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## **“Dear Carl”: thinking visually and geographically about public figures**

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## 'Dear Carl' Thinking visually and geographically about public monuments

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As I watched clips of the statue of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century slave trader Edward Colston thrown into the water in Bristol, UK, I couldn't help feeling pleased that some sort of poetic and visual justice was being served. At the same time, I knew that I worked in a glass-fronted, state of the art energy-efficient university building inaugurated as *Uni Carl Vogt* in 2015. It is named after a 19<sup>th</sup> Century scientist and politician who lived in Geneva, and who dabbled enthusiastically in racial theories.

As other statues fall around the world and debates are reopened about the physical presence in cities of past figures associated with colonialism, slavery and racism, I reflect on what these inescapable daily presences amongst us might mean. Switzerland has long thought of itself as innocent of colonial crimes since it did not directly participate in claiming and administering territories elsewhere. Scholars have productively revealed this to be a fallacious and self-serving narrative, both in the past and in the present. Instead, as monuments topple and public spaces are renamed, much-needed national discussions are slowly taking place about our own ghosts.

Before *Uni Carl Vogt* was opened in 2015, a letter was addressed to the university authorities by several members of staff requesting an alternative name. This was refused. We were told that this simply referred to its location on the *Boulevard Carl-Vogt*, and that Vogt had been a local scientific figure. The issue of naming was relaunched in June 2019 by members of the university's Feminist Strike Committee (*Grève des femmes / Grève féministe*). A large hand-painted purple banner was put up to rename the building "Uni Jeanné Hersch". This referred to the name attached to the street as part of the *100Elles\** art activist project that aimed to draw attention to the gendered dimension of street naming.

This visual narrative, imagined as a personal letter, contributes to these ongoing discussions by focussing on one historical figure who was part of the Swiss and international intellectual history of promoting racial theories. Carl (Karl) Vogt was one more active and enthusiastic participant in the epistemic violence that interpreted socio-scientific data solely to demonstrate the inferiority of some people, and the so-called natural superiority of White Europeans. I use this to reflect visually on the mundane spaces of daily life transformed into places of memory, thinking through the ever-present weight of colonial knowledge and epistemologies within our scientific disciplines, spaces and institutions.

**Key words:** comic geographies, visual geographies, public memory, heritage, race.