Black Lives Matter: Race Discourse and the Semiotics of History Reconstruction

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Abstract

The death of unarmed black male George Floyd, who was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis, May 25, 2020, has given momentum to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement whose activists rallied in different parts of the world to remove or deface monuments to historic figures associated with racism, slavery, and colonialism. These social practices of toppling statues have a discursive value and, since they are meant to communicate a message to the broader society, these actions are incorporated into a semiotic system. This study examines signs and, therefore, the system of representations involved in toppling statues performed by BLM activists and documented in photos. The research employs a critical approach to semiotics based on Roland Barthes' (1964) semiotic model of levels of signification. However, for a comprehensive analytical understanding, the study also makes use of a multidisciplinary Critical Discourse Analysis CDA approach which provides a systematic method to examine and expose power relations, inequality, dominance, and oppression in social practices. Besides its general analytical framework, the integrated CDA approach combines Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional analytical approach, which presupposes examining *text, discursive practice,* and *sociocultural practice*, with Reisigl and Wodak's (2001, 2017) Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA), which investigates ideology and racism within their socio-cultural and historic context. The analysis of the images reveals a common thematic structure and encoded messages produced in order to change the cultural and social norms of the USA national discourse generated and cultivated within a specific ideological and historical context. These social actions consist of signs that make up a coherent communicative system which provides BLM activists with instruments in the struggle over the memory of slavery, white supremacy and oppression of the past for the rights of the black minority in the present in a better society of racial equality, human rights, and liberation.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, racism, semiotics, message, communicative strategy, national narrative, critical discourse analysis.

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1. Introduction

Conflicts between racial and ethnic minorities and the dominant white group have significantly influenced the political and social history of the U.S., where the white group has succeeded in preserving its hegemony at the political and social levels. The exclusion of minorities throughout the U.S. history has taken numerous forms, e.g., the extermination of Native Americans (Thornton, 1987; Utley & Washburn, 2002; Yenne, 2006), Ku Klux Klan's white supremacy nationalism (Chalmers, 1981; Du Bois, 2017), slavery and economic exploitation of blacks (Fredrickson, 1982; Baptist, 2016), and finally has led to the emergence of the civil rights movement that accounts for the systematic oppression of the minorities by the whites (Chafe, 1980; Levy, 1992, 1998; Carson, 1995; Sugrue, 2009; Wilson, 2013).

The black civil rights movement of the 1950s resulted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which focused on equality and legal protection. Thereafter, social movements of blacks continued to claim the attention of society and media to the issues of racial injustice and discrimination (Harris, 2015).

Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who killed black teenager Trayvon Martin in February, 2012 (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). The movement started on social networks with the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. Nowadays, the slogan identifies the movement in all its online rallying and direct actions of street protestors. According to its official website, the movement's mission is "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes", while activists of the movement are working "for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise" (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Since 2013, the movement's slogan and hashtag #blacklivesmatter have come to the fore in response to cases of racist violence and police brutality, namely incidents that involved killing Black males, like, for example, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, by police (Cheung, 2020).

Black Lives Matter (BLM) has gained its global prominence with the last episode of killing unarmed black male George Floyd that took place on May 25, 2020. Floyd died from asphyxia caused by a white officer kneeling on his neck for eight minutes. The slow strangulation of Floyd, captured on video by a passerby, spurred the protests globally and added a new action (which is to be discussed further in this article) to demonstrations, viz. removal or defacing of statues that glorify historical figures known for their institutional racism and owing their fortunes and reputations to the oppression and crushing of people of color and smothering of indigenous cultures (Bracelli, 2020; Grovier, 2020). In other words, the protestors led by the BLM movement have started to target the monuments that symbolize the legacy of slavery and colonialism in a way that transforms anti-racism into a battle for memory and a counter-memorial commitment (Traverso, 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Race as a Floating Signifier

For Stuart Hall (1985), race is a pervasive concept that differentiates societies, a "floating signifier" that divides individuals into groups within the same society. Race has a semiotic indication that enables an individual to connect with others who share similar characteristics and/or put aside and judge those who are different from them. Thus, race can be understood as a social construct and belongs to the sphere of semiotics. Henceforth, Hall's definition of race does not come from biology but rather from the individual's cultural and social understanding of race (Hall, 1985, as cited in Jhally, 1997).

Drawing on Saussure's notion of the signifier (or "sound-image" (Berger, 2012, p.2)) and the signified (or "mental concept" (Chandler, 2017, p.14)), on his assumption that "language never exists

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apart from the social fact" (de Saussure, 1916, p.79) as well as Hall's idea of race as "floating signifier" (Hall 1985, 1996), the word *black* in its indication to race may be considered a "mark of difference" (Hall, 1997, p. 110) that operates only in its relevance to other notions of a semiotic system (Hall, 1985, as cited in Jhally, 1997). Within this context, race gains meaning and its discursive characteristics only when organized within language, within discourse, and within systems of meaning. Thus, it becomes observable in racist practices and ideologies (ibid.).

Given this, the contemporary anti-racism social movement and its slogan "Black Lives Matter" along with its hashtag '#blacklivesmatter' are a discursive representation for black activists. These words are meaningless without connecting them to real-life actions or events, i.e. without their context. Thus, the slogan and hashtag of the movement become the "floating signifier" of race representation and the brutality of law enforcement as well as the black community. Snow and Benford (2000) consider this floating signifier as a "collective action frame" (Snow & Benford, 2000, p. 614) that "mobilizes potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Benford & Snow, 1988, p. 198). According to Gamson (1992), these collective action frames have semiotic power as they were developed out of shared meanings maintained by the movement's members. Hence, BLM provides its activists with remarkable discursive power by aiming at reconstructing the reality whether among the community members or outside the community when seeking support and integrating into the broader society.

2.2. Semiotics as a critical approach towards ideology and culture

While semiotics in general is a study of signs, their systems, and the meanings embedded in these signs, critical semiotics is concerned not only with the description of these signs that symbolize life, but rather it conceives semiotics as a critical understanding of the processes in which cultural participants form a symbolic meaning in ways that enhance, maintain or oppose and challenge the relations of power, dominance and subjugation in a society. Hence, our study of racism treats semiotics as a critical approach that provides a description and understanding of the nature of different symbols in imagery and text used to generate messages that appeal to racist ideology, slavery, black inferiority, white supremacy of the past and racist practices of the present. These embedded messages are constructed with the help of visual imagery and verbal language. Drawing on Barthes' concept of the "rhetoric of the image" (Barthes, 1964), this study is an attempt to analyze the pictured behavior of BLM protesters and their actions against historic monuments that glorify white figures related to slavery, racism, and white supremacy (Mcilwain, 2007). The protesters' behavior is interpreted as a communicative action whose message can be decoded only in the context of deconstructing the old image of slavery and oppression and constructing a new image for the present and future based on racial equality and liberation.

In this sense, critical semiotics interprets signs and sign systems not only as means used by individuals to construct their social realities but also as a value-imbued products that have the ability to achieve certain cultural goals and promote ideological agendas that affect the way individuals and certain groups see themselves and others (Mcilwain, 2007).

One of the frameworks of this study is the notion of ideology related to the semiotic theory put forward by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1964, 1977). One of the notions discussed in (Barthes, 1977) particularly relevant for our research is the essentially ideological nature of signs (images in particular), i.e. a sign is culturally referential and conveys denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. According to Barthes, images are substantially connotative with an implied meaning that, whether "invisible" or "clear", are actively able to convey a message, though the implication of the message may not be fully and promptly discernible. The connotative messages are "read" by audiences as parallel to a particular ideological frame. This ideological reading, in turn, is stimulated by the

ideological associations that the image produces and channels viewers/reader understanding according to their cultural and ideological framework. For Barthes, even though messages of ideological associations are produced by both language and visuals, yet the image preserves its communicative primacy: "The image no longer [in historical terms] illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image" (Barthes 1977, p. 19). Therefore, the message of any linguistic text that comes with an image is derived from the image itself and the text should not be perceived as independent.

Hodge and Kress (1988), in their turn, view social semiotics as "a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own interests" (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 3). Given this, Barthes' theory of semiotics as a critical framework of ideology and culture views the production of these symbolic 'versions' as a way to convey a cultural message by adducing familiar associations familiar to recipients, i.e. viewers/readers. In the case of beheading or toppling statues to historical figures known for their participation in slavery and racist policies against the blacks, recipients decode the clear message that white racism and supremacy of the past must end and racial equality should be established in the present. In a sense, they use the past image to reproduce a new reality of the present.

2.3.   Racism, Ideology and Critical Discourse Analysis

According to Foucault (1972), discourse is related to the exercise of power and conveyance of ideology and it triggers events that help modify a reality and construct social relations. Foucault argues that discourse is dominated, carefully selected, and re/distributed in a way that combines power and intimidation to control events. Consequently, laws, institutional discourse, media discourse are used by dominant groups to keep control over social and political realities and thus maintain their prevailing ideology. To follow this logic, white groups' oppression and subjugation of black and other ethnic minorities were aimed at enhancing white supremacy.

If discourse is used to control, modify, and change events, the counter racist discourse implemented by the BLM movement should be understood as a call to create a new social reality opposite to the one the blacks have endured throughout the American history. Hence, this study aims to shed light on the discursive practices employed to deconstruct exclusionary ideologies.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), thus, provides a systematic method to examine "the reinforcement of negative cultural and conceptual stereotypes" and guides the analyst to more "explanatory investigations of how racism and inequality is embedded in language structure and use" (Lederer, 2013, p. 265). Moreover, CDA allows to examine power elements such as "oppression, repression, marginalization, and dominance" (McGregor, 2004) and thus "to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (van Dijk, 2008, p. 85). Hence, CDA is an investigatory method to help visualize how such elements of power conducted from higher social levels play a vital role in the public sentiment towards perpetuating the interests of dominant social groups (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

Another methodological approach within CDA that helps to investigate ideology and racism in their socio-cultural and historical context is the Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) put forward by Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2009, 2017). Wodak views ideology as an important means to establish and maintain unequal power relations (Wodak, 2009, p. 1), while Van Dijk (1995) argues that ideologies are socially shared, which should not be perceived in terms of 'right' and 'wrong,' but rather be understood and evaluated as either 'more' or 'less effective' in promoting the interests of a particular group. One of the aims of DHA is thus to "demystify" discourses by deciphering ideologies" (Wodak, 2009, p.1). For Fairclough and Wodak, discourse is historical and it is shaped by cultural, social, and historical context (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Hence, the theoretical approach of DHA as one of many

branches within CDA is relevant to investigate the historical cultural and ideological contexts embedded in the episodic memory of BLM's activists.

DHA approach integrates "multiple layers of socio-political and historical contexts in order to theorize dimensions of social change and identity politics" (Wodak, 2009, p.1). This approach is related to "macro-topic" and to the "the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity which involves social actors who have different points of view" (ibid.) which involves, in this case, two different social actors: the BLM activists representing the inferiority of the oppressed and dominated black race and the white groups with their supremacy, dominance and racist ideology. Such argumentations at the macro level armed with its discursive and communicative strategies aim at shifting an ideological baggage from the powerful dominant social group to the subjugated and suppressed group (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

Besides the above mentioned CDA approaches, Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical approach will provide an extra theoretical methodology applied to analyzing the events set in motion by the BLM activists. According to Fairclough (1995), every communicative event includes three dimensions: *the text* where linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, syntactic structures and lexical choices are analyzed; *discursive practice* (interpretation); discourse as a *social practice* (or socio-cultural practice) where factors such as power and ideology are promoted to explain the interactivity between socio-cultural context and production and consumption of the texts. For Fairclough (1992), text production and text interpretation rely on the context. Drawing on this, analyzing the discourse (i.e. verbal and non-verbal messages) of the BLM movement should be based on the socio-cultural context of the black community including its past and present social and political realities as well as the ideological and cultural dimensions of these realities. Thus, when a communicative event is analyzed within the context of its sociocultural practice, the analyst can detect multi-layered strata such as the instant situational context, the context of institutional practices that enfold the event and/or the social and cultural frame at its wider level (Fairclough, 1995).

3. Methodology

Since this paper deals with photoed actions of toppling or defacing of statues by BLM rally, a critical approach to semiotics based on Roland Barthes' model of semiotics is applied to analyze the messages produced by the activists' actions. This approach will examine the signs and the system of representations activated in the events of toppling historic statues acted out by BLM activists and documented in pictures. This system of meanings and representations is operated by the actors to create events that produce discourses replete with sociocultural, political as well as ideological messages within a specific context. This system contains written texts, their authors, actors, themes of the texts, and implications depicted in the texts. These factors are interrelated to produce a substance from which the readers/viewers recognize the event and its messages. The photos in the sample document activists' actions sometimes accompanied with written texts (usually slogans) as well as objects used as political and ideological symbols.

However, for a comprehensive analytical understanding, this study will also employ an integrated multidisciplinary approach that adheres to the analytical paradigm of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fowler et al., 1979; Van Dijk, 1993, 1996, 2008; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Meyer, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2009; Wodak, 2013). Fairclough (2001) states that a particular concern of Critical Discourse Analysis is "with the radical changes that are taking place in contemporary social life, with how semiosis figures within processes of change, and with shifts in the relationship between semiosis and other social elements within networks of practices" (Fairclough, 2001, p.123). Hence, the CDA approach in our research combines Three-Dimensional Analytical Approach (Fairclough, 1995) and Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2017), since "Empirically adequate critical

analysis of social problems is usually multidisciplinary (van Dijk, 2008, p. 86). Besides, CDA is not considered a specific method of analysis, but a multi- and interdisciplinary approach (Meyer, 2001): it is a methodology that encompasses various approaches from different disciplines, such as linguistics, political science, philosophy, sociology, psychology and anthropology (Van Dijk, 2003). The analysis has, therefore, a relevant implication to communication and critical cultural studies, since it uncovers the appeal to deconstruct the racist past, its ideology, and its continuance in the present implemented in systematic racist practices against the black community.

4. Findings and Discussion

The BLM's activists during their rallies in different cities of the world toppled, vandalized and/or removed statues of historical figures relevant to past racism, colonialism, genocides, and slavery. The BLM protesters targeted many statues and monuments in numerous cities in Western countries such as, most notably, Christopher Columbus in the USA, King Leopold II of Belgium in Brussels and other cities in Belgium, Edward Colston and other slave traders and owners in the UK, generals and presidents of the confederacy in the USA, to name just a few. These statues had been celebrated publicly for a long time and had become a part of the cityscapes and peoples' collective memory, yet in 2020 they were toppled, defaced, burnt, or thrown into rivers by BLM activists in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. The sample consists of photos that depict actions against statues, including those to Christopher Columbus in the U.S. cities and slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol.

4.1. Iconoclasm, Social Semiotics, and the Struggle over History

Statues to these historical figures summarize the linkage between memory and rights: they stand as mnemonic icons of the status of the Blacks as brutalized and stigmatized minorities and send the message that this social group is still oppressed while the public space is still celebrating their oppressors (Traverso, 2020). For Albadry (2020), the past still controls the present and the statues named after racists are not just monuments but rather a reminder for modern racists that those who committed atrocities against the blacks and other ethnicities of color are immortalized in bronze or ivory figures. Henceforth, celebrating these colonial and slavery-era figures in public perpetuates white supremacy and, therefore, hinders decolonization and reconciliation. Finally, it is only their removal that can deconstruct racism (Albadry, 2020). This logical reasoning leads to an explicit call for 'iconoclasm', which is "the deliberate destruction of religious icons or monuments, usually for religious or political motives" (New World Encyclopedia. org, n.d.) and is defined by Oxford Dictionary as "the action of attacking or assertively rejecting cherished beliefs and institutions or established values and practices" (Iconoclasm, n.d.).

Monuments in public landscapes, besides being a celebration of historic personalities, serve as a conceptual reinforcement of cultural and ideological dimensions. Located as 'icons' in public landscapes, these monuments serve as standing pictorial myths. For example, in New York City, there is a statue of President <u>Theodore Roosevelt</u> depicted on a horse with a Native American Indian and an African man standing on either side (see Figure 1, image A). <u>Bill de Blasio</u>, the AfroAmerican city mayor, has claimed that the statue "explicitly depicts black and indigenous people as subjugated and racially inferior" (Bracelli, 2020). Iconized publicly, historical figures of this kind mythologize the cultural and ideological context and solidify cognitive representations of oppressed people, inferior and grateful to their masters for setting them free.

Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), explains how the identity of blackness has been colonized then culturally reproduced in a new psychic construction by the French white colonizers:

The black man contented himself with thanking the white man, and the most forceful proof of the fact is the impressive number of statues erected all over France and the colonies to show white France stroking the kinky hair of this nice Negro whose chains had just been broken (Fanon, 2008 [1952], p.171).

Such mental and cultural models produced and enhanced by white dominance are a shared experience in all Western colonizing countries. For example, (Figure1, image B) shows the statue of President Abraham Lincoln known as the "Great Emancipator" which has been standing for more than a century in the city of Boston, USA. In his Emancipation Memorial, Lincoln is depicted standing over a black slave kneeling on his knee before him and the president is extending his left hand over the slave with broken chains on his wrists, which explicitly presents Lincoln as a superior who is freeing the man from slavery. The statue has an inscription on its pedestal: "A race set free and the country at peace. Lincoln rests from his labors." This culture of colonialism, enslavement, and then liberation of the blacks is still connoted in the legacy of Western societies not only in their historical narratives but also in their present cultural, social, and even mental practices towards the blacks. Not surprisingly, Malcolm X, one of the leaders of the blacks in the1950s and 1960s in the USA, explained the case of the blacks' psyche by asserting that "[t]he black man in America has been colonized mentally" (X & Farmer, 1971 [1962]).

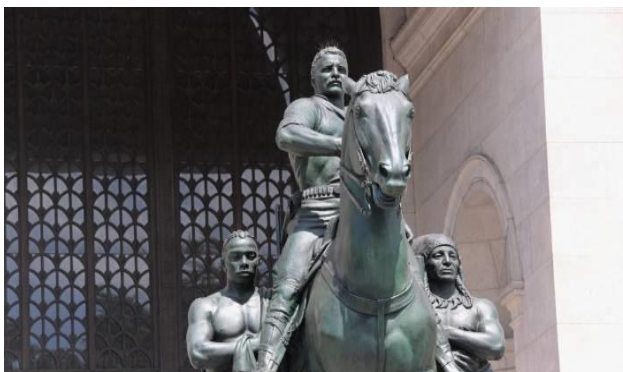Figure 1. Statues iconizing white supremacy

Image A. Statue of President Theodore Roosevelt depicting a white man with others subservient. (Photo by Todd Maisel).

Image B. Boston statue depicts President Abraham Lincoln standing before a freed black man. AP/Michael Dwyer

The arrangement of characters in the monuments, their poses, and actions serve as a permanent reminder and, thus, the perpetrator of the black's submissiveness and white superiority in the collective transgenerational memory of the oppressed communities. Therefore, driven by the killing of Floyd, BLM activists' actions are presented in what Traverso (2020) calls an "iconoclastic fury" revolutions usually retain. Such an iconoclasm expresses an unconscious tendency to deny the past and always triggers resentful reactions (ibid.). Hence, the BLM's protests and actions against such iconized figures can be understood as a struggle over memory, ideology, and history; to erase the past history of inferiority, oppression and racism, and constructing a new reality based on human rights and racial equality.

In response to the killing of George Floyd, BLM protestors in different cities across the USA targeted statues of the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (see Figure 2) who launched the European colonization of the New World under the auspices of the Spanish crown. Columbus'

discovery entailed uttermost crimes throughout the history of the Western Hemisphere, the Native American Genocide, and the transatlantic slave trade (Matthews, 2015; Tharoor, 2020).

Figure 2. Beheading and toppling the statue of Christopher Columbus

Image. A. The head of a Christopher Columbus statue pulled off amid protests against racial inequality in Boston. Photo: Brian Snyder/Reuters

Image B. Statue of Christopher Columbus, which was toppled by protesters in Richmond | AP

From the point of view of CDA, targeting the statues of the explorer aims at deconstructing exclusionary ideologies with "hidden dimensions of power, control, injustice, and inequity" that "appear to be commonsense assumptions of social reality and 'truth'" (Strauss & Feiz, 2014, p. 313). The protesters try to reformulate the ideological history based on white supremacy, genocide, and exploitation and start a new national discourse based on dehumanizing the celebration of white criminals, exploiters, and colonizers and, therefore, on the revival of racial equality. In other words, this action marks an attempt to deconstruct the discourse from the point where it began in the past and to replace it with a new one for the present.

Another conceptualization of Figure 2 with the help of the critical approach to social semiotics enables to decipher symbolic codes of the communicative event. The act of beheading of the statue (Figure 2 Image A) symbolizes brutality of slaughtering Native Americans, which is a symbolic reaction to the precedent real action, a condemnation expressed with the same, though symbolic, action meant to punish the culprit. This drive for reciprocity and revenge has come with the rising Black Power which will not accept the "White" celebration of historic enemies of the oppressed minorities and thus refuses to tolerate those enemies' figures as undisputed part of their daily lives in the urban landscapes. In other words, the dominant discourse of white ideology sees these figures as worthy of glorification, while for many other ethnic minorities the same figures represent a different version of history, namely indigenous dispossession, exploitation, and genocide (Tharoor, 2020).

Figure 2 Image B reveals the statue of Columbus pulled down to the ground as the focal point. Behind the toppled monument, there are two people with a poster saying "End White Supremacy" that explicates their interpretation of the statue's ideological content. The photo is another illustration of the struggle between the two opposite views on history expressed with signs within the urban space. Both honoring historical figures such as Columbus by erecting monuments to them and the opposite iconoclastic actions such as toppling the statues belong to the sphere of social semiotics that is in fact engaged with politics, since "[p]olitics is expressed through symbolism" (Kertzer, 1988, p.2) and symbolic forms in modern societies are more influential than rationalistic computations. Thus, BLM-

inspired anti-racist iconoclasm sweeping Western cities carries a new historic consciousness that inevitably affects the urban landscape (Traverso, 2020).

4.2.   The Semiotics of Myth De/Construction

In his book *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes states that each object, idea or text, whether it is verbal, written, or pictorial (e.g., an image or a photograph) can be a myth that conveys a message. Drawing on this, we can argue that statues and monuments are myths made for a communicative purpose, that is, they convey meaningful messages to their viewers. For Barthes, 'myth' is "a system of communication, … a message… it is a mode of signification, a form" that has "a historical foundation" and, thus, "we shall have to assign to this form historic limits, conditions of use, and reintroduce society into it" (Barthes, 1972, p. 107-108). Barthes' myth has a "double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (ibid., p.107). Henceforth, what these pictorial myths, i.e. statues, produce, is sustaining and nourishing the viewers' mental models of white supremacy and inferiority of colored minorities.

Figure 3 illustrates toppling the statue of slave trader Edward Colston and replacing it with another monument to a black woman, which reveals mythical meanings and their ideological and cultural representations. Semiotic and critical discourse analysis of the signs, meanings and signification of the sign system encoded in the statues explicates cultural and ideological components meant to be understood by the viewers.

Figure 3 includes four images (A-D) that picture pulling down the statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol and throwing it into the harbor and then replacing it with a new monument to a black woman, Jen Reid, perceived as a signifier of the BLM movement. It should be noted that Edward Colston built his wealth and reputation by enslaving tens of thousands of men, women, and children in the West coast of Africa and shipping them to Americas, mostly to the British Caribbean region with nearly a quarter of them dying before reaching the destination (Haynes, 2020; Parkes, 2020).

The analysis of the images in Figure 3 gives the representational meaning intended to a viewer. In Image A, the setting is the street where the statue of slave trader Edward Colston is located. The actors are BLM protesters, i.e. anti-racism activists, gathering around the statue. While some of the protesters are pulling down the statue off its plinth, others are watching or documenting the event on their cameras. Ropes are wrapped around the statue's neck and feet, which symbolizes enslavement: slave traders and owners used to tie up the black people's with ropes or chains while putting them on sale or forcing to work. The action in Image A is, in fact, a transfer of black slaves' terrible experience onto the person who inflicted on them this suffering centuries ago.

The focal spot of the image is the statue falling down while the crowd's reaction to its fall is of a secondary importance in the scene. This focus spot gives the interpretive meaning of the image, which is deconstruction of the racist past and its figure and refusal to celebrate this figure that is a spacial instigator of the black community's transgenerational episodic memory. It also conveys the interpretive meaning that lies in that white supremacy and its systematic racism against the blacks should be condemned and judged throughout its shameful history. The action also aims at deleting the mythical representations of the Whites as masters and superiors from the mental model cultivated in the black and other minorities.

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Figure 3. Pulling down the statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston and replacing it with

Image A. The statue of Edward Colston pulled down from during a Black Lives Matter protest rally in Bristol city Centre (AAP)

Image B. A protester with his knee on Colston's figure's neck mirroring George Floyd's death (Getty Images)

Image C. The statue of Colston is thrown into Bristol harbor during a Black Lives Matter rally (PA Wire)

Image D. Edward Colston's empty plinth has been filled with a monument to the BLM's activist Jen Reid titled 'A Surge of Power' (Getty Images)

Image B is undoubtedly of semiotic relevance and delivers effectively and unambiguously its representational and interpretational meanings. The image reveals Colston's figure lying on the ground and surrounded by the protesters. The photo focuses on Colston and a black man kneeling on the statue's neck and reproducing the brutal act by which George Floyd was killed. The symbolic signification points out racist acts of today within the historic context by reversing the scenario of Floyd's murder: the trader who participated in transporting black slaves from Africa to the USA is now strangled by their descendants, which also implies altering the whites' narrative that honors the whites' ancestors who oppressed, enslaved and exploited the blacks. The symbolic transfer of Floyd's death scene onto Colston's effigy is an interpretational indication of institutional racism and brutality towards the blacks and the continuation of this patrimony since the times of Colston and other slave traders who initiated it; it is a struggle of memory of the past for the rights of the present.

After toppling Colston's statue, the protesters dragged it along the streets of the city towards the harbor. The statue then was raised upright and dumped into the water, which was the last step

made to get rid of Colston's figure. Thus, Image C shows protesters, mostly blacks, holding the statue with ropes and throwing it off the embankment. Some parts of the statue are painted red, and the neck is wrapped with a white rope. The image immediately draws the viewer's attention to the statue sliding into the waters and the actor's collective action. The red painting on the statue symbolizes the blood of the enslaved people who perished on board, whereas the rope stands for the shackles the slaves were chained with. Throwing the effigy into the water represents remembrance and retaliation in the symbolic act of justice to those victims who were dumped overboard from Colston's ships.

The actions of BLM's activists against Colston's monument reveal the hidden cultural and ideological struggle between the white majority of the city, the embodiments of the ethics and social norms of their civilization, and the black minority who resists these norms and attempts to eradicate their embodiments from their spatial sights. Colston has been dignified for centuries in Bristol as "a kind of father of Bristol and a figurehead who was a great charitable philanthropist" (Parkes, 2020) and, thus, he was commemorated in the city center with the inscription "memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of the city" (ibid.). The black community, on the other hand, sees Colston's figure as a symbol of "full, true history of transatlantic slavery, colonialism and exploitation" (ibid.) and his legacy as a reminder that the city wealth has been built upon the blacks' enslavement.

Therefore, this semiotic discursive practice has communicative purposes: it conveys the message that the whites' history was inhuman and that, instead of venerating it, the attitude to executioners and victims should be reconsidered. Reshaping attitudes to the racists of the past should occur simultaneously with reshaping attitudes towards present-day racism and oppression, George Floyd's death being decoded as one of their manifestations.

Thus, toppling of Colton's monument is a struggle to control the national discourse delivered in the urban landscape: the narrative is imposed by powerful dominant white groups and resisted by the dominated black minority. The statue's substantial representation for the Bristolians is a signifier for the charity man who contributed much to the city but for the black community, it is a signifier of brutality and oppression with the representational meaning of their ancestor's merciless oppressor and a mental torture. This weak ethnic minority attempts to modify and change the historic context of the national discourse through a semiotic social action. The semiotic meaning of the statue is a pictorial sign of psychological and mental inferiority in the blacks' collective cognition. Hence, the blacks' physical action against this sign is a social behavior with political consequences: the sign conveys the message that the ethnic minority resists the mental model of inferiority, rejects the idea of 'slave mentality' and whites' privileges celebrated by this monument in the public space.

Image D is probably the most powerful semiotic signification in the process of the monument's removal depicted in Figure 3. It is a semiotic performance of the aforementioned *myth* in Barthes' interpretation. Drawing on Barthes *Mythologies* (1972), one may view the statue of Colston as a myth with the semiotic signification that communicates with the viewers and delivers messages within a historical context. Thus, removing this statue is an attempt to eradicate the Colston myth and its 'communicative form' (see (Barthes, 1972)) and to replace it with its opposite.

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The *Surge of Power* monument (Image D) delivers new messages that the actors want to bring into public discourse. This is a semiotic representation of the struggle over national collective memory and its historical discourse defined by Wodak (2009, p. 7) as "a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action". Erecting a statue of black activist Jen Reid "presupposes a signifying consciousness", a mythical "speech" with "a message", an "image, which is given for this particular signification" and an attempt to make it "suitable for communication" (Barthes 1972, pp. 107-108). The *Surge of Power* statue is a figure of black activist Jen Reid, a black woman whose right hand is raised with the fist clenched. The fist as a symbol of the black power movement in the late 1960s and 1970s in the USA symbolizes strength, solidarity, unity as well as resistance and defiance. Put on the plinth to replace the monument to the slave trader, *Surge of Power* denotes a new wave of the black power that is rising in the context of the ongoing breaking up from the narrative of slavery, inferiority, oppression, and exploitation. The old narrative is contested by a new myth of the black power, racial equality, and liberation, i.e. the values that should be adhered to today.

The symbolic statue of the black woman, though removed 24 hours later, aimed at evoking a different system of associations among the public, as Barthes states: "myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it" (Barthes, 1972, p.129). Such a social semiotic action is not so much about George Floyd's death but rather about further cultural and political dimensions that create a focusing event which serves as "an impetus for bringing an important issue to the public's attention and creating acceptance for the issue in the public-policy arena" (Fishman, 1999, p. 353). It is an attempt to establish a new visualization of the black identity. This process of identity construction sends a message to the public and policymakers: they have to review history and see it from the ethnic minorities' viewpoints. In other words, the white supremacy practices such as celebrating racists and looking down on people of color should be terminated. Instead, narratives and interests of the minorities should be acknowledged and given equal rights to public celebration, while the minority groups should finally become active participants in the national discourse at its social, cultural, and political levels.

Conclusion

The analysis of the sample reveals that the tragic death of George Floyd, who was strangled by a police officer, has activated salient conceptual patterns in the mental representational system maintained by individuals of the U.S. ethnic minority groups, first of all, the American black community. The accumulated resentment at racial inequality was expressed through symbolic actions of toppling monuments to historical figures associated by minorities of color with white supremacy, oppression, racism, and slavery. These social practices exposed the conceptualization that used to be relatively hidden but has resurfaced and become ever more visible. BLM activists' actions against the statues indicate a struggle to change the cognitive stance implanted by the white elite into the society. This alteration involves transforming the collective identity of the black minority, which also presupposes transforming behavior norms and social practices.

The images under consideration encode a message by means of elements that, in their turn, make up a semiotic system. The activists' communicative objective is public and unambiguous denouncing of all the vestiges of memorial norms related to slavery, colonization, and supremacy that the white majority cultivates and celebrates with the monuments to slave traders and colonialists.

The meanings of the BLM messages are embedded in the historic, political, cultural, and ideological contexts and may not be decoded without bringing in the background knowledge of the past and of today. Interestingly, events arranged by the BLM movement follow the saying 'Actions speak louder than words': BLM activists prefer non-verbal signs to verbal means. Therefore, visuals become the main channel, and details (e.g., the target of activists' action, the color of paint, the tools chosen, the gesture, etc.) acquire ultimate importance. This set of signs is used within the black minority's strategy aimed at condemning the white majority's national narrative and myths as well as at struggling for their own, alternative, view on history and its moral assessment. As a result, the messages sent by BLM's actions against significant figures of the past in order to change the interpretation of history are provoked by the events in the present and are designed to build a better future free from racism, oppression, and inequality.

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