Why activists are vandalizing statues to colonialism

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March 17 2020

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In 2018, statues of Edward Cornwallis and John A. Macdonald were removed from their respective pedestals in Halifax and Victoria. Across Canada, colonial statues have also been vandalized as an act of protest.

Statues and monuments have become major flashpoints of political conflict over the past decade.

After the 2015 Charleston Massacre, in which a neo-Confederate white supremacist murdered nine African Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a movement to remove Confederate monuments and place names swept across the United States.

Another wave of Confederate statue removals and place renamings occurred in the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

In South Africa, the #RhodesMustFall movement led to the removal of a statue honoring the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in 2015. This inspired efforts to challenge Rhodes's legacy elsewhere as well.

A crowd looks on as the statue of imperialist Cecil Rhodes is removed from its perch at the University of Cape Town in 2015. Schalk van Zuydam

Monument controversies are not unique to the 21st century. Commemorative landscapes have been radically transformed during political regime changes throughout history. Following the Second World War, monuments to the Nazi regime were toppled. Similarly, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of apartheid in South Africa led to significant changes to the memorial landscape.

The Legacies of Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism is a process of colonization based upon the replacement of Indigenous or colonized peoples with a settler society. This involves both the disposession of Indigenous land and the erasure, either through assimilation or elimination, of Indigenous peoples.

Colonial statues and place names are part of the political infrastructure of settler place-making in Canada. As a result, they have become focal points for challenging settler-colonial power and testing the limits of reconciliation.

On Jan. 31, 2018, the Cornwallis statue was taken down from its pedestal in Halifax. As an honorific commemoration for the "founder" of Halifax, Mi'kmaw elders have long viewed the statue as a sign of the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples and called for its removal.

As if answering the East Coast, the John A. Macdonald statue was removed from the entrance to City Hall in Victoria on Aug. 11, 2018. The decision to remove the Macdonald statue was made as part of the city's formal reconciliation process with the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations.

As Canada's first prime minister, Macdonald was chief architect of its residential school system and promoted genocidal policies against Indigenous peoples. His monumental presence at the entrance to City Hall was a major barrier to reconciliation efforts.

In August 2018, a second plaque was installed to replace a bronze statue of Canada's first Prime Minister John A. Macdonald after the first was vandalized shortly after the removal of the statue from the front of City Hall in Victoria, BC. Chad Hipolito/THE CANADIAN PRESS

A year later, the city of New Westminster followed suit, removing a statue of the "Hanging Judge" Matthew Begbie from the grounds of the provincial courthouse.

Those opposed to the removal of statues often propose adding historic plaques as a way to recontextualize statues while leaving them in public spaces. Some activists, however, have chosen a different option: vandalism.

Vandalizing Colonial Statues and Monuments

Across Canada, contentious statues and monuments linked to settler colonialism have been targeted with vandalism. In Montréal, the John A. Macdonald and Queen Victoria monuments have been regularly spray-painted. Macdonald statues have been vandalized in Kingston and Regina as far back as 2012.

Accompanying the campaign to remove the Cornwallis statue in Halifax were several incidents of vandalism as well.

These are not random acts of hooliganism. The vandalism of colonial statues is an expression of political protest against the celebration of settler colonialism in Canada.

The political content of monumental vandalism is often communicated by those who commit such acts in the form of accompanying communiqués. Often posted online anonymously, these communiqués explain the motivations behind acts of political vandalism. In *The Politics of Attack: Communiqués and Insurrectionary Violence*, author Michael Loadenthal describes communiqués as "the communicative component of an insurrectionary attack."

A group called the Montréal May Anarchists claimed responsibility for the vandalism of Montréal's Macdonald and Queen Victoria monuments in 2019. They targeted these monuments to oppose celebrations of white supremacy and genocide.

In their communiqué, the Montréal May Anarchists made reference to previous acts by #MacdonaldMustFall, inspired by the #RhodesMustFall campaign and the Delhi-Dublin Anti-Colonial Solidarity Brigade.

Citing other monument controversies and social struggles, these communiqués place themselves as part of a broader activist community. These groups frame their acts of vandalism as an expression of their commitment to anti-colonial and decolonization movements internationally.

The Future is Not Cast in Stone

The removal of statues and monuments is often equated with "erasing history." But history itself is a process that has witnessed countless changes to commemorative landscapes.

In settler-colonial societies such as Canada, the creation of monumental landscapes celebrating colonialism has played a significant role in the process of erasing Indigenous histories and ties to the land. There is a difference between the repressive erasure by dispossession that colonialism has unleashed and the restorative erasure of removing colonial statues to restore an Indigenous sense of place.

Colonial statues are a visible barrier to decolonization and reconciliation because they embed white supremacy in public spaces.

Various far-right groups have rallied to defend colonial monuments subject to controversy. For example, members of the Proud Boys disrupted a Mi'kmaq protest against the Cornwallis statue. Similarly, the right-wing group Students for Western Civilisation bemoan what they see as an erasure of European culture. Commemorating colonialism with monuments aligns with the goals of a growing number of white supremacist groups in Canada.

The question of whether colonial statues must fall or remain is not a matter of history alone. It is part of the process of reckoning with the ongoing injustices of settler colonialism in the present in order to work toward decolonizing the future.

Removing a statue, monument, or place name does not erase history. It serves as a reminder that the future is not cast in stone.

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Retrieved on November 14 2026 from
https://theconversation.com/why-activists-are-vandalizing-statues-to-colonialism-129750

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