

A Questionnaire on Monuments

From Charlottesville to Capetown there have been struggles over monuments and other markers involving histories of racial conflict. How do these charged situations shed light on the ethics of images in civil society today? Speaking generally or with specific examples in mind, please consider any of the following questions: What histories do these public symbols represent, what histories do they obscure, and what models of memory do they imply? How do they do this work, and how might they do it differently? What social and political forces are in play in their erection or dismantling? Should artists, writers, and art historians seek a new intersection of theory and praxis in the social struggles around such monuments and markers? How might these debates relate to the question of who is authorized to work with particular images and archives?

—Leah Dickerman, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty

IRENE V. SMALL

On April 9, 2015, as a statue of Cecil John Rhodes was removed from its plinth at the University of Cape Town, the artist Sthembile Msezane raised her arms to embody the mythical stone Bateleur eagle—the *chapungu*—from the ancient ruins of Great Zimbabwe that Rhodes had once appropriated as his possession and personal emblem.¹ The statue was the target of the #RhodesMustFall movement that had ignited on campus a month before and quickly spread to other universities in South Africa. It also caught on at Oxford, host of the prestigious Rhodes scholarship, an honor conceived specifically as the pedagogic instrument of empire. In a widely reproduced photograph of Msezane's performance, she stands above the crowd, back to the sculpture and a beaded veil shielding her face, one of her outstretched wings extending to the arm of the crane as if to dismantle the monument with the sheer force of her gesture.

Msezane's critique extends to the masculinist and territorial logic of monumental statuary at large. Nevertheless, this image orchestrates a certain temporal collapse that posits her action as the phoenix-like triumph of a restituted monumentalism, one that delivers justice and reparation in turn. It is deeply satisfying,

1. See the artist's account in "Sthembile Msezane performs the fall at the Cecil Rhodes statue, 9 April 2015," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/15/sethembile-msezane-cecil-rhodes-statue-cape-town-south-africa>.



Sthembile Msezane. Chapungu, The Day Rhodes Fell. 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

for instance, that her fierce wingspan and defiant female body echo and overturn that of Rhodes in the famous print of him stretching a telegraph line across Africa, one arrogant boot planted in Cape Town, the other in Cairo, envisioning the unbroken path of British empire. Yet such temporal collapses also oil the mechanisms of power and political stasis in post-apartheid South Africa, where the proferring and consumption of symbols often trumps systemic transformation.

In her work on queer temporalities, Elizabeth Freeman defines “chrononormativity” as “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity.”² And while we might think immediately of the disciplinary effects of linear, teleological, or positivist modalities, the temporal rhetoric of emancipation has also been harnessed to corral and control: “Democracy has arrived! (Resist no more).” This is why the most significant outcome of #RhodesMustFall was not the removal of the statue, but the #FeesMustFall movement later that year that demanded the economic and intellectual decolonization of the university at large, spawning internal defiance by queer, feminist, and other dissidents in turn. The lingering question, of course, is what epistemologies of change will endure.

By what came to be known as the #Fallism of 2015, the Johannesburg-based Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR), a shifting group of artists and collaborators, had already died by its own design. But one can glimpse in its residues and spectral hauntings another non-normative temporality, one that in radically rejecting monumentality, coaxed into being new articulations of the experiential presence(s) of South African history. Indeed, the collective’s inaugurating event concerned nothing less than the ontology of passage as comprehended in its multiple historical and existential iterations: from the notorious pass books by which the apartheid regime regulated the movements and recognizability of bodies to the associated passing of persons from one race to another (acts of biopolitical mimesis and bureaucratic sabotage but also alienation, desire, and despair); from the cataclysmic event of death and the lurching time of grieving, to the often indiscernible passing of one generation into another.

CHR’s *PASS-AGES: References and Footnotes* was staged in the basement of the former pass book office in Johannesburg, now a women’s shelter, and one of its many references is to Coco Fusco’s *Rights of Passage*, a performance at the second and last Johannesburg Biennale of 1997.³ Held three years after South Africa’s first democratic elections, that exhibition had come to be a “phantom limb,” as CHR co-founder Gabi Ngcobo put it, deprived of any actual functioning but haunting the contemporary with urgent questions that remain unresolved, if transmuted in form.⁴ To this

2. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3.

3. See *PASS-AGES: References and Footnotes: A Curatorial Project by the Center for Historical Reenactments (CHR) in collaboration with the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism (JWTC)* (2010), pp. 1–12. Available at: <http://historicalreenactments.org/images/projects/Passages/15-1.pdf>.

4. See Gabi Ngcobo, “Endnotes: Was it a Question of Power?” (2013), <https://www.newmuseum.org/blog/view/museum-as-hub-endnotes-was-it-a-question-of-power>, and Khwezi Gule, “Center for Historical Reenactments: Is the Tale Chasing Its Own Tale?” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 39 (Summer 2015), pp. 88–100.

end, the CHR has pursued *reenactment* not in terms of a repetition of the historical archive so much as a contemporary investigation of its undead.⁵ For if the archive, in a Foucauldian sense, is the manifestation of power concretized as statements, only an oblique touch can yield its unwitting ghosts and possible lines of flight.⁶

During its properly institutional life from 2010 to 2012, CHR's activities included Xenoglossia, A Research Project, which explored the tensions and incommensurabilities of language, Fr(agile), a curating and caring for of documentary photographer Alf Kumalo's archive, and They Will Never Kill Us All, an embroidered banner that rematerializes a sign documented by Kumalo that was carried during a 25th anniversary commemoration of the 1960 Sharpeville protest and massacre. CHR's banner was in turn mobilized in ongoing contestations of violence, including protests against the homophobic murder of Disebo Gift Makeu in 2014. In these and other interventions, CHR core members Ngcobo, Kemang Wa Lehulere, and Donna Kukama collaborated with a host of other artists, researchers, and collectives, among them Sohrab Mohebbi, Jabu Pereira, Khwezi Gule, Kader Attia, Ruth Sacks, Sanele Manqele, Mbali Khoza, Gugulective and Made You Look. Elements of the projects bleed into one another, and several, such as *Na Ku Randza* and *Does This Window Have a Memory?*, excavate and circulate informal histories proximate to the CHR's site in downtown Johannesburg.

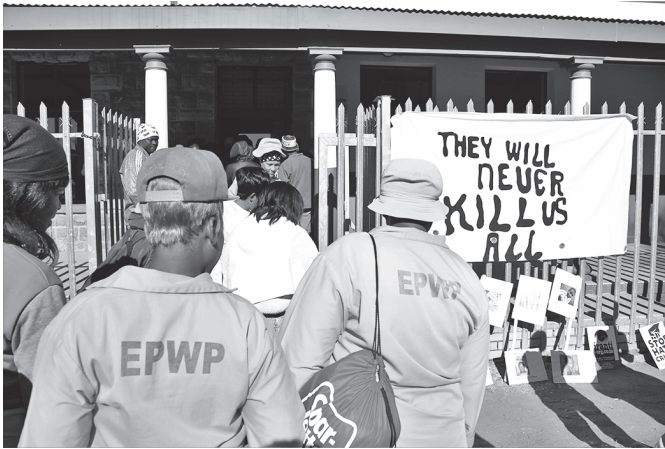
After two years, however, CHR found that its motivating "phantom" had transformed into "a sculpture that dropped a pin over our roof."⁷ And so to hold off the ossification of a single recognizable configuration, the collective staged an "institutional suicide" on December 12, 2012. But as Gule has eloquently written, "the shadow of death runs deep through the work of CHR," and this constitutive spectrality has allowed various returns.⁸ These include *After-after Tears*, a 2013 exhibition that references the "after-tears" parties (also known as *Wie sien ons?* or "Who sees us?") held in South African townships after funerals; *The Second Coming*, which marked the one-year anniversary of the CHR's institutional death on Friday, December 13, 2013 (improbably, but definitively, also the day before Nelson Mandela's funeral); and *Digging Our Own Graves 101*, a 2014 publication that considers what the philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe has termed the "Nongqawuse Syndrome," a symptomatic form of "political disorder and cultural dislocation . . . which advocates, uses, and legitimizes self-destruction, or national

5. On some of the problematic aspects of repetition within reenactment practices, see, for example, Paige Sarlin, "New Left-Wing Melancholy: Mark Tribe's 'The Port Huron Project' and the Politics of Reenactment," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 50, no 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2009), pp. 139–57; and Hal Foster, "In Praise of Actuality," in *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (New York: Verso, 2015), pp. 127–40.

6. Michel Foucault, "Part III: The Statement and the Archive," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 79–134.

7. Center for Historical Reenactments, "We Are Absolutely Ending This" (December 12, 2012), <http://historicalreenactments.org/endingthis.html>.

8. Gule, "Center for Historical Reenactments," p. 97. Gule's article remains the most extensive discussion of the extent and significance of CHR's activities.



Center for Historical Reenactments. Untitled (banner). 2012. Photograph by Gugu Mandla. Courtesy of Iranti-org.

suicide, as a means of salvation.”⁹ Is the CHR’s necromantic orientation a form of such fatalism or, worse, cynical prophecy? Or could its fugitivity unsettle the chrononormative mandates of a political culture that aggressively commemorates but can barely come to terms with the ongoing fact of death at every turn?

In *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Jacques Derrida reminds us that ghosts must be named (he himself dedicated the 1994 text to the recently assassinated anti-apartheid activist and South African Communist Party leader Chris Hani).¹⁰ If CHR transforms the iconographic logic of the monument and the image into something more akin to the rumor or legend, it also moves from an archival impulse to a citational praxis, one that resists a centripetal imperative to consolidate or collect in favor of a centrifugal movement that disperses towards the periphery.¹¹ It is here—in footnotes, appendices, afterthoughts, and errata—that ghosts are named and find themselves in altered constellations. Perhaps it amounts to an instituting in reverse, a monumentalism etherized but not forgotten.

IRENE V. SMALL is an assistant professor of contemporary art and criticism at Princeton University.

9. Achille Mbembe, “South Africa’s Second Coming: The Nongqawuse Syndrome,” *Open Democracy*, June 14, 2006, https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/southafrica_succession_3649.jsp. Nongqawuse was a 16-year old Xhosa girl who had a vision that if the Xhosa people killed their cattle, their ancestors would return and the whites would disappear into the sea. Belief in her prophecy resulted in a massive slaughter of cattle between 1856–87 and a large-scale famine. See also *Digging Our Own Graves 101* (Johannesburg and Berlin: Center for Historical Reenactments and the 8th Berlin Biennale, 2014).

10. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

11. See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 3–22, as well as Dieter Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art,” *e-flux journal* 4 (March 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>.