CHAPTER 28

The Ugly and Violent Removal of the Cecil Rhodes Statue at a South African University: A Critical Posthumanist Reading

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On March 9, 2015, black South African student Chumani Maxwele threw human feces at the statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes on the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus. Maxwele took offense at this visual sign and material expression of colonialism and its overwhelming presence in a prime geopolitical position at the university—more than 20 years 'post' apartheid. Frustrated by the lack of transformation at this historically white university, he went to a township, scooped the excrement from a portable flush toilet and smeared it on the statue. His actions led to a series of protests, such as the occupation of university buildings, as well as on-going debates and profound changes at UCT and other universities across South Africa. The event started the #Rhodesmustfall (RMF) movement, resulting in the statue's forceful removal exactly one month later.

My own embodied experience of the knowledge I had of the statue's pending removal by crane and truck was deeply discomforting. I could not bear to watch the event itself—in the same way, I would struggle to witness the demolition of a house, the uprooting of a tree, the eating of the flesh

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of a nonhuman animal, or the execution of a human animal. In the early afternoon of the day of its removal, I felt drawn to have a last look at the statue. I felt curious, excited, but also nervous as everyday news communicated materially and discursively through the university's website, the national news, and social media such as #RMF. Twitter had put pressure on staff to respond, to take up a position, for or against. Emotions were palpable beyond the organs of my body—forever shifting through the uncertainty and in/determinacy of the event. On arrival, I noticed fine arts student Sethembile Msezane standing on a plinth becoming a statue herself. It was only later that I discovered that she had already stood there in that position for many hours.

Having positioned herself just behind the statue (Fig. 28.1), she shows much of her black skin, with feathered wings attached to her arms, creating powerful pedagogical moments or 'flashpoints' resisting hierarchies of difference. This human statue is discursively and materially entangled with the Rhodes statue, as well as the crane that is about to remove it, the truck and the people around it and me with my camera. Neither then, nor now, am I at an ontological distance from the act of re-membering this event 'in' the past.

Because of my interest in critical posthumanism, I 'made' the photo of Msezane sub/consciously with the machines in the background. What drew me to take the photo was the flesh of her gracious body and her beautiful youthful black skin in the context of the statue's imminent violent removal by the machines in the background. Her flesh stood in stark contrast to the machines that were about to remove the body of old bronze behind her with such brute force. These (never pure) perceptions express themselves in the embodied act of what is better expressed as 'making' the photo, rather than 'taking' it. To say that I was taking the photo would suggest that I positioned myself as a distanced observer using my tablet as a mere tool. However, photos are material and discursive constructions and I cannot analyze the event as if it were an objective moment separate from my own subjective mark making. The photo was inspired by my lived experience of hierarchies of difference supported by the binaries of humanism such as young/old, white/black, real/appearance, male/female, and art/science. The 'fully human' is middle-aged, white, masculine, able-bodied, and European—humanism's yardstick with which we measure the worth of the 'Other' as the norm. Binaries reinforce hierarchical thinking, since each part of the binary otherizes the other in fixed positions. Msezane's race, youth, and

Fig. 28.1 During the removal of the statue of colonialist Cecil Rhodes, black South African fine arts student Sethembile Msezane stands like a statue atop a nearby plinth

gender stand in stark contrast with the white older male Cecil Rhodes. It is this juxtaposition that provokes a response, to take response-ability for the a/effects of power-producing binaries and the marks they make on human and nonhuman bodies.

I see her black skin, her eyes covered, and feathered wings attached to her arms. She has positioned her art installation courageously facing the campus, the buildings, the people, and all the socioeconomic, political, and ethical problems resulting from the deep inequalities exacerbated by *apartheid* capitalism. Resisting the hierarchies of difference that are manifested in South African institutions, Msezane's back is turned against the Rhodes statue. In contrast, Cecil Rhodes's body, leaning slightly forward, is turned away from the campus regally looking down. His pensive gaze extends beyond the Cape Flats with its enforced relocated inhabitants, townships, and informal settlements toward the North-East as though to map the route of his colonial dream, the Cape-to-Cairo railway. The entanglement of all human and nonhuman phenomena 'intra-acting' with one another means that it is impossible to say where the boundaries are of each person, or the crane, or the truck, or my camera. This complex assemblage also includes me as the person who took the photo.

In an interview, Sethembile described how standing in this position four hours made her legs hurt, her arms to become sore, her feet to turn blue, and her skin to become sunburned. Reading this, I felt admiration and compassion for her extraordinary commitment to the #Rhodesmustfall cause, but I also felt sorry for the statue. It is/was a powerful sculpture made by Marian Wallgate—one of the few women ever commissioned to sculpt a public monument, and its extraordinary color, texture, and fine detail have aesthetic power and agency. I do not want the statue to die. All discourses surrounding this historical event of the removal of the statue from campus ignore its aesthetic quality and the deeply discomforting emotions provoked when paying attention to that which is more than human.

Through a humanist lens—for example, from a postcolonial, poststructural lens focusing on power, identity, and human agency—the discomfort can be interpreted as an expression of white privilege or even white guilt. But I was (also) deeply troubled by the destruction, violence, and ugliness toward the nonhuman. I wondered what these popular theoretical lenses were missing in their exclusionary focus on the social sciences.

In quantum physics, as understood by feminist philosopher Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2012), I find an explanation for my dislocated emotions other than the psychological or the psychoanalytical. In this view,

a body is seen not as a property or entity, but as a field or force and such an orientation troubles all distinct identity theories. My reading of the photo disrupts the prevailing anthropocentrism that dominates discussions about transformation, also in 'post' colonial South Africa. The ironically western humanist metaphysics that is assumed in these attempts to decolonize education threatens to divide our communities even further because of the binary lenses that are used. An alternative positive philosophical orientation to postcolonial theorizing sees difference as always e/merging as an a/effect of connections and relations within and between bodies (human and nonhuman).

The meanings produced do not exist prior to the making of the photo, but materialize as an effect of their mutual engagement and quantum entanglement. The material also had agency in what was said and done and how the photo worked. Ontological relationships bring meanings into existence, not the other way around. Disrupting a privileged human perspective could involve understanding both statues from the perspective of the nonhuman, for example, the sounds of the crane, the smell of the diesel spilled from the truck, the texture of the ropes around the statue, the chirping of the birds, the shine of the bronze, the beating of Msezane's heart, and the tickling sensation of the feathers of her wings. The human and nonhuman bodies are doing something to each other. The bronze statue offers certain possibilities to the human statue and the other way around. For example, Rhodes' position facing away from UCT affords Msezane to position hers toward the campus and face the audience. The human and the nonhuman statue, the camera, the students watching, and the photographer (me) are all overlapping forces: the cold bronze, its aged color, Msezane's still body and silence, the steps, the force of gravity, her sweat, the plinth, her wings, and her rumbling tummy. Neither has agency on its own and new meanings materialize as an effect of their mutual engagement and quantum entanglement. There are no stable identities, but a continuous becoming of bodies that transform as an effect of the intra-actions between them. The material has agency. Cameras are usually regarded as subordinate to humans' agency, yet the material-discursive is pulling to have the photo made.

Now, why does this latter reading matter in terms of justice? Critical posthumanism profoundly democratizes relationships within the one species (e.g., child/adult, black/white, male/female) and between humans and other earth dwellers. Nothing is considered to stand outside, above, or take a true privileged transcendental position. The decolonizing effect is

that humans are viewed relationally and always already entangled with non-human others, which prevents complexity and reduction in diversity, respects otherness, and includes other corporeal and embodied knowledges. My posthumanist reading opens possibilities for paying careful attention to how the material in our lives also has power and agency, and realizing that bodies (including our own) always intra-act with the discursive, thereby making room for empathy and care for differences-in-the-making.

Questions

1. What is involved in re-membering an event?
2. What could a humanist reading of the event/photo be like and how does it differ?
3. In what way does a posthumanist reading make a difference in terms of ethics and justice?

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Related Further Reading

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