

this personal and public questioning – at its coldest, a sort of empathetic blackface – ‘devalues’ the affective infinitude of Eckford’s *nonperformance* at Little Rock, turning attention from the possibility of Eckford being recognised as embodying ‘an object that becomes a subject by refusing its own disclosure’, and towards Arendt’s more *reasonable*, humanistic political philosophy. What Kohpeiss’s reading potentially omits, however, is once again how the prospect of Blackness’ absolute violability, opposed to its incapacitation, troubles the possibility of especially *Black* insurgent non/performance. For instance, the sheer fact that Hannah Arendt can even utter the question – ‘what would I do if I were a Negro mother?’ – indicates a potential problem in focusing our thought on *what* bourgeois coldness might occlude (i.e., Black nonperformance), as opposed to questioning *how* coldness gains its whitening capacity for occlusion and appearance. Namely, this would involve something closer to an interrogation of how Blackness, in being nothing but the oscillation between white invention and (self-)destruction, is also the very means through which a certain criterion of de/humanisation – the affective preservation of humanity and its affectible others – may be measured at all. Ultimately, the concern must arise over what is so (whitely) desirable, so sensuously attractive,

about envisioning agency in the pure violability of the slave.

While it is of course necessary to imagine, through rage and nonperformance, that ‘a sociality could be discovered ... that consciously withholds itself from the political’, doing so also immediately draws us away from any overdue confrontation with a much more pessimistic truth: the ‘Door of No Return’ is birthplace not only to the devastations of African chattel slavery and its immediate afterlives, but to every ongoing atrocity and mode of resistance. Bourgeois coldness, which whitens *all* by effacing what *is not* [*n'est pas*, per David Marriott], appears the only affective means of reconciling this reality – overdetermined by, in Frantz Fanon’s words, a ‘racial distribution of guilt’ – that is often as horrifying as it is Self-affirming. If its circularity can be derailed, as Kohpeiss infectiously believes it can, doing so will entail going beyond Moten’s resistance of objects, beyond nonperformance, beyond self-disintegration, towards a questioning of how, and to what extent, the struggle has already been decided. As Moten himself says elsewhere, ‘we live in the nightmare of Eurofuturity’, and neither the cold accelerant of masochistic self-disintegration nor the warmth of a fugitive politics of care might finally, once and for all, awaken us from it.

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## Risks we cannot not run

Rahul Rao, *The Psychic Lives of Statues: Reckoning with the Rubble of Empire* (London: Pluto, 2025). 208pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 74535 076 9

In April 2004, an activist group called *De Stoeten Osstendenoare* (‘The Bold Ostenders’) vandalised a monument to King Leopold II (1835-1909) in the Belgian coastal city of Ostend. This statue of Leopold, astride his horse, has faced the North Sea on the Ostend beach promenade since 1931. To Leopold’s left, there is a group of admiring local fishermen and their families; on the King’s right, three Congolese adults and three children climb upwards towards their ‘*genialen beschermers*’ (brilliant protector), who, according to a plaque, liberated them from Arab slavery. They are guided by a white officer in a pith helmet.

Eager to puncture this illusion of benevolence, the Bold Ostenders sawed off the hand of one of the Congolese men – a reference to the notorious punishment meted out to labourers who did not meet their rubber quota in Leopold’s brutally administered colonial possession. But to the activists’ dismay, no one noticed. Days passed. It was not until the Ostenders sent a ransom letter to the city council, demanding the Belgian state issue an official apology to the Congo, that the missing hand was acknowledged. Then, finally, uproar. A manhunt for the culprits was initiated by a particularly belligerent judge. A journalist who had interviewed the

activists was placed under investigation and shadowed using anti-terror legislation (this surreal sequence of events is captured in the 2010 short film *Sikitiko*, directed by Pieter de Vos). The hand is still missing, but the monument was effectively wrenched from its quiet place in the seaside scenery to become a flashpoint for debates around colonial violence, Belgian identity and postcolonial reparations.



In his new book *The Psychic Lives of Statues*, Rahul Rao points to this ‘inopportune’ fact, ‘that most people in most places ignore most statues.’ The problem is not simply that the history that a statue tells ‘might be flawed, but also that that history barely registers at all.’ This is why defacement has the potential (when it is noticed) to be so shocking: it shakes the statue’s publics out of their stupor. In vandalising or toppling a statue, activists hope to reveal the forms of power that its presence smuggles into the built environment. Against the ‘putative pastness’ of the statue’s referent (typically a wide range of dead monarchs, military officials, politicians, philanthropists and other public men), the iconoclasts identify these structures as part of a smouldering drama of inequality and violence in the present. But this theatrical approach creates a strategic paradox for activists,

who ‘use statues to draw attention to causes while insisting that the removal of statues is the least important of their demands.’

Rao’s book navigates a moment of heightened public investment in monuments. *The Psychic Lives of Statues* was prompted, Rao writes, by the 2015 protests demanding the removal of a monument to the colonial politician and mining magnate Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa. The successful felling of Rhodes sparked ‘the most recent iteration of the global iconoclasm in which I am interested’. This moment, which traversed the African continent and encompassed Europe, North America, Australia and beyond, targeted statues that, like Rhodes or Leopold, are ostensibly relics of a past age but which ‘index ongoing experiences of discrimination, dispossession and death’, calling into question ‘formal proclamations of temporal rupture through emancipation, abolition and decolonisation.’ For the protestors at UCT, Rhodes was not just a symbol of historic exploitation but also a sign of ongoing institutional racism on campus and the lingering force of white supremacy in South African society. His statue was removed on 9 April 2015 but the struggle to ‘decolonise’ UCT continues.

Rao, a member of the *Radical Philosophy* editorial collective, first reflected on these themes in a three-part-series of essays ‘On Statues’, published on the critical International Relations blog *The Disorder of Things* across 2016-17. Trialling many of the arguments developed in *The Psychic Lives of Statues*, the essays are interested not only in the toppling of statues, by decolonial agitators as well as by state forces, but also in the construction of new statues. Having taught these blog pieces to students for several years, I was particularly excited to receive this monograph. Like both of Rao’s earlier books – *Third World Protest* (2010) and *Out of Time* (2020) – *The Psychic Lives of Statues* is a powerfully-argued, border-crossing work of comparison and analysis. It draws unexpected and thrilling connections across the ‘rubble’ left by the British empire. Amidst the debris, it unearths a series of challenging but generative insights for those who wish to counter contemporary manifestations of racial, class and caste hierarchy.

The book is also threaded through with fragments from Rao’s autobiography. We join the author as he cycles past a ‘Birthplace of Feminism’ in London’s Newington

Green; we glimpse him as a Law student in Bangalore bundled into a police van during an anti-government protest; we grimace as Rao is yelled at by a ‘lone enraptured male’ whilst kayaking in Tobermory Bay in Scotland. Rao’s engagement with the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement, which famously spread from Cape Town to the United Kingdom, is charged by the fact that he was himself once a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford. Rao shares his excitement but also the embarrassment generated by the RMF Oxford protests, conscious of how little his generation had done to challenge the inequalities consolidated by the scholarship. ‘I am a beneficiary of both apartheid’, Rao writes, referring to the racist extraction that allowed Rhodes to make his fortune but also the violence of the caste hierarchy in India that facilitated Rao’s ability to win a scholarship at Oxford. The book is particularly illuminating for the way it reads race and caste in concert and in contrast.

Though the book crosses the familiar sites of contemporary ‘fallism’ – Cape Town and Oxford but also Bristol, Charlottesville, Sydney – the book refracts much of its discussion through twenty-first-century India. As Rao writes, it is not a book about India, but an ‘Indocentric view of a global conversation about race, caste and decolonisation in the aftermath of the British empire.’ There are autobiographical reasons for this – Rao is from Bangalore – but India compels his attention primarily as a site of proliferating monuments. To understand the power of statues, Rao insists, we need to interrogate why they are put up as much as why they are pulled down.

Competitive statue-building in twenty-first-century India is tied to processes of economic liberalisation but also to the desire to consolidate, in material form, rival publics. Calls from different constituencies to dethrone ‘founding fathers’ like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru coincide with the fevered erection of alternative icons. Dalit activists have been particularly prolific in recent decades, installing tens of thousands of statues of the jurist and political leader Dr BR Ambedkar (1891–1956) across the country. As Rao notes, these statues propel a powerful source of Dalit pride, consolidating visibility ‘in a social context in which segregation and exclusion from public space have long marked the Dalit condition’. But right-wing Hindu nationalists have also engaged in iconopraxis, mining history to construct a martial, masculine tradition, from the seventeenth-century

Maratha warrior Shivaji to the twentieth-century freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose. Chapter 4 is devoted to the ‘Statue of Unity’, a 182-metre-high sculpture of India’s first Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950), inaugurated in the Narmada Valley in Gujarat by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018 and currently the world’s tallest monument. Rao walks us through the ‘dystopian wonderland’ around Patel’s bronze-clad feet and explains the statue’s many functions – including the ‘triumphant capstone’ it provides to a ‘much longer-running project of extractive settler colonial capitalism’: the Narmada River Development project and its sequence of monumental dams.

Rao reflects on this convergence between the ‘material wage’ proffered by Hindu nationalism’s promise of *vikas* (development) but also the ‘psychological wage’ (the phrasing is from W.E.B. Du Bois) provided to its followers through public spectacles of Hindu supremacy, captured in new statues but also in other forms, not least the lynching of minorities. This leads Rao into a captivating and consequential chapter on the ‘overused and much-abused political imperative of decolonisation.’ The globally circulating language of ‘decolonisation’ has found a curious resonance with Hindu nationalists in India and amongst the Indian diaspora, allowing them to couch their calls for cultural revival and historical revisionism (against British but also Muslim ‘colonisation’) in an apparently progressive register. Rao sees this rightly as an example of ‘the perverse mobilisation of emancipatory concepts’ to reinforce rather than dismantle hierarchy. But for Rao, the task is not to adjudicate between ‘true’ or ‘false’ invocations of decolonisation, but rather to reflect on decolonisation’s ‘seductions and temptations’. The problem is not just that decolonial ideas have been misappropriated, but rather that the decolonial impulse ‘always already carries within it the danger of a renewed will to power’. Decolonisation, approached as a form of iconoclasm, a clearing of space, is, paradoxically, most dangerous at the moment of its success, laying bare that vexing question of *what happens next?*: ‘Who should rule? What statues should come up here?’

Imagining theoretical canons ‘as a kind of sculpture gallery’, Rao approaches the problem of decolonial canonicity in a time of fallism. The post-RMF global wave of iconoclasm targeted not only European colonisers but also once-cherished anti-colonial and anti-racist figures.

I have already mentioned the critique of Gandhi, in India but also abroad, which Rao describes as the result of the ‘herculean struggles of Dalit movements, activists and intellectuals over several decades’ to give caste (and in turn Gandhi’s flawed approach to ‘untouchability’) a global intelligibility. But Rao also notes the effect of emergent African discourses of decolonisation, which frame Gandhi (and so too his statues in Africa) as a cipher for both Indian imperialism and racial capitalism. In South Africa, meanwhile, a defining feature of the RMF mobilisations was disenchantment with Nelson Mandela: a frustration with his compromises and the unfinished business of post-apartheid reform, as well as a sense that his name had been co-opted and instrumentalised by elites.



It is the contested legacy of Frantz Fanon, that towering figure of contemporary discourses of decolonisation, that forms the bulk of the analysis in Chapter 5. Rao, following Kobena Mercer, notes the short stop between Fanon’s ‘acute diagnosis of colonial pathologies and nationalist prescriptions about how they might be remedied

– many of which have taken violently homophobic and misogynist forms.’ He follows bell hooks’ critique of Fanon’s reiteration of gender stereotypes and the absence of women from his libidinal economy. But Rao also reflects on how hooks refuses to jettison Fanon, observing how she dethrones him *and* keeps him close. Taking the position of a ‘resisting reader’, hooks affirms Fanon as ‘indispensable even as he is inadequate’. Rao celebrates this dethroning but holding close as ‘the only defensible form of decolonial iconicity’. The stakes of decolonisation are simply too high to abandon it upon recognising its dangers, or its invocation by fulminating Hindu nationalists, or indeed its banal appropriation by museums and cultural institutions in the West. What is needed is a ‘more self-reflexive inhabitation of the seductions and temptations of decolonisation itself, in the full knowledge that they are risks we cannot not run.’

Rao concludes this chapter by asking what ‘a sculpted practice of dethroning but holding close’ might look like. He gives us only one, tantalising example, that of the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum in Accra, whose ‘palimpsestic’ monuments evoke, for Rao, both the romance and the tragedy of the postcolonial condition. I find Rao’s cursory prompt for a new sort of monument brimming with possibility, and certainly demanding further reflection – from activists, artists and architects alike. But whatever new landscapes such a critical approach might generate, they are nowhere near evident in Ostend, Belgium. Finally responding to critiques of the Leopold statue, which had swelled as part of the global Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the city council commissioned the British Guyanese artist Hew Locke to ‘recontextualise’ the monument in late 2024. Locke’s design surrounded Leopold with five, tall pillars, each topped with a different golden sculpture symbolising colonialism in the Congo. One of them was a replacement for the missing hand, clenched into a fist; another was the decapitated head of Leopold. In early 2025, following a round of municipal elections, the newly-instated council members abruptly cancelled the project. Leopold continues to gaze out, unobstructed and intact, into the North Sea.

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