

# Unsettled Matters, Falling Flight

## Decolonial Protest and the Becoming-Material of an Imperial Statue

*Joanna Ruth Evans*



*Figure 1. On the evening of 12 March 2015, students at the University of Cape Town cover the Cecil John Rhodes statue in white and red cloth, following a mass debate on Jameson Plaza earlier that day. (Photo by Rebecca Hodes)*

On 9 March 2015, at a small, unauthorized protest at the University of Cape Town, political science student Chumani Maxwele hurled a full portaloos container of human excrement onto a statue of the 19th-century British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes. This large, bronze statue sat on a stone plinth at the heart of the University of Cape Town's colonial façade. It was flanked on either side by imitation Georgian buildings covered in a Virginia Creeper with Ivy League aspirations. Here, the Rhodes statue had remained for 81 years, slowly oxidizing to a minty green, streaked in the chalky guano of generations of sea birds. It had survived two regime changes: South Africa's exit from the British Commonwealth (1961), and the dismantling of apartheid (1994). On 9 April 2015, one month after Maxwele's action, the statue was hoisted by a crane from its plinth and driven on the back of a truck to an undisclosed location. This removal followed one month of intensive student protesting known as Rhodes Must Fall (RMF).

### Student Essay Contest Winner

**Joanna Ruth Evans** is a theatre artist from South Africa. She holds a BA in Theatre and Performance from the University of Cape Town and an MA in Performance Studies from New York University. Her research follows decolonial movement, drawing on queer, affect, and new materialist theory, black studies, and decolonial theory. Her plays have toured throughout South Africa, and to international festivals and theatres in Italy, Germany, Iran, Réunion, Hungary, and the United States. She lives in Brooklyn, where she makes work with just about anyone she can, but especially her best friend, Lua. In Fall 2018 she will begin the PhD program in Performance Studies at NYU.

What does it mean “to perform,” and what does performance do? Located in the heart of New York City’s vibrant art scene, **The Department of Performance Studies at NYU** is dedicated to the analysis and study of cultural enactments of all kinds, and to understanding how they can produce meaningful change. Combining an interdisciplinary range of approaches including feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, and other modes of analysis, with an equally diverse range of research methods, Performance Studies offers graduate and undergraduate students the opportunity to explore and think critically about the world-making power of performance in theatre, performance art, dance, sound/music, visual and installation art, activism, and online, as well as in the performance of “everyday life.”

The Department of Performance Studies at NYU Tisch School of the Arts was established in 1980 as the first of its kind, and is ranked #1 for doctoral programs in Theatre and Performance Studies by the National Research Council.

RMF described itself as a “collective student, staff and worker movement mobilising for direct action against the institutional racism of UCT” (see Indrajith 2015). As debates raged over what should be done with the statue, its material form was already engaged in many acts of doing, as it collided with shit, cloths, trash bags, paint, plywood planks, hazard tape, and climbing and assembling bodies. These material interactions were far in excess of institutional proceedings. They unsettled the university’s latently colonial representational order by exposing an entanglement of matter and symbol, history and present.

The emergence of Rhodes Must Fall was felt to be a tipping point, the beginning of a fraught public reckoning with the failures of South Africa’s “Rainbow Nation” ideals. “Next the invisible statues” stated one of RMF’s leaders in a televised debate after the statue’s removal (Big Debate South Africa 2015). In the years that followed, a large student movement known as Fees Must Fall (FMF) spread across campuses nationwide, taking on the “invisible statues” of financial exclusion, latent colonialism, and institutional racism. After the widely celebrated success of RMF, FMF was met with governmental inertia and partisan manipulation, institutional suppression, police brutality, and growing public criticism. FMF’s embodied and material practices (occupations, walk outs, sit-ins, barricades, etc.) were vehemently criticized and used as evidence of a supposed lack of political strategy. In light of this, it is important to consider how a dismissal of material animacy and action might inscribe protest into racist representational logics. To do so I trace the changing material form of the Rhodes statue over the initial month of RMF protesting. I draw on photographs, video footage, news and social media reports, and my own memories of this period, during which time I was working in Cape Town, having graduated from UCT in 2012.

Attending to the material site of the statue raises a number of questions: What was the Rhodes statue doing at UCT—what work was its presence performing? How was the statue activated such that after only one month of protest it was expelled from the university? And, to expand this into a broader enquiry, how and what might decolonial protest move?

## The Overrepresentation of Cecil John Rhodes

*The world is nearly all parceled out, and what there is left of it is being divided out, conquered and colonized. To think of these stars that you see overhead at night, these vast worlds that we can never reach. I would annex the planets if I could; I often think of that. It makes me sad to see them so clear and yet so far.*

— Cecil John Rhodes (1902:190)

Rhodes was a fortune hunter turned statesman, known even in his own time for his cruelty and excesses of ego and ambition. In 1870 he came to South Africa and built his vast fortune in the frantic exploitation of labor and land that was the Kimberley diamond rush. Amongst his many excesses, he is remembered for “the outlandish decision to invade and occupy a vast chunk of Southern Africa which he then named after himself” — Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) (Nyamnjoh 2016:28). Like many with ambitions of legacy, he turned to education to memorialize himself, setting up the prestigious Rhodes scholarship, and donating the land on which the University of Cape Town (UCT) was built. Of said construction, Rhodes claimed, “I will build the university from the stomachs of kaffirs” (in Johnson 1967), marking in chillingly truthful terms the direct relation between the material architecture of the university, and the brutal subjugation of the people of South Africa.

Slightly hunched, chin rested on a clenched fist, the Rhodes statue was posed as Rodin’s *The Thinker* (1910)—that quintessential figure of modernity’s existential crisis. A self-identified social Darwinist who devoted his life’s work to extending “the influence of the English-speaking race” (Rhodes 1902:98) in the name of a God whose existence he placed at “a fifty percent chance” (89), Rhodes embodied the contradictions of the West’s “modern man.” In *The Order of Things*, Foucault describes the figure of man as emerging on the cusp of modernity—“only a recent invention” ([1970] 1994:27)—as the result of a “mutation” in the “arrangements of knowledge” (397). Through this mutation the newly secular and social Darwinist Western man came to recognize himself *within* nature, and yet, in being supposedly alone in recognition of this, somehow, distinct *from* nature: simultaneously transcendental subject and empirical object. This “mutation” enclosed the emergent figure of man permanently within representation’s existential crisis: the crisis of how he can at once represent The World to himself, while being simultaneously representative of said world. This paradox produced the illusory void between self and world/other that shapes Western epistemology—a void in which countless atrocities are committed and permitted. The settler colonialist response to the impossibility of being simultaneously transcendental subject and empirical object was (is) to build a world outside of oneself that is representative of oneself. This was the dream of Rhodes, and of empire and its war on difference. Encapsulating this dream, the inscription on the statue’s plinth—a verse from “A Song of the English” by Rudyard Kipling—announced Rhodes’s unfulfilled plan to build a railway from the Cape to Cairo: “I dream my dream, by rock and heath and pine / Of Empire to the northward. / Ay, one land / From Lion’s Head to Line!” The mountain slopes behind the university are populated with said pine trees—a sunlight- and water-hogging alien species introduced by the British, in whose shade indigenous plants cannot grow.

In “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the After Man, its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” Sylvia Wynter troubles the soils and spoils of Foucault’s archaeological dig in *The Order of Things*. She exposes the unearthed skeletons, tightly packed earth, and teeming mass of life whose uncounted forms surround the scaffolds of Western modernity’s thought. Wynter’s transnational and transhistorical excavation reveals that Western modernity’s figure of man is not coincidence, Foucauldian mutation, or by-product. Rather, it is simultaneously *the* primary product *and* facilitator of Western expansion and subjugation of the “rest” of the world, which is to say, the world itself. The West’s exclusionary and hierarchical definition of the human emerged with Western expansionism in order to legitimize the subjugation of what became deemed “subhuman” life (Wynter 2003:264). Replacing an earlier God/

Man order, the newly secular West's human/subhuman hierarchy emerged with the production of what Aníbal Quijano names the "idea of race," which became "the most effective tool of domination in the last 500 years" (in Wynter 2003:263). Wynter's corrective reveals that the new descriptive statement that Foucault named man was, rather, *White Man*: the representative subject of the human, and originator of representational thought about a world of differently raced and therefore subhuman objects/others. Wynter claims that it is through Western Man's persistent overrepresentation that an ongoing global order of inequality and human and environmental subjugation is maintained, perpetually organized around a human/subhuman hierarchical binary.

"There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument," states Robert Musil ([1957] 2006:42). If monumentality produces invisibility, the monument is built and maintained not to become invisible, but rather to materially activate and distribute invisibility as an organizing structure. For the university to cohere with the monumentalized Rhodes in its

midst, certain zones of invisibility had to be maintained: matter could not be seen as active, and the colonial past could not be seen as present. Like a paperweight, the statue pinned down these epistemological negations, helping to maintain UCT's latently colonial representational order. Its invisibility reproduced the same cleaving of the material from the symbolic as the racialized human/subhuman hierarchy that produced coloniality. Despite post-apartheid transformation policies,<sup>1</sup> by 2015 UCT in many ways still served the will of the person whose statue occupied pride of place at its center. Twenty-one years into South Africa's democracy the university still



Figure 2. Cecil John Rhodes posed as "The Thinker." The statue held a place of prominence on the University of Cape Town campus since 1934. (Photo by Danie van der Merwe, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6880780>)

1. "Transformation" is the umbrella term used to refer to the redress of racial inequality post-apartheid. UCT's stated transformation goals include: "making the university a more representative institution in terms of its academic and support staff, and of its student body, promoting enhanced intellectual diversity, transcending the idea of race, improving institutional climate and having an enhanced focus on our intellectual enterprise on African perspectives" (*GroundUp Staff* 2015).

*felt* white, spoke English, had a disproportionately white student and staff body and exclusionary fees structure, and reproduced Western values of academic mastery.<sup>2</sup>

Foucault's assurance is that *if* the “fundamental arrangements of knowledge” that produced (Western) Man were to disappear, “one can certainly wager that man would be erased” ([1970] 1994:397). The problem, of course, is that through self-perpetuating overrepresentation Man continues to reproduce these arrangements, which—though continually updating, recoding, mutating, and short-circuiting—remain oriented around a human/subhuman organization of life, where the category of the Human is afforded via proximity to Western Man. So how to forestall Western Man's self-perpetuating descriptive statement? Similarly, how to make present an already too-present statue? The task is not merely to critique the figure of Western Man and all it represents, but to override or unsettle the very epistemologies<sup>3</sup> of representation through which this overrepresentation occurs. It is this overriding of the logics of representation that hurtles us into the performative, aesthetic, and insurrectionist realms, and necessitates an attendance to the material transformations of the statue.

## The Becoming-Matter of Cecil John Rhodes

*The black imagination is omni[present],  
It is the convergence of all existence based on the experience of blackness  
: in a system that does not recognize its existence.*

—from “Introductory Poem: *The Black Imagination*” (Rhodes Must Fall 2015)

The institutional response to the “controversial” monument is, “but what should we do with it?” This deflects engagement with the pricklier question of, “what is the monument doing?” To ask this question means engaging with the monument as a material actant.<sup>4</sup> The Rhodes Must Fall protests saw the university attempting to draw students away from the body of the statue and into the realm of dialectic debate and institutional procedure. And though the students engaged intensively (and on their own terms) with these procedures, they also repeatedly returned to interact with the statue's material form. These often spontaneous, anonymous, and seemingly incidental interactions were in excess of the institutionally legible dimension of the protests: as transformation was debated, the statue itself was already transforming. It was here that the latently colonial constructs of the representative human subject and materially inanimate object imploded.

This implosion began when stone, bronze, and shit collided, as Chumani Maxwele hurled the full portaloos container onto the statue. He wore black tights and a pink construction helmet. Two signs hung over his naked torso: “Exhibit White Arrogance UCT” read the sign on his front; “Exhibit Black Assimilation UCT” read the sign on his back. Maxwele had brought the portaloos that morning from the township of Khayelitsha where, in the absence of sanitation services, the government supplies small plastic portable toilets, which “compromise privacy and produce lingering smells in people's homes” (Robins 2015). This action was resonant with the service delivery protests by the Ses'khona People's Rights movement, who hauled portaloos

2. *GroundUp* conducted a five-part report on transformation at UCT at the time of the protests. This report covers student and staff demographics, curriculum issues, and fees and financial exclusion (see *GroundUp* Staff 2015).

3. I use “epistemologies,” making noun of adjective, to highlight the *thingly* nature of the epistemological mechanics that construct not only what is considered logical, but what is considered at all.

4. “Actant” is from Bruno Latour's “Actor Network Theory” and refers to “literally anything” (i.e., any human or nonhuman entities) that acts or “is granted to be the source of an action.” The term helps to perceive action and effect beyond what is instituted by the intervention of individual human subjects (see Latour 1996). Jane Bennett has also taken up the term in *Vibrant Matter*, see especially chapter 1, “The Force of Things” (2010:9).

containers “from the shacks of the urban periphery to Cape Town’s centers of political, cultural and economic power—the steps of provincial parliament, the Cape Town International Airport, [and] an upmarket city gallery” (Robins 2015).

Maxwele named the event a “poo shower,” saying, “This poo that we are throwing on the statue represents the shame of black people. By throwing it on the statue we are throwing our shame to whites’ affluence” (in Bester 2015). With this action, the Rhodes statue was activated as the source of not past but current “black shame.” A sudden intimacy emerged between time, body, and architecture, with the soiled statue pulling its surrounds into direct relation. While the majority of Cape Town’s black population live on the outskirts of the city without access to basic sanitation services, the leafy suburbs around the university are connected to seamless sewerage networks. The mere presence of refuse from the township in these suburbs was an historic event. The legacy of Rhodes’s empire’s ongoing domination became undeniably present, in the reality of a city so racially segregated that even its shit does not mix.

Much of the news reporting opened with a description of the stench rising up the stairs of the university. Even the air was refused emptiness and revealed as a thick and visceral interlocutor between the statue, the university’s architecture, and the living bodies (and olfactory senses) occupying the space. All was implicated; nothing was empty. This sudden intimacy of historical, spatial, and bodily sense collapsed the void that had previously neutralized the statue’s presence. “Power creates emptiness. Emptiness attracts power,” write the French collective, The Invisible Committee, “leaving the paradigm of government means starting politically from the opposite hypothesis. There is no empty space, everything is inhabited” (The Invisible Committee 2015:79).

This might have been a small, isolated, and barely witnessed incident—but the smell spread. Inserted into the prestigious, hallowed zone of the university, the abjectness of this material was simultaneously impossible to ignore, and impossible to reconcile: a generative contradiction. The viscerality of the shit both demanded and repelled engagement, as is evidenced in the manner in which public discourse simultaneously obsessed over the shit *and* wished it away. Repeatedly it was treated as contingent to the “larger issue,” and public debate circled around the legitimacy of the protests *despite* the abjectness of the instigating material. The university’s official statement emphasized their encouragement of “freedom of expression” and “open debate,” but condemned as “reprehensible” and “unacceptable” the throwing of shit (in Nyamnjoh 2016:72), ignoring that it was precisely this that had produced the newfound urgency to respond to the statue’s presence. The inability to recognize the material collision of shit and statue as a political actant rendered materiality as contingent upon temporality: positioning the protests as an inevitable progression of a contemporary present, and their objects (statue, shit, bodies) as passive representations of this progression. This perception imagined empty objects within a linear present, objects that were animated only via the narration of Western Man. Within these temporal logics, the material activation of the statue was eclipsed by what the institution deems its merely “symbolic” significance as a *representative* of a finite history.

This portrayal of history as finite and only symbolically accessible is part of an exclusionary temporal logic within South Africa, and under global neoliberalism more generally. Wynter’s human/subhuman hierarchy could be seen to distribute itself around the representation of the temporal such that the human (Western Man) is attributed a full and living present, while the subhuman is relegated to a past that can be mourned but never redeemed, and a future that is always yet to come. This state of continual deferral is maintained through the overrepresentation of Western Man’s conception of time, which comes to be *the* descriptive statement of temporality: namely that of an empty present in which man imbues all that he touches and perceives (all that he represents to himself) with contemporaneity, while that which he cannot (or will not) touch or perceive is rendered nonexistent. The epistemologies of contemporaneity become what Christopher Pinney describes as “the most powerful trope of homogenous empty

time” (2005:264). This homogenous, temporal void permits the ceaseless deferral of attendance to the material reality of precarious life. It suppresses the multiple, cusping potentialities of the dense and dangerous nonhomogeneous and noncontemporaneous present, in which each moment and matter holds the potential for the emergence of a new politic, an upheaval, an insurrection, or a redistribution of the sensible.<sup>5</sup>

The image that proliferated through print and web captures the yellow-brown liquid in the moment it is air-bound. On the plinth, an abstract shape has appeared: the shadow of the oncoming shit. Jonathan Jansen, chancellor at the University of the Free State, dismissed the action as “crude,” claiming that Rhodes Must Fall was “not in fact a movement. It was a moment” (in Fairbanks 2015). This cleaving of the emergent “moment” from the political “movement” reveals the petrification of representational epistemologies in the face of a dense and nonhomogeneous present. Ironically, this statement finds its self-validation in a democracy founded by the highly organized anti-apartheid movement, which has been so thoroughly monumentalized into the national descriptive statement that we forget that it too comprised a multitude of emergent moments. It took materiality’s strange torque to unsettle this monumentalized notion of political action and implode the historical movement into the precarious present.

The generation who grew with the “new” country knows what it is to live in a temporal void: in the stagnating present of a simultaneously bloody and bloodless revolution that, in the end, does not end, but slows to an almost imperceptible pace. When students of this generation say that they are still living under apartheid, what would it be to understand this not as a metaphor? What are the representational logics that render apartheid an event of the finite past? And what does it take to disrupt these logics, such that the void of a homogenous contemporaneity erupts into many and multiple temporalities—many living pasts and historical presents—all of which might be ethically addressed? In an implosion of linear time into matter, the waste-product of shit became politically productive. The shit that was expelled from the body as waste—as devoid of value—and itself expelled by bodies treated by the state as devoid of value, began to generate. The generative effects of the shit’s very actual, very material presence collapsed the institution’s progressive logics of gradual transformation, and its sanitization and containment of history.

Soon after the shit was thrown, the Rhodes Must Fall movement erupted into the public eye. Over the next few weeks the university scrambled to hail the statue in from the unsettling realm of abject materiality, to the seemingly stable, representational realm of rhetorical debate. No longer able to contain the event of the shit to the act of “an individual” (Klopper in UCT Media 2015) as their initial statement had claimed, the university began positioning the growing intensity as a democratic positivity of its representational structures (Newsroom 2015). According to the logics of these structures, the sudden urgency of Rhodes’s presence and what it revealed of the latent coloniality of the university might have been resolved through policy debate. By the promise of this political logic, what is *representable*, what UCT historian Rebecca Hodes termed “empirical facts” and “reasoned arguments” (Hodes 2015), becomes increasingly overrepresented, while that which is *unrepresentable* (black pain and anger, the historical pres-

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5. Jacques Rancière speaks of the “distribution of the sensible” as “a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed.” Participation in the commons is dependent upon power’s distribution of what is perceptible, sensible, legible etc. A “redistribution of the sensible” is the moment of political emergence in which these terms are unsettled, and the conditions for inclusion/partaking are thereby shifted. At UCT, this redistribution happened not at the level of institutional policy, but, foremost, in the realm of the sensory—through an unsettling of what could be sensed, and thereby what was thought to make sense (see Rancière [2010] 2015:44).

ent, matter's animacy) is exiled to the surrounds of politics proper.<sup>6</sup> But as UCT abstracted the experience of institutional racism into the realm of policy debate, students returned to the material site of its systemic production.

After a mass debate held on Jameson Plaza on 12 March 2015, a small group of students once more materialized Rhodes's body. A dusky photograph shows students standing precariously on the plinth's ledge, pulling sheets over the body: first white, then red (the traditional colors of isiXhosa funerals). The form changes: Rhodes's great bulk is measured anew by the size and softness of the sheets, taking on a stooping, clerical quality. There is a ritualistic clarity and aesthetic simplicity to this action of concealing, marking, altering, and softening. Having been materially activated by the shit—its presence surfacing into the politics of the university—the statue can no longer remain as it once was. Rhodes *must* fall, but he must also be *felt*. Like a body being prepared for burial or embalment, the statue cannot simply be disposed of, or swept under the carpet of institutional bureaucracy. Neatly cut strips of blank paper are pasted over the name and inscription on the plinth, burning brightly on the greying stone. The whiteness of the cloth and the paper is not the whiteness of latent colonialism's false neutrality, or the sanitization of history. It is an anticipatory white: not blank, but ready.

This material excess to institutional proceedings is contextualized within a post-1994 South Africa in which the material is itself in excess of democratic transformation. With the dismantling of apartheid and the transition to the democratically elected, black-majority governance of the African National Congress in 1994, South Africa's legislature was transformed and a new constitution (one of the world's most progressive) was adopted. Moral accountability was redistributed via the Truth and Reconciliation hearings.<sup>7</sup> However, these legislative and symbolic transformations were unaccompanied by a significant redistribution of wealth and land, leading Achille Mbembe to name South Africa, "the only country on Earth in which a revolution took place which resulted in not one single former oppressor losing anything" (Mbembe 2015). From Dutch and British settler colonialism's invasion of land; to imperialism's extraction of wealth and exploitation of labor; to the apartheid state's exiling of South Africa's black populations not only to the surrounds of citizenship (via disenfranchisement and segregationist legislature) but to the geographical surrounds of the land itself (to the very edges of cities, or to the small and arid "indigenous homelands"), the history of South African governance is a history of state-executed exploitation and theft of land and people. In 1994, the democratically elected African National Congress, inheriting the apartheid state's debt, had little choice but to adopt a neoliberal economic policy counter to their ideals. "The South African case is particularly troubling," writes David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*:

Emerging in the midst of all of the hopes generated out of the collapse of apartheid and desperate to reintegrate into the global economy, it was partly persuaded and partly coerced by the IMF and the World Bank to embrace the neoliberal line, with the predictable result that economic apartheid now broadly confirms the racial apartheid that preceded it. (2005:40)

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6. For more on the "surround" to politics see "Politics Surrounded," in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons*. They open this chapter with a spatial metaphor of the colonial laager as the field of operation for majoritarian political control and distributions of power. Outside of the laager is "the surround"—the realm of minoritarian dissent, world-building, *planning*, and simply staying alive. Under the myth of self-defense, the laager continues to invade, co-opt and repurpose the space of the surround. Politics therefore is an "ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround" (Harney and Moten 2013:17).

7. For a brief overview of this transition period, see "The Transition in Context" in *Book 6: Negotiation, Transition and Freedom* by Christopher Saunders (Saunders 2004).



The blatant material dispossession of colonial and apartheid rule has been eclipsed by “democratic” neoliberalism, which perpetuates this same dispossession via the wealth accumulation of the economic elite, but now under the liberatory guise of “individual entrepreneurial freedoms” (2) and private property rights. As wealth and land remained consolidated around the (now slightly racially diversified) economic elite, the promise of land and wealth redistribution was written out of South Africa’s democratic imaginary.<sup>8</sup> The realm of the material is therefore in excess of democratic governance, even as the government hitches itself to material promises. In its perpetual deferral of redistribution, the “new Democracy” functions via an *avoidance* of the material; a void within which the elite accumulate vast material excess. This void—between the perpetually lagging democratic promise and the lived urgency of materially precarious lives—produces a cynical fallacy at the heart of the social in South Africa, and under neoliberalism globally. This hypocrisy continues to be deemed the only possible state of affairs, legitimated by the overrepresentation of the global hegemony of neoliberal logic (the new discourse of Western Man), such that it has “become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2005:3). So pervasive are the logics of private ownership that the repeated justification for the presence of Rhodes’s statue was that he donated the land and money for the university, negating that it is the very fact and conditions of this “ownership” that mark his presence as brutal.

In the microcosm of UCT, the material transformations of the statue reveal the entanglement of matter and rhetoric that representational epistemologies conceal. In fact, more than an entanglement, they reveal that the rhetorical itself is always already material, and that any illusion otherwise is a void of power’s functioning. At a transformation debate on 16 March 2015, the deputy vice chancellor’s opening statement attempted to cleave the material cite from dialectic rationalism: “The events of the past week cannot be taken out of the equation, but it is crucial that we leave this meeting with confidence of what a university is all about—a space that is fundamentally about position, counter-position, argument and counter-argument” (in Farber 2017). According to this logic, the “events” of the statue’s re-materialization are tangential to the representational debate that *a university is all about*; once more, the university’s coherence depends on making matter contingent upon representation. The SRC president, Ramabina Mahapa, walked out of this meeting, stating, “We can no longer breathe. The winds of change are blowing through UCT [...] You revolt when you can no longer breathe, and we can no longer breathe. We have reached an impasse with management at requesting transformation and this university cannot continue [as if it is] business as usual” (in Farber 2015). This invocation of breath—of the actual sensation of suffocation—evokes the intimate relation between the material and psychic environment of the university and the bodies occupying it. Under these conditions, the recourse to UCT’s procedural protocols becomes somewhat ridiculous; how can one debate when one cannot breathe?<sup>9</sup>

That Sunday, after the debate, the statue transformed once more. On the sports fields below Rhodes, the Cape Epic cycle race was celebrating the finish of its first stage. The Cape Epic, with its promotional banners, flags, and kiosks, was overshadowed by the improvisatory assemblage of the protest, with its bedsheet banners, spray paint, and black plastic trash bags. Students wrapped the statue in a patchwork quilt of these bags, secured with packing tape and string. On its back were pages with the words “RHODES MUST FALL” (a “kick me” sign taped to an unsuspecting back). The suffocating environment referenced by Mahapa con-

8. In 2018, speeding up land reform has come to the forefront of the political agenda (see Roelff 2018).

9. “I can’t breathe” has flown from the pages of Fanon (see Fanon [1952] 2008:12), to the lips of Eric Garner caught in a police headlock, to the Black Lives Matter movement, and to the University of Cape Town. This cry is not now a metaphor, now a desperate plea for bodily survival, now a political rallying call, and now an institutional critique; it is, from the moment of its utterance, all of these.

gealed in the form of the black plastic bags engulfing the body of the statue (could Rhodes breathe under there?). The plastic is synthetic, cheap, and potentially suffocating, but it is also soft, durable, and black—a new epidermis for the transforming body of the statue. Rhodes was simultaneously blackened and marked as disposable—and the more black the statue became, the sooner the institution would move to dispose of it. This altered form, this new materialization, began to act on Rhodes’s temporality and futurity. From the imperceptibly slow time of bronze, stone, and monumentalized history, the statue was now revealed to be in intimate relation with the university’s present: over the next few days its form gradually altered for all to see, as the plastic shredded and scattered in the wind, until only one long strip was left billowing from the head. Mahapa’s “winds of change” metaphor, which had already been embodied through the invocation of breath and suffocation, now materialized through this interplay of wind and plastic. The trash bags marked Rhodes as hyperbolically disposable: imagine a future in which the colonial order could be hauled off by a waste removal truck—what dump would be big enough, and far enough? Within a couple of weeks, in a self-manifesting entanglement of metaphor and matter, Rhodes would indeed be driven away on just such a truck.

This turn to the site of the statue to unsettle latent colonial power came after decades of transformation debates, both nationally and within the university. The realm of representative politics was not *not* engaging with transformation; but this was not where, in fact, colonial power was situated, or where change could emerge. The protesting students knew from the national phenomenon of South Africa’s partial democracy that colonial power’s survival was inscribed in the architectural construction of the material world. The Invisible Committee describe contemporary political movements’ tendency to take on material structures as revealing an “intuition” about the nature of power under global neoliberalism: “Contemporary power is of an architectural and impersonal nature [...] Anyone who means to undertake anything whatsoever against the existing world must start from there: the real power structure is the material, technological, physical organization of this world” ([2014] 2015:85).



Figure 3. The statue after students wrapped it in a patchwork quilt of trash bags secured with packing tape and string, and the words “RHODES MUST FALL,” March 2015. (Photo by Rodger Bosch)



Figure 4. The statue covered in black trash bags and tape with Table Mountain in the background, March 2015. (Photo by Rodger Bosch)

On 29 March 2015, in a material recoding of the funerary rites evoked by the earlier white and red cloths, UCT erected a coffin around Rhodes: a plywood cube that looked about to tumble down the stairs. This attempt to restore a perceptual void around the statue reveals just how present it had become. In UCT's report to the provincial Heritage Council proposing the statue's permanent removal, Ashly Lillie writes, "It is an uninspired work that was derived directly from Rodin's highly acclaimed *Thinker*. It therefore not only lacks originality, but also has very limited aesthetic merit" (Lillie 2015). The overrepresentation of Rhodes, emphasized by the proliferation of *The Thinker's* pose, had become suddenly *too* present, too blatantly evident: unsettlingly so.

But, by that point, the statue was no longer exactly Rhodes as he once was. The risk that the statue now presented to the university was not only its animate presence, but also its constant state of transformation. One could not know what form it would take next; it might no longer act in the university's best interests. The statue had become responsive, entering into direct relation with those who were most attendant to it: the student protestors. This relation of responsiveness with its social environment made it antithetical to the lag of institutional procedure and immaterialized democracy. After one month of material-becomings with the many interventions and improvisations of student protestors, it was no longer the stabilizing force of an overrepresented colonial epistemology. It no longer represented and reproduced the latently colonial epistemological voids of deactualized symbolism, empty contemporaneity, and inanimate matter. Rather, the statue was becoming the materialized intensity of an emergent black radicality. In its proliferating transformations, its imploding temporalities and symbolisms, its responsiveness to affect, the frantic looping of its changing image through media, mind, and moment, the statue had become the nexus of something like popular, endogenous epistemologies, as described by Francis B. Nyamnjoh: "Far from subscribing to rigid dichotomies, popular epistemologies build bridges between the so-called natural and supernatural, physical and metaphysical, rational and irrational, objective and subjective" (2012:131). The statue's mutating matter had itself become this bridge. It was a zone of mobility *between* past and present, rhetorical and actualized; what Deleuze and Guattari name a "line of becoming." They describe this line as "a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's-land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other" ([1980] 1987:293). Precisely because of the between-ness of this bridging role, the statue was no longer contingent upon, nor co-optable by, any one fixed interpretation, ideology, or epistemology. It was instead drawing all possible functions into a "deterritorialized" relation. This deterritorializing function meant that, far from serving the majoritarian power of latently colonial epistemology, the statue was, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms "becoming-minoritarian," as it was becoming-matter (293).

On 9 April, the day of the removal, Rhodes was enclosed in a high wire fence and surrounded by a sea of bodies. The architecture was overcome by a rising wave up the Jameson steps—students singing, climbing lampposts, ululating, chanting in disjointed unity, cellphones craning, a drone in flight overhead. The crowd hummed with that communal affect of being *within* history, and *within* a moment; that is, before it has solidified into its representable form. Rhodes, who now had bright orange paint streaked across his eyes, was harnessed with green ropes and rigged to a crane. The intensity continued to build, until the statue, it seemed, was ejected by the intensity of the crowd. Or (more cynically put), the university pulled the plug, finally flushing the shit that started this all. Even as Rhodes rose up, the crowd continued to chant, "Rhodes Must Fall, Rhodes Must Fall."

Rhodes, in the end, did not fall, but floated. Or rather, the statue's falling was a flight of sorts, perhaps a fleeing. Disjointed from the stone plinth, Rhodes became, quite literally, a baseless ideology. The statue spun slowly on its ropes, locating unseen vistas with its hazard-orange gaze. "In popular systems of knowledge," writes Nyamnjoh, "the opposite or complement of presence is not necessarily absence, but that which is beyond the power of the senses to render



Figure 5. *The Rhodes statue is suspended in mid-air as a crane lifts it into falling-flight, 9 April 2015. (Photo by Micha Serraf, hello@thecapetownphotographer.com)*

observable” (2012:132). In the moments of Rhodes’s falling-flight, the dichotomy of presence and absence imploded. Intensity shifted from the statue’s body to the space of its absence: the empty plinth. For a moment the plinth remained empty, and a deep hole—a void—was revealed at its center. Then the fence was broken and people streamed in to occupy the plinth. Behind them, Rhodes was secured to the back of a truck. A student climbed the truck and attempted to cover the statue’s face, releasing the surrounds from its unseeing gaze.



Figure 6. *The statue being secured to a truck for removal, 9 April 2015. (Photo by Sipho Mpongo)*

Days after the statue’s removal, a dark shadow spread from the base of the empty plinth, descending the full flight of stairs, ending in a stooped shoulder, a curved head resting in the crook of a fist. Spray painted anonymously overnight, each distinguishable stroke hashes out the moments of its making. While the plinth has since been boxed in plywood, the shadow has not been scrubbed away.

Sylvia Wynter's claim that the overrepresentation of Western Man is *the* struggle of our time holds a double imperative: to unsettle the West's exclusionary descriptive statement of the Human (i.e., of itself), and to establish autonomy for the plurality of humans "ourselves." This autonomy necessarily needs to be sought beyond the assumption "that the mode of being in which we now are (have socialized/inscribed ourselves to be) is isomorphic with the being of being human itself in its multiple self-inscribing, auto-instituting modalities" (Wynter 2003:132). Understanding Rhodes's falling-flight as both an unsettling of Western Man and an emergence of endogenous epistemology, gives a clue as to the nature of the autonomy Wynter calls on. Namely, that it has no one "nature." If "the being of being human" is "in its multiple self-inscribing, auto-instituting modalities," then autonomy from power's stratifications and overrepresentations is found (inasmuch as it is never "found") within perpetual invention, improvisation, and responsivity. As soon as the unsettling is thought to be done, settlement returns—perhaps in a different guise, but nonetheless sedimenting into familiar patterns of overrepresentation. The decolonial motion that I see emerging through Rhodes Must Fall is one of perpetual unsettling via the multiple re-turns to transform the statue. I want to consider this re-turning as a choreography of decolonial movement: a turning motion that attends



Figure 7. *The fading graffiti shadow of Rhodes descending the stairs from the base of the plinth, which, after three years, remains boxed in gray plywood, April 2018. (Photo by L. Evans)*

as it unsettles. It is a turning that takes in the full vista, refusing the fixed mark of Rhodes's metallic gaze, and its petrification of past, person, world, and the knowable.

In *Matter and Memory* Henri Bergson writes that "there is in matter something more than, but not something different from, that which is actually given" (2005:71). This "more than" is no mystical phenomenon. Rather, it is matter's insistent excess beyond the division of self from world, subject from object, animate from inanimate, and human from nonhuman life. This "more than" quality could be described, in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's terms, as "torque" (2013:52). Neither the force, nor the object, but the spin, torque is always unpredictable and in excess of its parts. Harney and Moten attribute torque to blackness, to fugitiv-

ity, to that which is anoriginary to governance, and which leaves governance, therefore, always on the back foot: always reactive, never creative (2013:52). It is this torque, this "more than," that colonial power voids in its representation of matter, and materially precarious life, as immaterial. It is also this torque that sets off an unfurling of invention: of shit colliding with metal, draping blankets, windblown bags, the (im)possibility of weightless bronze, absent-presence, and falling-flight.

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