

Black Lives Matter movement, monuments and Finland

Sofia Aittomaa, Åbo Akademi University, Finland

In many countries the year 2020 was marked by public debate about statues, monuments and other lieux de mémoires with links to slavery and/or colonialism. The decades-long controversy sprung up in connection with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The aim of this essay is to explain the public debate and recent events regarding statues and monuments with links to slavery and/or colonialism, as well as to explain why there has not been a similar debate in Finland in connection with the BLM movement. This is done by looking at international examples of statues and monuments that have been brought to the fore following the BLM movement and a comparison with the situation in Finland.

The BLM movement is an international social movement, dedicated to fighting racism and anti-Black violence, especially in the form of police brutality. The movement started in July 2013 as an online movement with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting-death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old African American killed in Florida, USA, in February 2012. The BLM movement expanded and became more widely known in 2014 after the police killings of two unarmed African American men (Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri). The movement returned to the headlines and gained international attention after the killing of George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. The violent death of George Floyd was the starting point of the George Floyd protests, a series of protests against police brutality and racial inequality, that began in Minneapolis, USA, and quickly spread internationally.

Statues, monuments and other lieux de mémoires around the world became focal points for demonstrations in connection with the George Floyd protests. On 7

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June 2020, the statue of the eighteenth-century British slave trader Edward Colston (1636–1721; unveiled in 1895) was pulled down and thrown into the harbour by protestors in Bristol, UK. On 9 June 2020, a statue of the noted slaveholder Robert Milligan (1746–1809; unveiled in 1813) in front of the Museum London Docklands was removed by local authorities to “recognise the wishes of the community”. In Belgium several statues of King Leopold II (1835–1909), targeted due to his brutal colonial rule in Belgium’s African colonies, have been destroyed and/or removed.

In the aftermath of the 2015 Charleston church shooting, in Charleston, South Carolina, many municipalities in the United States have taken steps to remove Confederate and racist statues and monuments. Most of the statues and monuments in question were erected years after the Civil War ended in 1865 and a vast majority of them were built during the Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation. Many of the controversial Confederate statues and monuments were built with the intention to further ideals of white supremacy. In 2017 the proposed removal of the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee (1807–1870; unveiled in 1924) in Charlottesville, Virginia, became international headline news when the Unite the Right Rally brought together various racist, antisemitic, white nationalist, and white supremacist groups, with the common goal to save the statue of Robert E. Lee. The rally generated several fights between protestors and counter-protestors and resulted in one death and several injuries.

The ongoing process of the removal of Confederate statues and monuments in the United States gained momentum in 2020 amid the BLM movement, catalysed by the death of George Floyd. Several statues and monuments of Confederate leaders and the explorer Christopher Columbus, as well as other controversial figures representing racist parts of American history, have been toppled and/or beheaded by protestors, who see them as symbols of racism and oppression, or removed by the authorities.

In several of the Nordic countries, statues and monuments have been debated and under attack amid the BLM movement. In Finland, however, no statues, monuments or memorials have been debated in connection with the BLM movement. A peaceful BLM protest was organized in Helsinki on 3 June 2020, but ended prematurely due to the large number of demonstrators (3000 persons) and the COVID19 restrictions regarding public gatherings.

In Finland there are almost none statues or monuments linked to the eighteenth-century when Finland was an integral part of Sweden. Russia captured the region of Finland from Sweden in 1808–1809. Between 1809 and 1917 the Grand Duchy of Finland was an autonomous part of the Russian Empire and the Russian emperor was Grand Duke of Finland. A vast majority of the statues and monuments in Finland were erected during the Finnish national awakening in the mid-

nineteenth century. In Finland, as in the rest of Europe, nationalism was the driving force behind most statues, monuments and memorials.

The first monument in Finland, The Stone of the Empress, was erected in 1835 to commemorate the first visit of the Empress Alexandra (the German-born wife of Nicholas I) to Helsinki in 1833. Next in line were the great men of the nation, according to the dominant nationalistic political view. There was a determined vision to construct a Finnish nation and identity by creating a Finnish philosophy, historiography and art. The monuments were essential as means of the nation-building. The monument to the scholar Henrik Gabriel Porthan (1739–1804), also called the father of Finnish history, was unveiled in Turku in 1864; the statue of the poet Frans Mikael Franzén (1772–1847) was unveiled in Oulu in 1881; the monument to the priest and poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877), also called the national poet of Finland, was unveiled in Helsinki in 1885. To my knowledge, there are no statues, monuments and other lieux de mémoires with links to slavery and/or colonialism in Finland. However, Finland is no outsider to the transatlantic slave trade and slavery; in recent years several researchers have pointed out Finland’s “colonial complicity” with European colonialism.¹ Even though the ongoing discussion has not yet involved statues, monuments and other lieux de mémoires we cannot rule out that some connections will be made in the future.

In the surge of the BLM movement there have been initiatives in both Tampere and Helsinki to commemorate Rosa Clay (later Lemberg; 1875–1959), who received Finnish citizenship in 1899 and thus became the first Finnish citizen of African descent. She was born in Omaruru in Southwest Africa and ended up in Finland as a foster child of Finnish missionaries. Her foster parents toured on spiritual occasions and presented Clay as a circus animal. Clay graduated as a teacher in 1898 and worked in Kuopio and in Tampere before emigrating to the United States in 1904. In 2020 the Tampere City Council decided to honour Clay by naming a square after her (Rosa Emilia Clay Square) and at the time of writing the Helsinki City Council is discussing a possible lieu de mémoire to commemorate her.² Even though there has not been any public debate regarding statues and monuments in Finland, the BLM movement has perhaps opened the discussion of the whiteness of the cultural heritage in Finland.

¹ <https://raster.fi/2020/03/03/racism-and-colonial-legacies-in-multicultural-nordic-societies/> 8.4.2021; *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 4/2020.

² <https://www.migranttales.net/rosa-emilia-clay-finally-gets-recognition-when-tampere-names-a-square-after-her/> 8.4.2021; https://www.hel.fi/helsinki/fi/kaupunki-ja-hallinto/paatosenteko/kaupunginvaltuusto/esityslistat/asiakirja?year=2021&ls=11&doc=Kecha_2021-02-17_Kvsto_3_Pk 8.4.2021.