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Contestations of the past in Trinidad: An analysis of the two Columbus Statues
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Abstract

This study analyses the historical contestations that surround three popular monuments in Trinidad. These three monuments are; the two statues of Christopher Columbus and Woodford Square which are representative of Trinidad's colonial figures and experiences. The contestations surrounding the monuments are brought to the forefront of analysis through semi-structured interviews and corroborated with secondary sources. This study employs a qualitative methodology using primary oral and written sources as well as secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and newspapers. This work seeks to establish the link between monuments and their ability to produce dialogue about the colonial legacy in Trinidad. These monuments are found to be important tools influencing the historical narratives constructed by various groups who share differing perspectives that inform their position within the historical contestations that call either for the monuments to be removed or left in their current positions.

Key Words: contestations, monuments, colonial figures, historical narratives, public history, decolonization.

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Introduction

Rationale

The history of Trinidad from 1498 is representative of a colonial and imperial system of Spanish and British rule. The impact of European colonization in Trinidad has meant that how we construct and remember history is often following Western historiography. The public arena is filled with signs, symbols, street names, buildings, artifacts, and monuments that represent contested colonial figures. According to historian Bridget Brereton, “Contestations surrounding the presence of controversial monuments in society is not solely confined within the local context of Trinidad. Every past, every claim to the truth about the past, is open to interpretation.¹” There has been a global outcry, protests, debate, and dialogue concerning the presence of monuments representing controversial colonial figures in public spaces by critics throughout the world. Some examples of such global protests against colonial monuments are the "Rhodes Must Fall Campaign" in South Africa, the marches against Confederate statues, and the protest against the Columbus statue in Martinique. Groups in various societies throughout the world have become overtly vocal about colonial symbols that permeate a “post-colonial” world.

Vehement challenges are being posed, questioning the relevance of monuments that symbolize the oppression, enslavement, and exploitation of subaltern groups who influenced the contemporary infrastructure and superstructure. The website Code Switch argues, “Monuments do

¹ Bridget Brereton. “Contesting the Past: Narratives of Trinidad and Tobago History,” *New West Indian Guide*, no.3 (2007): 169.

not mean anything on their own. They mean things because we make them mean things.²”Memory and how the past is remembered by various groups in Trinidad society is important in understanding how each specific monument came to be understood in terms of the historical experiences that would emerge as a result of the Western colonial experience.

Contestations play a vital role in revealing the values and esteem that are elevated to the forefront of memory with key events, symbols, and characters that shaped Trinidad's society. Tyehimba Salandy claims, “The history of the Caribbean space since the Columbian invasion has meant that Caribbean people have not had the luxury of organically remembering or forgetting.”³ The role of politics in defending the status quo is an important part of negotiating the place of controversial monuments that fill our public spaces. Jennifer Allen states, “The conversation over what should be memorialized, what should go in a museum, what should take the form of a monument, what should be a holiday, is a process of negotiation.”⁴ This study seeks to analyze the contestations of the past in Trinidad through the analysis of the Columbus statues and Woodford Square.

² Jennifer Allen. “What Our Monuments (Don't) Teach Us About Remembering the Past,” Code Switch, last modified August, 23rd, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/08/23/545548965/what-our-monuments-don-t-teach-us-about-remembering-the-past>.

³ Tyehimba Salandy, “Rasta Memory versus the Historical Amnesia of Western Capitalism: Towards Decoloniality and Epistemic Justice in the Global Village” in *Local Articulations of Entangled Social Inequalities. Anthem Studies in Decoloniality and Migration* ed. Rhoda Reddock and Encarnacion Gutierrez (London: Anthem Publishers), 2.

⁴ Allen. “What Our Monuments (Don't) Teach Us About Remembering the Past.”

Thesis Title: Contestations of the past in Trinidad: An analysis of the two Columbus Statues and Woodford Square.

Thesis Statement: In Trinidad, the two Columbus statues and Woodford Square have been at the forefront in promoting debates about the legacy of colonialism and the subsequent historical narratives that are constructed about the colonial past of the country.

Parameters of the Study

This study will focus its analysis on three historical monuments found in Trinidad. Due to time constraints, these three monuments were selected as the most appropriate ones to conduct an analysis surrounding the contestations about colonial monuments. The major themes that will be explored in this study are contestations, colonialism, and historical narratives. The themes will allow for an in-depth exploration of the objectives guiding this research. All aspects of this study are closely guided by the requirements that are stipulated for HUMN3099.

The objectives of this study seek to:

1. Describe the background of Christopher Columbus and Governor Ralph Woodford and the monuments constructed to represent their characters in Trinidad.
2. Analyze the contestations that surround the two Columbus Statues and Woodford Square in Trinidad.
3. Examine the impact of these contestations on the historical narratives about the colonial legacy in Trinidad.

Methodology

This study analyses three key monuments that have been the center of recent historical contestations in Trinidad. The three monuments that will be evaluated are the two Christopher Columbus statues, one located in Moruga and the other one in Port of Spain and Woodford Square.

To gather the necessary data to conduct the analysis, the methodology this study employs is a qualitative approach. This qualitative approach will employ the use of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources this study used were oral and written. The oral primary sources were engaged through semi-structured interviews with ten participants spanning from over two months from December to February. The participants include key members in the public debate surrounding these monuments. The secondary sources used are books, journal articles, and newspapers which were collected over a period of five months spanning from October 2019 and March 2020. The research approach was descriptive in nature as it sought to analyze what these monuments meant to different groups and individuals in the contestations as well as how these monuments impacted how the historical narrative is constructed in Trinidad.

Chapter Outline

This study consists of three chapters. Chapter One describes Christopher Columbus and Governor Ralph Woodford. It outlines each of their characters along with their relation to colonialism and a brief description of the impact of their actions. The location and information of the creators of the monuments are explored in this chapter to set the context for chapter two and three.

Chapter Two is a synthesis and analysis of the primary and secondary data collected to explore the objectives of this study. It investigates the varying contestations surrounding the three monuments from the participants interviewed. This primary data is then corroborated with secondary sources to provide an in-depth exploration of these monuments and the meanings attached to them by various individuals and groups. It highlights the positions taken by key members in the local contestations on the relevance or necessity of these monuments in Trinidad's society.

Chapter Three is an examination of the historical narrative about the colonial legacy in Trinidad. It delves into how these monuments may shape or influence the way colonial experiences linked back to Columbus and Woodford are spoken and written about by different individuals and groups. Also, the way the colonial story is told through the existence of the monuments is analyzed with different historical perspectives being brought to the forefront.

Literature Review

Symbols are often constructed in public spaces to provide a narrative that may not always be based on objective truth but rather one that serves to reinforce the power relations in a society. Michel Rolph Trouillot in his work *Silencing the Past Power and Production*, emphasizes how public history is shaped and created not necessarily to portray the true nature of events but rather as an attempt to sway public opinion based on the creator's subjectivities. Public history can take several forms such as a flag, a memorial, a museum exhibit, living theatre, or monuments. These symbols are often manipulated by their creators who erect them in an attempt to either placate some aspect of history or to promote an agenda.

Trouillot makes his readers cognizant to the fact that the production of history for mass consumption has become a packaged commodity. One example that is mentioned in this work is how western capitalists sought to use the quincennial anniversary of Columbus's first voyage into the West Indies, as an attempt to define Christopher Columbus as a discoverer of a new world. This attempt was met with great objections by groups who opposed this narrative and struck back with the counter-narrative of Columbus's arrival in the Americas as conquest and the start of the genocide. Public history then as inferred from this work, gives impetus for a constant interplay of narratives that provide different details or perceptions of historical events that culminate in contestations and challenges of the narratives and symbols that portray the past. There is more scope for analysis on the role that public history plays in the construction of historical

narratives in Trinidad and Tobago. By looking at these three monuments, this study seeks to add the literature on public history.

The article “Rhodes Must Not Fall” written by Richard Drayton seeks to explore how the experiences of empire are explored in art, architecture, organization of knowledge, and the rituals of politics or the economy. Drayton in this article seeks to analyze two modern controversies surrounding public monuments that are at the center of public spaces in Oxford and Bridgetown. He delves into the history and origins of the statues of Lord Nelson in Bridgetown, Barbados, and Cecil Rhodes at The University of Oxford. The context behind the construction of the Lord Nelson statue shows how this statue serves to reinforce the Western colonial domination of Barbados. Drayton highlights how it seems clear that the sponsors of this monument sought to demonstrate their "patriotism" and their membership in political classes of the British nation.⁵ The article then goes further to look at how the symbolic representations that are inherent in these statues shape the discourse of experiences and history between the colonized and the colonizer. Drayton's claim is substantiated in the statement “the statue of Rhodes, for them, was the capstone and symbol of the university’s complacency about its structural racism.” The museum and city belong to the present. He urges his readers that there is a pressing need to renegotiate the idea of heritage so it can act as a medium in revealing the many silenced pasts and allow for an inclusive view of citizenship and cosmopolitan inclusion.

⁵ Richard Drayton, “Rhodes Must Fall? Statues, Post-Colonial “Heritage” and Temporality,” *Third Text*, (October 2019): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1653073>.

Contrastingly, the article entitled “Affective Politics and Colonial Heritage, Rhodes Must Fall At the UTC and Oxford” written by Knudsen and Anderson addresses why statues matter in society. It is argued that Eurocentric symbols such as statues of public figures like Christopher Columbus assume a focal point in decolonizing political actions. Three critical points of analysis are made about the statues as a form of heritage. the first point postulates that statues, flags, street names, and more are not relics created from the historical period they represent but instead they were added later as political tools in a struggle over race, economy, socio-political formations, and cultural affirmation.⁶ The second point explores how these symbols are not always a representation of historical truth. They argue that in these such cases, statues can be removed or torn down in a societal attempt at “demythologizing whiteness” without necessarily tampering with “historical truth”. In the same manner that erecting monuments can be a lengthy process, dismantling them can also be lengthy. The third point states that statues should be viewed as more than some random icons in public spaces but instead signs of substantial matters. Therefore, the fight against structural racism means a fight against visible symbols. Roger Mac Ginty in the article “The Political Use of Symbols of Accord and Discord: Northern Ireland and South Africa”, goes further to elaborate on the role of symbols and symbolism in politics. He argues that through symbols and symbolism, identity bond is created between the individual and the group in an attempt for solidarity.⁷ They are often used to promote the worldview of those who erect the symbols, mobilizing emotions and people. Symbols are constructed with the intent to either reassure or

⁶ Britta Knudsen and Casper Anderson, “Affective Politics and Colonial Heritage Rhodes Must Fall at UTC and Oxford,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, no.3 (2019): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1481134>.

⁷ Roger Mac Ginty, “The political use of symbols of accord and discord: Northern Ireland and South Africa,” *Civil Wars*, no.4 (September 2007):2, DOI: 10.1080/13698240108402461.

placate the public mind with the intent to mask the social inequality that exists due to the unequal power structures.

This study will look specifically at three monuments and the contestations that surround them from various groups in Trinidad and how these monuments shape the historical narratives from varying perspectives. The existing literature speaks from an international context with little or no attention to the local public debates or historical narratives that surround monuments in Trinidad and Tobago. This has resulted in a dearth on the literature on that topic highlighting a need for more research and scholarship. This research seeks to add to the body of limited literature that exists in the country surrounding monuments and their impact on public debates and the historical narratives in Trinidad.

Chapter 1

The Background of Christopher Columbus and Ralph Woodford

Christopher Columbus

Christopher Columbus was an Italian mariner who left Spain with royal authorization in search of a Western route to the riches of the East. According to historian Eric Williams, “A series of dramatic events in 15th century Europe culminated in Christopher Columbus’s overseas voyages acting as an agent of the Spanish monarchy.”⁸ Columbus embarked on four voyages from 1492 to 1504 where he encountered lands in the West Indies and Central America and claimed it for Spain.

European colonization in the region had begun and it left an indelible mark on the West Indies and the subsequent populations that were transplanted as a result of European economic enterprise. Professor Tony Martin argues, “By opening up the Americas to outside influence, Columbus as it were, completed the circle of globalization and ensured Europe’s dominance in the new scheme of things.”⁹ Columbus provided an inextricable link that connected two worlds, the “Old” World and the “New” World. The arrival of the Spanish Conquistadores brought the same plight to Trinidad and its inhabitants as it had brought to Hispaniola and the other islands. Therefore, an inevitable conflict ensued between the Spanish colonialists who were seeking wealth

⁸ Eric Williams, *History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago* (New York: Eworld,1942), 5.

⁹ Tony Martin, *Caribbean History from Pre-colonial Origins to the Present* (New Jersey: Pearson,2012), 17.

for the Spanish empire and the indigenous people who had a culture to defend. This conflict had a devastating impact on the indigenous population, leading to the eventual genocide of that population. The arrival of the Spanish conquistadores had an overwhelmingly negative impact on the indigenous population and their cultures. Within, this cultural erasure became evident as indigenous cultural practices and beliefs came under attack by the Spanish conquistadores who imposed their religious beliefs, economic practices, diseases, and culture. Brereton contends that "Once the fatal contact was made, on that July morning in 1498, the Arawaks of Trinidad would suffer the tragic fate shared in varying degrees by all the Amerindian peoples of the Americas."¹⁰ The arrival of Spanish colonialism in Trinidad spelled trouble for the indigenous population and their culture.

The indigenous population was subjected to torture, enslavement, and subsequent genocide under the hands of Columbus and by extension, Spanish colonialism. Columbus encountered an inhabited land on July 31st, 1498 which he called Trinidad. According to Fergus, "Scholars estimate the population of Trinidad at 30,000 to 40,000 in 1498."¹¹ Columbus established the Encomienda system which was a scheme to exploit the labor of the indigenous population of the islands. Beckles and Shepherd assert, " This system detailed a way of making the change from war conditions to colonial society and it was a way of controlling and enslaving indigenous people."¹²

¹⁰ Bridget Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962*, 1.

¹¹ Claudius Fergus, "Judging Columbus Through History (Part 4): Genocide and White Supremacy in Trinidad," Wired 868, last modified November 20, 2018, <https://wired868.com/2018/11/20/judging-columbus-through-history-pt-4-genocide-and-white-supremacy-in-trinidad/>.

¹² Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, *Liberties Lost Caribbean Indigenous Societies and Slave Systems*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 41.

This system was also responsible for speeding up the genocide of the indigenous population since rampant terror was employed to uphold it. Fergus contends, “In effect, Columbus’ repartimiento was the prototype for the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, with similar consequences.”¹³

There are two statues of Christopher Columbus in Trinidad. One is located at Columbus Square situated at the corner of Duncan Street and Independence Square. This statue was donated by an affluent cocoa proprietor, Hypolite Borde in the 1880s. The other statue is located in Grand Chemin, Lanse Mittan Road, Moruga, and was constructed by the self-styled Prince of Moruga, public figure, estate, and museum director, Eric Lewis in 2012. These two statues have been central in the contestations in Trinidad and Tobago surrounding the place and relevance of Colonial monuments in contemporary times.

¹³ Fergus, “Judging Columbus Through History (Part 4): Genocide and White Supremacy in Trinidad.”

Ralph Woodford

Woodford Square is located on Frederick Street, Port of Spain between the City Hall and Trinity Cathedral. This square was given several names by different groups in Trinidad before its current name. It was called “Place of Souls” by the indigenous peoples and then Brunswick Square by the British until 1917. The Square was named after the British Governor Ralph James Woodford in 1917 by Mayor E. Prada. Woodford at an early age of 29 was given the task by Britain to govern their colony of Trinidad. According to Gertrude Carmichael, “He was a well-educated man of decided character, with a colorful personality.”¹⁴ Governor Woodford was the fourth British governor and the first civilian governor in the colony who took a different approach from the previous military governors such as Picton and Hislop. Considerable power was vested in his leadership by the British government to govern the colony following the British colonial system. Carmichael goes further in noting, “From the beginning, Woodford made it quite clear that he intended to govern and he took steps to find out about everything.”¹⁵ He engaged in a series of expeditions throughout the island in an attempt to enhance the development of road and sea networks. Gerard Besson posits, “He is credited with rebuilding the capital of Port of Spain after it was ravished by a fire in 1808. Woodford ran Trinidad as if it were his country estate.”¹⁶ He also led the purchase of Paradise estate which is today Queen’s Park Savannah. He met Trinidad

¹⁴ Gertrude Carmichael. “Some Notes on Sir Ralph James Woodford, Bt. (Governor of Trinidad, 1813 to 1828)” *Caribbean Quarterly*, No 2. (1951-1952): 26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40652533>.

¹⁵ Carmichael, “Some Notes on Sir Ralph James Woodford, Bt. (Governor of Trinidad, 1813 to 1828),” 27.

¹⁶ Gerard Besson, “Picton and Woodford,” Paria Publishing Co Ltd, last modified February 17, 2012, <http://caribbeanhistoryarchives.blogspot.com/2012/02/picton-and-woodford.html>

with significant social, economic, and political challenges that he sought to address. Carmichael asserts, “When he left the colony 15 years later in 1828, the Colony was prosperous for the British monarchy, trade was good, roads and communications improved.”¹⁷ His measures were also oppressive to many groups in Trinidad society such as enslaved Africans, free coloreds and the indigenous population, which was representative of British colonialism throughout the region.

Woodford was a bastion of the British colonial value system and took appropriate measures to ensure adherence and conformity to that system by all of Britain’s subjects in the colony. Paria Publishing notes, “He created prescriptions against the free black people and sought to prevent marriages between white and black people.”¹⁸ Woodford had an overt disdain for free coloreds and free blacks which culminated in the creation of an 1822 law. This law allowed free coloreds and free blacks to be flogged for a minor offense based on the approval of the city magistrate who was usually a white slave owner. This law led to vehement challenges against the rule of Governor Woodford by the free blacks and free coloreds. This cause was championed by Doctor Jean Batiste Phillippe, a free colored. According to the National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, “During Woodford’s tenure, Doctor Jean Baptiste Phillippe addressed a council in London, stating that life for enslaved persons, free blacks and free coloreds was a nightmare under Woodford’s rule.”¹⁹ They were also not allowed to practice their professions and could no longer be addressed as “Mister” or “Madame”. Besson states, “He sought to prevent their advancement wherever he

¹⁷ Carmichael, “Some Notes on Sir Ralph James Woodford. Bt. (Governor of Trinidad, 1813 to 1828),” 38.

¹⁸ Besson, “Picton and Woodford”.

¹⁹ “100 Years of Woodford Square,” The National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, last modified June 5, 2017. <http://nationaltrust.tt/100-years-woodford-square/>.

could.”²⁰ Woodford's policies and attitude towards the non-white, non-European groups, was symptomatic of the wider racist structure in which British colonialism fostered.

Woodford Square has been an essential locus for many important historical events in the country that has left an indelible mark on the historical and political landscape of Trinidad. The square was the site of some colonial atrocities. For instance, in 1806 three enslaved Africans who were accused of rebelling were hung, with their heads decapitated and left in the square while their bodies were carried around the various estates as a sign to warn against further insurrection from the enslaved Africans. It is one of the busiest squares in the nation's capital with the space serving as a hub for political and religious gatherings, reasoning sessions and craft markets. The National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago noted, “It was the venue of Trinidad’s public speakers.”²¹ The People’s National Movement was launched from this park. Dr. Williams bestowed Woodford Square with the new title of the University of Woodford Square in the 1950s. The square was used for gatherings and rallies during The Black Power movement. This square has been the background for a host of historical events that would shape the society of Trinidad and Tobago. On December 4th, 2011 it was declared by Cabinet as a Heritage site. On May 25th, 2017, the square celebrated 100 years since being named Woodford Square.²² Recently, Woodford Square has been one public monument to be included in the contestations in Trinidad with a call by some individuals and organizations for its name to be changed.

²⁰ Gerard Besson, “J.B Phillip,” Paria Publishing Limited, last modified October 5, 2011, <http://caribbeanhistoryarchives.blogspot.com/2011/10/jb-philippe.html>.

²¹ “Woodford Square,” The National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, last modified on April 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wk0onShS5TQ>.

²² “100 Years of Woodford Square.”

Chapter 2

Contestations Surrounding the Columbus Statues and Woodford Square

Christopher Columbus

The character associated with the infamous Italian Mariner, Christopher Columbus is greatly contested throughout the world. These contestations are not just confined to academic cadres but are evident in the public spaces we occupy. A plethora of words and statements are used to produce varying understandings and accounts of Columbus, that have emerged either in defense or in opposition to him. John Henrik Clarke contends, “They have named cities, countries, towns, rivers, colleges, parks, streets and even their capital after him.”²³ Public spaces throughout the world have been filled with mementos to colonial figures such as Christopher Columbus. His image has become a packaged commodity that has been sold throughout the world for public consumption. Many utterances of the name Columbus are often accompanied by words such as "discovered" or "discoverer".

The notion of Christopher Columbus “the discoverer” is highly contentious. Martin states, “The indigenous people who greeted Columbus would have been surprised to learn that he had discovered them, as is traditionally alleged.”²⁴ The word discovery attaches a connotation that

²³ John Henrik Clarke, *Christopher Columbus and the Afrikan Holocaust Slavery and the Rise of European Capitalism* (New York: EWorld, 1998), 12.

²⁴ Martin, *Caribbean History from Pre-colonial Origins to the Present*, 12.

the lands Columbus encountered were void of civilizations or inhabitants. Eric Lewis states that "history is not something that is clear cut, we were not there, you have many authors, many types of biases, depending on who the authors are." This assertion shows that biases, agendas, and the established power structures influence how historical accounts and narratives are constructed. Gerard Besson, author and historian claim that "In Trinidad, there is a relatively small amount of people who are creole and would be hot and sweaty about the Columbus statue." Besson does not see a large section of the population as being concerned about the Columbus statue in Trinidad. Contrastingly, Leslie Ann Paul, writer, heritage preservation, and research officer of the National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago state, "The thing with monuments especially with ones like the Columbus statues, they promote these figures as some kind of beacon of civilization." Therefore, the specific position taken by individuals or groups is linked back to their values and perspectives that would impact how they perceive Columbus. However, personal feelings and values are not based on empiricism that is necessary for the construction of historical narratives.

The atrocities committed by Columbus have been documented by a host of historians who has employed primary documents as evidence to substantiate their work.²⁵ The agenda behind the myth of Columbus as discovering new lands can be linked back to colonial fables. Trouillot argues, "Calling the first invasion of inhabited lands, discovery is an exercise in Eurocentric power that already frames future narratives of the events."²⁶

²⁵ Examples of these historians are Eric Williams, Tony Martin, Bridget Brereton, Claudius Fergus, and John Henrik Clarke.

²⁶ Michel Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Books Press, 1995), 114.

Many of our public spaces in Trinidad have a colonial legacy that is often evident in the monuments we see. Dr. Samaroo, professor of history and past head of the history department U.W.I, St. Augustine states, “monuments are very important in our history because they remind us of the past. Monuments can have a positive or negative effect.” Essentially, monuments can tell a story of a people, place, historical epoch among many other things. Shabaka Kambon, director of the Rhodes Must Fall Caribbean campaign and activist, argues that “the Columbus monuments in Trinidad perhaps more than any other monument are a kind of secondary agent of colonialism as it reflects and amplifies the ambitions of those who put it in our midst.” This monument serves as a tribute to Columbus and can be seen as glorifying his character in history by some individuals, groups, and organizations in society. Dr. Ramsay a history lecturer and researcher at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus mentions "people put monuments when they are in power, meaning when they have the economic means to do so.” Monuments are symbolic of power in a society. This power allows those with the economic strength to erect monuments and have their narratives told.

Within these contestations surrounding the Columbus monuments, there exist numerous dialogues regarding the place of such a controversial monument in the society and their public spaces. On the 1st of August 2018, The Cross Rhodes Freedom Project in collaboration with the Warao nation, launched a petition to have the statue of Columbus in Port of Spain removed and taken to a museum.²⁷ Mr. Kambon and Professor Samaroo both refer to these monuments as "germs of rot" and call for their removal from those public spaces in which they currently occupy.

²⁷ Julien Neaves, “Petition Launched to Remove Columbus Statue,” *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, August 1, 2018, <https://newsday.co.tt/2018/08/01/petition-launched-to-remove-columbus-statue/>.

Professor Samaroo carefully explains "Our monuments are mementos to the oppressors and in our time, we should be interested in getting rid of these monuments. At the same time, I would not advocate that they take down these monuments and mash them up, we have a museum where such reminders should be with appropriate descriptions."

This view is opposed because these statues are a part of Trinidad's heritage and removing it can lead to possible historical erasure. The Mayor of Port of Spain, Joel Martinez admits that while he is cognizant of the statue's controversial nature and objections by some revisionist groups, he believes it holds cultural and historical significance to Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the city.²⁸ A similar viewpoint was shared by Mr. Lewis and four Moruga residents concerning whether the statue should be removed from Moruga or not. Lewis notes that the idea to remove the Columbus statue from Moruga, "is a very biased and arrogant decision that seeks to promote a racial divide. The Columbus monument has brought a lot of attention to Moruga in the form of Tourism." Eric Lewis perceives the call to remove the Columbus statue from Moruga as an attempt to take away part of the financial earnings from Moruga.

Some individuals or organizations are accused of seeking a self-interest agenda while silencing the voices of others in society concerning the contestations. Besson brings up a question concerning the call for the removal of colonial monuments by asking "who are the "we" that these individuals and organizations are speaking for? Some voices, individuals, and organizations are heard louder at the expense of those who may not have access to even contribute to the dialogue.

²⁸ Shane Superville, "Leave Christopher Columbus alone," *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, June 21, 2018, <https://newsday.co.tt/2018/06/21/leave-christopher-columbus-alone/>.

Edifying civic monuments were, in fact, the ideological and historical twins of the modern public museum.²⁹ Leslie Ann Paul, states that her argument in the contestations are "that let it be removed, it does not have to be in the public glare, you can put it in a museum, say in a back room and put something else in its place. Something that is prideful and you have a plaque with something stating that this was here before along with the reasons why it was removed. Sometimes these painful reminders are good." Monuments play an essential role in educating society about the history of a country. Which monuments we use to educate and how those monuments are used are very critical to ensuring that a balanced historical narrative of Columbus is produced for public consumption in Trinidad's society.

²⁹ Drayton, "Rhodes Must Fall? Statues, Post-Colonial "Heritage" and Temporality," 3.

Governor Ralph Woodford

Ralph Woodford is an important colonial figure who played a pivotal role in shaping the political, cultural, and economic climate of Trinidad under British rule from 1813 to 1828. His governorship and character is one that is greatly contested especially since a location filled with historical activities in Trinidad is named after him, Woodford Square. Governor Ralph Woodford is undoubtedly representative of the British colonial past of Trinidad. Shabaka Kambon argues that “Woodford is a white supremacist that projects the values that Britain wanted to project in the 20th century.” He advocated against the abolition of the slave trade and lobbied on the side of the planter –class in seeking to defend their interests.

Furthermore, he was deeply concerned about the position of the free blacks in Trinidad society, sought to impose restrictions that would limit their mobility and prohibited the marriage between free blacks and whites. Gerard Besson claims that “If you examine Woodford, what you would find is that Sir Governor Ralph Woodford was by far the most overt racist to ever exist in the administration of Trinidad.” Despite this claim by Besson, he is against renaming the square and ties it back to the notion of who are the inheritors of the traditions of Woodford. Besson reasons that, “We must not eradicate or throw away the milestones of our social and political history. These are markers that tell us at various points in time where we were.” These markers mean different things for different individuals and groups. Therefore, these markers can evoke a wide range of feelings from veneration and appreciation to disdain and resentment.

Woodford’s character is contested among some because of the projects and policies that he implemented and the detrimental impact it would have had on some groups in society, for

example, the indigenous people. Professor Samaroo notes that "Governor Woodford is the first Governor that gave the country its first example of ethnic cleansing when he gathered all the first peoples from Tacarigua, Arouca and put them in Arima under the control of the Catholic church." This would have had a devastating impact on the culture of the indigenous population that was already declining in numbers. Professor Samaroo goes further in elaborating his claim by arguing that "He put them under the worst regime you could think of which is the Roman Catholic church, subsequently completing the genocide of the first people." In light of this information, Professor Samaroo is in favor of having the name of the Square changed from Woodford.

However, another view of Woodford is given by Gertrude Carmichael, that presents a polar and positive picture of the first civil British Governor in Trinidad. Carmichael asserts that "Woodford was a refined, elegant and very handsome man, dignified with a strong personality. Those who worked with him and knew him described him as courteous and well-bred."³⁰ Woodford's strong personality is often summed up to him being tasked with taking control of a colony with many challenges in the social and economic spheres. A large section of the capital, Port of Spain had been ravished by a fire 1808 and under Woodford's order, the city was redeveloped. Carmichael asserts that "He had streets paved, he created the botanical gardens and he planted ornamental trees around the city. Woodford always exerting himself to improve conditions for the good of the whole colony."³¹ This assertion by Carmichael can be challenged in terms of whose good was Woodford truly seeking to improve. It was the good of the British Crown with their respective values, beliefs,

³⁰ Carmichael, "Some Notes on Sir Ralph James Woodford, Bt. (Governor of Trinidad, 1813 to 1828)", "38.

³¹ Carmichael, "Some Notes on Sir Ralph James Woodford, Bt. (Governor of Trinidad, 1813 to 1828)", "37.

status quo, and economic need. His most paramount aim a, need to bring order and stability to the precarious state of Trinidad.

Woodford was given significant power by the British Crown which undeniably enabled him to take strong action in Trinidad. Woodford was the Governor, Commander in Chief and Vice Admiral. In addition to his judicial functions, he directed the whole financial, legislative, and executive machinery of the Colony.

Despite the contestations surrounding the name of Woodford Square, the square itself has endured a long legacy. Dr. Ramsay postulates, “Just because some spaces may have a colonial history, does not necessarily mean that they need to be eradicated or moved.” Woodford Square has been subjected to multiple name changes over the course of its existence, from Brunswick Square which was symbolic of the German and British alliance when in 1797 a German military squadron took charge of the area. However, in 1917 the name of the square was changed to Woodford Square in honor of Governor Ralph Woodford who is credited with laying out and beautifying the area. The monuments that are displayed in Trinidad’s public spaces are seen as symbolic of more than just the characters they represent. Drayton posits, “There is a link between symbolic representations that are inherent in these statues and how they shape the discourse on the experiences and history between the colonized and the colonizer.”³² Shabaka Kambon argues for the removal of the name Woodford Square as he sees that name as adhering to the values that the British Empire sought to project unto its colonial territories. He takes the argument further by stating that every group that rises to power is emboldened with the right to rename as they deem

³² Drayton, “Rhode Must Fall?”, 12.

appropriate but other groups in society are not afforded that same right. This causes the contestations to look at the power relations in the process of naming and renaming with focus on who or what benefits from a name change or removal or monument from the public gaze.

The proposal to rename Woodford Square is seen similarly as the call to remove the Columbus statues by some who oppose such actions. Besson and Lewis see the acts of renaming and removing these monuments as tampering with the cultural heritage of Trinidad, subsequently leading to a possible historical erasure of these colonial figures from the historical narrative of this country. Mac Ginty, “Symbols have multiple forms of expression, and are capable of connecting with different individuals or groups in different ways, thus adding to their potency.”³³ Dialogue about renaming Woodford Square is concerned about more than the name of the square, but moreover what the name is symbolic of about the history of Trinidad under British colonialism. This movement is connected to a global movement where they have been campaigns to remove symbols that represent the various bastions of colonialism that would have led to the oppression of various groups in society who are contemporarily still haunted by the vestiges of those colonial structures. Decolonizing public spaces means having a dialogue about what the name Woodford means to Trinidad. From these discussions, the issue concerning a name change can be reasoned.

³³ Mac Ginty, “The political use of symbols of accord and discord: Northern Ireland and South Africa, ”2.

Chapter 3

Impact of the contestations on the Historical Narratives on the Colonial Legacy in Trinidad

Monuments play a significant role in the heritage and historical narrative of a country telling a story about an event, character, or historical epoch that would have shaped not only the history of the society but also the contemporary structures. Colonization did not only alter the physical landscape of the colonized, it often took over the psyche of the colonized. Professor Sabelo Gatsheni contends, “If you remove colonialism physically without removing it epistemically, it will not disappear.”³⁴ The two statues of Columbus along with Woodford Square are just three of the monuments at the center of heated historical contestations as the issue of commemoration versus education and preservation is often discussed. Those who call for the removal of the Columbus statues and the renaming of Woodford Square are highly concerned about these monuments serving as a source of commemoration for these colonial figures in the historical narrative of Trinidad. According to Trouillot, “Commemorations sanitize further, the messy history lived by the actors. They help to create, modify, or sanction the public meanings attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebrations.”³⁵ There is a danger in

³⁴ Duncan Omanga, “Decolonization, Decoloniality, and the Future of African Studies: A Conversation with Dr. Sabelo Ndlovu Gatsheni,” Social Science Research Council, last modified January 14, 2020, <https://items.ssrc.org/from-our-programs/decolonization-decoloniality-and-the-future-of-african-studies-a-conversation-with-dr-sabelo-ndlovu-gatsheni/>.

³⁵ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History*, 139.

monuments being a source of commemoration as it can lead to the emergence of a one-sided historical narrative about the colonial legacy in an attempt to project a favorable position for those who seek to romanticize the colonial experience in Trinidad.

Confronting the colonial legacy of the characters represented in these monuments in the society is a central focal point in the contestations in Trinidad. As Bridget Brereton points out, multiple competing historical narratives exist in the country which is the colonialist, Afro-Centric, and Indo Centric narratives.³⁶ These narratives all create a standpoint from which their unique historical experiences and perspectives can be highlighted and explored, each producing a plethora of racial and ethnic narratives that often are expressed through different art forms with monuments being one such expression. Eric Lewis sees the Columbus statue in Moruga, “as serving the same purpose as a page in a history book.” Monuments are a key feature of public history. David Trotman highlights, “Usually when historians refer to public history they refer to their efforts at seeing public monuments as texts that can be read, interpreted and mined for insights into the minds of their creator and their times.”³⁷

Decoloniality is inherent in the call to remove or rename the colonial monuments that fill the physical landscapes of Trinidad. According to Ronceverte Almond, “For Modern nations forcibly melded and within this ruthless cauldron, imperial legacy offers a bitter, but the seemingly indispensable path to identity.”³⁸ This imperial legacy lives on through the street names, statues,

³⁶ Bridget Brereton, “Contesting the Past: Narratives of Trinidad & Tobago History,” *New West Indian Guide*, no.3(2007): 170.

³⁷ David Trotman, “Public History, Landmarks, and Decolonization in Trinidad.” *Journal of Caribbean History*, no.1 (2006): 39.

³⁸ Ronceverte Almond, “The University of Woodford Square and the Age of Obama,” *The 18th Century Common*, last modified November 28, 2012, https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/roncevert_almond/.

parks, and other monuments that were named in the honour of various colonial characters. Ramon Grosfoguel a proponent of Decoloniality postulates, "One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to the decolonization of the world." ³⁹ Therefore, decolonization requires a proactive attempt to rethink the legacies that are celebrated in a "post-colonial "world forging a new identity free from the imposition of coloniality.

Both the statue in Moruga and Port of Spain means various things to various groups and individuals impacting the construction of a historical narrative that would be inextricably linked to one's values and ideologies. Professor Samaroo postulates that "these monuments force us to look back in a negative sense." The negative sense is tied to the experience of colonialism as a system that served to benefit the white European elite at the expense of those classes that were subjected to the brutalities and exploitation that were inherent in such a system. While Professor Samaroo does not approve of having the title of the Square named after Governor Woodford, he notes that "you have to ensure that you record history, to avoid a possible erasure, which is why monuments are so important. We are not saying that you do not write about Columbus or Woodford, you have to." The important point is how the history of Trinidad portrays these individuals in an attempt to create an accurate historical depiction of events and not skew the historical record. Shabaka Kambon points out "It comes down to how you see colonialism." Although these colonial figures are attached to a painful past of genocide, enslavement, indentureship, oppression among other negative experiences, it is essential to ensure that the

³⁹ Ramon Grosfoguel, "The Epistemic Decolonial Turn Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms," *Journal of Cultural Studies*, no.2(2007):219.

colonial history of Trinidad is not wiped out from our history books. Dr. Ramsay makes a salient point in mentioning that “by erasing everything of something, that takes away part of the story of who you are.” However, there is sometimes a danger in how historical narratives about colonial figures can skew the true character and atrocities perpetrated by these individuals and the colonial system by extension.

Trinidad had a long experience with colonialism that has left an indelible mark on many institutions, beliefs, values, and practices of the country. However, while remembering events and characters of our past is a necessary part of the construction of not just the historical narrative but also historical analysis and research, how the historical past is remembered is important. Monuments and the power to tell a story while painting a specific historical narrative are inextricably linked. Some groups in society may not be afforded the same opportunity or access to resources to have their stories and historical experiences told, far less through a monument. This may lead to the silencing of some historical narratives, especially when those with powers construct monuments that seek to portray a historical narrative favorable to their agenda. Trouillot points to the fact that "If history is merely the story told by those who won, how did they win in the first place? And why don't all the winners tell the same story ?"⁴⁰ Trouillot ties the historical narrative back to power relations maintaining that some groups in society have the resources to make their voices and experiences more visible than other groups in society and this applies to the historical narratives of Trinidad.

⁴⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History*,6.

These monuments without proper education on this history of Trinidad can assuage the brutality inherent in colonialism. When we think about the “experience of empire”, whose objects, whose representations are curated behind these monuments? Drayton observes, “Even after democratic revolutions of the twentieth century... we continue to live in a symbolic landscape that erases from sight and sound that vast majority who lived and died on the underside of Empire.”⁴¹ Understanding what feelings these monuments evoke for different groups in Trinidad is essential in situating those historical narratives to be borne out of these feelings. Therefore, the dialogue is most important in these contestations before deciding what actions are to be taken about these monuments. Shabaka Kambon, Professor Samaroo, Leslie Ann Paul, Eric Lewis, and Gerard Besson all pointed to the need for dialogue to educate the public on the history of Trinidad before seeking to consider removing or renaming monuments. The contestations should provide an inclusive forum in which all voices in the public can be heard and allowed to learn about the colonial legacy of the country. This historical awareness will now allow them to better situate their positions on these monuments in the contestations, based on the historical evidence This will allow for collective participation in the contestations that would transcend beyond the academic and bureaucratic spheres giving the ordinary citizen a say in what should or should not be done concerning the removal of the Columbus statues and the renaming of Woodford Square.

Conclusion

⁴¹Drayton, “Rhode Must Fall?”, 2.

In Trinidad, three monuments have been at the forefront of the historical contestations in the country. The two Columbus statues and Woodford Square have been a few of the monuments to take the forefront in promoting dialogue in society about the legacy of colonialism and the subsequent historical narratives that are constructed about the colonial experience of the country. Both the characters of Columbus and Woodford are contested in Trinidad, with a plethora of viewpoints about their colonial legacies. This has led to the emergence of local contestations that has transcended beyond academic discourse about the necessity and relevance of these monuments in Trinidad's society.

Some individuals or groups call for the immediate removal of these monuments which they view as glorifying the values and experiences of colonialism. Others argue for the monuments to be left alone and not be removed as it is key to preserving the heritage of the country. They see it as a step towards historical erasure. Within the contestations, the desire to use these monuments as a point for historical dialogue among members was seen as important. These monuments are part of public history and influence the shaping of the historical narrative. However, shaping the historical narrative is more complex than the existence of these monuments but is inextricably linked to one's values, agendas, and position within the societal hierarchy. Removing or renaming these monuments are part of the ongoing process of decolonizing public spaces, where the existence of colonial monuments is seen as problematic for an independent nation seeking to form a "post-colonial" identity. These three monuments serve in a similar role as a page in a textbook and have the power to tell a story. However, whose story is told and how it is told has implications for society. Within the contestations, this study found that there is a need to incorporate voices that

are often silenced in society to have a more inclusive dialogue that would impact on the historical narratives associated with colonial figures such as Columbus and Woodford.

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Appendices



Image 1

Image of the Columbus Statue in Moruga with the creator of the statue Eric Lewis to the right and Aileen Alexis on the left. Source: Carissia Richards on January 9th, 2020.



Image 2

Image of the Columbus Statue in Port of Spain Independence Square

Source: Politics 868, September 6, 2017.



Image 3

Image of Woodford Square

Source – National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, June 15th 2017.

List of Interviewees

Professor Brinsley Samaroo

Dr. Gerard Besson

Dr. Allison Ramsay

Eric Lewis

Shabaka Kambon

Leslie Ann Paul

The Four Moruga Residents are:

Jerome Burbal

Victoria Sanker

Lesten Douglas

Marvin Wilson