

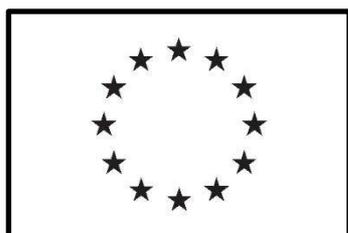
# ECHOOES

EUROPEAN COLONIAL HERITAGE MODALITIES IN ENTANGLED CITIES

## Affective Politics and Colonial Heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford

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# Affective politics and colonial heritage, Rhodes Must Fall at UCT and Oxford

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## ABSTRACT

The article analyses the spatial entanglement of colonial heritage struggles through a study of the Rhodes Must Fall student movement at the University of Cape Town and the University of Oxford. We aim to shed light over why statues still matter in analyzing colonial traces and legacies in urban spaces and how the decolonizing activism of the RMF movement mobilizes around the controversial heritage associated with Cecil Rhodes at both places – a heritage that encompasses statues, buildings, Rhodes scholarship and the Rhodes Trust funds. We include a comparative study of the Facebook use of RMF as it demonstrates significant differences between the two places in the development of the student movements as political activism. Investigating in more detail the heritage politics of RMF at UCT we fledge out what we call an affective politics using non-representational bodily strategies. We argue that in order for actual social movements to mobilize in current political controversies, they need to put affective tactics to use.

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Colonial heritage; social movements; social media; affective politics; decolonization

On 8 March 2015, student activist Chumani Maxwele threw human faeces on a statue of the British born imperialist and colonial politician Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902) at the campus of the University of Cape Town (UCT). In connection with the act, Maxwele stated: ‘As black students we are disgusted by the fact that this statue still stands here today as it is a symbol of white supremacy’ (Maxwele quoted from Goodrich and Bombardella 2016, 7). The video-recorded excrement-incident ignited the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement. Exactly a month after the incident, the statue of Rhodes was removed from its pedestal at UCT as a result of an accelerated process that involved student demonstrations and events, protracted negotiations in the governing bodies of UCT and extensive media coverage in South Africa and across many parts of the world.

In this article, we analyse the Rhodes Must Fall student movement at UCT and focus on the affective strategies employed in the mobilisation of heritage in an agenda to decolonise higher education in South Africa. Within a month after the excrement incident, the RMF movement and the call to ‘decolonize university’ had spread from the UCT to the University of Oxford in the UK – from the former colonized in the South to former colonizer in the North. While our main focus is on the RMF, we provide a comparative analysis of the RMF at the two universities. By doing this we shed light on the geographies of contemporary struggles around colonial heritage. Moreover, the comparative dimension allows us to gauge the importance of the affective strategies.

Affective strategies have been particularly prominent at UCT – a fact that is revealed through a content analysis of the Facebook pages of the RMF at UCT and at Oxford respectively. Our central

claim here is that these strategies – e.g. in the form of throwing ‘shit’ at a statue in public space – initiate a new kind of affective politics. RMF at UCT attacked the statue as a symbolic structure – not to deconstruct it through semantic drifts towards other significations as previous ‘reworkings’ of the statue have done, but rather to shift its register into a more-than-representational and affective bodily ‘abject’. Through this gesture of transforming the symbol into an ‘abject’, we argue that the statue becomes a strong political mobilizing tool capable of attracting but also repulsing audiences.

The first part of our article provides a comparative reading of the complex and contested legacy associated with Cecil John Rhodes’ name and estate in the two cities. Included in this comparative study is an analysis of the Facebook use of RMF at UCT and in Oxford. As accessible online platforms, RMF Facebook groups offer data to analyse content regarding the use of heritage by the movements to mobilize. The second part of our article investigates in closer detail the heritage politics of RMF around the statue of Rhodes at UCT and here we analyse how the activist repertoire of the movement primarily consists of biopolitical tools transcending biopower. In the conclusion, we discuss the RMF affective strategies in the wider context of ongoing controversies over colonial statues and heritage.

### **Cecil John Rhodes and heritage landscape in Cape Town and Oxford**

Cecil John Rhodes was a British imperialist and one of the key figures during the late nineteenth century ‘scramble for Africa’ that accelerated the territorial expansion of formal European rule on the African continent (Wesselink 1996). Born in Britain in 1853, Rhodes moved to South Africa where he made a fortune on the diamond and gold deposits discovered in the 1870s and 1880s. An ardent imperialist, he dreamt of uniting the Anglo-Saxon-race and creating a colony from Cape to Cairo under British Rule (Mitchell 1910; Phimister 1974; Flint 1976; Merrington 2001). In 1889, he co-founded a chartered company – *The British South Africa Company* – that conquered and ruled a huge territory north of the South African colonies. In 1895, this territory was named Rhodesia after Rhodes (today the independent nations Zimbabwe and Zambia) (Galbraith 1974). Rhodes also used his financial power to dominate the political scene in the South African colonies, reaching the pinnacle of power as Cape Premier from 1890–96. The ‘native policy’ of Rhodes’ government discriminated against the black majority and has been regarded as a precursor of the segregation and apartheid policies that shaped South African politics in the twentieth century (Rotberg 1988; Thomas 1996). Due to his influence as imperialist and colonial politician, Rhodes has remained a disputed and controversial figure in South Africa to this day.

Rhodes was obsessed with his legacy and at his death bequeathed a large sum (3.3 Million Pounds) to a trust that was to ensure the continuation and consolidation of his imperial ideals in his English mother country as well as in the colonies (Stead 1902; Darwin 2001). Moreover, as Paul Maylam has demonstrated in an important study, Rhodes’ followers and admirers had the political and financial power to create a ‘Cult of Rhodes’, erecting monuments, statues and buildings in his honour in many locations in southern Africa. His supporters ensured also the production and dissemination of a plethora of hagiographical publications and paraphernalia celebrating Rhodes and his imperial ideals. The ‘Cult of Rhodes’ was particularly active during the first decade after Rhodes’ death in 1902 and again from the late 1920’ to the late 1930s when a ‘second wave’ of hagiographies, celebrations and public monuments were produced including statues of Rhodes at the UCT campus and in Oxford (Maylam 2005).

The Rhodes heritage is particularly condensed in Cape Town where Rhodes was Premier and in Oxford where he enrolled as a mature student in the 1870s and 1880s (Figure 1). In Cape Town, Rhodes inhabited Groote Schuur, a house built in Dutch colonial style that he bought in 1893 and restored to include a zoo and garden with local plants as well as imported plants from England as a form ‘ecological imperialism’ that served to underline what he perceived as natural and organic links between Britain and South Africa (Le Sueur 1913, 246; Maylam 2005, 154–155,



Figure 1. The Rhodesian landscape at UCT. Private photo.

Brennen and Ernsten [Undated](#)). After Rhodes' death, Grootte Schuur functioned as the official Cape residence of eleven Prime Ministers of South Africa from 1911 to 1994 and, in that respect, it remained a strong symbol of white rule until the end of the apartheid era.

UCT itself dates back to 1829 but grew substantially from the 1880s in the wake of the mining boom. In 1928, the main campus was moved to the site near Grootte Schuur on land bequeathed by Rhodes ([Walker 1929](#)). In 1912, a huge monument at Devil's Peak in the hills above the future site of the university was erected in honour of Rhodes ([Maylam 2005](#), 51–53). A statue of Rhodes had been installed in Company Garden's park in central Cape Town in 1908 (with the inscription 'your hinterland is here') and in 1934 the contested statue at the main square of the university campus was unveiled. The tangible legacy of Rhodes is thus notable in and around the UCT campus. Moreover, unlike in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe where public statues of Rhodes' were taken down in the wake of formal decolonization in 1980, the monuments had – until recently – been left in place in Cape Town ([Thomas 1996](#), 16; [Maylam 2005](#), 46–47). Indeed, during a tour of the UCT campus in connection with a heritage workshop in April 2015, heritage scholar Nick Shepherd accurately referred to the UCT campus as 'the last Rhodesian Landscape'.

Upon his death in 1902, Rhodes scholarships and the Rhodes Trusts were established with Rhodes' bequest with the purpose of creating and educating a cadre of imperial-minded males to help promote the British empire and Rhodes' ideas of Anglo-Saxon predetermination to imperial rule ([Kenny 2001](#)). In 1929, Rhodes House was inaugurated in Oxford as a memorial to Rhodes and to house the Rhodes Trust. Like the monument at Devil's Peak in Cape Town, it was designed by the imperial architect and Rhodes admirer Herbert Baker and decorated with imperial symbols including the Great Zimbabwe bird that Rhodes had imagined to evidence of a link between Rhodesia and an ancient Phoenician civilisation in Southern Africa ([Baker 1934](#); [Maylam 2005](#), 74–75). Rhodes also donated substantial sums to his College, Oriel, where a statue of Rhodes was placed at the top of the college main building in 1932 ([Rotberg 1988](#), 86–87).

Rhodes' imperial activities, his fortune – and his heir and followers in both Southern Africa and Britain – thus produced a tangible legacy in forms of buildings, statues, publications and scholarships. This heritage has remained a highly visible – and an increasingly controversial – part of the environment at UCT and Oxford ever since.

When the RMF in Cape Town as in Oxford now demand a rupture with 'resilient colonialism' at several levels including curricula, university hiring practices, and the presence of visible icons of colonialism at the universities, they explicitly question the silent re-affirmation of colonialism (Nyamnjoh 2016). Moreover, Rhodes' heritage created a connection between Oxford and Cape Town, and this colonial-era connection is also directly mirrored in the RMF in the sense that Oxford was the first location outside South Africa where RMF's questioning of 'contemporary colonialism' gained momentum. The RMF movement in Oxford was formally established in April 2015, less than 1 month after the initial excrement-incident at UCT.

Colonial ideologies thus seem to be a continuous process and the construction of colonial legacy a never-ending story with several peaks throughout history, demonstrating that the desire for aligning with and re-affirming colonialism occurs at several occasions often as a result of concrete battles and issues.

### The Rhodes statue as contested space at UCT

The statue of Rhodes at UCT was installed in 1934, during the 'second wave' of Rhodes' commemoration three decades after his death (Maylam 2005, 37). The statue was sculpted by British artist Marian Walgate. It is a 1.5 times life-size bronze statue in a similar pose as that of Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. The figure has Rhodes seated with a map in one hand, a symbol of his dream of empire, with his 'imperial gaze' on the landscape below the hills.

The excrement-incident that ignited the RMF movement was not the first action directed at the monument (Jenkins 2016)<sup>1</sup>. A recorded incident occurred during the University's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1979 in the context of apartheid struggles. In this case, student activists covered the statue in pink paint to protest against the apartheid policies imposed by the South African state. Apartheid rule came to an end in 1994 but incidents around the statue only picked up pace well into the new millennium. In 2007 the Rhodes Statue was adorned with football regalia as a critical comment to the announcement that the football world championship was to be hosted by South Africa in 2010. Another incident occurred in 2014, when the *Tokolos Stencil Collective* – a group of artists performing cultural jamming<sup>2</sup> focusing on economic racial division through their stickers and graffiti art in public spaces in Cape Town – made the Rhodes Statue central to political protests. A text in red *Remember Marikana* referred to the violence and atrocities committed during mining strikes in South Africa in 2012 where dozens of people were killed. Placed alongside a small figure clothed in green with the right arm and a clenched fist raised, a significant iconic signature was made. This signature is widely used, for example by the R2K (right-to-know) movement that focuses on freedom of expression and access to information in South Africa.

The statue has thus afforded opportunities 'to gather contemporary concerns around them in meaningful ways' (Goodrich and Bombardella 2016, 8). Unsurprisingly, opinions about what to do with the statue differ profoundly. Goodrich and Bombardella, for example, dismiss the removal because this would indicate a 'false' liberty and an urban geography that is freed of segregation and inequality. In doing so, they end up recommending a status quo as statues offer battlegrounds for social and political struggle. We find this argument less than satisfactory as the only thing that is *not* allowed is to remove a moribund heritage that continues to linger. Mbembe, likewise, disagrees with this view and simply states that 'this statue – and those of countless others who shared the same conviction – has nothing to do on a public university campus 20 years after freedom' (Mbembe 2015, 3). Mbembe argues that for memory to fulfil its function, the removal of the statue equals a necessary attempt to *demythologize whiteness*. The many alterations of the Rhodes statue throughout its history show that it is politically mobilizing, as the removal of

Rhodes equally proved. The demand for the removal of Rhodes as well as its actual removal caused heated debates on RMF's Facebook page. Heated debates with mutually contesting views as well as the production of images, texts and actions proliferated (Rhodes Must Fall (ed.), the Johannesburg Salon 2015). While Goodrich and Bombardella argue that statues can be mobilizing tools, this can hardly constitute an argument to conserve them forever. RMF's actions show that they believe statues to be neither empty signifiers able to signify what various activist groups want them to signify and nor are they neutral containers of political mobilization. For RMF, Rhodes represents white supremacy at the UCT campus and, as a result, had to be removed (Figure 2).

### RMF, collective action and internal dissent

RMF can be situated in the landscape of social movements. Here, primarily three social movement paradigms prevail: the Political Process (PP) paradigm, the Resource Mobilization (RM) paradigm and the New Social Movement (NSM) paradigm. The Political Process model considers social movements to express the conflicting social interests that are the result of and influential to institutional politics: 'The agency of the movement is relegated to its ability to demonstrate, to mobilize in order publicly to manifest its claims which should then be taken into account by institutions' (Jerne 2016, 6). In this paradigm, people mobilize in order to change politics at an institutional level. The Resource Mobilization paradigm argues that people only engage politically in order to gain access to resources (mostly economic) for themselves. The New Social Movement paradigm, on the contrary, draws on culture to explain what animates social protest. Thinkers from this school and argue that New Social Movements are increasingly animated by identity, cultural and emotional needs, rather than class politics (Jerne 2016). Even though RMF as a social movement has features from both PP and the New Social Movement paradigms, it transcends these categories in deploying affective strategies as elements in their counter-public endeavour. From our perspective, RMF is in line with global protests and movements against austerity politics and economic inequality that have appeared since the financial crisis of 2008 in the US, Europe and elsewhere. The Occupy Movement, Los Indignados in Spain, anti-austerity protesters in Greece, and Nuit Debout in France, searching for alternatives to contemporary austerity politics, criticize uneven wealth distribution and the fact that no alternatives to neoliberal politics seem



Figure 2. The fall of Rhodes. Wikimedia commons: RMF Statue removal 32 desmond bowles. Jpg.

possible. These movements are heterogeneous and have mixed political affiliations in their membership. They are committed to direct and participatory democracy and, although diffuse in their concrete political goals, they mobilize through prospects of alternative political futures. Copying the revolutionary calendar from 1789, les Nuit Deboutistes baptized their movement ‘Movement of 32 March’ (Castelletti 2016) and claimed to be a grassroots political force beyond institutionalized politics fuelled by the strong affect of political enthusiasm at the sight of the revolutionary crowd (Lyotard 1986, 63). The affective intensity in these movements stems from their ability to build up faith and the desire to co-create a common future not yet stabilized in concrete actions, forms of organizations and objectives. Experiencing the openness of the future to be re-invented together seems to energize these movements.

As noted the Rhodes statue was a space of contestation prior to the excrement-incident in 2015. However, it intensified dramatically with the activities of RMF. With the objective to engage with a deeper controversy concerning institutional racism at the university and in the whole country, the first step was to have the Rhodes statue removed. The statue expressed in some sense a strong feeling of non-acceptance among the contemporary black students – at many places in South Africa simultaneously – and became a symbol of ‘what Africa should not be for us in the future’ as it was phrased by a black female student in an MTV news cover (Base News MTV 2015). Many witnesses came forward to explain what it is like to be a black South African student at various universities; revealing stories of abuse, violations, harassment (Contraband Cape Town 2015 featuring the documentary *Luister* presenting testimonies of 32 students of colour attending Stellenbosch University), and also just how the ‘vibe’ at campus hits as ‘a sense of not belonging’ (ZA MTV 2015). The structural racism is thus felt by both students of colour and by white South Africans who ‘don’t understand it, but who should try to’ and who should perform ‘active listening’ according to two white students interviewed on MTV Base News. In this respect, the RMF expresses an outspoken and visible form of decolonizing national political action. Demythologizing whiteness is considered part of a bigger decolonial struggle that aims to mark the end of false universalism in the guise of ‘Westernized’ or Eurocentric canons that attribute truth only to Western forms of knowledge production (Ngugi 1981; Mignolo 2014; Sousa Santos 2014). This form of decoloniality seeks to constitute a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue between different epistemic traditions. It is based on a notion of ‘pluriverse epistemologies’ aiming to give voice to new actors from heterogeneous groupings of race, class, gender or nationhood (Mbembe 2001; Mbembe 2015; Mignolo 2009; Mignolo 2017; Sousa Santos 2011).

In our reading, this is exactly how the excrement-incident has to be understood: as a mobilizing gesture to arouse enthusiasm around a new political aim in South Africa. After Rhodes fell, a new or succeeding student-led movement, Fees Must Fall, appeared, reacting against the prospect of increasing fees announced by the government.

Another important part of the ideological platform of the RMF is its alignment with race-based protests not only against the unequal social opportunities and unjust access to higher education but likewise an expression of anger towards a more deep-rooted structural racism. Globally, RMF chimes with the Black Lives Matter movement and their protest rallies against white police brutality towards black citizens. Black Lives Matter is a movement that RMF explicitly aligns with through demonstration-placard texts such as ‘Black pain matters too’ and ‘Transform UCT All Black Staff Matter’ (Azania Rizing Productions 2015).

Finally, the RMF is internally divided on gender issues, mostly articulated as overt criticism of the ‘official’ leadership of RMF. This appeared first as accounts of sexual harassment and assault as part of the RMF campaign, with one of the first incidents from November 2015 reported under the hashtag #RepeatAzania (Bernardo 2015). A first-year student in gender studies was sexually harassed by a male protester, allegedly forcing his fingers into her vagina without consent. A discussion revolved around whether or not this constituted rape as no penis was involved. Protests from feminists, LGBTQ and rights activists multiplied against what was called a ‘bigoted and patriarchal’ leadership of RMF (Kagure 2016). The fight against rape culture and ‘big man politics’

has continued in the form of public naked protests of women marching in the streets. This internally repressed aspect of RMF appeared in its full potential at the opening of the exhibition 'Echoing Voices from Within', a 1 year commemoration exhibition of RMF at UCT. The exhibition was curated by the Centre for African Studies (CAS); however, the UCT Trans Collective disrupted the RMF exhibition by smearing photographs with red paint and blocking entrances to the Centre for African Studies. The members of the Trans Collective criticized RMF for not really wanting to be intersectional and by doing so not practicing decolonial thinking and practices.

Thus, economic, political, race and gender issues co-exist and sometimes conflict in the RMF student movement. Certainly, decolonial practices and thinking do not form a programme or coherent ideology to which all participants subscribe. In this respect, the Rhodes statue has served as a focal point for mobilizing groups that share some but not all viewpoints and agendas. Using the distinction Bennett and Segerberg (2012) make between connective and collective action, in which the latter is associated with high levels of organizational resources and formation of collective identities while the former is based on weaker ties and a technologically based networking, we could say that RMF is a textbook example of collective action due to the student political identity agenda of the movement. On the other hand, the organizational support of RMF is not quite stable and is far from being an ideologically well-oiled machine. What is to be drawn from the distinction between collective and connective action is maybe that neither of them can do without the other to some degree.

### **RMF on facebook**

Both RMF at UCT and in Oxford use social media to communicate their cause and actions and to mobilize politically. In this section, we make a content analysis of the two Facebook pages of the movement as the most important archives documenting actions taking place in both locations. As digital and mobile devices increase and more and more individuals have access to these technologies, participation and immediate communication become crucial concepts in understanding how global media, social bodies and political processes intertwine. Frequent opportunities for user participation of non-professionals participating in media production and dissemination offer a platform for connective and collective action to take place (Carpentier 2011; Kelty et al. 2014; Knudsen and Stage 2015). The 'immediacy' (Bolter and Grusin 2002) quality of the audio-visual posts, documenting events *as they take place*, increases the formation of networked and affective publics being the 'publics that are the imagined collectives emerging as the result of the intersection of people, technology and practice'. The networked publics of RMF both at UCT and in Oxford are thus constituted not only of the groups forming collective attuned action around ongoing political issues but also of individuals and groups forming more connective ties to the feelings of indignation, discontent and disagreement with ongoing, reinforced and reproduced regimes (Papacharissi 2015, 119). And finally, we encounter opponents to RMF's heritage political endeavour. The most prominent arguments being that protesters are violent and thus deserve what they get, that they should study and not engage politically – i.e. another missed opportunity to get out of poverty – and that the dispute is not about race and, therefore, Rhodes has no role to play in the conflict between university authorities and students.

The present analysis is an automated data scraping of the Facebook content of UCT: Rhodes Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford. We have concentrated on two kinds of analysis. Firstly, we have performed a topword-analysis divided in two time slots. The initial time frame being 'in the heat of a new political movement' at the very beginning of the action and immediately after the removal of the statue in Cape Town (01.03.15 – 01.08.15) (Table 1), and the second timeframe being the aftermath of the events (01.10.15 – 01.05.16) (Table 2) in order to establish whether key concepts of the movement changed over time. Secondly, we have compiled Facebook statistics comparing the number of posts, comments, likes and shares at the two

**Table 1.** Topwordanalysis of the FB pages of UCT: Rhodes Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford at the beginning of, during and shortly after the removal of the statue of Rhodes at UCT campus.

### Facebook – topwordanalysis



#### 1.3.2015-31.7.2015 UCT

- 1) Rhodes # 2.057
- 2) black # 1.723
- 3) white # 1.533
- 4) status # 1.215
- 5) Africa # 1.081
- 6) South # 1.048
- 7) students # 922
- 8) university # 854
- 9) history # 653
- 10) movement # 548

#### 1.3-2015-31.7.2015 Oxford

- 1) Rhodes # 1.454
- 2) Oxford # 790
- 3) rmfo # 654
- 4) statue # 580
- 5) Africa # 558
- 6) black # 542
- 7) white # 493
- 8) history # 396
- 9) Fall # 395
- 10) racist # 372

**Table 2.** Topwordanalysis of the FB pages of UCT: Rhodes Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford up until a year after the removal of statue.



#### 1.10.2015-1.5.2016 UCT

- 1) students # 1.194
- 2) black # 677
- 3) white # 620
- 4) university # 454
- 5) education # 377
- 6) workers # 332
- 7) rmf # 321
- 8) south # 305
- 9) movement # 259
- 10) protest # 243

#### 1.10.2015-1.5.2016 Oxford

- 1) Rhodes # 1.377
- 2) Oxford # 729
- 3) rmfo # 627
- 4) statue # 561
- 5) Africa # 521
- 6) black # 486
- 7) white # 441
- 8) history # 387
- 9) students # 344
- 10) university # 334
- 11) racist # 321

websites in order to state some very general statements of similar or different uses of digital social media in the two localized versions of RMF (Table 3). We have observed the recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2012) on how to adequately protect individuals when analysing datasets from the internet. Although the two Facebook pages are public, they can very well be perceived as private. We follow Nissenbaum (2010) in her statement that the solution to this blurring of boundaries between private and public is not to assure people's right to control information about themselves in a strict sense (Nissenbaum 2010, 2). She offers to internet researchers the possibility of a framework of contextual integrity that observes social norms and rules in distinct social contexts (Nissenbaum 2010, 3–4). Our data analysis is stripped of personal, private or any recognizable features of individuals and therefore not able to do harm according to AoIR ethical rules. Later on, in our close analysis of what Robins entitles the shit political gesture against the statue of Rhodes at UCT, we give voice and body to bottom-up political protests that – listened to carefully and taken seriously – not only criticize regimes but are also capable of disseminating enthusiasm and political hope for a changed future – even though the longevity of the movement does not appear obvious.

In order to perform the topword analysis and Facebook statistics, we have used the software tool entitled digital footprints (<http://digitalfootprints.dk>).

The result of this analysis is that UCT: Rhodes Must Fall changes significantly between the two timeframes. As RMF aligns with broader political issues – to join #Fees Must Fall and #end to outsourcing – Rhodes disappears as a term, as do the terms History and Africa. The words Protest, Student, Worker and Education come in while Blackness and Whiteness persist. In the Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford page, on the contrary, there is much more stability between the timeframes. All the words are echoed in the two searches except for the word Fall. One could argue that of course UCT: Rhodes Must Fall had to find other objectives as Rhodes *did* fall. However, they could have stayed within a heritage frame and attacked what is left of the Rhodesian landscape at UCT. However, they did not; with the fall of the mobilizing statue, the goals become more abstract and general such as in #PatriarchyMustFall, and therefore it also becomes more difficult to measure successes. We can likewise say that political actions around tangible symbols have a strong mobilizing effect. They mobilize both opponents and supporters due to the very concrete expression of political goal making.

The statistical analysis of posts, comments, shares and likes gave us some remarkable insights into the differences in the localized use between the two connected movements. The number of shares at UCT: Rhodes Must Fall is twice the number of comments, while in the case of Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford, these two numbers are equal. In connection to the result that in Rhodes Must Fall In Oxford the number of comments is 7.5 times higher than the number of posts, we can say that the use of digital media is quite different at the two universities. Rhodes Must Fall In

**Table 3.** Shows an example of how Facebook statistics can tell us something about how publics engage with FB pages, if they primarily just like, comment upon or even share posts, links and images.



Oxford is to a large extent a forum of debate while UCT: Rhodes Must Fall is a page that documents and encourages direct and performative action in public space.

From this data analysis, we can deduce some qualitative differences between RMF as a political movement and their use of Facebook as a social media platform at the two universities. At UCT, we note the formation of a networked public around heritage and race issues that develops as events unfold. The political actions take place mostly outside Facebook and – although antagonistic utterances that contest the foundation of RMF also appear as mentioned above – its role is primarily to mobilize around concrete actions. In the case of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford, we see a more continuous yet restrained effort around the agenda of decolonizing the university first and foremost, and the social media platform used as a deliberative forum for political debate that to a lesser degree performs in public space.

### **The affective activism of UCT: Rhodes Must Fall**

The content analysis of the Facebook page thus indicates a key difference between the movements at Oxford and at UCT. At UCT we see an affective public mobilizing around direct action, while we in Oxford witness a more deliberative use of FB as a platform for political discussions. This result supports our reading of the affective body-politics of the RMF at UCT. The body-political nature of RMF at UCT is conceived in the initial gesture that ignited the whole movement: the excrement incident on 9 March 2015 performed by Maxwele at the Rhodes statue. We consider this strategy as something additional to the well-known strategies around visual imagery. Looking at the growing literature on RMF at UCT in particular, the role and use of visual imagery in the unfolding of the movement is predominant (Kros 2015; Bosch 2016; Murriss 2016). Analysis of the visual archives widens the perspective on activism to also encompass the forms of communication amongst the activists, their overt mass media strategies and ways of keeping up the momentum of the movement, and internally mobilizing through sharing imagery. The images that the movement members post – portraying mass assemblies, as in the RMF profile picture of 12 March 2015, which formally imitates the iconic imagery from former actions that the movement align with (the Soweto uprising in 1976, the Marikana miners' strike in 2012) – become part of the repertoire of mobilization employed by the movement. Likewise, more aligned with our reading of RMF as a particular bodypolitical movement, specific artistic actions are used such as the Saartjie Baartman performance 25 March at UCT library about a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited as an attraction in European freak shows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as displayed faces and bodies excited and strongly implied in the concrete political actions. This happens when mouths are taped, faces are used as screens to write on, and bodies are undressed, but also occurs when rhythms, dances, songs, smiling and laughing faces become part of the repertoire of mobilization used by the movement. The analyses show how visual imagery mobilizes internally, influences or becomes part of mass media representations and how certain 'poses' seduce or pull bystanders to take pictures expanding the visual archive into an open-ended source of political manifestation and inspiration.

We agree that the particular strength of RMF is the ability of the movement to contagiously spread outside the ranks of confined allies, and we very much believe that the particular characteristic of this movement is its ability to mobilize affectively. This happens most certainly partly due to the visual repertoire of RMF's 'counter-archive' consisting of a whole range of photo genetic images that are capable of competing with the iconic status of Rhodes on his plinth (Kros 2015).

It is often said in popular discourse that we cannot do anything about the past: 'it' – very often the unpleasant/unjust/horrifying past – just happened and now we have to look at the future. Dealing with heritage, we know that to change the path of the future, a revisiting of past events is often necessary. In order to consider new directions, a revision, a criticism and maybe sometimes a radical distancing from the past is needed. What is really happening in the excrement-event of 9 March 2015 at UCT? The recordings of the event available on YouTube show that the event in

itself is not particularly spectacular. The excrement throwing lasts only a short moment and as a liquid material it falls away rather than solidifying into a new solid image as defacing efforts often do. The effect of the ‘disgusting’ gesture does not in itself become an image capable of stirring up emotions and fails to go viral. What we see in the video footage of the event is rather a focus on the people documenting the event and not the event itself. It is an indisputable fact that many subsequent events around the statue were far more spectacular. These included the wrapping of the statue in black plastic bags, the artistic proposal to keep the shadow of the statue painted on the ground as to imply Rhodes’ haunting presence-absence, as well as the fine arts student Sethembile Msezane who posed as a statue by balancing her body on the plinth that Rhodes had just left – for four hours her eyes covered in feathers and her arms elongated with feathered wings (Kros 2015, 279). In contrast to such a performative image, the excrement event is not in itself photo genetic, but it is nonetheless the revolutionary gesture that puts Rhodes in motion, the gesture that ‘breaks up’ a symbolic system of colonialism still in place configured by the statue. In the next paragraph, we unfold the close reading of this revolutionary event that functions as a starting point of re-configuring Rhodes’ heavy legacy. We use a semiotic vocabulary from Bulgarian-French linguist Julia Kristeva to understand how the affective politics of RMF *erodes Rhodes* from below: meaning from the body, from the matter, from the affective realms.

### **Making the symbol disgusting**

RMF performs a kind of double movement in their attack on the monument; on the one hand, they target the symbolic level of the monument (its mental and social impact) through subtle or artistic-poetic strategies, covering the statue, so to speak, with various other matters. These strategies respond to the monument using the repertoire in contemporary local conflicts between citizens and political authorities in South Africa; on the other hand, RMF gives agency to the statue in transforming the statue from ‘what has been deemed desirable [...] to being disgusting’ (Ngai 2005, 353). In this perspective, the material statue becomes disgusting and is the ‘thing’ able to evoke disgust: an artefact in public space having the qualities of being ‘dangerous and contaminating and thus something to which one cannot possibly remain indifferent’ (Ngai 2005, 336). Thus, the first part of the excrement-gesture is to make the things we live by and barely notice worth noticing. This gesture is in its first phase capable of altering the monument from being a symbol either of desire or just a symbol thin as air to an abject of disgust capable of mobilizing citizens politically.

Secondly, this gesture puts the statue in motion by placing it in an affective realm of repulsion and attraction concerning its fall from symbol to abject, semiotically speaking. The concept of abject from Kristeva is useful in this case because it displays disruptions in the symbolic/social order through the means of what Kristeva calls ‘energetic dischargings’ (Kristeva 1974, 23) from the semiotic order, meaning affective pre-symbolic repertoires thrown into the symbolic to break up structures. As a linguist and literary scholar, Kristeva demonstrates how modernist authors attack social orders through attacking language as symbolic system: by breaking up syntax, the meaning explodes through the means of affective layers closer to the socio-biological body. Reading the shit political strategy of Maxwele as we now baptize it following Robins (below) as the igniting gesture of the whole RMF, we believe that the affective and energetic discharging that puts the statue into motion symbolically speaking reveals how it all began and how RMF at UCT primarily uses biopolitical tools. By throwing shit at this monument, the statue changes from a symbolic and iconic object into an abject, meaning that it was once close to the social body but has now become disgusting and must be kept away from the social body (like excrements, corpses, spit, blood etc.) in order to keep the latter safe. To Kristeva, abjection is not just a fancy word for rejection. It is alchemy transforming the death drive “into a jerk of life, into new signifying processes, (Kristeva 1980, 22, our translation). The ‘new’ appears as the shit political gesture makes visible through transgressing a series of dichotomies that normally constitute the social order: public-private, inner-outer, upper-lower, sacred-profane, vertical-horizontal,

cognitive-linguistic, bodily-materialist, upgrading-downgrading, liquid-solid, symbol-index. Through the gesture of abjection, the statue is set into motion and its journey towards removal and new beginnings emerges.

## Shit politics

Shit politics is already put to use locally as a political weapon in South Africa in response to biopower as a strategic tool to segregate races and groups of people (Foucault 1976). These tactics have been acknowledged within academia (Rountree 2013; Robins 2014a; Robins 2014b) and have an actual focus on affects and bodily openness towards the world. Bodies are here being understood in brain-body-world entanglements in a bio-social sphere in which they are affected and affect other bodies constantly without taking psychological detours around processes of identification and mirroring of identities (Brennan 2004; Blackman 2012). Affective politics, thus, in our view, is something contemporary activism more or less consciously employs.

We look at shit politics in a double perspective. Shit politics shows itself to be part of a local repertoire of protesting that is also employed in our case. In this context, it has stable connotations. But it is equally – as stated above – an expression of a more general shift towards performative and biopolitical tools of protest, e.g. as in using bodies as shields as it is done in political conflicts. Political scientists have pointed to human shielding as a new weaponization of life and as an ambivalent form of insurgent politics in times with increasingly biopolitical forms of sovereign power deployed around the globe (Bargu 2013; Bargu 2017).

Let us first consider the context of excrement in contemporary South Africa. A war of toilets was initiated in 2011 to draw attention to sanitation disasters in many informal settlements in South Africa. In 2013, community activists from Khayelitsha informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town threw portable toilet containers filled with faeces onto the N2 highway and in the departures section of the Cape Town International Airport. The shit-activists protested against the city and the provincial government providing shack dwellers with portable rather than ‘proper’, permanent, modern flush toilets. Robins (2014a; 2014b) contrasts the strategies of movements such as Social Justice Coalition (SJC) performing banal, slow activism (483) lobbying and pressuring the city government to maintain, clean and monitor toilets in informal settlements in Cape Town and more spectacular strategies such as throwing the faeces in the International Airport. Robins acknowledges that the spectacular strategy puts the issue on the official political agenda: ‘moving excrement from the periphery to the centres of power had become a potent expression of discontent with poor service delivery in post-apartheid South Africa’ (Robins 2014a, 2). Robins complains that key European thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas disqualify the more private, mundane and embodied conceptions of politics.

When shit is handled overtly as a political weapon, it often has to do with what Holston enumerates insurgent citizenship (Holston 2011) and the unequal distribution of space and rights-claims of housing, transportation, sanitation etc. acclaimed by non-privileged city dwellers. In this process, new political subjectivities for the poorer part of the South African population see the light of day using remedies ‘at hand’ or more precisely ‘at body’. In our case, we see a whole range of affective strategies put to use in RMF UCT: the excrement event, Msezane’s feathered performance on the emptied plinth, the 1 year anniversary disruption of the naked and smeared bodies of the LGBT community at UCT, and the encouragement to form human white shields to protect the black students from police violence during the protests in autumn 2015. During the incidents in which students and workers at UCT gathered to protest fee increments and outsourcing of labour at UCT, police had already fired rubber bullets at the crowd, so the call for human shields on Twitter (‘White allies are asked to move to the front and make a human shield’ was just a pre-emptive move. Bargu argues that voluntary human shielding is part of the repertoire of political action, although its significance is contested. For human shielding to work, it must rely heavily on the power of publicity and a general call to humanitarianism, and it acts as a generator of ‘counter-publics’ that are

re-affirming and mobilizing internally in the fight against a common enemy (Bargu 2017, 301). In her analysis, Bargu states two highly important points for our purpose here. Looking at the shields of white allies in front, mobilizing some bodies to protect other bodies, only works if some lives are valued more than others (Butler 2009). Analysing the performative action of letting some bodies protect other bodies, Bargu writes: ‘the strategic deployment of privilege in order to subvert the humanitarian hierarchy among lives, the same hierarchy is affirmed and recreated’ (Bargu 2017, 303). This seems only partly true as the action is staged and decided by the movement itself as a very conscious use of ironic mimicry of the fact that black lives matter less (Bhabha 1996). But Bargu has a second important point that connects to the very foundation of voluntary human shielding in the biopolitical sovereignty reigning. Voluntary shielding upholds, according to Bargu, the political *meaning* of life, its relation to justice, against the value of biological survival (Bargu 2017, 303). That point refers us back to the discursive, deliberative and rational driven public sphere (Habermas 1991 [1962]) that seems challenged by affective politics. Our point aligns more with Robins in his concern that private, mundane and embodied forms of politics are not being recognized as valid political expressions. The new affective politics do not necessarily substitute old views with solid new ones. It is more uncertain of the future, but it installs new dynamics *from below* that are capable of attuning bodies (Massumi 2009) to emotional states of, for example, enthusiasm.

### **RMF and the Rhodes statue in Oxford**

In line with our comparative Facebook analysis, as a political movement the RMF In Oxford is a less performative and more deliberative affair. As mentioned, Oxford was the first location outside South Africa where an RMF branch was established. This happened less than a month after the excrement-incident, with gatherings of students demanding that the Rhodes statue and other symbols in Oxford should fall as well. The presence in Oxford of the tangible legacy of Rhodes thus served to create a new connectivity between the two locations. There is notable historic irony to this. Rhodes’ old dream of building the lasting ties that would bind together Britain and Southern Africa under the ideological umbrella of empire provided a platform for expressing a student alliance united in an agenda of ideological decolonization. Thus, in March 2016 a march at Oxford celebrated the first anniversary of the RMF movement in both locations under the headline ‘A March for Decolonization of the University’ (RMF Oxford Facebook, 12–18 March 2016). The protesters passed Oriel College (with the statue of Rhodes at the top of the building’s façade), the Old Indian Institute Building (a former training academy for colonial administrators and now a library) and finally Rhodes House, home of the Rhodes Trust. These sights had been selected to elaborate on the core demand to decolonize the university. A close reading of the RMF Oxford Facebook page reveals that for RMF Oxford the call to decolonize the university means at least four things. Firstly, the activists call for changing or removing colonial iconography in Oxford. This relates to the tangible and the intangible heritage of Rhodes including statues, plaques, Rhodes scholarships, the Rhodes Trust and the physical building, Rhodes House. Secondly, RMF Oxford emphasizes the need to improve black and ethnic minority representation in academic staff. Thirdly, RMF Oxford insists on including more non-Western and non-male authors in order to decolonize curricula and allow a broader representation of epistemologies. Fourthly, the RMF espouses an agenda to fight institutionalized racism and discrimination of students at the university. The strategies and interventions of RMF Oxford have not been confined to debates and demonstrations exclusively but include also more public oriented initiatives such as ‘Alternative City Walks’ that highlight sites of ‘colonial heritage’ at Oxford and the recording of a music video, ‘Dreaming Spires’, by the artist Femi Nylander. Alluding to Mathews Arnold’s ode to Oxford, Nylander’s lyrics and video draws attention to the colonial heritage at Oxford including Rhodes House and the Rhodes statue at Oriel College : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkPfqh8uYxc>). (Figure 3).

As in the case of Cape Town, the statue of Rhodes has also been central to RMF Oxford from the outset. In 1932 a statue of Rhodes by Henry Pegram was placed at the top of the façade of the



**Figure 3.** RMF protesters in front of Oriol College. Petitioning Oriol College, Oxford University. [change.org](https://change.org).

main building of the college facing Oxford's busy High Street (Maylam 2005, 72). A key episode occurred around this statue in January 2016 when Oriol College decided *not* to remove it as had been demanded by the RMF since April 2015. This was thus the exact opposite outcome from Cape Town where the statue was removed within a month after RMF at UCT started the protests. Initially, Oriol College declared that it would consider removing a plaque commemorating Rhodes and inaugurate consultations about how to deal with the statue itself. Several scenarios were discussed including removing the statue as was done in Cape Town or to move it to a park inspired by Memento Park in Budapest. An artistic reframing was also proposed and other suggestions included adding a plaque to the monument to provide historical context (Garner 2015). However, in January 2016, the college terminated the consultation period and announced the decision not to remove the statue. According to news reports and college sources, this decision was partly taken as the college faced a substantial loss of donations from alumni who were strongly opposed to removing the statue (Rawlinson 2016; Espinosa 2018).

RMF Oxford has thus so far not achieved the aim to have the statue of Rhodes removed. However, the heritage focus of RMF In Oxford has been successful in the sense that the previously 'unremarked' colonial symbols have been mobilized in order to raise a concern over colonial legacies and current discrimination at the university. As in Cape Town, the mobilization of mass media attention and of students has been enhanced by the existence of this tangible heritage. However, a notable difference has been that the affective politics have been employed much more in the case of RMF UCT. To us, this difference in outcome points to the power of affective politics.

## Statues matter

As this article is being written, statue disputes proliferate particularly in the US. It concerns Confederate monuments in the Southern States (New Orleans, Charlottesville) and likewise at Capitol Hill, Washington DC in the National Statuary Hall Collection and in Baltimore. Further, ‘softer’ Eurocentric symbols such as statues of Christopher Columbus and public figures such as the statue of a mayor of Philadelphia, Mr. Rizzo ill-reputed for his harsh tactics towards blacks in the city (Trip 2017), become the centre of interest in decolonizing political actions. These disputes and discussions show that statues in public spaces matter and continue to do so. The following points regarding statues as heritage have to be made in the context of RMF:

1) Statues, flags, street-names etc. are rarely relics from the historical period they represent. They have been added later and have to be regarded as political tools in a struggle over race, economy, socio-political formations and cultural affirmation.

This was also the case with Rhodes and his legacy. As noted the ‘Cult of Rhodes’ was particularly active during the 1920s and 1930s, decades after Rhodes had passed away. In addition to the statue at UCT from 1934 other statues of Rhodes were erected in Salisbury (today Harare) in 1928, in Mafeking (today Mafekeng) in 1932 and several others had been planned but did not materialise (Maylam 2005, 121). During this period, the links between the white settler minority in Southern Rhodesia and the British in South Africa needed affirmation as the legitimacy and survival of the settler state depended on this racial and economic relationship (Phimister 1988). Rhodes, ‘the Founder’, was a potent symbol of this connection not only between the whites in Rhodesia and in South Africa but also with Britain and the other ‘white’ settler colonies. Indeed, also in Britain a spate of Rhodes monument-erecting occurred at this exact moment including the building of Rhodes House and the establishment of a Rhodes Museum in his place of birth in Bishop’s Stortford (Maylam 2005, 58–60). The 1930s also saw the publication of the first critical biography that aimed to debunk the myth of the ‘Rhodes Colossus’ (Plomer 1933). This called for counter-narratives and no less than seven book-length biographies of Rhodes were published between 1933 and 1936. Thus, during this period, Rhodes’ supporters used their substantial political, financial and cultural power to produce perhaps the biggest wave of paraphernalia, publications, and monuments to promote and protect Rhodes’ legacy and the values he symbolized. Importantly, when the statues at Oriel College and UCT were erected in the 1930s it was part of an already very self-conscious form of memory politics. This is similar, in many ways, to the contested statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville that like most confederate memorials was erected not in the aftermath of the civil war but several decades later in the context of ‘the lost cause movement’ and the Jim Crow Segregation Laws (Brundage 2017; CNN 2017). The Confederate flag in the South did not appear as a symbol until after WWII and it really became ubiquitous during the Civil Rights Movement as a symbol against the federal government and racial equality (Little 2015).

2) This entails that the symbols are not always witnesses to a certain historical period and as such entitled to speak ‘historical truth’ (Ricoeur 1972); rather, they are the outcome in specific historical periods of political struggles that do not have greater or lesser legitimacy than later epochs. In such cases, statues can be taken down, for example as part of a legitimate societal need for ‘demythologizing whiteness’ without necessarily tampering with ‘historical truth’. Like monument-erecting dismantling them can be a lengthy historical process occurring in waves. This has also been the case with the Rhodes’ monuments. When Rhodesia became independent as Zimbabwe in 1980 the public statues of Rhodes in Bulawayo and Harare were removed but this did not happen in South Africa after the ending of white minority rule in 1994. Scholars like Paul Maylam and Anthony Thomas, who in the 1990s studied the legacies of Rhodes in Southern Africa, were surprised that there was so little interest in Rhodes monuments. Writing in 1996 about the Rhodes statue in Company’s Garden in central Cape Town, Thomas noted how it was covered with streaks of white birdlime and how rainwater had eaten a rusty hole in Rhodes’ right

leg, and how '[P]eople stroll past uninterested, unseeing' (Thomas 1996, 16). Twenty years later protesters tried to cut down the Company's Garden Statue with an angle grinder (Voice of the Cape, 2016) while the other statue of Rhodes at UCT had become an abject around which political protests could be mobilised and the call to decolonise could be voiced.

3) Statues are thus to be seen as signs of substantial matters not as unimportant random icons in public spaces. When former Atlanta mayor and civil rights leader Andrew Young claims that he is always interested in substance over symbols (in Trip 2017), these two things cannot be separated. This means that you cannot fight structural racism without challenging visible symbols; however, on the other hand, and importantly, that gesture is far from enough.

## Conclusion

Following Rhodes legacy from Oxford to Cape Town, we were able to demonstrate that the Rhodes Must Fall student movement went opposite: from Cape Town to Oxford, reversing power geometries. A range of similarities were revealed but the most interesting difference from the Facebook analysis showed itself to be that RMF In Oxford was a forum of debate while UCT: RMF was a space of political mobilization to concrete actions. Our analysis had its main focus on the affective politics of Rhodes Must Fall in Cape Town as it showed to be more politically powerful at first. Here we should of course not overlook the fact that social and political contexts matter profoundly for the ways in which heritage is mobilized in different locations. Unlike at UCT, the language and aims of the RMF in Oxford have not expanded to include themes such as policy brutality, university outsourcing and uneven access to basic utilities. Rather, the issues raised by RMF Oxford remain focused on academic culture, curricula and not least the ongoing debate in Britain about how the country should deal with its colonial past in a situation where 'the long retreat from multiculturalism' had provided fertile soil for 'the return of a rose-tinted memory of empire', as Chaudhuri perceptively noted (Chaudhuri 2016). While it seems that the RMF in Oxford appears to have run out of steam (for the moment at least), the debate about the country's imperial past continues unabated. The most recent example in Oxford is the controversy over the five-year research project launched in 2017 at the McDonald Research Institute at the university on 'The Ethics of Colonial History', which has caused heated debate in academia and among the wider public in Britain.<sup>3</sup>

While controversies over the imperial past continue in Oxford, the situation clearly differs from current developments in Cape Town. Indeed, examining the posts on the *UCT: Rhodes Must Fall* Facebook during 2017 it is notable that the images primarily show black protesters and contain information indicating increases in violence and conflict between authorities and protesters. Moreover, the protests concern proper housing, land occupation, and asking for help to bail out imprisoned comrades. The public authorities in South Africa position the protesters as violent villains to be silenced, obstructing them from voicing political dissent and legal protest. This volatile situation is constantly changing. In late 2017 the students gained what appeared to be an important victory as the Zuma administration launched a plan to reform higher education which included subsidising poor and working-class students

(Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training 2017). However, mistrust and uncertainties are great both with respect to how this education reform will be financed and enacted and more broadly how the quality of higher education can be secured as the economic and political crisis continues in South Africa also after the termination of the malfunctioning Zuma administration (Seán Mfundze Muller 2018).

One could of course conclude on a very sad ending to a very promising political protest. We would phrase it otherwise: RMF has proven efficient not least in its bodily tactics and use of affective politics. The affective politics is to be understood more broadly in the waves of resonance (the meme quality) of the movement locally and globally, in the creation of spectacles by the movement: the feathered female body on the plinth of Rhodes, the image

of the LGBT movement disputing the right of RMF to decide the movement's direction, and in the initiating gesture of RMF – the excrement event that played a predominant role in mobilizing around unleashing the energy and imagining other decolonial futures in South Africa and elsewhere.

## Notes

1. For information on activist and artistic interventions centered on the Rhodes Statue prior to 2015 we have benefited from Sarah Jenkins' MA project on this topic. The authors would like to thank Sarah Jenkins for giving us permission to consult and cite this material.
2. Culture Jamming is a form of political protest and communication that revolts against increasing commercialization in public space. This can take the form of lightly altering easily recognizable advertising around global brands to change the whole meaning completely: Helleven (7-Eleven), Puke (Nike), logo (Lego) ([www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)).
3. For more on this project see the project webpage: (<http://www.mcdonaldcentre.org.uk/news/ethics-colonial-history>). In the ongoing controversy, an important intervention by a substantial group of Oxford scholars who protested against the methods employed in the project: <https://theconversation.com/ethics-and-empire-an-open-letter-from-oxford-scholars-89333>. Accessed 18 May 2018.

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