Killing Rhodes: decolonization and memorial practices in post-apartheid South Africa

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Killing Rhodes: decolonization and memorial practices in post-apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the conflicted relationship that exists between practices of memorial commemoration and contemporary calls for the decolonization of public space. Drawing on the example of the Rhodes Must Fall movement that originated in Cape Town, South Africa, this article demonstrates how the spatiality of commemoration is affected by decolonizing interrogations of memorial structures. Within a postcolonial context, commemorations of Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902), the iconic British businessman and politician who was well known for his race-based prejudices and who played such an important role in the history of South Africa, have become sites where lingering colonial and racist discourses are unearthed and explored. As such, the practices and spaces of memorialization have come under severe criticism for the distorted historical narratives they have long upheld. This article demonstrates how decolonizing practices and ideologies affect public perceptions of those commemorative structures that have long served to memorialize Rhodes.

KEYWORDS

Decolonization; memorials; commemoration; Rhodes Must Fall

Introduction

More than a century after his death, the spectre of Cecil John Rhodes still looms large over the South African landscape – a condition that can, to a large degree, be attributed to various processes of memorialization that connect his name to both the physical and ideological topography of this country. Rhodes (5 July 1853–26 March 1902) was a British businessman, mining magnate and politician who served as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, South Africa, from 1890 to 1896. While posthumous commemorations have largely focused on his supposed generosity and his adroit exploitation of African resources for the benefit of the British Empire, his legacy has also been the target of increasing scrutiny and criticism, especially for the race-based prejudices that he held and openly advocated. In response to decolonizing practices and discourses, the institutionalized memory of Rhodes as saviour and leader has come under severe pressure. Growing calls for Rhodes ‘to fall’ (for his legacy to be radically questioned, destabilized and re-evaluated and re-inscribed) emphasizes a tension that exists between commemorative structures and practices of decolonization, insofar as the impetus for...
remembrance that motivates most of the tombs, memorials and statues that litter the South African landscape stand in stark contrasts to a growing need to topple those products and institutions that come from South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past. Rhodes and his memorialized legacy stands at the centre of this tension.

Drawing on ethnographic descriptions and discussions of the highly influential and controversial Rhodes Must Fall (RMF hereafter) protest movement that began in March 2015 in Cape Town, this article investigates the radical effect of decolonization practices on state institutions and structures that are invested in commemoration. As a collective movement that was mobilized against institutional racism, RMF initiated its call for decolonization by focusing on the removal of a statue of Rhodes on the University of Cape Town campus, arguing for its removal as symbolic for the fall of the white supremacy and privilege that Rhodes (amongst others) have stood and continue to stand for. Coupled with the occupation and burning of buildings and other forms of civil disobedience and disruption, the RMF movement saw the removal of Rhodes’ statue after approximately a month of protest action as the strategic starting point of a larger drive towards decolonization. Combining public demonstrations with a strong Internet presence through the Facebook page ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ and the Twitter hashtag ‘#RhodesMustFall’, the movement had as its outcome both a physical and ideological interrogation of Rhodes and his memorialized presence as a tacit representation of the continuing influence of hegemonic racialism.

While Rhodes’ statue at the University of Cape Town forms the primary basis of this analysis, I also look at three other memorial structures that have undergone scrutiny and critique, namely the Rhodes Memorial that was erected on the slopes of Cape Town’s Table Mountain, Rhodes’ grave in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe and the statue of Rhodes at Oxford University’s Oriel College in England. These commemorative structures are investigated by deploying two interpretive frameworks; first, theories of commemorative practices and contemporary discourses on memorialization; second, that of decolonization and the critical re-inscription of colonialist and imperialist histories. From this basis, the RMF movement is examined for its radical effect on structures and practices of commemoration.

**Commemorative structures and processes of memorialization**

Memorials have a long history as commemorative structures primarily invested in facilitating remembrance. ‘To commemorate’ means to serve as a memorial or reminder of something and to honour some memory in ceremonial and/or spatial terms.

Shelly Hornstein reminds us that memorials are traditionally understood as commemorative sites, as so-called ‘permanent installations … [that] mark the geographic location of an event in history and/or memory’. This process of geographically inscribing an event into a landscape is, for Hornstein, always geared towards a specific audience, as memorials and monuments are created for their ‘constituents: those for whom … [they] have meaning’. Contemporary discourse and writing on memorials highlight various issues that affect our understanding and consumption of commemorative sites, ranging from their growing economic and touristic value, their ability to create, delineate and divide a certain public as well as challenges and changes that they face under anti-memorial and counter-monument rhetoric.
in such discourse is the question as to how commemorative structures potentially act as a means or enabling mechanism for disengaging with troubling histories and conflicting pasts. As James Young argues, memorials and monuments are ‘cultural reifications’ that ‘may not remember events so much as bury them altogether beneath layers of national myths and explanations’. Processes of memorialization potentially ‘coarsen historical understanding as much as they generate it’; Young contends with metanarratives and generalized historical tropes being the outcome of monumentalized versions of history and its human agents.

The process of Rhodes’ memorialization took shape in various ways, including the creation and erection of monuments, memorial sculptures and a tomb in his honour. In addition, this process of memorialization also took a discursive slant in public and institutional rhetoric around the legacy of Rhodes. Following on his death in 1902, various documents started to circulate amongst a western public aiming to immortalize Rhodes as a great hero of the Empire and Progress. For some, Rhodes’ legacy lay in his ardent ‘extension of British influence towards the heart of the [African] continent’, an endeavour that won him the accolade of being the ‘moving spirit’ and ‘civilizing’ agent behind Britain’s imperialist endeavours. This practice of public glorification is also reflected in British politician and Member of Parliament Henry Cust’s extravagant eulogy to Rhodes, worth quoting at length here:

There are very few among the sons of men who, born not in the list of kings and warriors and philosophers, have power within them to change profoundly the maps and minds of humanity. They are yet more rare and happy to whom it is given to see in large measure their work accomplished while they live. The savage selfishness of Napoleon could ransack Europe with a sword; but when the storm had thundered past, the crops that ripened to harvest were none of his sowing . . . Force and ambition are common enough in history. Power and ideas are seldom allied in their highest quality. If to create, if to make two blades of grass grow where but one grew before, be to exercise the highest faculty of man, you will find very few indeed who, unaided from the outset by birth, fortune, or any save their own support, have reached the height of that achievement. Fewer still are men who have done these things unselfishly and done them so that they shall lastingly endure. Amongst that chosen few I do not hesitate to write the name of Cecil Rhodes.

Over 50 years later, a paper presented by the Right Honourable Viscountess Violet Georgina Milner ‘in the presence of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, at a meeting of the Commonwealth Section, on Thursday, 14th May 1953’, also sings Rhodes’ praises in terms of his role as British imperialist. For Milner, Rhodes’ strength lay in his ability to identify and use the ‘hundreds of thousands of acres of fruitful waste land in the sun-washed spaces of South Africa’ and his glorious dream ‘of homes and yet more homes for the English in Africa’. Central to Milner’s thesis stand the racial tensions that had underlined this quest for British expansion. Milner proposes that

in reading the story of Rhodes in Africa one is struck by his liking for power of sympathy with the natives . . . He thought native questions very important and generally very much misunderstood by a section of the people, and that the Colonists ought to show their superiority by a better understanding of these still primitive people.

‘The natives are children’, he said, ‘and we ought to do something for minds and brains the Almighty has given them.’ Even in such excessive praise lies the racial prejudices of
Rhodes and his followers, which repeatedly undermines the narrative of supposed benevolence and magnanimity that the process of his memorialization undertook.

Even though such adulation of Rhodes was never left unmarked by criticism and conflicting viewpoints, the process of his discursive memorialization was monumental in its scope, with his name tied to British power and expansion and, importantly, to the adroit exploitation of British colonies and territories for their resources and wealth. If anything, Rhodes’ memorialization focuses on his role as businessman and imperial entrepreneur, so to speak, but the extent of his achievements for the monetary success of the British Empire was largely clothed in the grander rhetoric of civilization and progress. One of the most notable discourses surrounding Rhodes was his endeavour for building the Cape to Cairo railway line—an ambitious enterprise that, had it been successful, would have linked the Suez Canal with mineral-rich Southern Africa, thus making the exploitation of the African continent all the easier for the British Empire. This ambition also contributed significantly to the discursive memorialization of Rhodes, as seen in the famous ‘The Rhodes Colossus’ illustration that appeared in Punch magazine on 10 December 1892 after Rhodes had announced his plans for telegraph and rail connections that would extend throughout the length of Africa (see Figure 1). With his legs straddling the African continent and arms held aloft, Rhodes appears victorious in his expansionist undertakings. The conscious imitation of the classical Greek Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, authorizes and reinforces the triumphalist rhetoric. Viewers appear to be gazing upwards at Rhodes (with his head almost disappearing in the heavenly clouds and his feet distorted in size, as if the viewer is kneeling before him); it is clear that the monumentalization of Rhodes has received a compelling and forceful beginning.

As Paul Maylam argues, Rhodes achieved ‘quite extraordinary immortality . . . [that] rested on monuments, memorials and the ubiquity of his name’. Starting with his funeral and continuing for decades after, Rhodes’ memory was incessantly reiterated in the form of monuments, memorials and language as a force worthy of public remembrance. Monuments served the crucial function of inscribing a particular narrative of Rhodes as a titanic visionary that epitomized all that was good about the British Imperial project. These monuments therefore focus attention on this supremacist narrative.

**Decolonization and the critical reading of Rhodes**

Revisionist readings of Rhodes and the monuments that commemorate and mythologize his career can benefit from influential discourses of decolonization that emerged from Black African writers such as Fanon, Yansané and Wa Thiongo during the course of the twentieth century. Such critics deconstructed hegemonic narratives of white supremacy through trenchant exposure of its institutionalized inequalities and oppressions. Their ideas can productively be brought to bear on the myth of Rhodes in order to reveal the blatant injustice of his legacy. While such critical practices span a range of fields, contexts and continents where colonialism has left its footprint, a recent point of critique and contention within the South African context is the memorialization and ideological legacy of Rhodes. As a figurehead of British imperialism and a powerful advocate of white supremacy, Rhodes is irrevocably entangled with
the very economic, political and racial discourses that decolonization takes issue with. The fact that much of the recent decolonizing discourse and protest originating in South Africa is centred on Rhodes is therefore not surprising, seeing that his posthumous memorialization bolstered colonialist and imperialist endeavours. Since his death, the memorialization of Rhodes became ever more clearly a symbolic shorthand for larger discourses on empire, race and ownership, and his commemoration (through the spaces posthumously attributed to and staked down for him) was never intended to

Figure 1. Edward Linley Samborne, ‘The Rhodes Collosus,’ *Punch* (1892) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20759/20759-h/20759-h.htm> [accessed 10 March 2018].
be a racially blind, egalitarian enterprise. The memorialization of Rhodes was always a deliberately racially orientated endeavour insofar as the ‘fact’ of his power, influence and supposed generosity centred on his status as a white male British subject. This ‘fact’ assumed material form by being wrought in granite and bronze in the various memorials that represent him as a benign and positive figure. Both in spatial and discursive terms, Rhodes’ memorialization has been a profoundly racialized initiative that was meant to naturalize and scaffold support for white interests in South Africa.

It is exactly this feature of an entangled history that forms the basis of contemporary scholarship on and applications of decolonization. For Michael Collins, decolonization speaks of the entanglement of histories of empire and their aftermath. Hence, decolonization is not a discrete process that marked a shift from empire to national independence but a multi-layered, multifaceted phenomenon. While decolonization had particular, specific causes and effects in different African settings, it was also shaped by wider, structural dimensions of empire that may be seen as systemic: the political and economic relationship between imperial ‘core’ and colonial ‘periphery’; the colonial state in terms of its bureaucratic structure; ideologies of governance, ‘development’ and race; and emancipatory narratives of anti-colonial freedom and nationhood. Many of these aspects of empire and decolonization cut across particular imperial or national contexts and point us towards complex chronologies of change.

For Collins, decolonization as field of study and critical practice is concerned with (re)writing the history of the empire. It also aims to unsettle the historical orbit of imperial history, the moral purpose of the colonial civilizing mission and the lack of attention to various forms of colonial violence. At its core stands the idea that the ‘empire’s many afterlives’ are in need of intervention while, at the same time, attention should be paid to how such afterlives affect decolonized territories and its peoples.

Within the South African context, the process of demythologizing whiteness and destabilizing a colonial heritage has centred, to a large extent, upon the legacy and memory of Rhodes. As Achille Mbembe argues, processes of the demythologization of whiteness and decolonizing imperialist structures in South Africa are inevitably centred on Rhodes. As Mbembe maintains

Cecil Rhodes belonged to the race of men who were convinced that to be black is a liability. During his time and life in Southern Africa, he used his considerable power – political and financial – to make black people all over Southern Africa pay a bloody price for his beliefs. His statue – and those of countless others who shared the same conviction – has nothing to do on a public university campus 20 years after freedom. The debate therefore should have never been about whether or not it should be brought down. All along, the debate should have been about why did it take so long to do so. To bring Rhodes’ statue down is far from erasing history, and nobody should be asking us to be eternally indebted to Rhodes for having ‘donated’ his money and for having bequeathed ‘his’ land to the University. If anything, we should be asking how did he acquire the land in the first instance … But bringing Rhodes’ statue down is one of the many legitimate ways in which we can, today in South Africa, demythologize that history and put it to rest.

Mbembe makes a very important case for the critical redress of Rhodes and his memorialization – as Mbembe points out, the decolonization of knowledge is entwined with the decolonization of public spaces, both of which are inseparable
from the democratization of access. This process of democratization is about the ‘creation of new forms of life’, of laying certain structures to rest in order to facilitate the space for self-ownership outside of the colonizer–colonized binary. What is interesting in Mbembe’s argument is the idea of decolonization as the quest for life after colonialism that he speaks about – a life that is determined outside of the conditions set by colonialism. While Mbembe’s vision of what such a decolonized future might entail is quite open-ended and vast, his plan for interrogating the present is clear: Rhodes must fall. Hence, a trajectory is sketched out in which the reception of Rhodes’ memorial legacy is of critical importance insofar as it is identified as the transitional point between two timeframes, namely that of a colonial past and a decolonized future, seen as a continuing and developing project. The practice of decolonization is specifically concerned in this context with the memorial structure of iteration and repetition – of a statue’s ability to remind and immortalize, over and over. The critical break that decolonization calls for in our relation to colonial legacies and histories is thus inevitably also an appeal for rethinking how and what we remember and memorialize. When it comes to Rhodes, the question of how to remember him differently and how to reorient our view towards a future in which he features differently is concerned with those traces we have at our disposal in the present to allow for such critical interventions. Memorials, sites that bring the past and future together through their very materiality, thus feature prominently in decolonizing practices insofar as they are situated at the critical juncture where our relationship with time and space comes into play.

#Rhodesmustfall: from discourse to practice

The first action of the RMF movement is largely credited in the public arena to the exact moment when political activist Chumani Maxwele hurled a bucket filled with human excrement at a statue of Cecil John Rhodes on 9 March 2015 on the University of Cape Town campus. While the impetus behind the protest movement has a complex history that precedes this singular act, Maxwele’s infamous gesture arguably provided the spark that set the public arena alight, drawing commentary and debate amongst everyday South Africans, academics and politicians. For Maxwele, a self-proclaimed follower of the decolonizing writings of Frantz Fanon, his decision to act out against Rhodes’ statue came out of a need to initiate change. In the words of Maxwele: ‘How do you decolonize Africa? Fanon made it clear that decolonization must happen through violence’. It is exactly this call for violent change that Maxwele cites as his reason for targeting the statue of Rhodes. For Maxwele, the sight of the statue of Rhodes had been an alleged cause of pain during his years of study at the University of Cape Town, hence his decision to act out against it. As Maxwele argues, ‘It is not just a statue, as many claim – Rhodes didn’t want black people’. While the public’s reaction to this incident demonstrated the degree to which South Africans are divided on the topic of, inter alia, decolonization and how it should be enacted or initiated (with responses ranging from condemnation and bafflement to praise and veneration), it had as a result a concentrated focus on those memorial structures that celebrated the life and legacy of Rhodes.
Unveiled in 1934, the bronze statue of a seated Cecil Rhodes gazed out over Cape Town from its prominent position on the institution’s upper campus. The location of this statue was strategically chosen, for it allows the statue of Rhodes to seemingly contemplate the vast stretch of land that lies before him – in this context it is the Cape Flats from which his plans to build the unrealized Cape to Cairo railway-line sprang. After more than 80 years of stoic contemplation (only a month of which marked the vigorous protest of the RMF movement), the statue of Rhodes was removed on 9 April 2015 in the presence of a large public audience – see Figure 2. While Rhodes’ statue was slowly hoisted from its granite pedestal, countless cell phones and cameras documented his disgraced exit. For the supporters and participants on the RMF movement, this was the moment when Rhodes finally started to fall.

Here, the word ‘fall’ indicates a complex understanding of what it means to engage with the dismantling of monuments. Central to this word lies its connotation of breaking down (of toppling a structure or enacting a downfall) and of disintegration (of decline and demise). It also speaks to the condition of being seized and captured (of falling into the hands of someone else), while, at its most extreme, it can point towards something that ultimately fails, suffers ruin and defeat, or dies. On a moral and ethical level, it also glosses the Biblical ‘Fall of Man’, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden – a crucially important resonance, given the coalition of Christian missionary and imperialist interests involved. A further such idea is found in the English proverb ‘pride comes before a fall’. As such, the term ‘fall’ spans a trajectory of meanings, ranging from its suggestion of moral compromise, change and submission to termination and death. In the context of the RMF movement, the application of the term ‘fall’ addresses the deconstruction of an ideology that is physically facilitated by taking down a monument. Following the logic of this movement, it is only by removing his monument that the hegemonic legacy of Rhodes can be ended, or at least marking the beginning of the process that will eventually reach such a termination. For this

reason, the monument becomes the point of entry into and the signpost of processes of decolonization and critical redress.

Such a call for bringing about the fall of Rhodes had larger repercussions for the status of memorials within South Africa. Following on the protest action against Rhodes’ statue at the University of Cape Town and other calls by South African politicians (such as Julius Malema) for the removal of colonial and apartheid symbols, several memorials and colonial-era statues were vandalized across South Africa. These included statues of British monarchs, such as Queen Victoria and King George V, South African politicians, such as Louis Botha (first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa) and Paul Kruger (President of the South African Republic and notorious opponent of Rhodes’ imperialist ambitions), as well as several Anglo-Boer War monuments, amongst them the Uitenhage War Memorial for fallen British soldiers that was set alight for its alleged commemoration of colonialism. In addition to these memorials and statues, a bronze bust of Rhodes at the Rhodes Memorial in Cape Town was also vandalized by having its nose cut off (Figure 3). Graffiti accusing Rhodes of being a ‘racist’, ‘thief’ and ‘murderer’ sprayed on the granite pediment supporting the bust also featured. While the mutilation of the human nose has a long history of serving as a judicial punishment for severe transgressions, this vandalistic rhinotomy clearly performs the function of scarring the long aestheticized image of Rhodes. Appearing without his nose, the figure of Rhodes suddenly seems more vulnerable than contemplative now that the critical gaze has been turned on him. The act is therefore a strategic one, deliberately calculated to radically alter the viewer’s perception of this iconic face.

While Rhodes’ memorials have undergone brutal interventions in South Africa, his actual grave in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe – see Figure 4 – has also become a contested site. In 2010, Zimbabwean politician Cain Mathema called for Rhodes’ body to be exhumed and his remains returned to Britain. According to Mathema, Rhodes’ grave lies within an area locally known as the Malindidzimu Shrine (or resting place of spirits). Therefore, indigenous ideology views the presence of Rhodes’ remains there as an affront to the traditional values of this precolonial shrine and ‘an insult to our ancestors’.35 Subsequent reactions to Rhodes’ grave in the Matopos Hills have ranged from allegations by Zimbabwean war veterans that it is the cause of drought in the area36 to call for actively exploiting his gravesite for international tourism.37 At the same time, the debate has also centred around how to deal with the colonial legacy of Rhodes in a postcolonial Zimbabwean context – for Godfrey Mahachi, director of Zimbabwe’s National Museums and Monuments, the ‘call for the removal of the grave is not new but our view is that it is part of national history and heritage and therefore it should not be tampered with … This is the reason why we are keeping Rhodes’ grave because it is part and parcel of the history of Zimbabwe’.38

Further afield, in the United Kingdom, from another strategically chosen location, on high and in front of his alma mater, Oxford University’s Oriel College, Rhodes has also been gazing down at those walking past the entrance below. In line with the rhetoric adopted around his grave site in Zimbabwe, the idea of keeping history intact is further echoed abroad as Oxford University decided in January 2016 to retain Rhodes’ statue, after public calls for it to be taken down. This decision comes after an Oxford offshoot of the RMF movement organized protests and petitions to campaign for the statue’s removal. As Brian Kwoba, a fierce proponent of the cause, argues ‘the significance of taking down the statue is simple … Cecil Rhodes is the Hitler of southern Africa. Would anyone countenance a statue to Hitler?’ Following an outcry from wealthy alumni and donors who were supposedly ‘angered by the shame and embarrassment brought on the college by efforts to take down the statue’, and who threatened to withdraw funding (which allegedly ran in the region of 100 million pounds), the college’s Governing Body decided to keep the statue in place. The college proposed that it will rather provide a clear historical context to explain the presence of Rhodes’ monument on its campus. To date, the exact content and format of this supposed reparative history has not been finalized, and neither is it sure when and how (or if) it will take place.

Of interest in this debate around Rhodes’ statue at Oriel College are the diverging interpretations of historical framing and commemoration proffered by different role players. For Daisy Chandley, an organizer of RMF, ‘we are demanding debate and free speech, not trying to quiet it. We are not asking for history to be censored, but rather for people to realize that a statue – just like colonialism itself – is not history; it is something very much in the present tense’. Chris Patten, Chancellor of Oxford University, countered by arguing that students who don’t like Cecil John Rhodes or his historical legacy should ‘think about being educated elsewhere’. In addition, Patten claimed that ‘our history is not a blank page on which we can write our own version of what it should have been, according to our contemporary views and prejudices’. Central to this debate are questions of how to deal with legacies, memories and histories in present-day society, and whether the removal of a memorial would, in fact, constitute an act of rewriting, or censoring, history. However, as Maylam reminds us, ‘in the past forty years, since decolonization, the cult of Rhodes has waned. And yet the name lives on. There are two main, interrelated reasons for this. First, money: Rhodes’ bequest. Rhodes’s remarkable, continuing presence in Oxford is very largely due to the money he left the university … [Secondly] Rhodes has increasingly become a brand-name.’ For Maylam, the brand-value of Rhodes and the wealth still attached to his name forms part of a commemorative business, one that has far outlived any actual interest in his historical legacy. This has led to a significant divorce between what Maylam identifies as the brand and the history of Rhodes – with the former speaking about his present and future monetary value, while the latter is regarded as a murky territory in need of being framed correctly and/or differently. Consequently, it seems as if Rhodes’ public presence and basis for his commemoration are founded on the fact that his market value remains trusted and assured.

When read in the context of the RMF movement, this tension between what is considered history, present and future reaches a critical point. The very name of this movement harbours this tension, for while it speaks to causing a certain historical view
to fall, it also reminds one that this is itself a reiterative act. Rhodes does not fall once and for all, but his felling, so to speak, forms part of a larger series of acts and a repeated interrogation of historical metanarratives (such as those imperial narratives that brought the monumentalized version of Rhodes forth). In addition, the qualities of enactment that RMF tries to harness (its drive and its plea for bringing something to a fall, as underscored by the word ‘must’) carry complex implications for its reference to time. For while the movement has as its goal a larger decolonization project in which Rhodes and his legacy can be radically renegotiated, the very naming of it as ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ is geared towards a future in which the desired outcome (an act of falling, complete when accomplished) is occluded in the ever-present call to act (to continue to make something fall). Somehow, the act of interrogating a monumentalized history thus still calls the power of memorialization to the fore – Rhodes continues to be the proverbially hostile spectre that hovers on the horizon and, even where his physical monuments are removed, his presence continues to loom large.

Rhodes is thus not erased from public discourse and memory and remains embedded in those memorial structures that have imbued him an aura of divine immortality. Whether in physical memorials dedicated to him or public discourse about him, Rhodes does not completely collapse. Yet, a crucial part of his aura of invincibility has been ruptured – the particular version of history, constructed even before his death, and promulgated over more than a century, that glorified and monumentalized his imperialist affiliations. In this way, the relationship between history and memorial becomes unsettled, destabilizing the myopic, one-sided history that has long been narrated through sites of memory, including statues, graves and monuments. They now also assume a place in the counter narratives of the formerly oppressed, complicating and disturbing hegemonic histories of supposed victors and providing a voice for the previously silenced.

When Henry Cust wrote his extravagant eulogy to Rhodes (1902), it was clearly invested with an awareness of how as an immortalized image Rhodes serve larger nationalist and economic goals. In Cust’s own words,

The highest triumph of most modern men of state has been to destroy or at most to preserve. To Rhodes it was given to build and to build greatly. And he loved completion. He did not dip into the future. He abode within its gates.... He built for the idea of Anglo-Saxon expansion; but it was for the sake of human happiness. Rhodes labored, and his race has entered into his labors. Ideas do not die. So long as a great mind and an unselfish heart, so long as faith and courage, shall count among the nobler splendors of the Anglo-Saxons, so long will the memories and works and thoughts of Rhodes endure. And at the appointed season, among those that shall come after, will their renewing be seen.\textsuperscript{45}

While this narrative propagates the posterity of Rhodes – that of a person whose legacy endures and is renewed ad infinitum – it is exactly Cust’s call for mnemonic reiteration that the RMF movement disrupts. The uncomplicated endurance and renewal of the ‘memories and works and thoughts of Rhodes’ that Cust\textsuperscript{46} proposes is what the RMF movement aims to subvert. By calling for Rhodes to fall, the assumed linearity of the memorial narrative is destabilized insofar as the idea of a past that can be projected unchallenged onto and into the future is thwarted. When acting against memorial structures, the RMF movement speaks against the idea of posterity as it dislocates the assumed trajectory of past, present and future. In the context of Rhodes’
commemoration, this trajectory is twice obstructed; first, by disrupting the untroubled historical metanarrative of his supposed glory and benevolence (by showing how counter-histories exist that speak of a much more complex historical presence) and second, by questioning the very idea that Rhodes can (and should) be remembered indefinitely. For as this example shows, it is not only Rhodes’ memory that is left tarnished, but the very idea of Rhodes living on in memory and memorials becomes ever more difficult to sustain.

**Conclusion**

While writing this article, I happen to come across a photograph of Rhodes in an unexpected place. Placed above the public toilet at Lanzerac, a wine estate in Stellenbosch that prides itself on its ‘rich heritage and legacy’, hangs a framed reproduction of an early photographic portrait of Rhodes sitting cross-legged in a chair, his one hand resting on his thigh, the other gripping the arm of the chair. Rhodes is, however, not the only one gazing at me in this strangely intimate space, for the rest of the walls are covered with photographs of other ‘acclaimed’ male personas, including former president of the South African Boer Republic Paul Kruger and Al Pacino as the character of Tony Montana in the acclaimed gangster film *Scarface*. While sitting amongst other notable (and notorious) men, Rhodes is, however, granted the prime position of being the first figure seen when entering the toilet – in fact, he is placed right above it. Whether it was a conscious choice on the part of some decorator who had a flair for political commentary or whether Rhodes just happened to be accidentally placed where he is, the outcome is strange. In a certain way, the encounter decontextualizes Rhodes – it reduces him to just another male face that serves as decoration in a space that many might visit but would not deem important to remember. Nevertheless, his presence also reminds me that, even in this trivialized format, Rhodes still lingers. To the critics of Rhodes, there might be some poetic justice in the fact that he hangs above a toilet, but to anyone else he might just seem to be another man whose visage can be used to decorate a drab wall.

As this article demonstrates the decolonizing interrogation of history and its material remnants is of increasing importance in a postcolonial world. The RMF movement is but one such interrogation that plays out in response to commemorative structures. By questioning the right of memorials to be public receptacles of history and signposts for posterity, decolonizing movements twist the linearity of memorial discourses and practices – they are violent disruptions of teleological viewpoints in which a given event or person can seamlessly slide from the past into the future. Mbembe’s reminder that decolonization is about the disturbance of colonial timeframes is echoed here, insofar as the urgency and validity of the present is emphasized in the actions of the RMF movement. Against the grain of more than a century of memorialization and commemoration, this movement highlights the ‘now’ as the place where change can potentially occur. And as its actions show, this is a moment of violence. But then again, how can it not be, given that activists have to dismantle the inherited aftermath of a larger colonial violence that has had the time, resources and authority to sediment itself in granite, in bronze and even in language.
Notes

1. Rhodes was a staunch believer in the supremacy of the British nation and the Anglo-Saxon people – to such a degree that he proclaimed in his will that ‘the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race’, Cecil John Rhodes, The Last Will and Testament of Cecil John Rhodes, With Elucidatory Notes, to Which are Added Some Chapters Describing the Political and Religious Ideas of the Testator (London: Review of Review Office, 1902), p. 58. His business dealings and political stance were directly informed by this viewpoint and he became well known as a strong advocate for colonialism. This position had explicit white supremacist and racist leanings and his view of the South African black population as a ‘subject’ and ‘barbaric’ race resonated with later apartheid ideologies – see for example the work of Bernard Magubane, The Making of a Racist State: British Imperialism and the Union of South Africa, 1875–1910 (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996) and Anthony Thomas, Rhodes: Race for Africa (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

2. Sally Hornstein, Losing Site: Architecture, Memory and Place (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2011), p. 17.

3. Hornstein, Losing Site, p. 17. For further arguments on this issue, also see the work of Peter Carrier, Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures in France and Germany Since 1989 (New York: Berghahn, 2005).


15. Originally intended as a caricature, this image has come to be recognized as an illustration of the ‘Scramble for Africa’; that is the division and colonization of African territory by European powers. This image was accompanied by a piece of satirical verse on the character and ambitions of Rhodes – a verse that, despite making fun of Rhodes’ determination, still emphasizes his role as stalwart and astute statesman.

Maylam describes Rhodes’ funeral as an ‘event that certainly enhanced the Rhodes mystique. The laying to rest of Rhodes was spread out over 2 weeks following his death on 26 March. First, there was a public lying-in-state at his Groote Schuur house, the first day of which was Good Friday. Then another in the Cape House of Assembly. There would be four funeral services, one at Groote Schuur, one at the Cape Town Cathedral, one in Bulawayo and the final burial service at the grave in the Matopos. There was a week between the Cape Town Cathedral service and the final burial, as the coffin was taken slowly by train from Cape Town to Bulawayo, stopping at many points along the way. At Kimberley 15,000 mourners filed past. On 10 April, the coffin was taken on a gun-carriage along a road hurriedly constructed for the occasion, to the grave in the Matopos. On the same day, a memorial service was held at St Paul’s Cathedral in London. The funeral was more befitting royalty than a commoner. And its duration was such that it magnified both the historical figure and the memory of Rhodes’, Paul Maylem, ‘Monuments, Memorials and the Mystique of Empire,’ p. 142.


Achille Mbembe, ‘Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive’.

For more on this idea, also see Francis B. Nyamnjoh, #RhodesMustFall: *Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa* (Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2016).

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Cited in ‘Newsmaker, Chumani Maxwele’.
33. In the 1930s, the South African political and social landscape was already inundated with the early rhetoric that led to the rise of the apartheid regime. At the time of the statue’s unveiling in 1934, the South African Government’s segregationist stance was hardening, with Black South Africans being further disenfranchised in state legislation.

34. As Giorgio Sperati maintains, the ‘mutilation of the most extruding parts of the face (nose, ears, lips) has always meant a very severe impairment, not only of the body, but of the individual’s personality, since it results in a permanent alteration in the most noble and expressive part of the human body’, ‘Amputation of the Nose throughout History’, *Acta Otorhinolaryngologica Italica*, 29 (2009), 44–50.


49. Mbembe, ‘Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive’.

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