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## After the #Fall: The Shadow of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town

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### A #Fallist moment

On March 9<sup>th</sup> 2015 in an event choreographed for the press, Chumani Maxwele, a student at the University of Cape Town, threw the contents of a port-a-potty of human feces at a statue of Cecil Rhodes strategically located at the main pedestrian entrance to the university's upper campus. Photographs of the moment were widely circulated (FIGURE 1). Maxwele wears a pink construction helmet, possibly referencing the red helmets of the populist political party the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and sandwich boards with the slogan "Exhibit: White Arrogance @ UCT". The act of throwing human feces is an established mode of protest in the Western Cape. Anthropologist Steven Robins has written with insight and humor about the so-called "poo protests" deployed by the urban poor as a means of protesting the slow pace of service delivery under the presidency of Jacob Zuma. As political theatre, poo protests tap into multiple taboos, including Xhosa notions of hygiene, civility and respect, and their opposite, gross disrespect and insult directed against another person (Robins 2013, 2014).

Lingering with the moment, we can further annotate it in the following way. The statue of Rhodes was sculpted by the British medalist and figurative sculptor Marion Walgate, wife of the architect Charles Walgate who played a role in the design of the upper campus of the University of Cape Town following the death by suicide of its principal architect JM Solomon (Phillips 1993). The statue was commissioned by then Governor General, the Earl of Clarendon, and paid for by the Rhodes National South African Memorial Committee. It was dedicated in 1934. It shows Rhodes seated in the pose of Rodin's "The Thinker" (*Le Penseur*), although slightly more upright than the original. His right elbow rests on his thigh, and his head – which is slightly over-scale – rests on his right fist. His left-hand dangles over the edge of the chair or throne and is loosely clasped around a roll of papers. His gaze and the full force of his attention is directed forwards, towards the distant

mountains of the “Hottentots Holland” (FIGURE 2). Walgate’s statue stood on a substantial plinth of granite blocks (it was the plinth rather than the statue itself that was splashed with feces). Inscribed on the plinth are some lines from Rudyard Kipling’s imperial hymn “A Song of the Cities” (1893): “I dream my dream by rock and heath and pine/ Of Empire to the northward. Ay, one land/ From Lion’s Head to Line” (Twidle 2012). In the figurative staging of the scene, Rhodes is understood to be gazing north towards Africa (in fact, he gazes a few points south of due east). The statue was originally located approximately 100 metres further down the slope at the entrance of the upper campus proper. With the construction of the motorway bisecting the university’s upper and middle campuses in 1962 (“Rhodes Drive”, which leads to “Settlers Way”), it was relocated to the position where Maxwele encountered it, at the intersection of the lower ring road and the university’s Jameson steps.

Maxwele’s action led to a month-long protest and the formation of the student-led social movement #RhodesMustFall (#RMF). Initially calling for the removal of the Rhodes statue, the protest broadened to encompass the legacies of colonialism and institutional racism at the University of Cape Town, and the call to “decolonize” higher education (Knudsen and Andersen 2018, Nyamnjoh 2016). In the weeks that followed, #RMF protesters marched, picketed and held mass meetings. Numerous protest action focused on the statue itself, which was graffitied, covered over with black plastic bags, and became the site of spontaneous acts of defiance (FIGURE 3). On March 20<sup>th</sup>, #RMF activists occupied the main administrative building of the university – Bremner Building – site of the Vice Chancellor’s office, which they renamed Azania House.<sup>i</sup> On March 27<sup>th</sup> the university’s Senate voted in favor of removing the Rhodes statue. A few days later the Council of the University of Cape Town, the university’s highest decision-making body, confirmed this decision. Finally, on April 9<sup>th</sup> 2015, exactly one month after Maxwele’s poo protest, the statue was removed from the university campus. The South African social documentary photographer David Goldblatt captured the moment of the removal in an iconic image (FIGURE 4). A flatbed truck stands in front of the plinth. The Rhodes statue dangles in mid-air, suspended on the arm of a crane. A mass of onlookers surrounds the scene, many with cellphone cameras and tablets held aloft, captured by Goldblatt in the act of capturing the moment.

## Coloniality as deep inscription

There is something deeply satisfying about the fall or removal of statues, when those statues are of unpopular or tyrannical figures. Such moments become allegorical in a larger sense. They speak of the hubris of power, but also of its fragility, and the unexpected fall from grace. Paul Maylam, Rhodes's most important recent biographer, recounts an anecdote in which Rhodes tells his friend Leander Jameson that he expects to be remembered for millennia: "I give myself four thousand years" (Maylam 2005: 12). As a concept, history feels abstract and ungraspable. We understand that we are caught up in it, but at the same time its connection to the particularity and detail of our own lives can be difficult to fathom. When we are present at the dramatic fall or removal of a statue, as the student activists of #RMF were on April 9<sup>th</sup> 2015, we understand that we are part of history in the making. At the same time, some important questions are left unanswered by these events. We understand that an act like the removal of the Rhodes statue is a largely symbolic act, but how does it relate to, as it were, actually existing power in the world? What is the link between the symbolic act and the materiality of power? Should the removal be read as a statement of intention – a commitment to confront the legacies of Cecil Rhodes and colonialism at the university – or does it become an end in itself? What about the other, less obvious, legacies of Rhodes at the University of Cape Town? Heritage practices of symbolic restitution often target the obvious vestiges of colonialism and racism, like statues and street names, but how do we begin to conceptualize their less obvious vestiges?

In this short paper I set out to contextualize the Rhodes statue in the broader symbolic and memorial landscape of the University of Cape Town and the Groote Schuur estate. I argue that it is one instance of a more deeply inscribed set of ideas and relations. I have two conceptual starting points. The first is the idea of geometries of power, referencing the work of the Feminist geographer Doreen Massey (1999). I situate the Rhodes statue in relation to imperial geometries of power on the Groote Schuur estate, expressed through architectural form, through the organization of space, through lines of sight and forms of the gaze, and through everyday practices and the embodied habitus of the people who dwell in this landscape. A second starting point is the notion that coloniality exists as a form of deep inscription, in landscapes, in lives, and in the bodies

of colonial and former colonial subjects (Mignolo 2007, 2008, 2011, 2013, Shepherd in press). Often, as in the case of the University of Cape Town, the forms taken by this deeply inscribed coloniality are not immediately obvious to us and instead are part of an ambiguous and only partly understood inheritance. Taking the events of #RMF as a starting point, I track the formation of this ambiguous inheritance through two historical periods, the period of the construction of the upper campus of the University of Cape Town in the 1920s, and a period beginning in the 1890s with Rhodes's tenure at Groote Schuur, when he did so much to shape a memorial landscape and set in place the ideas that would frame his legacy. The University of Cape Town upper and middle campuses form one part of the much larger Groote Schuur estate on the slopes of Devils Peak, the eastern buttress of Table Mountain, acquired by Rhodes piece-meal through the 1890s (Phillips 1993).

It feels important to establish my own position in relation to the events and contexts described here. Beginning in the mid-1980s I was a student at the University of Cape Town. From 2000-2017 I was a member of the academic staff of the university, based in the Centre for African Studies where I established and taught a graduate programme in Public Culture and Heritage in Africa. In 2011 I began offering a Masters course on decolonial thinking and practice, and in late-2014 I hosted Walter Mignolo in an extended seminar in the Centre for African Studies that was to become an important source for #RMF and #FeesMustFall (#FMF). Many of the students from the Centre for African Studies were active in #RMF and #FMF.

### [The temple on the hill](#)

The South African College, later the University of Cape Town, was founded in 1829 on a site in the center of the city. It moved to its current location on the Groote Schuur estate in the 1920s. Two things enabled this move. The first was the terms of Rhodes's will which deeded the land for the establishment of the university. The second was a bequest of money made by Messrs. Werner and Beit, mining magnates, the so-called Werner-Beit Bequest (Phillips 1993). From the beginning the intention was that the University of Cape Town on its new site should embody the ideals of an Oxbridge institution, a kind of "Oxbridge in Africa". In the final design of the university this

intention was manifested in details both great and small: the quadrangular colleges of the original men's and women's residential buildings, and the stuccoed exteriors of the university buildings that encourages a luxuriant growth of ivy. Herbert Baker was at that date the pre-eminent South African architect, largely through his association with Rhodes and the many public buildings that he had designed. Baker being unavailable, a younger architect from his studio, Joseph Michael Solomon, was commissioned to produce a design for the University of Cape Town. Solomon was dispatched on a study tour of "great universities of the world", which took him to the United States and Europe (Phillips 1993). His itinerary included the University of Virginia, whose Jefferson library ("The Rotunda") formed the basis for the design of the University of Cape Town's great hall ("Jameson Hall", named after Rhodes's confederate), an imposing structure in the neo-classical style.

On his return, Solomon drew a plan for the University of Cape Town which, with slight modifications, was the plan that was eventually realized in the construction of the university. Solomon's design works off a strong vertical axis, and a series of cross-axes that follow the contours of the lower slopes of Devils Peak. The vertical axis runs from the top of Devils Peak through a small pavilion or "Summer House" constructed in the late-eighteenth century, the only existing structure on the site. Arrayed along the vertical axis are the central pediment of the neo-classical façade of Jameson Hall, a series of dramatic flights of stairs that lead from level to level of the university ("Jameson steps"), and the central plaza. The cross axes take the form of a series of sweeping avenues, originally imagined as straight lines, but later curved to allow for the natural contours of the site (Phillips 1993).

In design terms, Solomon's plan makes use of two architectural tropes, both of which are common in university designs, but seldom as perfectly realized as in the case of the University of Cape Town.<sup>ii</sup> The first is the idea of the temple-on-the-hill. The idea is that one approaches the university from the base of the mountain – Rondebosch, in this case – sweating and toiling up the lower slopes, via a pathway along the central axis (the "Japonica Walk"), a lonely pilgrim or seeker after knowledge. After several steep climbs (the "Jameson steps") one finally encounters the temple ("Jameson Hall") where, figuratively, one stands with the gods and, as it were, breathes

the rarified air and thinks deep thoughts. Along the route of this pilgrimage one encounters the statue of Rhodes, himself brooding, pensive, deep in thought (FIGURES 5 and 6). The second idea manifested in Solomon's design is the idea of the site of prospect. Standing in front of Jameson Hall on the central plaza of the university, one turns ones back to the mountain and looks out at the city, arrayed below in distant prospect: Rondebosch, Rosebank, Newlands, and further off, Athlone and the Cape Flats. This is a kind of looking – literally an “over-looking” – which is filled with power and intention. Standing figuratively with the gods, one looks out over the busy minutiae of daily life, literally and metaphorically “above it all”. I would argue that it is possible to understand this form of the gaze as a kind of imperial gaze, and I would further argue that the Rhodes statue itself instructed us in this form of gazing. The pensive figure of Rhodes in his chair gazed out and over. What he gazed at is Africa, “one land to the northward” in the words of Kipling's poem, figured by the distant peaks of the “Hottentots Holland” or the more proximate Cape Flats.

Thus, Rhodes's statue, strategically located at the symbolic entranceway to the University of Cape Town, formed a potent statement encapsulating the metaphorical thrust of the architectural design of the university, and its dramatic staging on the slopes of Devils Peak. Conversely – but importantly – what might be called the imperial designs of the University of Cape Town extend well beyond the single instance of the statue of Rhodes and are deeply scripted into the architectural fabric of the university and the organization of space. The “temple-on-the-hill” and the act of imperial gazing carry on, even after the removal of the statue of Rhodes. Indeed, they are part of the habitus of the University of Cape Town, something that we absorb through our bodies as we inhabit and are inhabited by the space, and which we are only partially able to name. For decades I either walked or drove to the University of Cape Town campus, so that I feel that I too have been imprinted by this habitus, and that I carry its marks as an unwilling legacy. It is certainly worth mentioning that it is mainly poorer staff and students, many of them black, who approach the university on foot – and would have encountered the Rhodes statue – while wealthier staff and students drive in via one of the other entrances.

## A last outpost of Rhodesia

In the early-1890s, Rhodes was at the height of his influence. A remarkable career had seen him make a fortune on the diamond fields of Kimberley where he established De Beers Consolidated Mines and become Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in 1890. In 1893 he first leased, and then bought, an estate on the slopes of Devils Peak, “Groote Schuur”, along with 1500 acres of surrounding land. Groote Schuur (“Big Barn”) has been constructed as a Dutch East India Company granary in 1657, before passing into private hands in the eighteenth century. Rhodes had Groote Schuur enlarge and renovated, entrusting the task to Herbert Baker, a young architect who was to play an important role in realizing Rhodes’s vision in the built environment. Baker invented a new style for the purposes, marrying aspects of “Cape Dutch” vernacular – like the exaggerated gables – to English “Arts and Crafts” style (Claassen 2009). A frieze placed over the front entrance depicts the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, and the establishment of the Dutch settlement at the Cape. Other elements, notable the downspouts of the gutters and finials of the interior staircases, shaped like Zimbabwe birds, reference the site of Great Zimbabwe in the newly conquered territory of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). From 1911 to 1994, Groote Schuur was the official residence in the Cape to eleven Prime Ministers, including the architects and perpetrators of apartheid. When Nelson Mandela became head of state in 1994 he declined to live there, moving to a smaller house lower down the slope (Fisher n.d.).

Groote Schuur is now kept as a museum and can be visited by special application. I visited with a group of students from the Centre for African Studies in 2014. Rhodes’s bedroom at the back of the house is kept as a kind of shrine. His bed faces the window, which has a view of Devils Peak. Opposite his bed a glass-fronted cabinet of curiosities is filled with “Africana”: carved wooden headrests, soapstone bowls, potsherds and stone artefacts. On top of the cabinet is one of the eight soapstone birds looted from the site of Great Zimbabwe. This bird was stolen by the hunter Willie Posselt on a visit to the site in 1889. Against the objections of the local chief, Posselt sawed it from the column on which it was standing and sold it to Rhodes. This is the last remaining bird not to have been repatriated following the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 and appears to have dropped from public consciousness (Mudariki 2014).

One of the interesting things about Rhodes as a subject is the intentionality that he brought to shaping his own legacy. Maylam writes: “Rhodes carefully planned and choreographed his own immortalization” (2002: 139). Following Rhodes’s death, the conversation turned to how he should be memorialized. The original proposal, put forward by Early Grey, was for a massive statue of Rhodes, modeled on the Statue of Liberty, to be erected on Signal Hill at the entrance to Cape Town’s harbor. Maylam writes: “This Cape Town was spared. Instead it got the Rhodes Memorial designed by the imperial architect, Herbert Baker, formally opened in 1912” (2002: 144) (FIGURE 7). Rhodes Memorial is situated on the slope of Devils Peak, slightly above and to the north of the University of Cape Town campus. Rhodes Memorial comprises three main parts. At the back, the highest part of the memorial, is a Greek-style temple fronted by columns, modeled by Baker on the temples at Paestum. Inside the temple is a bust of Rhodes in contemplative pose, modeled by the sculptor JM Swan. Shortly after the removal of the Rhodes statue from the University of Cape Town campus, this bust was modified: the nose was sawed off, and an attempt was made to decapitate the bust by sawing through the neck from the back (FIGURE 8). Imposing steps lead down from the temple and form the second element of the design. At the base of the steps is the statue “Physical Energy”, the work of the Victorian allegorical artists George Watts. It shows an over-scale nude male figure on horseback and manages to be both hyper-masculine and kitsch (FIGURE 9).

On each side of the steps of Rhodes Memorial are four bronze lions, also the work of JM Swan. According to Baker, the lions were designed to express “qualities of calm and reserved strength and power” (Baker 1934, cited in Maylam 2002: 144). The third element of Rhodes Memorial is a semi-circular viewing terrace that offers spectacular views to the north and east, on an axis slightly to the north of the sight-lines offered by Jameson steps and the central plaza of the University of Cape Town. Maylam writes: “Rhodes would have been delighted with the Memorial... Its prominent site and high visibility gives Rhodes an enormous, looming presence over Cape Town” (2002: 144). He notes that: “It is a thoroughly imperial monument, embodying a conjunction of architecture and empire-building” (ibid.). Rhodes Memorial repeats, in fact serves as the original for, the twin architectural tropes so powerfully deployed by Solomon in the design of the

University of Cape Town upper campus, the idea of the temple-on-the-hill and the idea of the site of prospect.

A complex play of references and allusions is set up between the different elements that constitute the memorial landscape of the University of Cape Town. Jameson Hall references the Paestum temple of Rhodes Memorial. The viewing terrace of Rhodes Memorial is repeated in the central plaza of the University of Cape Town. Lines of sight and forms of the gaze are recapitulated from site to site, by multiple agents: the bronze bust of Rhodes in the temple, the figure on horseback, the bronze lions, tourists and sight-seers on the viewing platform of Rhodes Memorial, and scholars and students on the central plaza of the university. At the foremost point of this immense play of signification and cross-reference, as a point of focus and intensification, was the Rhodes statue of the University of Cape Town, the statue whose presence was understood as such a visceral affront by the student activists of #RMF.

A final point is that this network of signification once extended across much of southern Africa, encompassing “Northern Rhodesia”, “Southern Rhodesia”, Rhodes’s burial site in the “Valhalla of the Matopos”, and numerous individual sites, locations, shrines, statues, place names, ceremonies, feast days (like Southern Rhodesia’s “Founders Day”), and so on (Maylam 2002, 2005). With the waning of British empire, the independence of once-colonized territories, and the re-evaluation of Rhodes’s legacy, this landscape of memory has been radically contracted to the point where we can speculate that the Groote Schuur estate constitutes the last remaining outpost of Rhodesia.

### The shadow of Rhodes

Following the removal of the Rhodes statue, university managers had the plinth, which remains on the site, covered in a plain wooden box. This was painted grey but was soon graffitied. As I write, the boxed plinth remains on the UCT campus. Over the years it has become a site for impromptu demonstrations and performances, like the small installations that are made on the plinth each year on the anniversary of the massacre of mineworkers at Marikana. It also enjoys a certain notoriety. I often see visitors and students posing for selfies in front of the plinth. One of the most

eloquent reminders of the Rhodes statue was made shortly before its removal. In late-summer the afternoon sun shines from the north-west, behind and to the side of Devils Peak. Someone carefully traced the outline of the shadow of the Rhodes statue as it was cast on Jameson steps, and then filled this in with black paint (FIGURE 10). Now the statue is gone but the shadow remains.

Since the moment of #RMF things have become more complicated and less clear, as perhaps is inevitable. Reputations have waned, the student movement in South Africa has been internally divided, and university managers have seized on the “crisis” of #FMM as an opportunity to force through a range of measures: ramped-up security, the militarization of campuses, budget cuts, increased class sizes, the gating of campuses, and random security checks. #RMF was not a completed set of events, but rather a beginning. It led to further protests: the #Shackville protests against inadequate provision of student accommodation, the protest actions against artworks at UCT, the transgender initiative’s protest at the Centre for African Studies Gallery, and the important national student protests of #FeesMustFall. These events have had a seismic effect on university life and culture in South Africa, to the extent that I would argue that there is a clear “before” and “after”. This new intellectual and political space – “after the #Fall” – began with the fall of a single statue.

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<sup>i</sup> "Azania" from the Ancient Greek is a name that has been applied to various parts of southeastern Africa. It is current among African nationalists as an alternative name for South Africa.

<sup>ii</sup> In 2012 the British publication the *Daily Telegraph* named the University of Cape Town upper campus as third in a list of the ten "most beautiful university campuses in the world" (the top two were Oxford and Harvard).