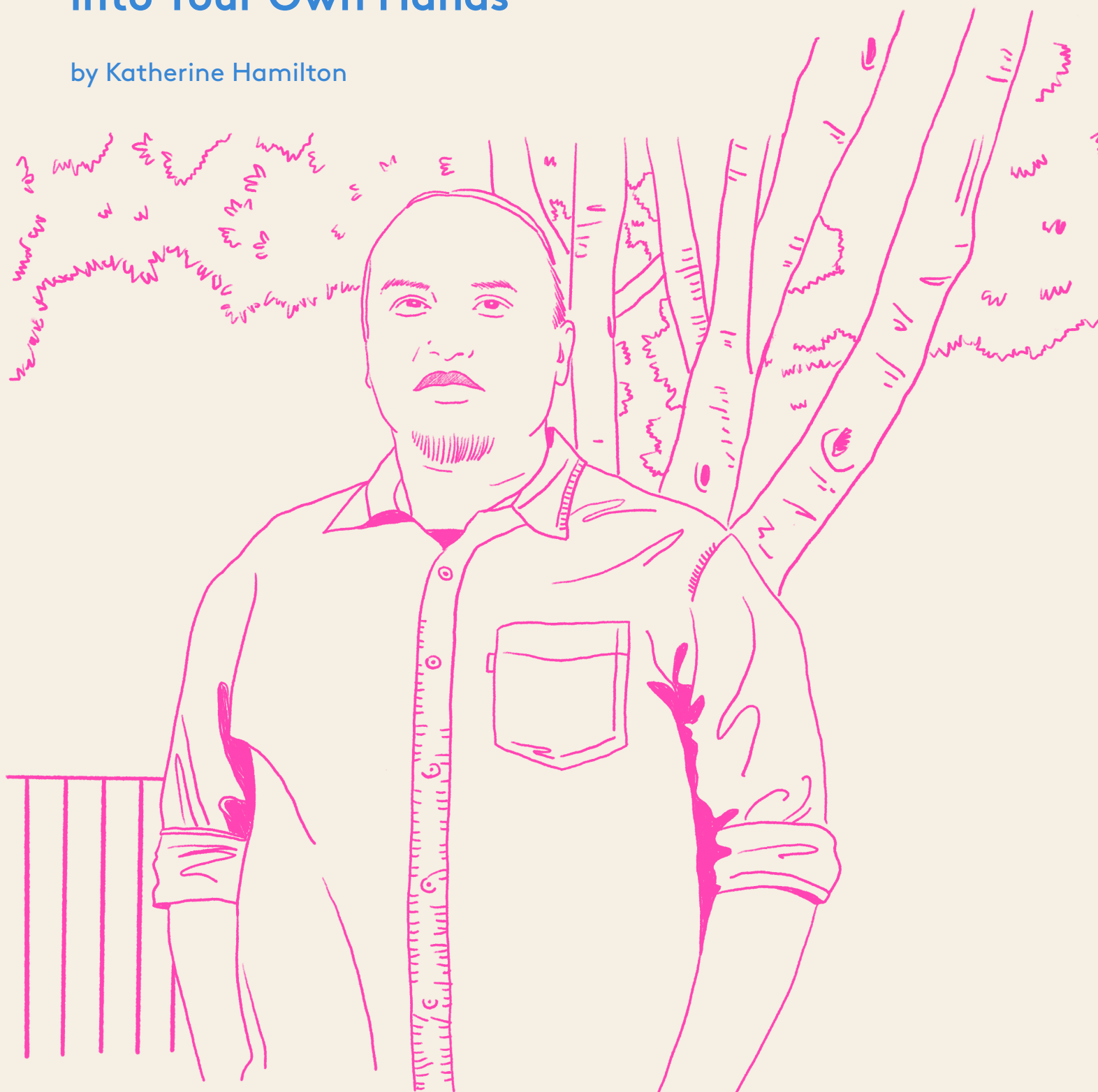


What is a Monument to Anti-Monuments? *Joel Garcia* on Taking Measures into Your Own Hands

by Katherine Hamilton



DIY STATUE REMOVAL GUIDE

math projects
(operating out of Tongva land)



OPTION A

OPTION B

CUT HERE

OPTION C

DRILL HERE

UNMONUMENTAL

Execution Time: Under 2 minutes
Crew Size: 20 - 30
Gear: (2) Recovery Tow Straps 5 in x 30 ft (37,2158) Revel 2
Approx. \$40 each
(2-3) 1/2 in. x 100 ft. Polypropylene Diamond Br
Approx. \$20 each
Cost: Under \$150

STEPS

1. Loosen straps and rope at the highest point such as the neck.
2. Stand about 20-30 feet away to create pressure at the weakest point between the sculpture and its base (usually cement).
3. Pull in unison such as together yelling "1, 2, 3, pull!"

Apply pressure at this point

Screenshot from Joel Garcia's lecture of a zine on how to remove a public statue


Over the past few years, calls to remove statues of racist figures have ricocheted around the Western world. With those demands came more pressure to rename schools, parks, highways, and other places that bear the names of historical figures who embodied the racist colonial policy that shaped dire economic, social, and political circumstances in the United States and other European-colonized countries. During summer 2020, when protests against anti-Black policing transpired worldwide, statues of slave owners and traders, racist politicians, and confederate heroes were toppled left and right in the [United States and the United Kingdom](#). One toppling that continues to stand out in my mind is Bristol protesters [throwing slave trader Edward Colston](#) into the harbor, forcing him to meet a fate similar to those he threw overboard or jumped off slave ships: unseen at the bottom of a body of water.

Activist and artist Joel Garcia of the Huichol nation spoke to CCA students via Zoom on November 18th to discuss statue toppling in L.A. and other anti-colonial actions artists can lead in their communities. Garcia contextualized his decision to topple statues in L.A. by telling us that there is no official way to make a complaint to remove a statue. When he reached out to the L.A. county to ask how much it would cost to remove the statue of Christopher Columbus from Grand Park, where the first Indigenous Peoples days would be celebrated in 2017, the city replied it would cost \$250,000. Rather than wait for the county to find the funds, Garcia and his team looked to guerilla action as the quickest way to make governing bodies recognize the peoples' demands. In reality, the cost to remove the statue was \$2,500, the price to rent and operate a crane. Yet, for guerilla actions to make policy or governmental changes, the organizers need to know the city's budgets, the cost of such statues, and if the cost of replacing something will be far more than just cleaning it up.

It's also essential for the guerilla action groups to control the narrative of their actions. When Garcia planned to remove the Junipero Serra statue in L.A., his group reached out to local media to cover the event and interview the organizers. They also had their own videographers to capture moments that could go viral. For Garcia, the internet is another place to build solidarity behind a movement. Going viral on the internet is a way to build more support for anti-colonial direct action on a scale that could not be achieved by on-the-ground outreach.

However, statue toppling itself is not a new or inherently radical act: as Garcia noted in his lecture, destroying an image can be a political act, both revolutionary and oppressive. For example, during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iraqi civilians top-

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pled the Sidham Hussein statue in Firdos Square in Baghdad. In the moment, this action represented the freedom of Iraqis and a “triumph” for the United States. However, a retrospective analysis from *The New Yorker* found the media overstated the civilians’ jubilation.¹ With hindsight, one might not see the U.S.’s imperial invasion of Iraq as a revolutionary triumph.

All this talk of toppling monuments brought to mind Marxist writer Bruno Latour’s term “iconoclash,” something distinct from iconoclasm. He writes, “Iconoclasm is when there is a clear intent for the destruction or the demise of an image. Iconoclash is when there is an uncertainty about what is committed when an image—from science, religion or art—is being smashed.”² Originating in the 18th century (though the act of destroying images pre-dated his naming by thousands of years), iconoclasm is the social belief in destroying images, icons, or monuments for political reasons to further the social or political cause. Though Garcia and other activists want to promote a political cause, namely decolonization, they do not want to erase these icons’ histories or destroy their images in favor of another kind of colonization. Instead, they aim to hold colonial powers accountable for their actions. Thus, the statues’ removals (rather than total destruction) are more akin to “iconoclash” as these statues’ fates are unclear, even for the activists taking them down.

1. [Max Fisher. “The Truth About Iconic Saddam statue Toppling.” *The Atlantic*. 2011](#)

2. *Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel. Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art. ZKM, 2002.*



Photograph of protestors kneeling on a statue of Edward Colton in Bristol

Thinking back to Colston's statue and the treatment of statues as bodies, even when [they don't look like bodies](#), writer Verity Platt points to the moment "when the fellers of Colston kneeled on his neck in an echo of the death of George Floyd. In an act of symbolic revenge, a figure who profited from the oppression of Black bodies (and whose monument was itself a perpetuation of this oppression) was subjected to the same violence perpetrated by his 21st-century successors."³ Notably, Colston's body did not rot at the bottom of the ocean like those who jumped from his ships. Instead, his bronze cast was brought to the [M Shed museum](#) in Bristol, where his triumph and demise would be preserved indefinitely. The example of the Colston statue demonstrates how museums typically preserve colonizers' histories while erasing the subjects of colonial conquer.

Museums and their collections are also attached to the art market and a barrier to confronting a nation's racist foundations. Typically, something ends up in a museum because it is "valuable." Under a capitalist system, such valuation is often determined by financial value. One of the arguments against removing statues is that it's censoring "art" and that art, protected by freedom of expression, should exist even when it is offensive. When Garcia had initially reached out to the L.A. county about removing Christopher Columbus, they replied that the piece was gifted to the public art department and is thus a work of art. In 2017, "deaccession" was still a dirty word and not something institutions were proud of doing.

3. [Verity Platt. "Why People Are Toppling Monuments to Racism." Scientific American. July 3 2020.](#)

Since the city wouldn't remove the statue, Garcia hired art appraisers to do the county's job and speak their capitalist language. The appraisers estimated these statues had a value of \$0. Because this statue was valued below \$400, toppling the Serra statue was not vandalism, and Garcia's group never got arrested. Furthermore, the city installed these monuments quite poorly, so they're easy to remove. And so, a question for the public skeptical of statue removal might be: why continue to support a government that uses tax dollars to protect something with a monetary value of \$0? If financial metrics are not sufficient to evaluate these objects' value, what historical or artistic value do they bring to the public?

However, as actions of iconoclasm, the answers to the questions above are met with more questions: if the statues are removed, what takes their place? What comes next? Where do these monuments to racism go after the public topples them? Indeed, even though we are in total agreement that these monuments *must* go, I still wonder... go where?⁴ The M Shed was an unsatisfactory end for the Edward Colston statue, but where do we put monuments to racism in continuing to hold the state accountable for the pain it has caused parts of its population? And what should go in these statues' place? As Garcia noted, colonization was not one monument—it is continuous monuments being erected in colonization's name; waves of colonial action and oppression day after day. Dismantling years of colonization will take years and years of consistent decolonial actions.



Screenshot from Joel Garcia's lecture of the statue's removal

4. Maggie Nelson. *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*. 2020. 51-53.

Thinking about the moments after a statue falls, I think of Columbian-born artist Iván Argote, who now resides in Paris (a city almost notorious for its protests). In his recent exhibition [A Place For Us](#) at the Perrotin gallery, the artist chops colonial statues in half, growing grass and flowers out of their once glorified heads and torsos.

Toppling one monument will not dismantle colonialism. Argote's work seems to point to these monuments' physical and historical endurance, even when they have been dismantled and dismembered. Changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples day, [literally replacing colonizers with Indigenous peoples](#), is a meaningful act, but it doesn't dismantle colonial governments. Something has to fill the emptiness left by an anti-monumental actions, or colonialism will occupy it.

What happens at the moment(s) after an anti-monumental act? What kinds of anti-monuments can take their place? Does a revenge fantasy on a statue create material change for people oppressed and dispossessed by these figures? Maybe I'm asking the wrong questions of these actions, but, like Garcia, I agree that the "what's next" is as important, if not more, than the action itself. To control the narrative of deolonial actions, we also need to propose solutions. Garcia argued that reclaiming the places where the statues fell by centering Indigenous knowledge of place and marking time is one solution. Building community to fill the space after the monuments fall is another.



**Installation View of Iván Argote:
A Place For Us at Perrotin New York, 2021.
Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli.
Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.**



**Screenshot from Joel Garcia's lecture of
statue removal in L.A.**

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