoration. The literature on this topic has long juxtaposed history and memory. The notion of de-commemoration suggests we must move beyond this distinction by studying various layers of temporality and the continuity between them: the periods of the event being commemorated, of the implementation of the initial commemoration, and of the transformation of its meaning up until its dismantlement and/or transformation. This point is crucial because most of the public debate that has taken place since 2020 has confronted the original “historical event” and the contemporary conflictual public interpretation of it, often ignoring the “in between.” Most of the chapters in this book highlight the necessity of adding the timeframes of commemoration to our analytical approach. The multiple layers of the temporality of de-commemoration contrast with the uniqueness of place. The transformations in which we are interested happen in a particular and unique location, although there are also some tendencies toward convergence and uniformity in remembrance styles.¹¹ Several chapters of the book examine the link between the debate over monuments and the contemporary concern for the redefinition of the role of public space in an era of digitalization. While social interactions are fragmented by the expansion of social networks, place-making seems to have remained crucial for the definition of collective identity. Here, paying attention to the places of de-commemoration enables us to question the symbolic redefinition of public place but also the more mundane issues at stake—such as urban planning and commercial usage.

With all this attention paid to varieties of de-commemoration, it is important to note there are of course many places around the world where there is not even a pretense of moving in the direction of anti-racism and inclusive democracy. Indeed, some governments are using the global trend of de-commemoration as a “boogey-man” that helps support nationalist and exclusivist memory politics and even novel laws. This has happened in Poland, Hungary, Texas, and elsewhere. And although there are a minority of memory activists in these places who are tirelessly working against white supremacy and racism and for women’s, refugee, and LGBTQ+ rights, the part of civil society that supports the government line is often stronger or more vocal.

Thus, it is important to be clear that grassroots activists are not always progressive and that de-commemoration can both support and undermine efforts to democratize and liberalize societies. For example, the United Daughters of the Confederacy is a long-established civic organization that has worked both to build statues honoring Confederate soldiers and to oppose their dismantling. Again, this is where a comparative and historical analytical perspective is preferable to a short-sighted journalistic one. Public space is best seen as a site of an open-ended struggle of different forces over how the past is made meaningful in the present. In sum, despite the many important recent instances of de-commemoration, the chapters we gathered in this book invite us to be skeptical of the assumption that we are on the precipice of a new global approach to the past.

However, the flip side is not true: de-commemorations and their upsurge in frequency do matter. This point is underscored by an exercise in counter-factuality: What would it mean for our societies if statues of colonialists and white supremacists and dictators were not being challenged? It would suggest that any shifts in political, social, or economic power are not penetrating the cultural and symbolic frameworks through which we make sense of them. And this would surely indicate a merely superficial transformation. As Lorena Chambers shows, when African Americans were finally allowed to vote, in many places they continued to have to grapple with white supremacist memoryscapes when exercising their voting rights (they had to pass by statues that glorified slave holders on their way to cast ballots). Thus, even though formal disenfranchisement had ended in superficial terms, the symbolic violence that underpinned continued discrimination and prejudice continued. It is important that these symbols, which have structural effects, are removed, even when they do not by themselves herald the end to racism and violence. In the final analysis, the authors and editors of this volume agree that de-commemoration matters.

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Notes

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