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# Decolonizing higher education in a global post-colonial era: #RhodesMustFall from Cape Town to Oxford

Ludvig Sunnemark and Håkan Thörn

## ABSTRACT

Considering globalization as part of a post-colonial conjuncture, the examination of the politics of decolonization is essential to understand key conflicts in global civil society. Recently, a global movement for the decolonization of higher education has played a key role in this context, with the #RhodesMustFall movement being particularly important. Starting at the University of Cape Town and spreading to Oxford University, the movement initially protested against the presence of statues of Cecil Rhodes at both sites. We argue that the #RhodesMustFall movement is part of what we call a *global field of decolonial politics*. We also demonstrate how movement discourse is necessarily rearticulated when shifting context: the primary characteristic of the UCT discourse is its constitution of “black” subjectivity, while the Oxford discourse is largely shaped by the diasporic situation of formerly colonized peoples within an ex-metropolis, constructing multiple plural subjectivities and recovering issues of race and coloniality from political margins.

## KEYWORDS

#RhodesMustFall; social movements; decolonization; post-colonialism; globalization; global civil society

## Introduction

In 2015, a sprawling student movement called #RhodesMustFall was formed in Cape Town. It aimed to decolonize the entirety of South Africa, starting with the large statue of Cecil Rhodes, standing by the Jameson steps at the University of Cape Town (UCT). In the same year, this movement initiative was picked up across the Atlantic by like-minded students who called themselves Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO), and protests were staged against a similar statue of Rhodes standing in the heart of the former British Empire, at Oriel College in Oxford University. Unlike at UCT, however, this space remains unchanged—while the protests here were both prolonged and intense, the statue still stands.

Inspired by the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US in 2014, and in turn, being a source of inspiration for the 2020 global anti-racism protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, these—partially

similar, partially different—protests became constitutive of a global movement for the decolonization of higher education, which has since become a dynamic and prominent part of a global civil society engaging with the legacies of colonialism. With the diasporisation of formerly colonized peoples into the educational systems of former metropolises, accompanied by an increase in access to higher education across the formerly colonized world, the relation between higher education institutions and colonial history has been questioned by several movements, of which the #RhodesMustFall movement is the most influential and distinguished example (Ahmed, 2017; Gibson, 2017; Luescher, 2016; Schreiber et al., 2016).

As the #RhodesMustFall movement became dispersed from one locality to another, demands for the decolonization of higher education were by necessity rearticulated and transformed in relation to new local, national, and global contexts. By studying similarities and differences between articulations by different movements, this article contributes to knowledge on resistances across different sites in the current condition of post-colonial globality. As globalization processes can be said to be partially dependent upon the simultaneous continuation and transcendence of “old” colonial structures, it is of great importance to examine that which actually and concretely takes part in constructing projects of post-, de- or recolonization, of which the different #RhodesMustFall movements are clear, recent and theoretically interesting examples.

The main purpose of this article is to study how contemporary struggles for decolonization unfold in different localities within contemporary globalized civil society (Thörn, 2009). More specifically, we examine how different #RhodesMustFall movements articulate the question of decolonizing higher education, thus examining the partially similar, partially differing conditions and characteristics of contemporary decolonial politics.

To analyze precisely the rearticulation and transformation of movement demands and identities, we perform a comparative case study on the two #RhodesMustFall movements at UCT and Oxford. This should however not be understood as a comparison between two pre-defined national contexts, but rather between two specific configurations of movement discourse, in which local and national contexts intertwine in the rearticulation of a globally dispersed predicament (cf. Thörn, 2009). More concretely, similarities and differences between different articulations will be analyzed in relation to local, national, and global contexts, addressing questions on how the issue of decolonizing higher education is articulated and how various collective identities are articulated in relation to the question of decolonizing higher education.

In the following section, we place our study in the context of previous research on initiatives for the decolonization of higher education. From

this, we elaborate a theoretical foundation centered on the concept of post-colonial globality, understood as the condition from which the movements emerged. This leads up to our methodological approach of discourse analysis of movement texts. From this, we move on to analyze the #RhodesMustFall movements. We compare the two cases, first by focusing on how the question of decolonizing higher education is articulated in relation to different local, national, and global spaces; and second, by focusing on how different subject positions become situated in relation to movement identity. Finally, we conclude by describing how the Rhodes Must Fall movements showed how local spaces can be ridden with tensions emanating from structural conflicts inherent to post-colonial globality, and discussing how such struggles are thus to be viewed as a key-part of contemporary post-colonial global civil society.

### **Research on the decolonization of higher education**

Research on the decolonization of higher education can be grouped into three general themes. First, a line of scholarship examines colonial features of contemporary higher education, often promoting overarching political or epistemological changes in the process. Understanding the legacy of colonialism as present within both former colonies and metropolises, such research focuses on a wide variety of local and national contexts (Ahmed, 2012; Bhambra et al., 2018; Calitz, 2018; Gyamera & Burke, 2018; Helete, 2016; Hendricks, 2018; Housee, 2018; Luangphinit, 2005; Mittelman, 2017). Within this strand of research, some attention has been given to the #RhodesMustFall movement, viewing it either as a positive example whose causes are to be furthered or as a catalyst for general discussion on issues of decolonization (Mangcu, 2017; Mbembe, 2016; Newsinger, 2016; Prinsloo, 2016). The second line of scholarship also stresses the need for dismantling colonial structures within education but focuses on developing and evaluating decolonial pedagogical or curricular strategies. Here, decolonization is primarily treated as applied, practical knowledge (Battiste, 2013; Bozalek, 2011; Elliott-Cooper, 2017; Fujino et al., 2018; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011; Shahjahan et al., 2009).

It is within the third line of scholarship that we place our study. It consists of empirical research analyzing social or political initiatives for the decolonization of higher education, rather than discussions of the nature of education as such. Here, the #RhodesMustFall movement and its offshoots have been used as illustrative examples of particular tendencies in contemporary movement activity; for example, movement discourse on commemoration and archival (Kros, 2015; van der Wal, 2018); activist usage of Twitter and Facebook (Bosch, 2017; Mudavanhu, 2017); usage of vandalism

as a strategy (Marschall, 2017). #RhodesMustFall has also in this context been approached as an important case to be studied in its own right, contextualizing, in particular, the South African movement in relation to contemporary social, political, cultural, or economic processes, such as massification and neoliberalization of higher education (Luescher, 2016; Mabasa, 2017); increasing frustration with the dominant racial consensus politics of post-apartheid South Africa (Ahmed, 2017; Dawson, 2017; Gibson, 2017; Holmes & Loehwing, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016); intersectional perspectives in South African politics (Khan, 2017; Qambela, 2016) or historical lingual conflicts (Dube, 2016).

While these studies of the RhodesMustFall movement have advanced our understanding of movement discourses and mobilizations in the original South African context, there is a lack of studies that analyze movements for the decolonization of higher education in relation to a *global context*. Similarly, in cases where comparative approaches have been adopted, movements have been treated as products of disparate national contexts (cf. Knudsen & Andersen, 2019).

The global context is of central importance as the issues of (post-)coloniality discussed by the movement(s) in question are not only defined through various national histories but also through colonial legacies articulated on a global scale, which is essentially what has enabled the global diffusion of the movement. If we are to understand the #RhodesMustFall movement fully it is thus imperative that we relate it to complex and interconnected local, national, and global contexts. Such an analysis can further advance our theoretical understanding of globally articulated social and political conflicts surrounding legacies and rearticulations of colonialism(s). Finally, we argue that to further the analysis of how conflicts are articulated in connection with global colonial legacies, a stronger focus on meaning-making practices is needed as this allows for an analysis of how the issue of decolonization transforms as it travels between different contexts.

### **Interconnected processes of decentering and dispersion: Defining the post-colonial globality**

As the #RhodesMustFall movement deals with the understanding, remembering, and dismantling of colonial structures, and as movement demands and identities are communicated across national and continental borders, we argue that this movement needs to be theorized in relation to what we term *post-colonial globality*. This concept is intended to conceptualize how processes of globalization are structured *ab initio* as connected to the “shift in global relations which marks the (necessarily uneven) transition from the Age of Empires to the post-independence or post-decolonization

moment,” dubbed by Hall (1996b, p. 246) and others as the *post-colonial* (Ahmed, 2000; Bhabha, 1994; Frankenberg & Mani, 1993; Hall, 1996a).

Hall (1996b) discusses the post-colonial as both a historical and an epistemological event. Historically the post-colonial helps us describe the gradual and uneven arrival of a new historical conjuncture beyond that of “classic” imperialism and direct colonial rule. Within this conjuncture, various forces of social change—diasporic migration patterns of previously colonized peoples into former metropolises, the establishment of hubs of finance and trade within former colonies, the globalization of media, processes of cultural hybridization, etcetera—become articulated as constituent parts of a general process of dispersion or decentering of old, seemingly stable, colonial relations.

The post-colonial also refers to the theoretical and epistemological deconstruction of colonial relations, inviting us to “re-read the binaries as forms of transculturation, of cultural translation, destined to trouble the here/there cultural binaries forever” (Hall, 1996b, p. 247), while still recognizing the power that such constructed binaries have had and continue to have. Through this epistemological shift, new fields of struggle and movement activity are opened; as colonial relations are reproduced, rearticulated, and imbued with new sets of meaning, struggles over the understanding, remembering, or dismantling of such relations become increasingly relevant.

Our concept of post-colonial globality starts from the assumption that it is fruitful to view post-colonization as a process of globalization and vice versa; the dispersal processes commonly associated with post-colonization open up spaces for new global relations through their simultaneous reconfiguration and continuation of the transversal and transnational connections established by colonial conquest (cf. Hall, 1996a, 1996b; Loomba, 1998/2005).

In one of the most important contributions to the field of globalization studies, Sassen (2006/2008, p. 420) views globalization as “a sharp proliferation of subassemblages” in which territory, authority, and rights are no longer configured as co-continuous with the nation-state, but reconfigured in relation to a multitude of spatialities and temporalities. However, like many other globalization scholars, Sassen does not sufficiently address how post-coloniality shapes contemporary globalization. Post-colonial scholars have not only emphasized the importance of the presence of a colonial legacy in the context of the latest phase of the globalization process, but also the presence and influence of de-colonizing processes and the politics of anti-colonialism on present-day politics (e.g. Young, 2004). Linking up with this view, we argue that the concepts of globalization and post-colonization must be seen as complementary and intertwined insofar as post-colonial globality concerns dispersion, decentering and simultaneous continuation of colonial relations across, above, beneath, or within

bordering practices of nation-states or empires, thus producing spatial and temporal reconfigurations of such bordering practices.

Concerning social movements, the establishment of a global civil society can be regarded as one of the more central effects of globalizing processes. This is succinctly addressed by Sassen (2006/2008, p. 371) as a “multiscalar politics” in which “the scale of struggle remains the locality [ . . . ] but with the knowledge and explicit or tacit invocation of the fact that multiple other localities around the world are engaged in similar localized struggles with equivalent local actors.” Again, we would however emphasize that this form of politics needs to be seen through the lens of *post-colonial* globality. As argued by Chandhoke (2002), Calhoun (2003), and others, much of the rather Eurocentric literature on global civil society views it as largely defined by the dispersion of the discourse of human rights and the norms and values of (Western) democracy across the globe. We would add that these conceptions also imagine global society as a relatively homogenous space that mainly serves the function of creating social integration across national boundaries.

In contrast, we define global civil society as a political space in which a diversity of political experiences, actions, strategies, identities, values, and norms are articulated and contested. Importantly, it is a space of struggle and conflict—over the values, norms, and rules that govern global social space(s), and ultimately over the control of material resources and institutions. In this sense, we link up with the neo-Gramscian tradition that views (global) civil society as a space of struggle over the legitimacy of contemporary global power structures—ultimately to establish a global hegemony (Cox, 1999; Thörn, 2016). While shifting shape from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism, and being challenged by emerging globalizing state powers, such as China and India, the power relations underpinning such global hegemony in the 2000s have basically reproduced the hierarchies that were established during the colonial era.

This notion of a post-colonial global civil society becomes relevant here insofar as the #RhodesMustFall movements articulate local issues surrounding the removal of particular statues and particular institutional cultures in relation to globally dispersed predicaments related to university politics and decolonization, thus enabling the insertion of contention into other local or national contexts. Situated in the context of post-colonial globality, the issues of the Rhodes statues were articulated as issues of de-colonization. The patterns of conflict and positions taken in the context of the public debates initiated by the movements were to a large extent conditioned by the political history of colonialism. What we are concerned with here is thus a global field of struggle in which globally dispersed memories and legacies of colonialism become discussed, managed, enacted, and counteracted by different localized actors. This field can be regarded as enabled by, and as an essential part of, *post-colonial global civil society*.



We would also emphasize how the legacy of colonialism could also *internally* structure global anti-/de-colonial movements. As highlighted by Thörn (2009), the anti-apartheid movement, one of the most important historical predecessors of the #RhodesMustFall movements, was defined by often tension-ridden cooperation between South African exile movements and Western solidarity movements, a significant example of the paradoxes, contradictions, and ambivalences that may characterize movement politics in the context of post-colonial global civil society. In the #RhodesMustFall movements, the colonial core-periphery dynamic defining global civil society's public sphere was evident in the fact that the Oxford-based protest gained much more media attention worldwide than the Cape Town protest, in spite of the fact that the latter represented a much more significant mobilization in terms of numbers and local/national impact. Additional examples of this follow in the analysis.

Consequently, our comparison between the Cape Town- and Oxford-based protests is not between two pre-figured national contexts, but rather between two specific articulations of contention placed in relation to complex and fragmented configurations of interconnected local, national, and global contexts, structured by post-colonial relations of domination. Although different contexts overlap and become intertwined, the analysis treats local contexts as primarily tied to the specific university space, national contexts as primarily tied to country-level political spaces and histories of power and resistance, and global contexts as primarily tied to how local and national contexts become related to globalized bordering practices and subassemblages.

By using the term post-colonial globality in reference to movement mobilization, we thus argue that the articulation of conflict within global civil society should be understood as occurring within a social system in which colonial power relations are both rearticulated and continued. This does not, of course, imply a simple reproduction of old colonial relations. Rather, definitions and understandings of ongoing yet transformed legacies of colonialism become in themselves discussed and contested as the post-colonial sets in motion different processes of dispersion, de-centering, and transformation of the "old" colonizer/colonized binaries. In these processes, fields for questioning and transforming our understandings of various colonial pasts are opened, simultaneously allowing for the understanding of how colonial power structures are rearticulated into the present.

### **Collective identity, conflict, and discourse**

In line with our focus on the movement's meaning-making practices, our analysis is methodologically based on *movement texts*, understood as manifestations of movement discourse, producing action-oriented collective identities (Thörn, 2015). Our analysis combines elements from social



movement theory's focus on social conflict and collective identity (Della Porta & Diani, 2005; Melucci, 1989) with the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001) and Laclau (2005). In line with this work, we define a social movement analytically as a space of collective action that articulates social conflicts to achieve social change (Thörn, 2009, p. 32). Insofar as processes of post-colonial globalization produce relations of power and inequality—as well as specific subject positions, institutions, and cultures—certain tensions and oppositions arise, as such processes affect the life worlds and relative standings of different groups and individuals. It is in relation to these tensions and oppositions that collective actors discursively articulate collective identities and subsequently initiate and take part in struggles over the further production of historicity (Cox & Nilsen, 2014). The organized social conflict thus never emerges automatically from processes immanent to a foundational social matrix, but must instead be constituted through articulatory processes in which collective wills, interests, and identities are actively constructed in relations of conflict to established power structures, institutions, and cultures. Thus, it becomes possible to understand movements as important social phenomena in their own right, rather than as given by first-hand structural phenomena.

In analyzing movement texts, we employed a method of discourse analysis that builds loosely on Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001). Here, individual textual statements are viewed as *articulations*. The articulation here refers to the practice through which discursive meaning is established, i.e. the instantiation of differential relations between “elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practices” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 105). Necessary for any articulatory practice is the implementation of *nodal points*—“privileged discursive points” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 112), i.e. particularly important signifiers which take a key role in establishing a particular set of meaning. The particular set of meaning resulting from an articulatory practice is then precisely what is dubbed *discourse*. Further, *antagonism* refers to the initiation of conflict between discursive formations as these point out each other's limitations through alternate significations. For Laclau and Mouffe, discourse theory is also intimately tied to the concept of *hegemony*. A hegemonic bloc is understood by Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2001, p. 136) as the relative unification of a “social and political space,” through the establishment of relations of equivalence between discursive elements via the usage of *empty signifiers*: broad, political signifiers which enable the crystallization of a variety of demands into “a certain discursive identity” (Laclau 2005, p. 93).

In concrete terms, this means our main material consists of published statements with the movement appearing as the main author, as well as

texts written by individual movement activists published or recounted on channels authorized by the movement. Our aim was thus to collect the totality of textual material produced by each movement aimed at the public. This included sweeping the movements' social media channels, and gathering from them a plethora of statements, including manifestoes, lists of demands, ideological/philosophical excursions, personal reflections from individual members, poetry, music, as well as shorter updates and statements. With regards to the UCT formation, texts were primarily published on a Facebook page, with texts published on third-party sites being recounted or linked to. With the Oxford formation, a WordPress blog was utilized as a medium for communication in addition to a Facebook page. By trawling these sources we were able to collect any texts authorized as collective manifestations (i.e. signed by a moniker of the movement), or texts by individual movement participants who as a result of being given voice through the movements' authorized or hegemonic channels can also be considered as collective manifestations. In addition, two published volumes were analyzed (Chantiluke et al., 2018; UCT Rhodes Must Fall Writing & Education Subcommittees, 2015).

The resulting mass of text—amounting to around 500 pages in total, not including the published volumes—was organized chronologically before being submitted to initial, cursory readings. After this, we undertook a more detailed process of coding, where each text was analyzed using a discourse analytical methodology. This included, but was not limited to, highlighting each definition or outlining of the two movements' identities, goals, and positions, noting how identity and ideology were articulated using collective nouns, historical and contemporary political references, political-ideological signifiers as well as references to physical spaces and monuments. In short, mapping how the movements' utilized certain *nodal points* in defining and outlining movement identity. From this, we summarized and compared how we had coded the texts produced by each movement. The differences noted were subsequently contextualized, with a particular focus on intertextual relationships between our analyzed texts and other sources.

### **Targeting a foundational coloniality**

Central to the movement texts are antagonistic articulations aimed at established ways of dealing with colonial legacies, both on a university and a national level. Through such articulations, ongoing coloniality is constructed as a foundational structuring feature of society in general, and the university space in particular, for example, in the following quote from the UCT formation (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015c):

[An] action that called into question the neo-colonial situation and the rainbow nation mythology that is suffocating our country [...] In the time we have spent at Azania House we have begun to understand the need for a new language that challenges the pacifying logic of liberalism. This logic presents itself to us in the ideas of ‘reform’ and ‘transformation’ [...] Transformation is the maintenance and perpetuation of oppression, hidden within meaningless surface-level change. We have recognised that what is needed instead is the radical decolonisation of this institution.

Here, both established “transformation” discourses and Mandelian reconciliation politics (i.e. “the rainbow nation mythology”) are actively criticized and ridiculed: by putting quotation marks around “reform” and “transformation,” viewing post-1994 society as “suffocating,” and connecting these established discourses to “the pacifying logic of liberalism,” they become articulated as disingenuous and compromising in the face of persistent colonial power structures. From this critique of established reformisms, it becomes possible to discern how coloniality is continually articulated as foundational of contemporary society as such; as ingrained in the “broader dynamics of a racist and patriarchal society” (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b) and as constitutive of a “neo-colonial situation.” This opposition necessitates “radical decolonization” as the only alternative.

In Oxford, a similar antagonism is established against the notion of “diversity,” which has been prominent in much UK university discourse since the early 2000s (cf. Ahmed, 2012):

RMFO wanted to make clear that the issue here is not diversity, but decolonisation. Diversifying into fundamentally unjust and unequal institutional structures does not eradicate the injustice and inequality but merely leads to tokenism regarding minority and suppressed groups. (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, 2015f)

“Decolonisation” is here given meaning through *negating* the notion of diversity. This further reinforces the view of colonial structures as present within the foundations of institutional culture and broader society: by emphasizing how diversity is not able to “eradicate [...] injustice and inequality” ingrained in “fundamentally unjust and unequal institutional structures” (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, 2015f), a more radical approach is implied. What is established in both cases is thus discursive equivalence between foundational coloniality and official measures deemed inadequate at addressing its consequences. This constitutes decolonization as a radical, thorough, dismantling of foundational structures, placed in antagonistic relationships to both foundational coloniality and established reformisms.

A key part of this discourse is also a particular view of history. By articulating coloniality as a foundational part of contemporary society, historical structures become viewed as thoroughly entrenched in the present. It is, for example, insisted that “Apartheid is not over” (Conrad, 2015, p. 33), that a “mutually productive culture of violence, racism, patriarchy, and

colonialism [...] to this day remains alive” (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, 2015c). Through such articulations, history becomes viewed as thoroughly active, continuous, and wrought with political implications for the present, thus opening it up as a space of political contestation.

### **Rhodes as nodal point: Decolonization as a politics of history-in-space**

The #RhodesMustFall movement utilizes the different Rhodes statues as nodal points within movement discourse, functioning as such by embodying and encapsulating the overarching issues which the movements seek to address. As the statues occupy central places within actual university spaces and as their presences are signified as not only symbolizing but actively endorsing colonial violence, they are assigned privileged points within the general discussion of the university space—and society at large—as defined through foundational coloniality:

This movement is not just about the removal of a statue. The statue has great symbolic power [...] It stands at the centre of what supposedly is the ‘greatest university in Africa’. This presence, which represents South Africa’s history of dispossession and exploitation of black people, is an act of violence against black students, workers and staff. The statue is therefore the perfect embodiment of black alienation and disempowerment at the hands of UCT’s institutional culture, and was the natural starting point of this movement. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b)

[It] continues to uncritically exist at the centre of an empire that remains untouched [...] Rhodes must be made to stand, revealed for what he really represents: the mutually productive culture of violence, racism, patriarchy and colonialism that to this day remains alive, aided and abetted by the University of Oxford. (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, 2015c)

Here the actual statues come to function as privileged signifiers: as they are said to be “standing” or “[existing] at the center” and having “great symbolic power” they are construed not as mere examples, but rather as entry points through which the university space at large can be understood. The actual physical presences of the statues are then signified as perpetuating historical structures of coloniality, as “[representing] South Africa’s history of dispossession and exploitation of black people” and “[representing] the mutually productive culture of violence, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism.” Through their centrality within the university space and the acts of embodiment and representation they are thus given credence through their connection to, and invocation of, larger systems and histories of coloniality, thereby functioning as nodal points for the establishment of an overarching discourse of radical decolonization.

This usage of physical, spatially localized, objects as nodal points also reveals a larger tendency within movement discourse: the convention of space and history in the constitution of the foundational coloniality.

Space is politicized by virtue of being viewed as configured in conjunction with historical structures and ideologies of coloniality—as symbolized and indicated by the physical presence of the Rhodes statues—which are then furthered and reproduced as the physical space stays “secured in time by concrete and bronze” (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015f). Decolonization thus becomes constituted as a politics of both history and space, or more specifically as *history-in-space*: ongoing historical structures of coloniality become secured in, and lived through, space, something which then becomes a central part of what is contested. This is primarily exemplified through the ways in which demands for the removal of the Rhodes statues are given primacy throughout much of the movement texts, but also through the ways in which the movements came to occupy physical spaces:

[A] physical and symbolic base from which to operate – a place where all black students, workers and staff know to go to be a part of the movement, to develop solidarity, to educate and be educated, and to be safe to express themselves, their experiences and their pain [...]. We need a new space in which to meet, to organise and to conscientise – a space in which to continue the process we began at Azania House of exploring what a decolonised educational space might look like. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015e)

Here it becomes obvious that occupation is not merely a tactical choice for putting pressure on university management but also constituted as an active intervention into colonial spatiality: by occupying the space, re-signifying it through renaming buildings and rooms, implementing new ways of education and living, actual decolonization of the particular space is performed through a form of direct action. Consequently, *history-in-space* is not merely *analyzed* as political, but actually *acted upon* through political intervention: engaging with space becomes a strategy for the concrete act of “*making history* by those excluded from history” (Gibson, 2017, p. 592). Specific physical spaces become transformed from being in line with the overarching coloniality of the university space and society at large to become an *alternative space*—a “[space] felt [...] to offer a sanctuary of relief from the oppressive features of mainstream arenas,” as put by Cassegård (2012).

Asking for the removal of the statue thus becomes a primary demand which symbolizes, indicates, and introduces a larger politics of reconfiguring the university *history-in-space*—and, further on, society at large—in line with a radical process of decolonization. The removal of the Rhodes statues is constituted as a “natural starting point,” i.e. as initial, tone-setting demands which eventually expand into a larger historical-spatial politics of decolonization.

This politics of decolonization is enabled precisely by connecting the local spatiality of particular statues, institutions, and cities, to inequalities and injustices produced by, and inherited from, globally articulated spaces and connections. This is further how the “multiscalar politics” discussed by Sassen (2006/2008) becomes enabled and conditioned by the post-colonial situation: it is through the globalization of localized issues of coloniality that the #RhodesMustFall movement can travel between different local, national, and continental contexts. By using the Rhodes statues as nodal points for the signification of a particular local spatiality as connected to, and defined by, globally articulated notions of foundational coloniality, a critical politicization of a post-colonial, global history-in-space is opened up, enabling movements in different localities to critically interrogate similar spatial structures and objects within their particular locality as connected to such global relations.

### **Hegemonic bloc or critical interrogation? Decolonial politics from Cape Town to Oxford**

As the Rhodes statues function as nodal points for general discourse on the local space as colonial, a more precise analysis of how meaning is ascribed to the statues, and thus to the local space at large, can be used as an entry point to the larger discussion of the ways in which the movements connect the local space to global spaces of coloniality. For the original movement at UCT, the logic of *activity* informs much discussion on the local colonial spatiality:

That the presence of Rhodes is seen as debatable shows that management does not understand the extent of the terrible violence inflicted against black people historically and presently. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015a)

At the root of this struggle is the dehumanisation of black people at UCT. This dehumanisation is a violence exacted only against black people by a system that privileges whiteness. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b)

*Activity* is here observable through the way in which the Rhodes statue, and the spatiality it represents, is seen as actually exerting historical, colonial violence: it is described *in itself* as “an act of violence against black students, workers, and staff.” The statue is signified as part of an ongoing and unbroken continuation of colonial violence by virtue of its physical presence within the university space. History-in-space thus becomes constructed as an active structure: the continuation of historical violence performed is neither latent nor subtle, but rather manifest, material, and physically felt.

This actively exerted violence is however never articulated as confined to the university space, but rather as directly continuous with the general state

of South African society, for which such violence is seen as directly constitutive: the “oppressive space” of the UCT is fundamentally defined through its reflection of the foundational “dynamics of a racist and patriarchal society” (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b). The “radical decolonization” advocated by the movement thus never becomes a matter of mere university politics, but constantly overflows the borders of the university space into larger society:

We have realised that the systems of exploitation which confront oppressed people at this institution cannot be tackled internally, precisely because they are rooted in the world at large. Black bodies, female bodies, gender non-conforming bodies, disabled bodies cannot become liberated inside of UCT whilst the world outside still treats them as sub-human. The decolonisation of this institution is thus fundamentally linked to the decolonisation of our entire society. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015d)

The radical decolonization of the particular educational institution is further linked to the black condition, “both nationally and then internationally” (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015d). The specific articulatory practice through which the local space becomes connected to the notion of a global colonial space is thus performed *via* the invocation of the South African national space; the local space is seen as colonial due to its continuity with a coloniality constitutive of the larger national space, which in turn can be defined as colonial due to its position as ex-colony within larger post-colonial globality. This is connected to the way in which “radical decolonization” is articulated as a broad and popular form of politics, forming the basis for the prospect of a unified hegemonic bloc centered on the movement:

The crux of this meeting therefore is to connect our struggle in UCT with the struggle of all black South Africans in order to forge meaningful and national solidarity. [...] MAQHABANE (sic) [COMRADES] THIS IS AN URGENT CALL TO RALLY THE MASSES AND LET OUR PEOPLE KNOW THAT THE TIME IS NOW. WE MUST BUILD BRIDGES BETWEEN OUR INDIVIDUAL STRUGGLES AND FORGE ONE UNIFIED PATH OF EMANCIPATION. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015c)

Usage of signifiers such as the “masses” and “people” in relation to the politics of decolonization, and relations of equivalence established through the “[building of] bridges” and the “[forging] of meaningful and national solidarity,” makes clear that the movement has the ambition to forge a broad popular basis for its politics. By integrating a specific concern for the university space into a chain of equivalent demands, pertaining to workers’ rights, housing, tuition fees, as well as constant expressions of solidarity with trade unions and workers organizations, the movement seeks to overflow the borders of the university space into larger South African society. Thus, the issue of decolonization is broadened to interpellate the national



space. The removal of Rhodes' statue can thus be seen as an *empty signifier* around which a plurality of struggles, demands, and interests can be rallied together in order to achieve broad, hegemonic formation (Laclau 2005, p. 96).

It should be noted, however, that this attempt at hegemony by the UCT formation remained precisely an attempt. It was a strategic, discursive maneuver performed by the movement rather than actually implemented alliance building. Whilst occasionally allying with campus workers, the #Rhodes Must Fall movement never gained the broad base it addressed in movement discourse; it never connected, at least on an official or organized level, to contemporaneous similar-minded initiatives, such as service delivery protests, the Economic Freedom Fighters, the radical trade unions NUMSA and SAFTU, or broad initiatives, such as the Poor People's Campaign. #Rhodes Must Fall activities instead dissipated during early 2017—possibly due to the generational nature of all student movements, possibly due to the political potential becoming saturated by the previously described movements. As described above, its influence and established alliances were instead primarily found overseas, becoming constitutive of global, multiscalar politics.

Contrary to these attempts at hegemonization, however, the Oxford statue, and the spatiality it represents, is defined by RMFO as characterized by a fundamental negativity - i.e. by the logic of lack, erasure, exclusion, and silencing:

At Oxford, survivors of imperialism find their own history held hostage, bequeathed to the archives by their oppressors. At Oxford, so many find their histories excluded, or almost unidentifiable in Oxford's imperial iconographies of space. Here, people experience the pain of cognitive dissonance because there is no 'legitimate' language for their own experience and knowledge and few curricular resources to invoke to change that. [...] So, for Rhodes to truly fall, Rhodes must first stand. Rhodes must be made to stand, revealed for what he really represents: the mutually productive culture of violence, racism, patriarchy and colonialism that to this day remains alive. (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, 2015c)

Here it becomes obvious that the historical-spatial coloniality of Oxford is understood as part of a context which attempts to erase or ignore its own colonial past. It is for such an erasure, for the actual reproduction of such a *lack* of critical engagement and knowledge, that the Rhodes statue becomes a nodal point: of a "one-sided rendition," of an "unspoken narrative," of "ignorance, apologism and [...] nostalgia." In short, Rhodes becomes a nodal point for the active obfuscation and subsumption of colonial relations and histories underneath a form of false consciousness that negates any "critical interrogation" of coloniality. The structure addressed here is thus both fundamentally ideological and negative in the sense that it is primarily intellectual, symbolic, or epistemological (albeit discussed as ingrained into physical space), articulated to mask actual relations at work.

Whereas the colonial relations present in the UCT case seem to exist on a readily observable surface level throughout all of society and are experienced physically and materially as “violence,” the colonial history-in-space of Oxford, as personified by Rhodes, rather exerts itself as a superstructure concealing a base level of colonial oppression—structures of “persistent racism that shadows [the] institution” *underneath* a surface level (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, 2015b).

The decolonization proposed by RMFO thus never becomes a project of overarching, revolutionary change in society as a whole, nor the basis for an ambition to mobilize a broad, popular movement reaching out to a whole national community as in the UCT case, but rather as an invocation of radical acts of “unmasking,” “revealing,” “exposing,” and “making Rhodes stand”—i.e. a form of “critical interrogation” which primarily takes place *within* the annals of the university institution. Material demands surrounding workers’ rights, housing, or tuition fees are thus subdued within the Oxford formation’s list of demands: what is instead focused on are issues of iconography, representation, and curriculum within the actual university space. The initiative proposed by RMFO must therefore be seen as comparatively particular and deconstructive: while the Rhodes statue has the function of *nodal point* within movement discourse, it never gains the position of *empty signifier* as it is never strategically utilized for the ambition to rally together a broad set of demands into a popular, hegemonic formation. The focus on the specific institutional space is however combined with a more accentuated and direct global focus:

We stand here, in Oxford, in solidarity with all those people on empire’s periphery, and bring the world’s decolonising fight to its heart. (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, 2015c)

Here the networks constitutive of global coloniality become articulated as synonymous with a notion of “Empire” which directly extends from “heart” to “periphery.” Oxford as a locality constituting this very “heart” becomes colonial not by being enveloped in a larger national context rife with colonialized inequalities, but rather through its direct role in constituting the “world” of globalized coloniality as such. Focalizing the university space and subsequently connecting it directly to a global spatiality in this manner further entails the prioritization of solidarity with movements in other higher educational institutions worldwide over the establishment of relations of equivalence with other organizations in the British national space. Whereas the discourse of the UCT formation constantly flows over into the surrounding national space in its quest for “decolonizing our entire society,” the discourse of RMFO rather reaches out to a global network of higher educational institutions in aiming to further the “process of decolonizing global higher education” (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, 2015e).

The UCT formation's articulation of decolonization as a broad, popular struggle implicating the whole national space makes sense when viewed against the South African national political context. The general political discourse of South Africa can be seen as largely defined through its position as ex-colony within a post-colonial world, with "nationwide discussions on the 'unfinished business' of the South African post-apartheid transition" (Luescher, 2016, p. 54) having pervaded the political mainstream for much of the post-1994 era. These discussions were intensified during the years preceding the #RhodesMustFall movement, with movements and parties, such as the EFF and the Poor People's Campaign gaining popularity through challenging the ANC establishment (cf. Dawson, 2017; Gibson, 2017; Mangcu, 2015; Nyamnjob, 2016). In this political context, it makes sense for decolonial political initiatives to attempt to constitute themselves as broad initiatives through the interpellation of a majority populus.

The British position within post-colonial globality is of course different. Racialized groups have here entered the "heart of Empire" through fragmenting processes of migration and diasporization (Loomba 2005[1998], pp. 145–151; cf. Gilroy, 1987). Consequently, questions of race or coloniality are often discursively subdued beneath other political relations, such as class, tradition, or imperial nostalgia, as described by Gilroy (1987, pp. 11–14). This could be seen as an explanation of the centrality given to processes of "unmasking" or "revealing" within RMFO discourse: within the context of ex-metropolis, there seems to be a primary concern with recovering questions of race or coloniality from the political margins to even be able to speak about certain concerns within the localized space. This marginality also complicates the potential construction of anti- or de-colonial struggles as broad, popular initiatives. Whereas an issue like anti-apartheid in Britain was enabled as broad, popular political engagement only under discourses of multiracialism, international solidarity, or anti-Thatcherism in the 1970s and 80s (Thörn, 2009), any contemporary articulation of decolonization as a radical form of racial politics in terms of a hegemonic bloc is difficult. As the university space, in particular, can be considered distinctly diasporic, the available histories of struggle in the Oxford context paint a rather fragmented picture. Without the popular or demographic basis for radical racial politics, the political field for radical decolonization must be more or less built from the ground up in the Oxford case.

### **Black majority populus or diaspora? Rearticulating collective identity**

These contextual configurations do not only affect the articulation of decolonization as a social and political objective but also the way in which the particular collective identities of the movements relate to different subject positions.

The UCT-based formation centers movement identity around the notion of *blackness*:

Our definition of black includes all racially oppressed people of colour. [...] It is therefore crucial that this movement flows from the black voices and black pain that have been continuously ignored and silenced. [...] An examination of South Africa's political history reveals the necessity for black people to organise to the exclusion of white people in the fight against racism. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b)

Here movement identity is explicitly articulated as directly flowing from a “Black” subject position, defined as a unifying “collective” “black consciousness” forged through collectively felt experiences of colonial oppression—of “black pain,” “collective agony,” and “wounds.” In short, “black pain is what has forged the black consciousness.” This collective consciousness is coupled with particular political interests, rendered meaningful through their dialectical negation of “whiteness,” seen as synonymous with coloniality or conquest. The articulation of such interests opens spaces for dealing with collectively felt experiences linking blackness to the reclaiming of “our land,” “where and how we live,” “how and what we learn” (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015e). #RhodesMustFall at UCT is thus not primarily constructed as a student movement, but rather a *black* movement. This identity is repeatedly articulated in line with Steve Biko's (1971) concept of black consciousness and how it established “Black” as a unifying category, constituted through a common experience of racial discrimination (cf. Desai, 2015; Mangcu, 2015). Blackness is thus primarily a “political category” including “all racially oppressed people of color” (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b).

It is through the invocation of blackness that a majority populus can be imagined, defined, and interpellated. With Rhodes functioning as an empty signifier against which movement demands can become articulated and placed in relations of equivalence with other formations and demands, blackness becomes an additional empty signifier around which the hegemonic movement identity is more positively named and constructed through the signification of a unifying, exterior symbol that enables linking to a set of demands through the constitution of a particular unifying subject position. This notion of Blackness is also linked to a more Africanized notion of Blackness, observable in the following quote:

Implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure – through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning – and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience. (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015b)

This, along with repeated reference to the pan-African space of Azania, reveals the broader ideology of Pan-Africanism as a key influence on the Cape Town #RhodesMustFall movement. As the notion of a common “experience” in this context becomes articulated in conjunction with a notion of African-ness, it renders the question of decolonizing the curriculum more or less analogous with a process of Africanization. Consequently, decolonization here does not merely entail the *deconstruction* of present coloniality, but also the *replacement* of such a structure with (re-)Africanized knowledge (cf. Mbembe, 2016).

In contrast to the unifying political notion of blackness espoused by the UCT formation, the collective identity of the RMFO is more connected to a particular intellectual or ideological position articulated in line with a project of “critical interrogation”:

We appreciate the warmth with which many of you have received the idea of this movement – and would like to emphasise that ours is an inclusive movement with which anyone who shares our ethos is free to align. (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, 2015d)

Here, movement identity is articulated in a more general manner; the appeal to “inclusivity” can be placed in stark contrast to the black separatism espoused by the UCT formation. Consequently, the demands and general visions espoused by RMFO are not articulated as flowing from the interests of an imagined black populus, but rather as constituted through a particular decolonial intellectual position—an “ethos”—to be constituted through processes of deliberation rather than from notions of common experiences or interests. Insofar as actual racialized or oppressed subject positions are addressed, they become articulated in a relatively general and multitudinous way. Instead of a central, singular subject position of “black,” a wide variety of plural, diasporic, and relatively nonspecific subject positions are evoked—“black and minority ethnic,” “people of color,” “victims of imperialism”—all of which are destined to include a wide variety of origins, positions, and identities dispersed and re-embedded into Oxford as ex-metropolis. The reconfiguration of curricula is therefore never articulated as a re-instantiation of a particular set of “original” knowledge—instead the creation of a “more intellectually rigorous, complete academy” by “integrating” a plurality of “subjugated and local knowledges is suggested (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015a).

These differences in the relationship between movement identity and subject positions are also to be understood in relation to the respective positionalities of the specific movement contexts within post-colonial globality. South Africa is an ex-colony with a rich history of political organization around the purported interests of an oppressed, black majority. The constitution of oppressed subjects in Oxford and similar ex-metropolises as diasporic, and hybrid, however, complicates the establishment of such a

unifying signifier, as well as the discursive derivation of “interests” from that signifier, thus making political identity less stable.

### Concluding remarks

In this article, we have analyzed #RhodesMustFall movements as part of a global multiscalar politics in which their localized demands are allowed to travel and become rearticulated in relation to new localities within a globalized world constituted through the dispersion, decentering, and discussion of colonial legacies and histories—post-colonial globality. We have demonstrated how such decolonial politics address similar, yet varying, concerns, reflecting local differences in how structures of coloniality are sustained in the post-colonial world. Thus, just like the post-colonial globality it is responding to post-colonial global civil society becomes “internally differentiated by its intersections with other unfolding relations” (Frankenberg & Mani, 1993, p. 303). Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe, we have argued that specific local initiatives for decolonization can be understood as rearticulations and as such as partially transformed through their insertion into new contextual configurations. We have demonstrated how key determinants of such rearticulations are the specific position of the local space within larger national and overarching global spaces, the ways in which such spaces have been imbued with historical political struggles over race and coloniality, and the consequences this has for the relative positions of various subjectivities.

By viewing individual pieces of colonial symbolism as nodal points, embodying and representing a larger colonial spatiality, thus creating what we have dubbed a politics of history-in-space, we have pointed to how a local space can be ridden with tension emanating from structural conflicts inherent in post-colonial globality. This invites students at other universities to interrogate their own local space similarly, thus making a multiscalar, global politics imaginable. Further, this politics invites us to read the post-colonial globality as a field largely defined by how globally articulated colonial structures have been dispersed and (re-)inserted into the specific local and national spaces, and how these are subsequently struggled over.

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