

# Readers respond to *Nature's* Editorial on historical monuments

08 September 2017

**Subject terms:** Ethics History Politics Society

This week, *Nature* published an Editorial on historical injustice in science and how it is marked and remembered. Many readers criticized its wording, position and tone. *Nature* has issued an apology and correction. Here we publish a selection of the responses we received on the issue of statues and memorialization. All are edited and published with permission. *Nature's* editors have commissioned further contributions, and welcome further feedback. *Nature's* Editorials, like those of many publications, are intended to present perspectives that the editorial staff of *Nature* judge to merit discussion. They do not necessarily reflect the views of any individual member of staff. They are ultimately the responsibility of the Editor-in-Chief.

## **Thomas Nelson**

*University of Montana*

The Editorial is extraordinarily insensitive to the many groups that have been on the receiving end of this history, either directly or indirectly, currently or in the past. Statues are not only meant to be remembrances. Rather, they honour their subjects. By leaving many of these statues in place, we continue to 'whitewash' our history. Those who fought in the name of white supremacy, fought so they could buy and sell people like cattle, do not deserve a place of reverence. This deserves no counterpoint, and an uncredited Editorial in a respected scientific journal is no place to espouse these ideas.

## **Kim M. Cobb**

*Georgia Institute of Technology*

I appreciate the clarification and the sincere apology, but I hope you take the suggestion of many of your critics and launch a series on race and racism in STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] in this fraught era.

I also hope that you institute a set of policies so that unsigned racially charged pieces, such as the 'whitewashing' piece, go through a more thorough review process (ideally by scientists of colour) prior to publication.

Real damage was done today, to science and to marginalized minority scientists.

It's critically important not to erase the misstep, but rather to learn from it and enact policies to prevent its repeat.

**Sonya Legg**

*Princeton University, New Jersey*

As a scientist who recently published in *Nature*, and who frequently serves as a reviewer, I am writing to voice my objections. The purpose of statues is not to provide us with a history lesson, it is to *honour* individuals. Some people represented by statues are not worthy of honour. Their achievements and failings will still be recorded for history through written documentation. Removing statues will therefore have no impact on our understanding of the historical failings of those individuals, but will ensure that they are no longer honoured. Surely, you, as an editor of a journal, should be advocating for the detail and nuance of the written word over the bland whitewash of a statue as a means for education?

That this is an Editorial means it represents the collective values of the *Nature* journal. Your lack of diversity in your editorial staff is clearly evident. Until *Nature* issues a retraction of this Editorial and takes steps to increase the people of colour on its editorial staff, I will not submit any manuscripts for publication, nor review any manuscripts, from any of the *Nature* journals.

**Michael M. Hoffman**

*University of Toronto, Canada*

In almost 20 years of reading *Nature*, I have never been so disappointed by an editorial decision.

This Editorial relies on a conceit that statues are an important historical record. This is false. History is recorded in archives, museums, books and serials. Despite a dearth of statues commemorating Nazis in Germany, no one has forgotten what they did. It's recorded quite well in paper and ink, if not stone and bronze.

The primary function of a statue is not to record history, but to commemorate and honour the subject. The decision to place a statue in a public place is a political one. And *Nature* has made its own political

statement by defending the continued commemoration of people whose moral choices were not merely 'questionable', as the Editorial states, but indisputably abhorrent.

**Haley Vecchiarelli**

*University of Calgary, Canada*

This Editorial needs to be retracted, and an explanation of why this Editorial perpetuates racist white supremacy, that is omnipresent in our society, including and especially in science, needs to be published in its place.

The Editorial says that these reminders are painful — should we not remove that which causes pain and suffering, especially to the marginalized members of our community? We have examples of how this has occurred in the past, such as in Nazi Germany, where there are no statues and results obtained from such studies are considered taboo. We do not need statues to remind us that those experiments were horrible. We need education, reparations to the victims and constant vigilance to keep it from continuing to occur.

**Katherine E. Gould**

*Pasadena City College, California*

This Editorial is entirely backward in its logic and thinking, and although I'm sure you did not intend for it to be a racist screed, that is what you produced.

It is not the removal of statues that whitewashes history, but the placing of those statues. Statues of scientists whose research was cruel, unethical and inhumane say that the accomplishments of a white man are more important than his methods or the countless people trampled by him. It says to the unwilling subjects of that research that their experiences — crucial to his accomplishment — are unimportant and should be washed away. The white man, for example J. Marion Sims, is so important that his heinous treatment of enslaved black women is irrelevant. White has been washed over black.

Removing such statues is not whitewashing — it is removing past whitewashing. Scientists have a responsibility to understand and assert that methods of the past can no longer be considered tolerable (if they ever were). Although we can and should remember the discovery, we also have a responsibility to stop lauding people whose methods were reprehensible.

Sims's discoveries will not be forgotten. Sims himself will remain an important lesson in scientific ethics. We should reserve statuary for people who deserve our respect not just for their discoveries but also for their methods.

I ask that you retract this hateful, ignorant and poorly conceived Editorial. I also urge you to seek out scientists from minority communities to weigh in on issues involving race and society. Again, I doubt that you intended to sound racist, but when you assert that the experience of black people is too insignificant to be given any consideration, you *are* being racist.

Finally, I urge you to start a campaign to fund the removal of statues of Sims and his ilk to be replaced with statues of the research subjects whose sacrifices led to important scientific discoveries, and to black and Hispanic scientists (women and men), whose work is overlooked.

**Celeste Melamed**

*Colorado School of Mines*

As a woman and a scientist, I want to urge you to retract your Editorial. Leaving perpetrators of so-called ‘mistakes’ — in other words, racist violence — on literal pedestals is not necessary to ‘acknowledge’ them. Instead, it celebrates them, and thus celebrates white supremacy. By publishing this Editorial, you are saying to your scientist readership that it is fine to perform unethical science as long as you get results. Better yet, you are telling a subset of your scientist readership that they remain unwelcome in science because of their race.

There is a wide variety of alternative options to consider instead of this offensive Editorial. How about replacing it with a column about global efforts to dismantle institutional racism in science? What about a series regarding the history of violence and white supremacy in STEM? Please reconsider your actions and retract this — you are placing yourself on the wrong side of history, and actively harming scientists of colour in your community.

*Nature* [doi:10.1038/nature.2017.22584](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature.2017.22584)

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