

'Oxford University has no regard for black life'

Sizwe Mpfu-Walsh argues that Oxford has shown itself to have no regard for black life in its decision not to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes.



Since its inception, Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) has bent over backwards to accommodate Oxford's ignorance. But the time has come to speak plainly. Oxford's response to our campaign has been nothing short of shameful. Oriel College's backtrack on a "listening campaign" and announcing in early 2016 that it would not remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from its prominent position overlooking High Street is only one example. In truth, the predominant response to RMF has been a knee-jerk scramble to defend nostalgic mythology.

Oxford University has no regard for black life. By that, I don't mean it's filled with people who make public racist remarks or openly profess the inferiority of blackness (though they certainly exist). Instead, I mean that the university displays a diabolical indifference to the past and present suffering of black people. This veiled racism is buried so deep that it masquerades as tolerance while retaining the effect of old-style oppression.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

That's the crux of this debate, not the ridiculous appeals to "free speech" or "historical preservation" that have characterised opposition to RMF thus far. Statues don't enjoy free speech, and there is no inalienable right to immortalisation. RMF has never hampered anyone's ability to disagree with us. On the contrary, we inaugurated the debate, before big money silenced it at the first indication we were winning. Therefore, the whole free speech objection is a red herring, and often a cloak for prejudice. The fact that many so-called "free speech advocates" have not criticised [Oriël's decision to trade money for debate](#) also speaks volumes.

This is not to say that free speech does not enter into the debate. But, where it does, the burdens of the principle fall on the side of RMF, not its detractors. Students should be allowed to make calls for the removal of statues without being compared to Islamic State. They should also be allowed to protest vociferously on issues that affect their everyday lives. And they should not be threatened with expulsion just for raising views contrary to establishment orthodoxy. Members of RMF have also continually been on the receiving end of various acts of cyber hate speech. If free speech has been limited, it has been limited against RMF.

Second, how can RMF be accused of "erasing history" when Oxford itself refuses to mark the complexity of its own past? Our actions have been confused with *damnatio memoriae* when in fact we want Rhodes to be remembered. The question, clearly, is not whether Rhodes is remembered, but how. Our opponents, on the other hand, cannot explain why we should preserve a single and misleading narrative at all costs. We also should not draw a false dichotomy between historical preservation and ethical awareness: putting the statue in a museum achieves both.

When probed about what they mean by "history", many of our critics actually reveal a deep ignorance of Africa, and Rhodes. What they really express is a desire to preserve infantile fables that reinforce their identities. History is not as simple or static as colonial apologists want it to be: removing the statue from its current position would itself mark the moment at which Oxford entered a more honest present. We should not be so overawed by history that we are afraid to make it. Beyond this, we are accused of wanting "safe spaces", when Oxford remains a safe space for the old boys club that runs it. Here's the ugly truth: Oxford is a safer space for a statue of Cecil Rhodes than it is for black students. The reduction of black vulnerability and isolation to a plea for "comfort" only further reveals the scale of the problem.

The facts are clear: over the last five years, Oxford only accepted between 19 and 30 black British students as undergraduates each year. That's half of what elite private schools Eton and Harrow sent. In 2010, for example, 21 Oxford colleges did not accept a single black undergraduate. There are only a handful of black professors, only one of them senior. How can anyone not be struck by how outrageous that is in 2016? Why have there not been protests in the streets for decades? Because Oxford is dull to black life. Unable to cope with our sustained critique, Oxford's senior leaders continue to deny that a problem exists, or tell anyone who raises the issue to "[go elsewhere](#)". By calling for the removal of the Rhodes statue, RMF wants to show just how far Oxford will go to defend the indefensible. Just how unwilling it will be to look itself in the mirror. Just

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.

<https://freespeechdebate.com>

what reflexes still dominate its systems of power. Whatever happens with the statue, we have already succeeded.

By ending its “six month listening campaign” before it began, Oriel College may think it has won the battle, but it is destined to lose the war. Whether now, or in generations to come, Rhodes will fall. One day, people will look back on those who defended Oxford’s racist symbols as they view the dons who argued that women should not be allowed into the university. They will be laughed at like those who, in the 17th century, campaigned against the teaching of science at Oxford. We are not campaigning to be understood by the relics of racism that still live today. We are marking, for history to record, the moment when black students exposed Oxford’s persistent racism, and the imperial blind spot that enables it. And we are only getting started.

Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh is a DPhil student in International Relations and an organising member of Rhodes Must Fall Oxford.

Published on: February 25, 2016