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

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As I watched clips of the statue of the 17th century slave trader Edward Colston be thrown into the water in Bristol, UK, I could not help feeling pleased that some sort of poetic and visual justice was being served: a statue of a man thrown into the same ocean his ships had sailed across while carrying vulnerable bodies. At the same time, I knew that I worked, in Switzerland, in a glass-fronted building inaugurated as Uni Carl Vogt in 2015. It is named after a 19th century scientist and politician who lived in Geneva and who dabbled enthusiastically in racial theories. He is conveniently remembered locally as a progressive who helped found the university as a lay institution, rather than for his shameful published views on racial inequality.

As other statues fell around the world and debates were reopened around the physical presence in cities of past figures associated with colonialism, slavery and racism, I reflected 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. Yet scholars have productively revealed this to be a fallacious and self-serving narrative (Michel, 2015; Purtschert and Fisher-Tiné, 2015; Boulila, 2019) 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 and first rector of the modern university. 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 Jeanne Hersch”. This referred to the name temporarily assigned to the boulevard 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 addressed by the author to Carl Vogt, contributes to these ongoing discussions by focussing on one historical figure who was part of the Swiss and international intellectual history of promoting theories of racial inequality. Carl (Karl) Vogt was an 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 case 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. In the second part of the comic, I reflect on what happened after the publication of some of its pages, in French, in a daily newspaper.
Figure 1.
Figure 2. © New York Public library’s digital collection (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-faa6-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99, last access: 12 October 2020).
Figure 3.

I wanted to tell you something. Especially since I read your book published in 1965.

I know you want to be taken seriously.

A real scientist who measures things.

Like Darwin, for example.

But I can see that you are scared.

You have other fears, too.

You are worried about the world changing.

People mixing.

You think it will lead to widespread sterility.

So you choose to prove scientifically that humans are divided into races.

Using scientific methods, facts, measurements.

Maybe you realise that you are a better politician than scientist?
To you, humans races are as distinct as species of great apes. To arrive ainsi à déterminer les points par lesquels ces types d'organisation se distinguent. Nous choisissons, pour établir cette comparaison, deux types qui se trouvent presque aux deux extrémités de la série des formes humaines, et sont d'une part, le Nègre, et le Germain d'autre part, et, en les traits, d'expé des deux extrémités des faits mêmes, et dans la prochaine leçon nous 

You, of course, belong to the highest category. Elle capte, de sorte que l'Europe n'est européenne que le nègre au-dessus de confirmation de cette leger à la. You were born German. Vous allemands et nègres, mais vous ont encore nécessaires pour en démontrer encore exacte, elle constitue óla y

Even in your day, these ideas made no sense. Ils étaient tout le monde. Ask Elisee Reclus, who lived and wrote about the unity of all people. Votre vue est née de la pride, not science.

To you, women - all women - are by nature closer to animals. Thanks for that too. Nous pouvons être certain que partout où nous apercevons un rapprochement vers le type animal, ce sera toujours dans le sexe féminin que cette tendance sera la plus prononcée, que par conséquent, nous eussions découvert chez la nègresse bien plus d'analogies avec les singes que chez le nègre, si nous

But, Carl, please stop.
I'm not surprised by your sexism, seeing as all your chapters begin with "Messieurs...".

Some of our colleagues are still a bit like that.

Your racism and your use of the scientific method to uphold your prejudice don’t surprise me either.

They deeply hurt and wound me.

I simply try to do better, aware of my own privileges.

But I’ve come to expect that.

Aware of the risk of focusing on my own white tears.

But, Carl, one thing does surprise me.

I try to think through how my own research is political.

Why aren’t you just in the archives?

Just another bad book. History not erased but filed away?

Why do I still see you everywhere?

Why do you still take up so much space in our city?

What does it say about us that we cannot get away from you?
Your colleague Louis Agassiz lost his square in Neuchâtel.

Our colleagues understood that you can teach history with other things than statues.

That taking away a statue also writes history.

That your statue doesn’t reflect your epoch, but the time of its construction.

In Geneva, we gave you a temporary woman neighbour, part of a feminist art project on street names.

But she won’t be staying around for long.

She’s on a sort of temporary contract.

So I come to work every morning in a building called after you.

It makes me feel sick and angry.

A old name might not be the most urgent thing worth fighting against. Other causes are more urgent.
But the news shows us that symbols matter.

Carl, couldn’t you just leave?

Go back to the dusty archives where you belong?

Just find a nice little place to live in the woods, out of the way?

I would find it helpful. The forest birds would gain a new perch.

There is a building site behind you now: Chiastons is being renovated. It’s the right time to move you, and to put in something that truly reflects values our city should embrace.

I’d be proud to show that to my students.

Carl, go away!

Best regards, Juliet
The summer passed, Carl did not write back.

The University authorities promised a debate and the creation of a commission, but other crises must have seemed more urgent.

I went back to work in my office in Uni Carl Vogt, wearing a protective mask.

I smiled inwardly when I saw the poster in the hall. Could I now interpret it as a hidden message to Carl?

But flowers covering half my face didn’t make me any less white, and still unbearably privileged.

Looking back, I think that the danger in writing to Carl in the first person was of centering my own pain, rather than those more directly affected by theories of racial inequality.

To make myself the core of the story, erasing the lived suffering of others.

Figure 8.
After the publication in French of my illustrated letter to Carl in a daily Geneva newspaper, many continued to speak up.

Inevitably some were shouting so loudly that they were being silenced, their histories stolen.

Delightfully unaware of irony.

But long-standing experts of Switzerland’s colonial pasts were also being given space and listened to. The university’s Feminist Strike committee spoke up again. And new voices, like local Black student activists, were claiming space and organising.

Diverse expertise to feed necessary discussions on imagining more inclusive academic spaces.

Doors to pass through to rethink the past.

Time for me to listen.

End.

3. https://lchocolat.ch
4. Translated from a poster on the wall in Uni Carl Vogl, part of an anti-harassment campaign: “He felt very strong, all powerful, untouchable, until a colleague asked him to stop.”
I have found these are some good places from which to start:


Pürtschert, Patricia; Falk, Francesca; Lüthi, Barbara. 2016. Switzerland and ‘colonialism without colonies’: Reflections on the status of colonial outsiders. Interventions, 18:2, 286-302

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