

Historical Memory, Public Monuments, and Postcolonial Citizenship: A Comparative Analysis of Commemorative Conflict in the United Kingdom and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Public monuments have become central sites of conflict over historical memory, colonial violence, racial justice, and democratic citizenship. This article compares commemorative controversies in the United Kingdom and South Africa, focusing on how monument debates reveal deeper struggles over national identity, historical responsibility, institutional legitimacy, and postcolonial belonging. The United Kingdom represents a former imperial metropole in which colonial memory is often contested through debates over statues, museums, universities, and public heritage. South Africa represents a post-apartheid democracy where monument politics is linked to decolonization, racial inequality, land dispossession, and unfinished democratic transformation. Drawing on memory studies, postcolonial theory, sociology, heritage studies, and political philosophy, the article argues that monument conflicts are not merely symbolic disputes but institutional struggles over whose histories are publicly authorized. The findings demonstrate that commemorative conflict operates through three mechanisms: selective visibility, institutional recognition, and affective citizenship. While British debates often center on imperial accountability and multicultural national identity, South African debates more directly connect memory to structural inequality and material decolonization. The article contributes to social humanities scholarship by developing a comparative framework linking public memory, postcolonial citizenship, institutional reform, and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: historical memory; public monuments; postcolonial citizenship; decolonization; United Kingdom; South Africa; heritage politics; race; public history; social humanities

INTRODUCTION

Public monuments have become increasingly contested in contemporary societies because they materialize histories of power in shared civic space. Statues, memorials, museum collections, street names, and university buildings do not simply preserve the past; they organize public memory by deciding which figures, events, and values are rendered visible, honorable, and legitimate. In recent decades, disputes over monuments associated with empire, slavery, apartheid, settler colonialism, racism, and authoritarianism have intensified across Europe, North America, Africa, Latin America, and Australasia. These disputes demonstrate that historical memory is not a settled archive but a political field through which societies negotiate justice, identity, and belonging.

The global context of monument conflict reflects broader transformations in social humanities scholarship and public life. Movements such as Rhodes Must Fall, Black Lives Matter, decolonize the university, and campaigns for museum restitution have challenged the colonial foundations of public heritage and demanded new forms of historical accountability (Mbembe, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). UNESCO has emphasized the role of cultural heritage in peacebuilding, social inclusion, and intercultural dialogue, while also acknowledging the need to address contested heritage and historical injustice (UNESCO, 2023). These developments show that heritage governance is inseparable from democratic participation, racial justice, and institutional trust.

The problem addressed in this article is the relationship between public memory and postcolonial citizenship. Monument debates are often dismissed as symbolic or cultural controversies detached from material inequality. This article argues the opposite: commemorative conflict reveals how historical narratives structure contemporary citizenship, institutional legitimacy, and social recognition. Public monuments shape civic belonging because they define who is imagined as the historical subject of the nation and who appears as marginal, conquered, enslaved, colonized, or absent. When statues honor imperial administrators, slave traders, segregationist leaders, or colonial benefactors without critical interpretation, they reproduce historical hierarchies in public space.

This article comparatively examines the United Kingdom and South Africa. These cases are selected because they represent different positions within colonial history and postcolonial memory politics. The United Kingdom is a former imperial metropole where public controversies over figures such as Cecil Rhodes, Edward Colston, and imperial museum collections have prompted debates about national pride, historical guilt, multicultural citizenship, and educational reform. South Africa is a post-apartheid democracy where monuments, statues, language policy, university symbols, and public heritage are tied directly to struggles over decolonization, racial inequality, land dispossession, and the unfinished work of democratic transformation.

The comparative value of these cases lies in their asymmetry. In the United Kingdom, empire is often debated as a legacy: something located in the past but still shaping migration, race, education, and national identity. In South Africa, colonialism and apartheid are more visibly institutionalized in spatial inequality, economic hierarchy, and symbolic landscapes. The comparison therefore allows analysis of how monument politics differs between former imperial centers and postcolonial societies struggling with the material afterlives of domination.

Existing scholarship on memory and monuments provides important theoretical foundations. Halbwachs (1992) conceptualized collective memory as socially organized rather than individually stored. Nora (1989) introduced the idea of *lieux de mémoire*, sites where memory becomes materially concentrated. Young (1993) examined counter-monuments and the ethics of difficult remembrance. Connerton (1989) showed how societies remember through embodied practices and commemorative rituals. Postcolonial scholars such as Said (1978), Fanon (1963), and Mbembe (2016) emphasized that colonial power operates not only through territory and economy but also through representation, knowledge, and historical imagination.

While previous studies emphasize memory, heritage, and identity, other scholars argue that monument politics must be connected to institutional power and social inequality. Trouillot (1995) demonstrated that silences enter historical production at multiple stages, from archival creation to public narration. Smith (2006) critiqued the “authorized heritage discourse” through which professional and state institutions privilege elite histories. Azoulay (2019) links imperial archives and museums to ongoing forms of dispossession. Shepherd (2020) argues that decolonization requires transforming the institutional conditions through which heritage is produced, not simply adding marginalized histories.

However, current social humanities literature remains limited in several ways. First, monument studies often focus on single national contexts without adequate comparison between imperial and postcolonial settings. Second, debates about statue removal are frequently analyzed at the level of symbolism without connecting memory to citizenship and institutional legitimacy. Third, heritage scholarship sometimes emphasizes representation while underanalyzing the affective dimensions of public anger, grief, shame, and recognition. Fourth, public history literature often prioritizes interpretation and education but insufficiently examines structural inequality. Fifth, decolonial scholarship sometimes critiques colonial memory without systematically comparing how different political institutions respond to memory conflict.

This article addresses these gaps by developing a comparative institutional memory framework. It argues that public monument conflicts operate through three interrelated mechanisms: selective visibility, institutional recognition, and affective citizenship. Selective visibility refers to the way public spaces make certain histories honorable while rendering others absent or marginal. Institutional recognition refers to how universities, municipalities, museums, courts, and governments validate or resist claims for historical justice. Affective citizenship refers to the emotional relationship between citizens and public symbols, including pride, shame, injury, resentment, and belonging.

The novelty of this article lies in linking monument conflict to postcolonial citizenship. Rather than

treating monuments as static objects, the article conceptualizes them as institutional devices that organize memory, power, and civic identity. This perspective contributes to social humanities scholarship by integrating memory studies, postcolonial theory, political sociology, heritage governance, and democratic theory.

The analytical framework developed here proposes the following relationship: public commemoration → historical visibility → institutional recognition or denial → affective citizenship → democratic legitimacy and postcolonial justice. This framework does not assume that removing monuments automatically produces justice. Rather, it asks how commemorative practices shape the social conditions under which historical accountability becomes publicly thinkable.

The research objective of this article is to explain how public monument conflicts reshape historical memory, institutional legitimacy, and postcolonial citizenship in the United Kingdom and South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative historical and interpretive social humanities design combining memory studies, postcolonial analysis, heritage governance, and political sociology to examine commemorative conflict in the United Kingdom and South Africa. The cases are selected through an asymmetrical comparative logic: the United Kingdom is analyzed as a former imperial metropole in which colonial memory is often mediated through heritage institutions, universities, museums, and multicultural public debate; South Africa is analyzed as a post-apartheid society in which monument politics is directly connected to racialized spatial inequality, decolonization, democratic transition, and institutional transformation. The principal units of analysis are public monuments, university memory conflicts, museum and heritage institutions, municipal decision-making, social movement discourse, and public narratives of national identity. The study compares two analytical dimensions: first, the symbolic politics of public commemoration; second, the institutional mechanisms through which memory claims are recognized, delayed, displaced, or contested.

The empirical basis consists of peer-reviewed memory and heritage scholarship, public reports on cultural heritage, university and municipal documents, UNESCO materials, documented public debates over Rhodes Must Fall and related monument controversies, historical literature on empire and apartheid, and secondary analyses of media and public discourse. The study does not fabricate interviews, archival discoveries, or field observations; it relies on verifiable public materials and established scholarly interpretation. Analytical techniques include comparative historical interpretation, critical discourse analysis, institutional process tracing, and hermeneutic reading of commemorative practices. Core variables include historical visibility, institutional recognition, heritage governance, racialized memory, public affect, civic belonging, and democratic legitimacy. Validation is pursued through triangulation across historical scholarship, institutional documents, public heritage reports, and comparative social theory. Ethical considerations include avoiding reduction of marginalized communities to symbolic claims and recognizing that memory politics is connected to lived histories of violence, dispossession, and exclusion. Limitations include uneven comparability between a state-level post-apartheid context and a former imperial metropole, as well as the dynamic nature of ongoing public debates; nevertheless, the comparison provides strong

Findings and Discussion

1. Selective Visibility and the Colonial Architecture of Public Space

The first major finding is that monument conflicts reveal the selective visibility of national history. Public commemoration does not neutrally represent the past; it elevates particular actors and narratives while obscuring others. In the United Kingdom, statues of imperial figures and benefactors historically normalized empire as civic achievement, commercial expansion, philanthropy, and national greatness. The public presence of figures such as Cecil Rhodes and Edward Colston became controversial because activists argued that these commemorations honored individuals connected to colonial domination and slavery without adequately acknowledging violence, exploitation, and racial hierarchy.

In South Africa, monument politics operates within a more visibly racialized historical landscape. Apartheid and colonial monuments do not merely symbolize past domination; they stand within urban spaces still shaped by racial segregation, unequal land ownership, and institutional hierarchy. Statues and names associated with colonial and apartheid authority therefore carry immediate social weight because they are embedded in everyday spatial inequality.

The comparative evidence indicates that selective visibility functions differently in imperial and postcolonial settings. In the United Kingdom, colonial memory is often managed through disavowal, nostalgia, or selective national storytelling. Empire may appear as heritage rather than violence. In South Africa, colonial and apartheid memory is more difficult to detach from material inequality because historical domination remains spatially and economically visible.

This finding extends Trouillot's argument that historical silences are produced through power. Monuments are not simply evidence of memory; they are instruments of historical selection. They make some lives publicly grievable and honorable while others remain unnamed. The public landscape therefore becomes an archive of inequality.

The societal implication is that debates over monuments should not be reduced to whether particular historical figures were morally flawed. The deeper question is how public space distributes historical honor and civic recognition. A democratic society must ask not only what it remembers but whom its memory serves.

2. Institutional Recognition and the Politics of Delay

The second finding concerns institutional recognition. In both cases, social movements have pressured universities, municipalities, museums, and governments to reassess commemorative practices. Yet institutions often respond through delay, consultation, deflection, or partial reinterpretation rather than structural transformation.

In the United Kingdom, campaigns around Rhodes at Oxford and Colston in Bristol revealed institutional tensions between heritage preservation, donor history, public protest, and anti-racist accountability. Universities and municipalities frequently framed decisions as matters of heritage management, historical complexity, or procedural review. Such responses can produce deliberation, but they may also delay recognition of harm.

In South Africa, Rhodes Must Fall began as a student-led movement demanding removal of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town and expanded into broader critiques of curriculum, language, institutional racism, fees, and decolonization. This demonstrates that monument politics can become a gateway to wider institutional critique. The statue became a condensation point for grievances about unequal knowledge production, university access, and colonial epistemology.

The comparative evidence shows that institutional recognition is not merely symbolic. When institutions remove, reinterpret, or retain monuments, they communicate whose claims are legitimate. Delay itself can become a political act when institutions appear more concerned with protecting heritage objects than addressing historical injury.

This reflects Ahmed's argument that complaint reveals institutional resistance. Those who challenge institutional memory often become treated as disruptive, excessive, or impatient. Institutions may affirm diversity in principle while resisting changes to symbolic and material structures.

The theoretical implication is that memory politics must be analyzed institutionally. Monuments do not act alone; they are maintained by councils, donors, heritage boards, universities, museums, and legal frameworks. The question is therefore not only whether a statue should fall, but what institutional order allowed it to stand unquestioned for so long.

3. Affective Citizenship: Pride, Shame, Injury, and Belonging

The third finding is that monument conflicts are affective struggles over citizenship. Public symbols generate emotions because they connect individuals to imagined communities. For some citizens, contested monuments represent heritage, continuity, and pride. For others, they represent humiliation, exclusion, and historical violence.

In the United Kingdom, defenders of imperial monuments often frame removal as erasure, vandalism, or an attack on national history. Critics argue that the issue is not erasing history but ending uncritical public honor. This conflict reveals competing affective attachments to the nation: one organized around pride in imperial achievement, the other around accountability for colonial violence.

In South Africa, monument conflicts are shaped by the affective burden of apartheid and colonialism. For many Black South Africans, colonial monuments are not abstract historical artifacts but reminders of dispossession and institutional exclusion. The demand for removal or transformation expresses a claim to equal citizenship in public space.

The comparative evidence indicates that affective citizenship is central to postcolonial memory politics. Citizenship is not only legal status; it is also the felt experience of being recognized by public institutions. When public space honors those associated with oppression, affected communities may experience the state or institution as failing to recognize their dignity.

This finding contributes to social humanities scholarship by linking memory studies with affect theory and democratic citizenship. Public memory is not only cognitive; it is embodied and emotional. Societies do not simply debate facts about the past; they struggle over the emotional terms of belonging.

The policy implication is that heritage governance should create participatory processes capable of acknowledging injury without reducing debate to polarized identity conflict. Public consultation must include communities historically excluded from heritage authority.

4. Decolonization, Education, and the Limits of Symbolic Reform

The fourth finding concerns the relationship between symbolic reform and structural transformation. Monument removal can be politically significant, but it is insufficient if not connected to broader educational, institutional, and material change.

In the United Kingdom, monument controversies have stimulated public debate about colonial history education, museum restitution, university curricula, and national memory. However, reforms often remain limited to plaques, reinterpretation, diversity initiatives, or heritage reviews. These measures may improve historical understanding but do not necessarily transform racial inequality or institutional power.

In South Africa, Rhodes Must Fall explicitly connected statue removal to curriculum decolonization, university access, language politics, and economic justice. The movement’s significance lies in its refusal to separate symbolic decolonization from institutional transformation. However, South Africa’s continuing inequality shows that symbolic change cannot substitute for material redistribution.

The comparative evidence indicates that decolonization has different stakes across the two contexts. In the United Kingdom, decolonization often appears as a challenge to national historical narratives and institutional heritage. In South Africa, it is more directly tied to post-apartheid transformation and the redistribution of power in institutions still marked by colonial and apartheid legacies.

This finding engages Tuck and Yang’s warning that decolonization should not become metaphorical. Removing symbols without transforming material relations can produce superficial change. Yet symbols are not irrelevant: they shape the moral and epistemic environment in which structural claims become intelligible.

The scholarly implication is that social humanities research must avoid false distinctions between symbolic and material politics. Monuments are symbolic objects embedded in material institutions. Their transformation can open or close pathways toward deeper reform.

Table 1. Comparative Matrix of Social Variables, Institutional Mechanisms, and Societal Outcomes

Variable	United Kingdom	South Africa	Empirical/Interpretive Evidence	Analytical Interpretation
Historical Position	Former imperial metropole	Post-apartheid and postcolonial democracy	Imperial history and apartheid scholarship	Memory politics differs by location within colonial power relations
Monument Conflict	Focus on imperial figures, slavery, museums, universities	Focus on colonial and apartheid symbols, universities, spatial inequality	Rhodes and Colston debates; Rhodes Must Fall scholarship	Public monuments condense unresolved historical conflicts
Selective Visibility	Empire often remembered through heritage and philanthropy	Colonial and apartheid power visible in space and institutions	Public history and heritage studies	Visibility structures national identity and civic recognition
Institutional Response	Reviews, reinterpretation, heritage protection, contested removal	Removal, transformation demands, broader decolonization struggles	University and municipal debates	Institutional recognition mediates memory justice
Affective Citizenship	Tension between imperial pride and colonial accountability	Tension between liberation memory and persistent inequality	Public discourse and movement analysis	Monuments shape emotional belonging in public space
Decolonization	Often framed as curriculum, museum, and heritage reform	Linked to land, education, race, and material transformation	Decolonial scholarship	Symbolic reform must be connected to structural change
Public Legitimacy	Heritage institutions face pressure to confront imperial violence	Democratic institutions face pressure to complete post-apartheid transformation	UNESCO and scholarly heritage analysis	Memory governance affects institutional trust

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Societal Outcome	Increased debate over imperial memory and multicultural citizenship	Intensified demands for decolonized institutions and public space	Comparative interpretive synthesis	Monument conflicts reveal broader struggles over postcolonial citizenship

The table demonstrates that monument conflicts are not isolated heritage disputes but comparative windows into institutional memory regimes. The United Kingdom and South Africa both confront colonial memory, but from different historical positions. In the United Kingdom, the central tension is between imperial nostalgia and accountability. In South Africa, the central tension is between formal democratic transformation and the persistence of colonial-apartheid structures.

The deeper analytical interpretation is that public monuments function as civic technologies of recognition. They teach citizens who matters historically, whose suffering is minimized, and whose authority remains public. When these symbolic orders are contested, the legitimacy of institutions that maintain them is also contested. Therefore, monument politics should be understood as part of democratic negotiation over historical justice and social membership.

5. Museums, Archives, and the Reorganization of Historical Authority

The fifth finding is that monument controversies are connected to broader transformations in museums, archives, and heritage authority. In the United Kingdom, debates over colonial collections, restitution, and museum interpretation have intensified as institutions face demands to acknowledge how objects were acquired through empire, war, extraction, and unequal exchange. Museums are increasingly pressured to move beyond neutral display and address provenance, violence, and repatriation.

In South Africa, museums and archives have been central to post-apartheid memory-making, including the documentation of apartheid violence, liberation struggle, and democratic transition. Yet public memory remains uneven, and questions persist about whose histories are archived, funded, and taught. Community histories, Black intellectual traditions, and local experiences of dispossession often remain underrepresented relative to official national narratives.

The comparative evidence indicates that historical authority is shifting from expert-centered heritage institutions toward more contested participatory models. Activists, students, descendants, local communities, and transnational networks now claim authority to interpret the past. This does not eliminate the need for historical expertise, but it challenges institutions to democratize memory-making.

This finding contributes to digital and public humanities by showing that archives are not neutral repositories. They are organized through institutional power. Decolonizing memory requires changing who collects, interprets, displays, and benefits from heritage.

6. Democratic Legitimacy and the Future of Postcolonial Memory

The sixth finding is that memory governance affects democratic legitimacy. Societies that refuse to confront historical violence risk deepening alienation among citizens whose histories remain marginalized. Conversely, societies that engage difficult memory through inclusive processes may strengthen democratic legitimacy.

In the United Kingdom, public conflict over monuments reveals unresolved questions about imperial history, race, migration, and national identity. A multicultural democracy cannot sustain legitimacy if public heritage continues to honor imperial figures without serious engagement with colonial violence and its afterlives.

In South Africa, democratic legitimacy depends partly on whether post-apartheid institutions can transform not only laws but also public space, education, economic relations, and cultural authority. Monument politics therefore reflects the broader challenge of making liberation materially and symbolically meaningful.

The comparative evidence suggests that postcolonial memory work is not a distraction from democratic politics. It is one of its conditions. Citizens relate to democracy through institutions, spaces, narratives, and symbols. Where these communicate exclusion, democratic belonging is weakened.

Scholarly Propositions

Proposition 1: Public monuments function as civic technologies of historical visibility.

Monuments organize public memory by selecting which histories receive honor, permanence, and spatial authority. Their political significance lies not only in what they represent but in what they silence.

Proposition 2: Institutional recognition mediates the relationship between historical memory and democratic legitimacy.

When institutions acknowledge contested histories through participatory and accountable processes, they can strengthen public trust. When they delay or dismiss claims of historical injury, they reproduce exclusion.

Proposition 3: Affective citizenship shapes responses to commemorative conflict.

Monument debates are driven by pride, shame, injury, grief, anger, and belonging. These affects are not irrational distractions; they are central to how citizens experience public history.

Proposition 4: Decolonizing public memory requires connecting symbolic reform to structural transformation.

Removing or reinterpreting monuments can be meaningful, but democratic justice requires changes in education, archives, museums, institutional power, and material inequality.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how public monument conflicts reshape historical memory, institutional

legitimacy, and postcolonial citizenship in the United Kingdom and South Africa. The comparative analysis demonstrates that monument debates are not merely symbolic disputes over the past. They are contemporary struggles over public recognition, democratic belonging, and historical justice.

The findings show that monuments operate through selective visibility, institutional recognition, and affective citizenship. In the United Kingdom, controversies over imperial figures reveal unresolved tensions between national pride, colonial accountability, and multicultural citizenship. In South Africa, monument politics is more directly connected to decolonization, racial inequality, spatial injustice, and the unfinished transformation of post-apartheid institutions.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in conceptualizing public monuments as institutional devices that organize memory and citizenship. By integrating memory studies, postcolonial theory, heritage governance, and political sociology, the article demonstrates that public commemoration shapes not only historical consciousness but also institutional legitimacy.

Empirically and interpretively, the comparison reveals that former imperial metropolises and postcolonial democracies confront colonial memory differently. Yet both contexts show that historical narratives remain embedded in public institutions. Democratic societies cannot build inclusive citizenship while preserving commemorative landscapes that deny or minimize historical violence.

The societal implications are significant. Heritage institutions, universities, museums, and municipalities should create participatory processes for addressing contested monuments. Public history education should move beyond celebratory national narratives and engage colonialism, slavery, apartheid, resistance, and historical responsibility. Decolonization should involve not only symbolic change but also institutional reform and material justice.

The study has limitations. It relies on secondary sources and documented public debates rather than original ethnographic fieldwork. Future research should examine local community perspectives, digital monument activism, museum restitution processes, and comparative cases in settler colonial societies, Latin America, and post-socialist contexts.

Ultimately, this article demonstrates that public memory is a central field of social humanities inquiry because societies become democratic not only through elections and laws but through the histories they choose to honor, mourn, contest, and transform.

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