The Fourth Plinth: creating and contesting national identity in Trafalgar Square, 2005–2010

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Abstract
Since 1999 the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square has seen the installation of a range of contemporary artworks that have prompted a national discussion about national identity, tolerance, diversity and history in the context of Trafalgar Square. This article explores aspects of the narrative around the Fourth Plinth scheme since 2005 to discuss the relationship between different versions of national identity and public place, and how the use of historical narratives can shore up contemporary versions of national identity.

Keywords
Fourth Plinth, history, lieux de mémoire, national identity, place, Trafalgar Square

Introduction
Urban public places have long played an important role in the life of nations. As stages for rituals, locations of national monuments, or sites of protest or resistance, they have helped to construct, reproduce or transform narratives of national identity. In part, this has occurred through the materialization of national history through statues of heroic figures or monuments to important national moments. In some cases, these symbolic structures become so familiar that they can almost disappear into the urban background as the meanings ascribed to them by previous generations dissipate.1

Former London Mayor Ken Livingstone has suggested this is the case for the statues in Trafalgar Square. In 2000, before a major refurbishment of the space, he admitted that ‘I think that the people on the plinths in the main square in our capital city should be identifiable to the generality of the population. I have not a clue who two of the generals there are or what they did.’2 A process of lost meaning, framed as ‘forgetting’, has occurred as the role of the imperial figures in the square, and what their activities might have represented about the nation and the empire, fades
from public memory: as Darwent says, ‘for all its marble and bronze, Trafalgar Square is an homage to forgetting’.3

However, even as knowledge of specific names and deeds has faded, the representations of the national past in Trafalgar Square continue to condition the space around them. The evidence below suggests that even ‘forgetting’, to the extent that it happens, does not lessen the relevance of the Square for revealing and generating narratives of national identity. Even if most visitors to the Square haven’t a clue as to who its statues represent, those representations still play an important role in contributing to narratives of contemporary national identity. In part this is because more modern interventions into the space cannot avoid a relationship with the existing monuments in the Square, as well as the Square itself. While this may seem an obvious point, it is the reason why contemporary artworks in Trafalgar Square continue to generate narratives of national identity, even when they also comment on other aspects of society, or even on the value of art itself.

Although Trafalgar Square has consistently been the setting for national events, its role in contributing to discursive narratives of Britishness has only been examined by a few scholars.4 This article looks at one small part of the contemporary history of the Square, the scheme of public artworks installed on the Fourth Plinth since 1999. Below, I will discuss four of the artworks that were installed on Trafalgar Square’s Fourth Plinth from 2005 to 2010, based on research focusing on media commentary across the major British dailies, both broadsheets and tabloids. In doing so, I will explore how these interventions into the space of the Square both commented on British national identity and how they were conditioned by the site itself.

National identity, history and place

This analysis is framed by an understanding of national identity as a discursive process encompassing many different modes of belonging. Anderson’s seminal notion of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ provides a good starting point. Anderson explored some of the specific ways in which national ‘imagining’ is generated and promulgated, identifying ‘print-capitalism’ and the categorizing power of the ‘map, census and museum’ as important aspects of the creation of unitary national identities. In doing so, his main focus rested on the ‘top-down’ processes that built a coherent national narrative out of a set of colonial bureaucratic and economic structures. However, his focus on how communities are imagined shows how national identity can bridge the gap between long-term historical processes on the one hand, and their tangible and immediate personal effects on the other. The structural aspects of national identity, focusing on national territory, myths and memories, legal rights and duties, the economy and ‘a common mass public culture’, has been linked to pre-modern ethnic cultural forms.6 In this conceptualization, the nation has ‘objective characteristics constitutive of a national identity independent of individual consciousness’.7

These ways of understanding national identity appear to help explain the ongoing significance of Trafalgar Square. Its name, its Victorian statuary, its layout – with fountains designed in part to help control the numbers of people who could gather there – and its position in a larger central London landscape of imperial power8 all point to a monolithic and powerful version of the British nation (and Empire). Hobsbawm and Ranger’s discussion of the ‘invention of tradition’ highlights a similar process, discussing how powerful groups work through national social and political structures to serve their own interests by ‘developing ideas, values and symbols that unified people across lines of language and ethnicity’.10 They identify the important role of the numerous public monuments, including war memorials, towering statues and public buildings that reflect narratives of national power.
These definitions bring together different aspects of the nation which are all on display in Trafalgar Square: the importance of a process of ‘imagining’, the role of mass cultures, and some of the mechanisms by which national narratives are created and reproduced. However, they all concentrate on structure and emphasize an ‘objective’ cultural form of national identity, thus implying that such identities are fixed and agreed by all members of the political community. As Graham Day and Andrew Thompson put it, these theories treat ‘the nation as a sociological reality … a real and unified group’, thus side-stepping the possibility of fluidity, contest or multiplicity. Özkırımlı’s reaction to the notion of the ‘invention of tradition’ is to acknowledge the constructed nature of specific cultural attributes, or traditions, of nations, while pointing out that nationalism is constructed in many different ways. Here he departs from Hobsbawm, in arguing that while nations hold real and deeply felt meaning for people, they are dynamic, changing and self-reinventing, based on ‘culture … that is not a passive inheritance but an active process of creating meaning, not given but constantly defined and reconstituted’. Bhabha similarly suggests that flexible and multiple narratives comprise national identity, and claims that membership of the nation ‘must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new “people” in relation to the body politic [and] generating other sites of meaning’.

Other work has addressed the question of the extent to which national identities can be multiple or flexible by focusing on issues of cultural reproduction, discourse and narrative, including non-elite groups’ relationship with the nation. While this scholarship still links the production of national symbolism to the processes of modernity (such as industrialization), its main concern is how and by whom this symbolism is constructed and reproduced. These accounts also recognize the ‘fluid and dynamic nature’ of national identity, and stress the contests and tensions that define it. Calhoun, for example, turns to Foucault’s notion of a ‘discursive formation’ to help capture nationalism’s complexity and dynamism, defining nationalism as: ‘a way of speaking that shapes our consciousness, but also is problematic enough that it keeps generating more issues and questions, keeps propelling us into further talk, keeps producing debates over how to think about it’.

Implicit in this formulation of national identity is the quotidian nature of the process by which it is reproduced. Billig likens this to a flag hanging limply on a pole outside a government building, a symbol of the nation, but one that passes almost unnoticed in everyday life. Edensor’s stance to the quotidian is more active, arguing, like Özkırımlı and Bhabha, that popular conceptualizations of the nation are significant in reproducing it:

[National culture] is constantly in a process of becoming, of emerging out of the dynamism of popular culture and everyday life whereby people make and remake connections between the local and the national, between the national and the global, between the everyday and the extraordinary.

Cohen’s notion of ‘personal nationalism’ draws these points together, arguing that any study of national identity must take into account both the intentions of the producers of national symbolism and ritual, as well as how their audiences read these rituals. Thompson similarly argues that the actions of individuals must be considered in studies of national identity, and that ‘nations and national identity are used by people to position themselves in relation to others’. This framework, then, is built on the relationship between the institutional and official on the one hand, and the vernacular, personal and quotidian on the other. National identity relies on both perspectives to reproduce itself, in a process that includes contingent histories and memories.

Scholarship on the contingent quality of the sites in which these processes occur, especially in terms of historical imaginings, resonates with ways of thinking about national identity as discursive, progressive and multiple. Here, Nora’s notion of lieux de mémoire is useful: sites of national
memory where the past is explicitly, if selectively, evoked and represented. Hoelscher and Alderman describe such sites as ‘spaces explicitly designed to impart certain elements of the past – and, by definition, to forget others’. Thus conceptualized, lieux de mémoire foreground only some aspects of the past, demonstrating a tension between official history, or a ‘representation of the past’, and vernacular or popular memory, ‘a perpetually acting phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present’. Nora’s identification of these two aspects of place speaks to the power of institutions to shape national narratives, as well as the resistance, adherence or even indifference to these narratives by the public. Lowenthal similarly identifies the uncertain relationship between the nation and its past, recognizing that national narratives can both include and exclude, and that nations ‘must draw sustenance from their past, yet to be fully themselves must also put it away from them’; while Halbwachs stresses the fluidity of history, describing it as a process of remembering that reconstructs and reproduces the past in light of the aims of the present. Through a process of collective memory and memorialization, nationalism collapses time and space – and past and present – into a single narrative located in a single place.

The arguably ambivalent relationship between the past and present, the official and popular, and the perspectives of creators of place and its users, helps make place a useful category of analysis for exploring narratives of national identity. This is especially true for those sites rich with symbolism of the national past, yet still subject to quotidian contemporary use. The large body of scholarship on the relationship among place, monuments and artworks, memory, history and national identity explore the potential of such sites thoroughly. These approaches coalesce around a range of issues that overlap somewhat with the literature on national identity discussed above.

For example, the flexibility (or otherwise) of national narratives, and their capacity to incorporate a range of perspectives, has been a consistent focus of geographical research that examines the negotiation and politics of the form, location and symbolism of public artworks. Johnson’s recent analysis of the politics and social impact of a monument to bomb victims in Omagh, Northern Ireland, for example, used the development of a memorial artwork to chart the process by which a community developed a common narrative about the bombings, including the treatment of perspectives that did not fit within it. Given the nationalist nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland, this process was necessarily bound up in questions of national identity, as well as those surrounding community, remembrance and the peace process.

On a larger scale, Till’s research on Berlin and Kincaid’s on Dublin tackles city-wide processes of remembering and forgetting the past through the urban built environment. Kincaid explores how sites with national symbolic content become important to contests over national identity, using examples drawn from Dublin’s built environment:

Any attempt to alter the built environment will also change the way the past and the future are perceived. Geography is history. The physical landscape bears the traces of the past, and all alterations to the built environment are a direct means of rethinking and determining which memories survive and which are thwarted or suppressed.

So what is the role of a place such as Trafalgar Square in this framework? I suggest that Trafalgar Square can provide examples of the discursive process of national identity creation and reproduction outlined above. The Square’s symbolic role as a site of national history, its ongoing use for both the quotidian and the spectacular, as well as its location at the centre of a larger ‘landscape of power’ that takes in government, finance and cultural institutions, make it a unique subject for studying the means by which national identity is discussed, imagined and reproduced, and how different histories are either commemorated or forgotten.
Creating and contesting national identity in Trafalgar Square

As an intensely used urban site, Trafalgar Square performs many different roles. It is one of London’s most popular tourist destinations, but it also hosts festivals, protests and the everyday routine movements through the city of thousands of people. Its fixed, material environment provides a flexible place for many different uses and stances towards to site, and it has meaning as both a representational space and one of quotidian use. Despite the links to the past implicit in its statues and layout, it does not seem to matter that the Square itself is not very old. It was built in the early 1840s, with the finishing touches – the lions at the base of Nelson’s Column – not in place until 1867. Nelson’s Column was completed in November 1843, and the main statues appeared between the 1840s and the 1880s, when the statues of George IV (1843), Charles Napier (1856) and Henry Havelock (1861) were installed on three of the Square’s corners, and later a statue of Charles George Gordon, best known for his ‘martyrdom’ in Khartoum, Sudan in 1885. His statue stood between the Square’s fountains, but was moved during the Second World War and later relocated to Embankment Gardens near the Thames.

The plinth in the north-west corner of the Square was not filled, even though it had been intended for an equestrian statue of William IV, which was never commissioned. The Plinth remained vacant until 1999, when the first of three works commissioned by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce was installed. These works were intended to generate discussion about what an appropriate and permanent modern artwork might be for the Plinth. However, the artworks generated such public interest that a new committee was formed to consider the best use of the Plinth, and it decided to use the space to display ‘an ongoing series of temporary works of art commissioned from leading national and international artists’.

When Ken Livingstone became Mayor of London in 1999, he appointed a new Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group to select artworks for the site. In 2012, the Group included arts administrators, broadcasters, an artist and a Principal of a major engineering and urban design firm. According to the publicly available material, for this Group, the Fourth Plinth program is foremost about using public space to engage with the arts; it is ‘part of the vision for Trafalgar Square to be a vibrant, public space and to encourage debate about the place and value of public art in the built environment’, rather than an explicit project of debate on national identity. The process for commissioning an artwork sees the Group select a shortlist of artists who are asked to provide a maquette of their installation, from which a winner is chosen. In the most recent selection process, the Commissioning Group invited public comment on the maquettes prior to the announcement of the installations chosen for display in 2012 and 2013. However, beyond this, there was no public reference to the process by which the winners were chosen, or the role that public opinion played in this process. This method of selection gestures towards the role of ‘elites’ in shaping national symbolism as discussed above, and the potential for the relationship between the official and the popular to shape narratives of national identity.

For example, even though the Commissioning Group appears to focus primarily on the value of the installations as contemporary artworks, for the public and the artists themselves, the sculptures have prompted a much wider discussion about British national identity, history and modernity in the context of Trafalgar Square. It would appear that that the site itself, with its national symbolism, popular history and central urban location, means that the artworks cannot avoid commenting on British national identity. In the remainder of this article, I turn to the public and media reaction to four installations since 2005, demonstrating how media discussion of these artworks regularly revolved around national identity.
**Alison Lapper Pregnant**

The first statue installed under the new Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group was *Alison Lapper Pregnant* by artist Marc Quinn, which depicted the disabled Lapper eight months pregnant. Mayor Ken Livingstone, who supported the scheme and endorsed the choice of works for display, described it as questioning ‘our notions of who should be the subject of a statue or memorial’. The treatment of the statue as a challenge to the surrounding works was a common contextualizing theme in media comment on the installation, particularly the contrast with other statues in the Square on the grounds of its depiction of femininity.

Creator Marc Quinn similarly compared it with the ‘triumphant male statuary’ in the Square and nearby Whitehall, and said he ‘felt that the Square could do with some femininity, linking with Boudicca near the Houses of Parliament. Alison’s statue could represent a new model of female heroism’. Elsewhere, the artist suggested that ‘Nelson’s Column is the epitome of a phallic male monument and I felt the square needed some femininity.’ In these accounts, the artistic strength of the statue was inseparable from its location in Trafalgar Square. Ken Livingstone alluded to this when he said: ‘The square celebrates the courage of men in battle. Alison’s life is a struggle to overcome much greater difficulties than many of the men we celebrate and commemorate here.’

Livingstone ascribed the symbolic power of *Alison Lapper Pregnant* to the artwork’s relationship to the statues on the other three plinths, all Victorian figures who personified official power, muscular Christianity and the global reach of the British Empire. Livingstone presented the statue’s subject matter, a pregnant disabled woman, as a contrast and a challenge to the narrative of martial, masculine and imperial power that the three other statues represented. According to this view, the other statues formed a vital symbolic context for the Fourth Plinth sculpture, central to the sculpture’s meaning. *Alison Lapper Pregnant* was described as both a challenge to the surrounding national narrative and an opportunity to re-write it. Livingstone also suggested that the narrative of national identity represented in the Square should be re-imagined to include women such as Lapper.

Another, less positive, take on the statue, particularly its depiction of disability, described it as evidence of ‘the new elite’s contempt for the public’, because the statue had been chosen by a committee rather than ‘public consensus’ over who was worthy to be represented in such an important public space. In an online editorial, Brendan O’Neill claimed that the change to how the artwork was chosen represented a change in the power relationship between the users of the Square and the authorities who choose the art to be displayed there. For O’Neill, the introduction of a contemporary art scheme for the Fourth Plinth was an attempt by London authorities to shape national narratives by controlling the built environment of one of London’s best-known public places. Rather than allowing the discursive, vernacular or ‘democratic’ choice of heroes to emerge from below, the elites, represented by the Commissioning Group, were attempting to impose a top-down version of the nation through the use of the Square. This tension parallels the previous discussion of how national identity is created and reproduced: is it structural, hierarchical and top-down, or vernacular and discursive? This commentary, however, positioned the artwork within a contest between elites and ‘the public’. In constructing such a dichotomy, such an argument overlooks the possibility that the Square might provide a site in which many different narratives can be accommodated.

**One & Other**

Four years later, instead of adopting the image of one person on the plinth, artist Antony Gormley multiplied this idea by 2400 for his work *One & Other*, which was displayed in the summer of...
2009. Gormley’s installation invited people from all over Britain to stand on the Fourth Plinth for an hour for 100 consecutive days from 5 July 2009. Applicants were chosen at random by a lottery, but represented all the areas of Britain in the same proportion as their region’s percentage of the national population. This meant, for example, that 207 Scots were asked to participate, and 333 from the south-east of England. The activities of the ‘plinthers’ were broadcast online via a webcam mounted on the plinth, therefore reaching a much wider audience than the one in Trafalgar Square itself.

For Gormley, this use of the plinth drew together many themes, including the power of the individual, his/her relationship with the national past and present, and the role of art in shaping public discussion about national identity. For example, relating the individual to the national, he described his project to one journalist as an attempt to present a ‘portrait of Britain made out of 2,400 hours of 2,400 people’s lives’. Furthermore, in creating this portrait, Gormley intended to contrast the participants with the figures on the other three plinths: ‘We are celebrating the living, and not the dead, the living who make up Britain in all its magnificence. We are creating a picture of Britain, and we don’t yet know what the picture in composite will be.’ Gormley used the ‘dead’ historical figures elsewhere in the Square to highlight the living individuals that collectively represented the present.

Commentators picked up on this theme, with some describing One & Other as explicitly a project about British national identity, with the goal to use a narrative of the ‘everyman/woman of Britain’ to provide a form of popular democracy. The national portrait that the installation created was certainly diverse. Participants dressed variously as a town crier, a football referee, Britannia, a giant pigeon, a gorilla, human faeces, and a few wore nothing at all. Some of the participants explicitly referenced their immediate environment. Gerald Chong, for example, dressed as Godzilla, played tennis before destroying a cardboard model of London, including Nelson’s Column, and the Houses of Parliament. Neil Studd, in a costume the colour of the plinth’s stone, stood dressed as Admiral Nelson.

As with Alison Lapper Pregnant, much of the media commentary in reaction to One & Other evaluated the project in terms of its place-specificity. In The Telegraph, blogger Peter Whittle complained that it was ‘spectacularly boring’ and that it ‘says nothing, illuminates nothing, and just adds to the mess which … is gradually eroding the grandeur of Britain’s foremost public place’. His complaint was based on the view that the installation was unsuitable for the Square, and diminished its national and historical significance. Others took issue with Gormley’s intention to provide a display of the ‘heroism of everyday life’ or a ‘portrait of Britain in our time’, instead describing the plinth as an isolating ‘hermit’s platform’ that diminished the individual on it with its size, rather than a ‘great democratic spectacle’. Alex Needham at The Guardian, however, praised it as a ‘life-affirming portrait revealing Britain’s better side’ that ‘championed the little guy against the intimidating grandeur of the square’s institutions’. These accounts were place-specific, using the environment of the Square to frame both the installation and their commentary on it. Gormley also did this, discussing the contrast of the activities of the ‘plinthers’ with the built environment of the Square and its historic symbolism by describing how his work engaged with the history and national symbolism of the plinth. He expressed its impact in terms of a popular, democratic response to a dominant historical narrative:

The square has its history as a place of national identity…. My project is about trying to democratize this space of privilege, idealization and control. This is about putting one of us in the place of a political or military hero. It’s an opportunity to use this old instrument of hierarchical reinforcement for something a little more … fun.
Here Gormley casts his project as a re-imagination of the nation through a re-imagination of the site itself. The built and symbolic environment of Trafalgar Square is crucial for the project’s success in commenting on modern identity, and is interwoven in both its historical representations and its contemporary everyday use. Furthermore, this conceptualization of the project would seem to align with ways of understanding national identity that foreground its discursive flexibility. Gormley’s characterization of the existing environment of the Square as hegemonic and representative of ‘official’ narratives of identity serves to highlight his contrasting democratic and vernacular intervention.

However, despite his emphasis on the democratic subversion of the Square as a ‘space of … control’, the project itself was subject to restrictions. The choice of participants was limited to a certain number from each national region, for example, and was chosen by computer lottery. While participants could do whatever they chose, it was strictly limited to one hour, and the only access to the plinth was via a cherrypicker that lifted people to their place. One participant good-naturedly described her experience in these terms: ‘I was given a glass of water and a clipboard of forms to fill in to prove my identity and confirm my image could be used. Would I also please promise not to break the law? Also, was I, by the way, carrying weapons? And, if I did feel faint, would I please fall towards the terrace side of the square, where the drop was less deadly? Fair enough, I would try.’

This degree of control complicates Gormley’s characterization of his project as a challenge to the hegemonic power that he believed the Square both represents and exercises. Malcolm Miles makes a similar point when he questions One & Other as a credible ‘picture of the nation today’ on the basis that it displayed a series of atomized individuals, each with their own message, rather than a coherent group narrative operationalized as ‘national’. Given how Gormley framed his project as a democratic and subversive exploration of national identity, however, the example of One & Other helps to illuminate the power relationships that inform the creation of national narratives in the Square. As participants helped build a ‘composite picture’ of Britain, they created their own national narratives, but these were shaped by the constraints of both the project’s rules and the material environment of the site itself. As with Alison Lapper Pregnant, the significance of this installation in terms of national identity, what tied it together into a larger (if loose) collective narrative, was the Square and its statues as a frame for meaning, a foil for comparison that underpinned the central animating theme: the contrast between the figure of the living individual, standing only for themselves, on one plinth with the statues, representative of history, power and the nation, on the others.

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park**

The sculpture of Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park, installed just after One & Other also generated public discussion about national identity via a debate over the appropriate use of the Fourth Plinth. Sir Keith Park commanded the Royal Air Force in south-east England in 1940 during the Battle of Britain. A New Zealander by birth, he is credited as having held off the Luftwaffe, forcing Germany to reconsider its planned invasion of Britain. Park’s statue stood on the Plinth for six months from November 2009. The statue was not commissioned specifically for the Fourth Plinth, unlike the other artworks, and its six-month tenure represented a compromise between the London government and campaigners who wanted a permanent statue of Park in the Square.

The contest over the permanency of the statue had begun the previous year. In March 2008, Terry Smith, the leader of the Sir Keith Park Memorial Campaign framed his support for the statue in terms of his views on the ‘real’ meaning of Trafalgar Square, based on a specific notion of national identity. Criticizing the Fourth Plinth scheme, Smith said that ‘the square was built to
commemorate those who saved the nation and defended it. It was not intended as a contemporary art fair.\textsuperscript{51} During the 2008 mayoral election campaign, London’s new mayor Boris Johnson had similarly framed the choice over what should fill the plinth as symbolic of larger national cultural and historical questions:

I can go for a dead white male war hero, gloved, goggled, moustached, forged in traditional bronze and thereby – so I am warned – earn the odium of the entire liberal funkapolitan art world, or else I can continue to support the rotation of strange and wonderful works of contemporary art and enrage those who think these conversation pieces are out of keeping with Nelson’s square and that a failure to install Sir Keith Park is a disservice to the memory of those who saved our country from tyranny in 1940 … I say to the Keith Park campaigners ‘some day your plinth will come’.\textsuperscript{52}

In these examples, both Johnson and Smith describe the symbolism and purpose of Trafalgar Square in very narrow terms linked to wartime commemoration, characterizing British national identity through the martial and masculine aspects of the past that are depicted in its statues and busts. In particular, Johnson recognized the Square as a site saturated with a national historical narrative of martial victory, beginning with Nelson’s naval victory, continuing through Havelock and Napier’s imperial battles in India, and finally expressed in the busts of First World War naval commanders Beatty and Jellicoe. For Johnson, the question of what should be on the Fourth Plinth was based on the importance of an aspect of national history already represented in the Square. However, as the new London mayor, he also recognized that the Fourth Plinth scheme of contemporary artworks was popular, and was reluctant to cancel it.

For other metropolitan officials, the choice of what occupied the plinth appeared to provide a possibility for a forward-looking discussion about the nature of national culture and identity, through a ‘public debate about contemporary art’.\textsuperscript{53} According to a Westminster Council planning report that rejected the possibility of a permanent memorial to Park on the plinth: ‘The fourth plinth is regarded as a site ideally suited for the display of provocative contemporary art.’\textsuperscript{54} The same report found that a permanent statue of Park would be ‘too representational and traditional’.\textsuperscript{55} However, it was precisely this ‘traditional’ link to the history of the Second World War that supporters of the statue invoked to buttress their claims. Sir Keith Park Memorial Committee chairperson Terry Smith, for example, used the history represented in the built environment of the Square to link Park’s image with a long-standing national narrative. When the statue was removed from the plinth in May 2010, Smith stated: ‘Park’s statue has fittingly sat beneath Nelson’s Column – a memorial to another great commander who likewise defended Britain from invasion 135 years earlier.’\textsuperscript{56}

Writing in The Independent, Arifa Akbar expressed this as a cultural struggle over history that underlined Trafalgar Square’s role as the symbolic heart of London and, by extension, the nation:

Yesterday, more that 30 years after his death, Sir Keith Park was plunged into another tussle for the heart of the capital as a row over Trafalgar Square’s empty fourth plinth sparked a furious standoff between some of the country’s most eminent statesmen, historians and artists.\textsuperscript{57}

Given that the statue was framed by both its supporters and detractors as symbolic of national identity, this is a reasonable interpretation. The contest between the supporters of the Keith Park statue on the one hand and the modern artworks of the Fourth Plinth scheme on the other foregrounds how national identity is unsettled in the space of the Square. For supporters of the Fourth Plinth scheme, the Square was a valuable site for artworks that explored modern identity. For others, modern British national identity was best represented by a figure symbolizing an instance of historical heroism, part of a long-standing narrative of British resistance to German attack during the Second World War.
By forcing the national past and present into a contest with one another, supporters and detractors of the Park statue implied a contest among various narratives of national identity, suggesting that they were somehow mutually exclusive. However, other events and representations within the space had already shown that Trafalgar Square, as a lieu de mémoire, had the flexibility to use the past to frame the present, rather than necessarily forcing the two into conflict. This is a good example of how place can reveal aspects of the discursive complexity of national identity. Just as Massey has argued for the necessity of an ‘unfinished and always becoming’ understanding of place, in reaching a compromise to allow Park’s statue to stand for six months, London officials seemed to suggest that the Square was able to accommodate a range of national narratives.

**Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle**

After its allotted six months on the plinth, Park’s statue was replaced by a sculpture by Yinka Shonibare MBE, a British-Nigerian artist with a record of works that have explored race, history and identity, particularly regarding the relationship between Britain and its former colonies. Shonibare’s *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle* was chosen by the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group and installed on 24 May 2010. The sculpture was a 1:30 replica of Admiral Horatio Nelson’s ship the HMS *Victory*, from which he commanded the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Its 37 sails were set for battle and made of colourful and distinctive Dutch wax fabric. Shonibare’s use of this fabric has featured in his previous artworks, and was described by the selectors as symbolic of the connections between empire, naval power, global trade and British identity.

One of the main themes in online newspaper reporting on Shonibare’s artwork was how the sculpture reminded viewers that modern British multiculturalism has deep roots in a history of imperial expansion and conflict. For the artist, the connection between the past and the present was central to this work. Shonibare linked this aspect of national identity specifically to London: ‘For me, it’s a celebration of London’s immense ethnic wealth, giving expression to and honouring the many cultures and ethnicities that are still breathing precious wind into the sails of the United Kingdom.’ This visual link made direct reference to the Square’s main monument, Nelson’s Column. At the unveiling of the sculpture, Shonibare was explicit about the site-specificity of his artwork, emphasizing the connection between it and the historical events represented in the Square: ‘I think Nelson would be proud to see that his battle has had a significant effect on the lives of so many people. This piece celebrates the legacy of Nelson.’ His ship in a bottle specifically invokes the Battle of Trafalgar, and, as with many of the other installations, uses the Square itself to link the present with a version of the British past.

While Nelson’s *Ship in a Bottle* appeared to celebrate the preconditions for the modern British diversity that Shonibare values, it also hinted at darker aspects of imperialism, such as slavery and other forms of exploitation. London Mayor Boris Johnson asked: ‘Is it pro-empire? Is it anti-empire? This colourful and quirky take on our seafaring heritage provides a vivid contrast that intensifies the historic surroundings of Trafalgar Square.’ In this description, the sculpture worked to highlight the historical setting, symbolically as well as visually. Charlotte Higgins also responded to the historical aspects of the work, arguing that it recast a familiar London place, causing her to ‘pay attention to the original reason for this square’s existence’, with the artwork highlighting some of the historical meanings of the Square itself. As with the other works discussed here, the relationship with its surrounding environment is central to the meaning of the installation, and it works to represent intertwining strands of history and identity, rather than mutually exclusive ones.

Shonibare’s sculpture demonstrates how aspects of Trafalgar Square can generate discussion over a range of narratives. Responses to the artwork touched on its multiple national meanings,
including the history of a specific battle, as well as more general issues of imperialism, trade and cultural exchange. The links between these historical narratives and modern London’s multiculturalism were especially important to the artist. Shonibare recognized the flexible symbolic meaning of both the artwork and the history that inspired it, claiming that he was trying to be both celebratory and critical. His work suggested a narrative of a contemporary identity that is subject to the cultural and social tensions that are the legacy of empire, but which also can produce a vibrant and unique metropolitan culture typified by tolerance.

Before the removal of *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle* from the Fourth Plinth at the beginning of 2012, some media reports suggested that a more permanent replacement was being considered. In 2008, *The Independent* reported that a statue of Queen Elizabeth II was being planned for the Fourth Plinth, and that this explained ongoing Greater London authority (GLA) support for the rotating program of modern artworks, rather than a permanent installation. While these reports were not officially confirmed, they do point to the ongoing interest in the occupancy of the space. In fact, the scheme is set to continue, with two more works announced for 2012 and 2013. The Fourth Plinth, through its lack of a permanent statue or memorial, seems to ask for an important artwork to fill it, and repeatedly prompts a discussion of what is nationally significant in contemporary Britain.

**Conclusions: the Fourth Plinth, national identity and contested space**

Trafalgar Square’s prominent position in the landscape of London, its history of public use and its ongoing status as a highly popular destination for visitors to London all contribute to its significance as an important metropolitan public site. Both the history of the use of the site – for protests, demonstrations, celebrations and other national events – and the representations of historical figures and events in the Square have helped make it into a national lieu de mémoire. As such, a subtle contest between different versions of the nation has played out within its confines. This has been evident in events such as the Poll Tax Riots in 1990, the use of the Square by female suffrage organizations before the Great War, and even the public commemorative vigil in the Square following the London bombing on 7 July 2005. This contest, however, has also been evident in the official and media discussion of the Fourth Plinth scheme.

Much of this discussion concerned the relationship between the Fourth Plinth installations and the other statues and monuments in the Square, framed explicitly in terms of national identity. The existing structures in the Square have been treated as symbolic of an official, top-down narrative of the nation, while the Fourth Plinth artworks were seen to augment, challenge or complicate this masculine and imperial story. In treating the contemporary installations as inextricable from their local environment, many commentators gestured towards a framing of national identity as discursive, multiple and complex. However, the built environment also limited this discourse, in some cases forcing the ‘official’ into a contest with the ‘vernacular’. Overall, however, media commentary on the Fourth Plinth scheme demonstrated how Trafalgar Square catalysed the discussion of Britishness, and also helped to illuminate some of the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary British national identity.

Over its history, Trafalgar Square itself has become subject to tighter and tighter regimes of control. By 2008, during a six-month period when I visited the Square repeatedly, the types of events for which it could be used were tightly controlled by the authorities in charge of it. In practice, this has seen the Square used for a program of official multicultural festivals throughout the year, including Chinese New Year, Eid, Diwali, Hanukah and others. For Livingstone and the GLA, the Square appeared to have a very clearly defined role as a ‘multicultural’ space, and this policy points to an overall official emphasis on urban cohesion that had come to dominate the official narrative of Trafalgar Square by the time the Fourth Plinth scheme began. This
demonstrates official attempts to transform the narratives that the Square represents, even as its statuary and memorials remain more or less the same. It also reinforces some of the themes of this article that I have explored through the Fourth Plinth, namely, that the scheme works to reveal multiple narratives of national identity, showing how these narratives operate in tension or cooperation with each other. Trafalgar Square also demonstrates the ongoing salience of historical narratives to shore up contemporary versions of national identity.

Finally, the Fourth Plinth scheme also points to the way that visibility in the Square is used by various national groups as a practical demonstration of visibility in the nation. This issue of visibility can be expressed in terms of contest or tension, as with the controversy over the statue of Sir Keith Park in 2009, whose brief stint on the plinth was cast as a struggle between the traditional forces of ‘proper’ history and the ‘funkapolitan’ cadres of modern art enthusiasts. However, it can also be more subtle. *One & Other*, for example, sought to make Britain itself visible through a composite portrait of its residents, and was lauded as a democratic response to contemporary questions about national identity, although some commentators criticized it as vacuous and reflective of a *Big Brother* culture typified by fame-hungry narcissism.68

Shonibare’s *Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle* was well received in the media coverage, perhaps because it did not shy away from the ambivalence of the history that the site represented. Instead, this artwork sought to incorporate many different narratives into a playful and visually-arresting installation. For some, his sculpture respected the history of the Battle of Trafalgar and reminded viewers of the symbolism of the site itself. For others, including the artist himself, it represented a celebration of contemporary Britain’s multiculturalism and the cultural vibrancy that this engendered. In terms of national identity, the significance of his work was that it did not force the range of narratives germane to the Square into a contest with each other, but instead presented them as inseparable, highly visible facets of modern British national identity.

Recognizing the ambivalence and multiple cultural and historical narratives within his work, in one interview Shonibare summed up his sculpture as ‘a monument to live, and let live’.69 Overall, the value of the Fourth Plinth in illuminating some of the complexities of national identity lies in the way it can draw together and make visible multiple narratives at the same time. By engaging with questions of what and who should be represented in the Square, the public was asked to consider issues of national visibility for a range of groups, framed by a built environment that is suffused with official versions of national history. The Fourth Plinth shows how a site such as Trafalgar Square can be re-imagined, demonstrating its ongoing relevance as a *lieu de mémoire* in which British national identity is made visible, re-created and subtly contested.

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**Notes**

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30 Kincaid, Postcolonial Dublin, p. 228.

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35 Fourth Plinth, ‘Marc Quinn’s Alison Lapper Pregnant’.


37 Ken Livingstone, quoted in Reynolds, ‘Whatever Would Nelson Think?’


42 Sooke, ‘Antony Gormley’s Fourth Plinth’.


49 Miles, ‘One & Other’, p. 358.


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