

# Destruction styles

## Black aesthetics of rupture and capture

Thulile Gamedze



Diagram A: rhodes explodes, corrodes, and loses head

I think that I and many others involved with the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement at the University of Cape Town – and beyond – might have preferred, on the 9th of April 2015, to see:

A. Cecil's head explode, blast-site of bronze shards glistening in the afternoon sun, on the sprawling, clamoring, continually inaccessible grounds of the university's main campus, or to watch him

B. corrode; to see him melt into chemical soup, nauseating smugness fallen to dusty, pungent metallic liquid, or to gather as he was

C. beheaded, the ugly likeness becoming a circulating prize, moving ritualistically for display between comrades' res and digs rooms.

But the motherfucker just got *airlifted*.

Until this moment, the texture of RhodesMustFall had been altogether different, the movement's 'decolonisation' denoting improvised – if strategic – instances of chaotic disruption, directed by radically critical readings of the South African status quo. But the awkward, unfamiliar ceremonial tone of the removal seemed to have

the unwarranted effect of instigating a feeling of 'unified resolve' to the insurgent action that had preceded it. Cecil John Rhodes' gentle elevation in the fresh autumn air was a sinister aesthetic reminder that the power of coloniality – evident, in this case, in the South African neoliberal university's response to decolonial critique – is an immeasurable capacity to co-opt and reconstruct that which undermines it.

Compare this institutionally paid-for airlift, for a moment, to Edward Colston's recent drowning in Bristol, the labour of heavy-lifting protestors never more at home (never less alienated) in their bodies, as they pulled him down and released nightmare to the depths. A world away from the weightlessness of air, from secured and safe removal, Colston fell heavy, drowned low and downward into deep water.

This comparison serves not to detract from the necessity of Rhodes' removal, but rather to emphasise the fact that the insurgent act need not be defined purely by its outcome (that the statue is gone) but should be read also with regard to the extent to which it attends

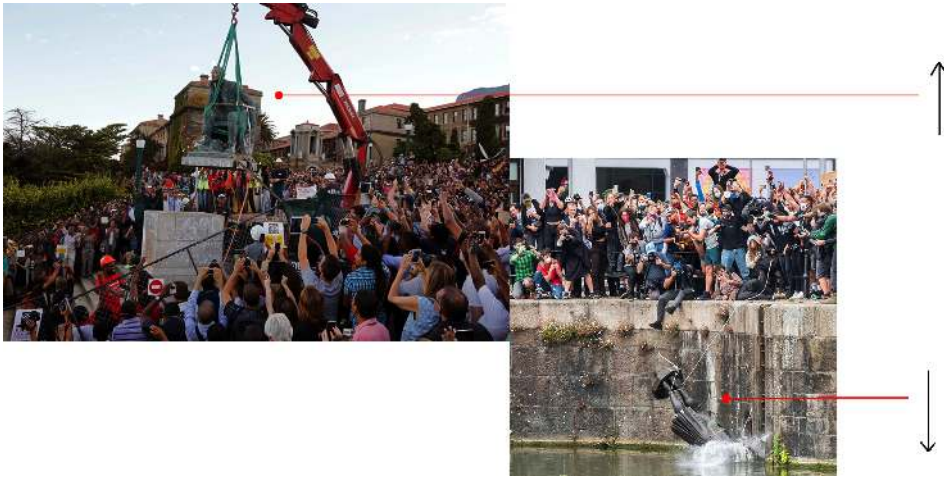


Diagram B: rhodes is lifted, colston is drowned

*aesthetically* to the historical or political problem at hand (Colston has been drowned!). The physical destruction of, or intervention in, coloniality's life is always *enacted* with significantly varying modes of style, tone, embodiment and performance, all formal and political choices that together can be regarded as an overall 'aesthetic'. When read in terms of their aesthetics, modes of destruction of colonial images and objects, and symbolic choices relating to the manner in which resistance is expressed by decolonisation movements, may take on a variety of political meanings that are less evident in readings of protest that centralise tangible outcomes. The act of destruction or insurgency should be seen as an act, visibilising through its aesthetic choices the connection between contemporary experiences of oppression (as patriarchy, racism, classism) and inherited historical traumas of the colonial project, in slavery, land theft, genocide, and so on. Our collaborative efforts then, in annihilations of white supremacy, are inevitably as aesthetic practitioners, illustrating expressions of resistance (better guerilla-facing than seated at the table) that further enunciate or diminish the *meaning* around which our protests are based.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I draw from an overlying analysis of RMF's 2015 employment of the word 'decolonisation' at the University of Cape Town. I imagine the term as a located aesthetic set, whose reconfigured meaning in this context made possible the temporary rupture of space-time at the university, but whose capacity to signify radical Black disruption has greatly declined, with the word continually instrumentalised by a global neo-

liberal academic discourse. I propose that the depoliticisation of the term has its origins in the actual climactic moment of Rhodes' removal and, more generally, that this institutionally-assisted 'insurgent' action can be politically unpacked, through aesthetic reasoning.

However, despite the slowing effect of neoliberal appropriation and capture of radical vocabularies, this time of abolitionist politics, expressed in the physical destruction of colonial symbols, is evidence that there exists a shared aesthetic (and political) impulse that transcends the limited possibility of rhetoric. In an intentionally aesthetic reading of contemporary Black embodiments of colonial destruction in the West, through the political lens of RMF in Cape Town, I reflect on a cross-spatial and cross-temporal parallel in meaning; a shared desire, perhaps, for the end of this world.

## Decolonisation with RhodesMustFall, Cape Town

The statue was therefore the natural starting point of this movement. Its removal will not mark the end but the beginning of the long overdue process of decolonising this university. In our belief, the experiences seeking to be addressed by this movement are not unique to an elite institution such as UCT, but rather reflect broader dynamics of a racist and patriarchal society that has remained unchanged since the end of formal apartheid.<sup>2</sup>

In early 2015, a much sampled, and largely broken, 'decolonisation' entered the mix of a group of radical Black student organisers at the University of Cape Town, mobilising around the image or phrase 'RhodesMustFall'.

Broken, because we must attend to the fact that decolonisation's re-re-re-re-emergence at this time was (and is) heavily annotated, the results of its historical processes in Africa having yielded much revolutionary independence struggle the ultimate outcome of which has been nations still structured by underdevelopment and exploitation intended to profit former colonisers. Regardless of the immense systemic failures of post-independence that the notion of 'decolonisation' brings with it, RMF found its employment necessary in the landscape of contemporary Cape Town – a city often described as South Africa's last colonial outpost. This is easily observable in Cape Town's stark geographical apartheid, where racial categories emerging from British colonialism and strengthened through white nationalist Afrikaner administration ('black', 'coloured', 'european') continue to determine where and how people live. Cape Town's racial divide largely determines peoples' access to resources, basic services, security, and level of exposure to the threat of government eviction and destruction of homes – a staple of life in the new South Africa.<sup>3</sup> As is well documented, the introduction of formal democracy in 1994 was a cosmetic intervention which both obfuscated and deepened the material inequalities of South African life through the implementation of deeply damaging neoliberal policies that arrived with the election of the African National Congress.<sup>4</sup> South Africa remained South Africa, only now with a heavily indebted Black government whose entrapment in racist economic negotiation meant that socialist measures, such as the nationalisation of land and natural resources, free education and free access to decent public healthcare, were impossible to implement with resources securely tied up in the private (white) sector. In Cape Town in particular, the failure of Azania's coming is glaringly obvious, the contentious UCT statue of Cecil Rhodes being just one of many littering the city alongside numerous other figures that pay tribute to the violence of British imperial rule in the Cape.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst RhodesMustFall came into being following an individual intervention with UCT's Rhodes statue, the movement's preoccupation with 'decolonisation' had no association with partisan, nationalist or individualised agendas.<sup>6</sup> Decolonisation, re-sampled, operated here with an ethics of non-partisanship, focused on what historical decolonisation processes had failed to rup-

ture: systemic reproductions of white supremacy. Based broadly in the recognition of South Africa as a product of coloniality, the movement directed its attention to the ways in which the university was a culpable agent in deepening the hold of white supremacist power structures.

Furthermore, decolonisation's 'arrival' in the movement was conditional, welcome inasmuch as it was accompanied by modes, practices and methodologies seeking to undo the rendition of revolution in terms that too closely mimic the colonial status quo. This break with 'revolutionary' business as usual, in other words, wanted nothing to do with the image of struggle as one of individuals, martyrs or heroes exemplified by able-bodied young Black men. Instead, I believe there was a desire to, perhaps prefiguratively, embody the actuality of revolutionary work which, by nature, is collective and in refusing to adhere to modes of identity regulated by institutional power, is Queer. In this regard, there was no formal leadership and, in media representation, press conferences and interviews, concerted effort was made to ensure that different comrades spoke on behalf of RMF. The movement treated meetings and negotiations with the university's management as open invitations, where any and all members who wished to, could attend and speak, often overwhelming the staff in numbers. RMF thus refused 'representation', choosing to remain in flux and resistant to the efforts of institutions like the university and the predominantly white-owned press to define and epistemologically *resolve* its identity and work. Led conceptually and politically largely by gender studies, politics and law students, RMF's 'decolonisation' project outlined its 'three-pronged' approach as a meeting point of Black Consciousness (hereafter BC), Black Radical Feminism (particularly Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality), and Pan Africanism.<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, the simultaneous take-up of these theoretical and political voices made for a rather eccentric and, at times, non-cohesive mixture of scholarship and strategy. The sharing of texts and ideas was improvisational, building in real-time, but the curriculum we were engaging was rife with irresolvable contradictions. How, for instance, does a Fanonian reading of violence through *The Wretched of the Earth* – a text in which the violation of Black womens' bodies forms a backdrop to both white settler colonialism and Black revolutionary



struggle – converse with intersectionality, a vocabulary designed to be legible in the context of American jurisprudence and demanding that all forms of an individual's (simultaneous) oppression should be recognised (simultaneously)? What emerges from this and from DuBois' question 'how does it feel to be a problem?', when asked in South Africa, a country whose vast majority is Black, over one hundred years later?<sup>8</sup> How do we reckon with a history of BC that is immediately associated with expressions of masculinity? What is Pan-African solidarity from South Africa, when African nationals who move to the country are subject to forms of xenophobic attack – physical, social and administrative? Where does our systemic complicity lie in this unfolding as Black South Africans?<sup>9</sup> How, in the context of widespread 'gender-based-violence', not sparing any corner of any campus of UCT, does a group of Black students – trans, queer and cis – hope to organise and read together, through this deep mistrust and fear?<sup>10</sup> What can a curriculum *be* under such impossible conditions?

In Paulo Freire's terms, dialogue is able to facilitate a pedagogy of freedom, through the coming together of ideas that critically name peoples' worlds and experiences in a continually unfolding process. The dialogic imperative is that the word, in such a pedagogy, must simultaneously *reflect on* and *enact* the transformation of collective reality. As Freire argues, 'When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating "blah" ... On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism. The latter – action for action's sake – negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible.'<sup>11</sup> So, at best, by virtue of its offering a meeting place for Black students (and workers at key times) to respond to and act against the manifest nature of oppression at the university, RMF could be said to have operated dialogically. At worst, aspects of the movement's internal failure, or coloniality (perhaps Freirian 'verbalism' or 'activism'), reproduced the oppression against which it purported to stand.<sup>12</sup> What I believe can be claimed here is that the sharing of theoretical work, rooted in personal experience and towards the creation of a collective Black study (and fugitivity), birthed a newly energised Black critique of the South African university that has had rippling ef-

fect.<sup>13</sup> This critique, by no means smooth, resolved or perfect, recognised the university as both a microcosm of, and a reproducing force in, the contemporary colonial landscape of South Africa and beyond.

## **RMF as a Black connective technology**

Means of communication were not constructed in the colonial period so that Africans could visit their friends.<sup>14</sup>

We are oppressed because we are black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group. We must cling to each other with a tenacity that will shock the perpetrators of evil.<sup>15</sup>

Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* offers a robust critique of the still-popular notion that Europe's colonialism 'benefited' Africa by providing services and infrastructure that the continent would not otherwise have had. Drawing on examples from across the continent, Rodney argues that colonial 'infrastructure' was built *only* to profit the coloniser, in the process deepening the oppression, enslavement and slow killing of indigenous peoples who were seen only as a cheap labour force. Of particular significance are the railways and transport routes which, far from enabling the coming together of Black people, resources and services, are oriented towards the sea for 'Black export' or Black repression (military deployment) thus instead producing fracture and alienation in the colony.<sup>16</sup> Rhodes himself was prone to citing the speculative plan for a railway from the 'Cape to Cairo', a notion exemplifying the scale of unchecked colonial exploitation in Africa and its desire to accumulate profit and alienate Black labour. Diagnosing colonial communicative devices as mechanisms precluding Black friendship, Rodney calls for a radical suspicion in our analysis of colonial infrastructural *purpose*.

The colonial university does not and cannot, by its very nature, provide connectivity between Black people for the benefit of Black people. Its infrastructures are designed with the opposite purpose – to appropriate and export Black knowledge (as we will see with 'decolonisation') – and to repress and gaslight Black expressions of opposition to oppressive conditions.

So in the sudden and impossible rupture caused by RMF, an initially haphazard but later more organised Black connective infrastructure was built, echoing historical appropriations in the colony in service of Black to-



Diagram C: forced entry into Azania (House)

getherness. The movement's singing of the Pan-African protest hymn *Azania* can be recognised in this regard, as the take-up of a Black connective intervention repurposing Rhodes' conception of 'Cape to Cairo' into a form of cross-border solidarity.<sup>17</sup> In occupying the administrative heart of UCT (the Bremner building, renamed 'Azania House') RMF undermined its operative function, capturing the very architecture of business as usual and holding the institution to ransom. Occupation, of course, is always a refusal of the 'proper'/colonial channels of negotiation and prioritises work that facilitates connection and friendship, even as this priority is destined for trouble.

Additionally, RMF's pedagogy aligned itself with Black Consciousness, a movement whose revolutionary intent also outlined the importance of Black connective technology. BC's project, as articulated by Steve Biko, was and is to 'broaden the base of our operation', to centralise the 'totality of involvement', and to move always towards a unified Blackness.<sup>18</sup> The movement took up the BC refusal of apartheid identificatory ethnography, the notion that to be *black* is to claim a political identity of solidarity against white supremacy (referred to in this text as *Black*). In stark opposition to terms like 'PoC' or 'Brown' and 'Beige', BC refuses to sustain the structure of white supremacy in its language of self-identification. These terms, granting whiteness full political opacity, render the racialised body hypervisible, as the sum of shades by which it is negated from being white. This central critique of BC – a philosophy and politics frequently re-marginalised in South Africa and elsewhere – is a rad-

ical one in its insistence that resistance to white supremacy be premised on a systematic refusal of race as a valid mode of identification. In its choice of opacity of identity, BC is preoccupied with self-identification, which, I'd argue, finds political parallel in radical conceptions of Queerness.<sup>19</sup> Political Blackness allows a container of solidarity, where forms of oppression in classism, patriarchy, colourism, language hierarchy, and so on are simultaneously collectively validated as lived realities and recognised as violences sustained by race as an operative formation of a white supremacist world. Political Blackness asserts a basic precondition of humanity, that of recognition and love, inclusive and respectful of difference. In its use of BC, RMF was a Black-run movement, comprising members with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, from historically racialised, segregated and oppressed groups that experienced different levels of oppression and exclusion under colonialism and apartheid.

### 'Decolonisation' under duress

During its first occupation in the lead-up to the statue's removal, the movement was highly visible and impossible to ignore. RMF action saw the disruption of university conferences and guest lectures, and the frequent vandalising of the university's surfaces and symbols. Keynotes of international professors were routinely redirected, in some way or other, to the contention at hand (decolonisation of the university), the role of chair in various talks, meetings and debates was decisively seized by fallists, and wheat pastes of Black revolutionaries appeared on

campus overnight.

Something shifted through the university's decision to remove the Rhodes statue. Overnight, management seized power, claiming a kind of administrative role over the movement and differentiating between 'legitimate' and 'criminal' protest. Following the removal of the statue, the continued occupation of Azania House was interdicted and officially entered into the realm of criminal activity.<sup>20</sup> Students were arrested, and furthermore, on reading the interdict and its attached 'evidence', we became aware that the occupation had been spied on and documented by management from its inception. The institution's performance of 'transformation' through its strategic compliance (in Rhodes' removal) was exposed in all its disingenuity.

If we see things this way, the specificity of the *style* of Rhodes's removal, specifically in his mechanical airlift, created the kind of photo-op that readily boosted the image of this 'African university'. Let us consider that once loosened from its plinth, the statue could have been removed in a variety of ways – wrapped in a protective layer and rolled into the back of a truck, say; manually walked off the plinth, with the help of some heavy-lifters; taken care of unceremoniously, packed into a wooden crate and disappeared into the night.<sup>21</sup> But some undercover, perhaps even unintentional, aesthete of the university's administration created a spectacle of epic proportion, which I argue contributed to the securing of the university's image in the public eye, thereby marking it as an ethical agent in the manner it chose to characterise and punish the movement in the period afterwards.

RMF was now in a corner and, forced into a more explicitly hostile relation with the university and the law, had to re-think its aesthetic practices.

In a smaller occupation of a university administrative building – 'Avenue House' bordered on one side by Rhodes Avenue – work continued in the form of longer-term, less risky projects. For a short period, there was an RMF church of Black liberation theology on Sundays. Here, we produced a journal issue and, together with workers, made a documentary on outsourced labour at UCT.<sup>22</sup> Mysteriously, at some point during this period, the nose of a bronze Rhodes bust situated off-campus suddenly disappeared, violently ground off, never to return (the same statue has since been decapitated).<sup>23</sup> Work wound down in pace, and more radical interventions – like the

nose business – were carried out in secret (while the action resonates with those of RMF, it remains unclear who was responsible for it). It was only towards the end of the year, when RMF participated in the call for 'national shutdown' initiated by the FeesMustFall movement at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), that visible actions recommenced.<sup>24</sup> This energy would continue into 2016 through the protest intervention known as *Shackville*.

*Shackville* took place on 15 and 16 February 2016, with RMF/FMF members organising and protesting around housing for poor Black students, whom the university had rendered homeless. This homelessness, which occurs every year, is due to an administrative system that overbooks its facilities (to sustain profit margins) on the assumption that some students will not enrol. The effect of this is that poor Black students not local to Cape Town are left without safe accommodation in the vicinity of the university and forced to complete their studies whilst homeless in a very expensive city. *Shackville* blocked a main UCT driveway with an installation of a corrugated iron shack adorned with the words 'UCT HOUSING CRISIS'. After refusing to move the set up – which included a braai, or barbecue – private security and state police were called in on 16 February. After a student was beaten up and the installation destroyed by security and police, students retaliated, collecting some of the university's paintings from nearby student residences and burning them. 'The Shackville 5' included students who were expelled following the action and interdicted by the university. In ironic employment of the wretched history of the new South Africa, students later began pushing the university to hold a 'Shackville TRC' in which the five would be granted amnesty, and other protest actions that had taken place would be 'forgiven'.<sup>25</sup>

This final straw, in *Shackville*, saw what were once 'courageous university activists' rendered in honest colonial form: as barbarians under the rightful threat of the law. The shift was, of course, inevitable, and I believe greatly overdetermined by the power of the static image of Rhodes' removal by the university, which now shadowed all RMF work. Having visually arrested the movement's insurgency so close to its inception, the institution's aesthetic powerplay sidestepped the necessity for genuine and sincere engagement with the structural critique that fallist intervention continued to push.



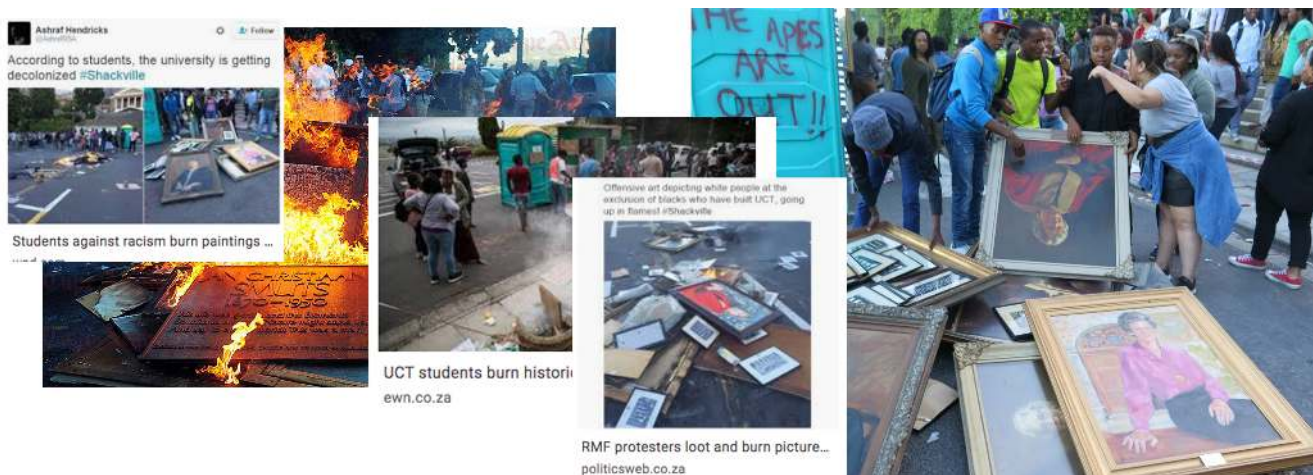


Diagram D: Shackville, samples

The heavy-handed treatment of *Shackville* protestors was evidence of this.

### 'Decolonisation' at the conference

The spectacle of Rhodes' removal (as event, and as an aesthetic/political shift) may have contributed to the beginnings of opportunistic and regressive mobilisations of the word 'decolonisation' within neoliberal spacetime. We began to notice something we would continue to see for the next few years: the word unstuck from the meaning it had had in the RMF context and its surfacing in spaces where its presence would before have seemed implausible. As I've mentioned, the notion of decolonisation for us – beyond the shuffling of curricular content – had implications for the radical re-organisation of the structure of pedagogical space. The movement had sought to disturb institutional academic hierarchies that contrasted 'professional' knowledge with the perceived inadequacy of 'not knowing' (frequently mapped onto hierarchies of white versus Black, wealthy versus poor, heteronormative versus Queer, masculine versus non-masculine, and so on). In this regard, RMF founded its own sense of togetherness through the mutual sharing, validation and political theorisation of members' lived experiences of oppression at UCT, within the context of a disruption of the university's regular form, via occupation of its main administrative space.

In light of RMF's generalised suspicion and continued intervention in normatively organised academic spaces, 'decolonisation's' entry into paid-for conferences

and panel discussions was jarring. The *form* of these academic spaces, in RMF's conception, was antithetical to decolonisation itself. What's more, as time went on, many of us involved in 'decolonisation' work were now faced with ethical conundrums. Suddenly recognised as 'specialists' on 'decolonisation', we were well-positioned to become agents in furthering the term's depoliticisation as invited panelists, conference presenters and recipients of international scholarships. Working through such invitations and attempting to decipher an event, publication or panel as either a site for the *application* or the *institutional appropriation* of ideas around 'decolonisation' became a crucial part in understanding the poignant harm easily perpetrated when we take up the seductive but politically-doomed role of Harney and Moten's 'critical academic'.<sup>26</sup>

But the extent to which the word 'decolonisation' has been turned on its head in the past few years goes beyond even this phase of appropriation and re-instrumentalisation of individual activists' work. My most recent and most disturbing experience of 'the newest decolonisation' occurred last year at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, at a conference entitled *Unsettling Paradigms: The Decolonial Turn and the Humanities Curriculum*. In a sinister programmatic choice, Wits Vice Chancellor Adam Habib had been invited to speak as part of a panel of VCs from a number of South African universities in a discussion entitled 'Decolonising the African University: Inspiration from Without the Ivory Tower'. Habib, having been responsible for the deployment of excessive police force (rubber bullets, in some



Diagram E: footnotes for vice-chancellor panel at 'Unsettling Paradigms' conference, 11 July 2019

instances at close range, military vehicles, teargas, stun grenades) against FeesMustFall protestors and their comrades at Wits University between 2015 and 2017, has since written a book entitled *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #FeesMustFall* in which he assumes an authoritative position in an exploration of the movement. His book, somehow framed by him simultaneously as a subjective memoir and as 'setting the historical record straight', has been criticised not only for historical inaccuracies but also as an irresponsible piece of writing demonstrating a lack of academic rigour in reductive framings of fallist politics, name-calling of academic staff who aligned with the movement and unethical inclusions of names and personal correspondence without the necessary permissions.<sup>27</sup>

In this turn – a colonial one, par excellence – we see Habib, a footsoldier of colonial reproduction in some of its most basic forms of physical violence and strategic misnaming, assume the role of epistemic authority over the meaning of the very labour that his agency, in collaboration with police, violated, traumatised and squashed. Not only should we hold Habib personally accountable for causing pain and fear to a decolonial student movement, but we should listen to and study his work on the subject of decolonisation itself. Herein, we can recognise the forceful and insidious undoing of this word, suddenly able to denote the very structures of violence and power that it, at a certain stage, contested and disrupted. At the panel discussion itself, a small, silent and open protest was organised by former RMF member Kealeboga Ramaru and her comrades, disturbing the event's bizarre perform-

ance of business as usual with signs detailing Habib's use of force against FMF activists. Despite the fact that information about Habib's application of force was made explicit by the action, the panel continued unhindered, with Habib speaking from behind silent protestors. The only acknowledgement of our presence was in one panelist's attempt to analyse it in real-time. In a severely infantilising moment, she congratulated us, going on to collapse the recent, tangible histories of trauma and violence that the protest highlighted into an added 'symbolic' layer of 'complexity' and 'nuance' that served to flavour the conversation. In this seemingly innocent seizure of authorial power over the act of disruption we can note another kind of institutional gesture of *lift and removal*.

In my own field of the visual arts, it is not unusual to encounter discussions or roundtables about 'decolonisation' at commercial galleries or even art fairs – centres of the racist, exploitative, capitalist exchange that roots the 'art world'. In these discussions, one often encounters a curious shift in the word's employment, whereby 'to decolonise' something no longer implies a structural and enacted critique of conditions through which knowledge production or exchange takes place, but rather involves a series of speculative, vague assertions that are perpetually relegated to the future. This drastic re-reading of the word – perhaps echoing the failures of historic decolonisation – is by no means an error. By taking it up in bewilderingly reductive questions like 'how do we decolonise arts practice?', or 'how do we decolonise education?', and situating it in the parameters of capitalist space-time, the discussants and listeners' sensory attention in these



contexts is shifted from the immediate presence of coloniality or of the neoliberal structures that determine the rules of exchange in the first instance. In these polite intellectual overhauls, the likeliness of radical intervention is reduced, insurgency collapsed by forced conflation of the word and the meaning or application of 'decolonisation'.

## New/Old Ruptures

Official discourse seeks to accustom us to thinking about state violence as a warranted part of the social order. For them the security of belonging accompanies the re-racialisation of whiteness as the intensification of anti-blackness. The police elaborate the grounds for the extension of a renewed and reconfigured white supremacist political economic order.<sup>28</sup>

In the destruction-work that has followed the hypervisible brutality of George Floyd's murder by the US state, a radical conscientisation, echoing the likes of Jared Sexton, Steve Martinot and many others, is immediately observable, accelerating the meaning of BlackLivesMatter (BLM) from something like 'police must be held accountable under the law for killing black people', to something like 'policing's very mechanism is as a terrorist wing of the white supremacist state'.<sup>29</sup> Whilst Sexton and Martinot's use of 'black' in 'anti-black' cannot be regarded as the same Black in Black Consciousness, I cite this quote to highlight its critique of the police, which figures policing in general as an operation with the function of perpetually sustaining the 'white supremacist political economic order', in their words (with further comment on my conception of black-Black relation to come.)

In BLM's call for the defunding of the police, I speculatively suggest that we may be witness to the bouncing of meaning across space. This is to say that this newly amplified call of BLM directly refuses, on a mass scale, the capture of the movement's intention by a singular cosmetic act, by a *lift and removal*, or good PR, in the form of arrest and punishment of a single officer. Instead, policing as structure is recognised as a system whose 'honest work' is the reproduction of (b)lack criminality and thus ongoing forms of enslavement. A BC elaboration on this would necessarily have to extend the understanding of policing's white supremacist expressions beyond their active role in the reproduction of the (b)lack slave, to

also include the continued theft and destruction of Indigenous peoples' land, Islamophobia, increasingly violent anti-immigration and bordering policy, anti-Palestinian workings of the US state, re-marginalisations of Africa and the 'global South' in (b)lack American conceptions of (b)lack history, culture and theory, and countless other instances of *racism*, as premised on the notion that race in general is formed through a binary relation to whiteness.

The destruction of Confederate, religious and imperial symbols, often described by diverse media as 'vandalism' or 'graffiti', highlights the dissonance between the violence of normative colonial systems, such as those described above, and the radical refusal in the impulse variously named as 'decolonial', 'anti-racist', Queer, Black, and so on. If we are to analyse this in a BC frame, in keeping with the fundamentals of this text, we could note that such metaphysical resistance work, of pulling, tying, drowning, burning and hanging – *Black work* – could never appear to be generative within coloniality's logic. I say this inasmuch as Black work, as labour unalienated from itself, cannot be understood as labour at all (in its essential manifestation in racialised capital, labour is only labour because of the sustenance it provides to the reproduction of white supremacy). Thus, in the relative illegibility of Black insurgency, in its refusal of the correct channels and its determination to use its own connective technology, we find some common aesthetics, all vulnerable to the misnomers of a colonial imaginary: Edward Colston, a seventeenth-century slave merchant is toppled and then drowned by BLM *vandals* in Bristol; two Confederate statues are pulled down with ropes, dragged through the streets, with one strung up on a lamppost, by *radicals* also associated with the BLM movement in Raleigh, North Carolina; religious statues are mysteriously beheaded in the middle of the night by an unknown *extremist* in Sudbury, Northern Ontario; Columbus suffers the same fate in Boston at the hands of an anonymous *cultural worker*; and recently, the bust of Cecil John Rhodes in Cape Town, whose nose was sawn off in 2015, is decapitated overnight by an unknown *rigorous aesthetic critic*.

The notion underpinning all such intervention irrespective of how it gets named is that Black lives, within the wide parameters of policing that constitute life in racial capital, *cannot* matter. Thus, the affirmative declar-



Diagram F: lynched, beheaded, drowned

ation that they do, even in the ongoing celebrated presence of slave merchants, colonialists and genocidaires, is a kind of sci-fi action, a violent seizure and induction of another world that actually recognises, and so loves, Black life. This action is necessarily deeply destructive of the values underpinning *this* world, and will thus inevitably be the subject of attempts to render it into abstraction, inaction and depoliticisation.

Lifts and removals, in many forms.

I propose here that solidarity and love (Black, Queer) operate in a metaphysical realm – where the *meaning*, the necessity for rupture, is sincere, consistent and held, and words like ‘decolonisation’ are changeable and temporary tools, important inasmuch as they facilitate this meaning temporarily. In the aesthetic possibilities presented by bodies acting against coloniality – the aesthetics of decolonisation, in one moment – we note a possible carriage of radical Black critique across space and time, a force that will continue to be taken up, regardless of the continued co-option of its vocabularies.

*Thulile Gamedze is a cultural worker from Johannesburg, involved in a mixture of art criticism, art history education and art production.*

## Notes

1. My interest in the aesthetics of insurgency draws on a number of recent politically-oriented writings that study the tonal, stylistic, textural, auditory and visual choices that have marked modes of contemporary Black protest or resistance in South Africa, reading these as portals through which subversive historical references, political alternatives and radical positions

might be read. Athi Mongezeleli Joja, ‘Bolekaja Aesthetics’, *AS-AP/Journal* 5:2 (May 2020), 248–256; Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo, ‘Between the Cold War and the Fire: The Student Movement, Antiassimilation, and the Question of the Future in South Africa’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118:1 (2019), 226–239.

2. RhodesMustFall Writing and Education subcommittees, ‘RhodesMustFall Statements’, *The Johannesburg Salon* 9 (2015), 6.

3. Racial disparity in ownership of land has not only remained unaddressed following the end of apartheid but also deepened with ongoing government evictions, destruction of shacks and confiscation of building materials belonging to Black people living on unused government or private land. The issue gained attention during the COVID-19 crisis as evictions continue even though the country’s lockdown regulations render them illegal. Lucky Makhubela, ‘The plight of unlawful evictions in South Africa’, *News24*, 8 July 2020, <https://www.news24.com/news24/columnists/guestcolumn/opinion-the-plight-of-unlawful-evictions-in-south-africa-20200708>.

4. Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000).

5. ‘Azania’ is the Pan-Africanist name for South Africa. The name has radical socialist connotations and calls for the nationalisation of land and resources.

6. On the 9th of March 2015, UCT student Chumani Maxwele threw a bucket of faeces at the Rhodes statue, whilst wearing a placard reading ‘Exhibit White Arrogance @ U.C.T.’ The faeces were collected from open toilets in Khayelitsha, a Cape Town township, with Maxwele’s intervention drawing connections between the white middle class institution and the ongoing impoverishment, exploitation and indignity of a working class Black majority, living in the urban margins. ‘Chumani Maxwele ignites the RhodesMustFall movement at UCT’, *South African History Online*, accessed 23 July 2020, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/chumani-maxwele-ignites-rhodesmustfall-movement-uct>.

7. The key textual elements guiding these areas were Kim-

berlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, Steve Biko's work on Black Consciousness as well as histories of BC student organising in the South African Students Organisation (SASO), and African histories of independence struggle from the Mau-Mau uprising to the Algerian War and the work of FRELIMO in Mozambique. The Fanonian vocabulary was relentless as was other work from the Black Radical Tradition, in particular, early DuBoisian conceptions of double consciousness as well as Orlando Patterson's – and later Afropessimism's – conception of the slave.

8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1995).

9. Thembinkosi Okonko, 'On Afrophobia', *The Johannesburg Salon* 9 (2015), 32–33.

10. Internally, the movement struggled against patriarchy under Black men, although this may be better articulated as 'white patriarchal mimicry'. In mimicry, we see the dehumanising effects of race, where the racialised subject is not granted western identificatory features – like gender – in the same way that white people are. To speak of mimicry is to suggest that Black patriarchy is the enactment of a colonial imperative and a deepening of the project of white supremacy, where Black men themselves do not benefit from the abuse they reproduce, but uncritically play out their colonial role. This reproduction of power was harmful to RMF members and made the space unsafe for many of us. The movement was deeply criticised by the UCT Trans Collective, whose protest-intervention in an RMF photographic exhibition at the beginning of 2016 highlighted the erasure of the labour of trans bodies from its images and halted the show. This intervention extended into a structural critique of the movement's patriarchy and lack of meaningful inclusion of trans people. Additionally, the intervention critiqued the movement's seeming acceptance and representation of sexually violent Black men in its photographs. Yusuf Omar, 'Trans Collective Stops RMF exhibition', *UCT News*, 10 March 2016, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2016-03-10-trans-collective-stops-rmf-exhibition>.

11. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Continuum International, 2005), 87–124.

12. There were deep failures of solidarity with disabled comrades at the institution that meant that for many, the physical space of occupation and the mostly physical manifestations of protest reproduced the inaccessibility of the university that they had long been addressing. As for those who were able to participate, the mental health crisis that erupted following the year of intensity and trauma of RMF participation – particularly amongst Queer and trans people, and cis women – was left largely untreated by the community; only those with the financial means were able to access the medical help that they needed. These are instances of a multitude of shifts from the status quo that RMF was not able to make, although there has been much work on these fronts since then.

13. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Learning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013). Whilst this text did not enter into popular RMF discourse,

I believe its conception of 'the undercommons' – and notions of debt, the neoliberal university and the academic 'critical professional' – offers a useful theoretical reading of the movement's politics.

14. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981), 209.

15. Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs C. R. (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1987), 97.

16. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, 203–280.

17. The hymn outlines a radical Pan-African solidarity that spans 'from Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Madagascar', describing a coming revolution in which there will be an armed seizure of the land, Azania, energised by the work of the Freedom Charter.

18. Biko, *I Write*, 97.

19. Edouard Glissant, 'For opacity', in *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–194; Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, 'Introduction: Theory in the Wild', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117:3 (2018), 453–464.

20. RhodesMustFall Writing and Education subcommittees, 'RhodesMustFall Statements', 13.

21. Michael Safi, 'Racist Gandhi statue removed from University of Ghana', *Guardian*, 14 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/14/racist-gandhi-statue-removed-from-university-of-ghana>.

22. RhodesMustFall Writing and Education subcommittees, *The Johannesburg Salon* 9 (2015), 128; RhodesMustFall & National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU), '#Outsourced', Youtube video, 7 October 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pu\\_pm5g3Ao](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pu_pm5g3Ao).

23. 'Cecil Rhodes loses his nose', *News24*, 22 September 2015, <https://www.news24.com/news24/mynews24/cecil-rhodes-loses-his-nose-20150922>; Mpho Raborife, 'Cecil John Rhodes statue in Cape Town vandalised, head chopped off', *News24*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/cecil-john-rhodes-statue-in-cape-town-vandalised-head-chopped-off-20200714>.

24. First mobilised in October 2015 at Wits University, Fees-MustFall protests sparked a series of shutdowns of South African universities and protest marches putting pressure on individual institutions as well as on the state to address the still unfulfilled constitutional right to 'free education', twenty-one years into the new South Africa.

25. Jenna Etheridge, 'We want a #Shackville TRC', *News24*, 15 September 2016, <https://www.news24.com/news24-southafrica/news/we-want-a-shackville-trc-uct-students-20160915>.

26. Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 25–43.

27. 'An open letter to the readers of Adam Habib's "Rebels and Rage"', *Mail & Guardian*, 1 April 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-04-01-an-open-letter-to-the-readers-of-adam-habibs-rebels-and-rage/>.

28. Jared Sexton and Steve Martinot, 'The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy', *Social Identities* 9:2 (2003), 176.

29. Sexton and Martinot, 'The Avant-Garde', 169–181.