PART 1

Envisioning

A Question of Power

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Introduction

In this essay, I reflect on the 2015 and early 2016 student activism at the University of the Witwatersrand, in the context of a national movement in South Africa. I am particularly interested in questions of form, narrative and aesthetics. Many of the acts of protest have been circulated through digital technologies offering a wide audience access to the events through spectacular images. These events have also been assembled and articulated through specific kinds of form, such as the autobiographical – where students invoke the category ‘I’ to articulate aspects of private life that animate their moves against structural injustices. I read these various animations of ‘the political’ in the same register that I read the novel, *A Question of Power* by Bessie Head (1974). While I do not offer a close textual reading of the novel, I propose that we read the various scenes of refusal animated by these students through an autobiographical lens that, like Head’s novel, offers us a splintered category of ‘I’ that both demands a politics of recognition while simultaneously refusing and disrupting the possibilities of that very wish.

Bessie Head’s (1974) partly autobiographical account stays with me because of the ways a range of spectacular structural injustices are narrativized through a powerful dialogue between the public and the private. The novel begs us to sit with the quotidian as political, the structural as libidinal and the spatial as affective. This essay follows this lead in deliberating on the recent student protests in South Africa (see Pilane 2016). On 9 March 2015 a frustrated student at the University of Cape Town threw faeces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. This wet and smelly demonstration would precipitate mass mobilizations across the country calling for free, quality education, decolonization and an end to outsourcing. Chumani Maxwele’s account of the incident takes a biographical form (see Fairbanks 2015). The sense of injustice that he felt that day begins with his rural birth, and his encounters with South Africa’s racialized geographies. Despite the promise of transformation made in 1994 when democracy was legislated, the lived experience of many who live in the country continues to be structured by apartheid’s arrangements of race, sex, gender and labour.

Chumani's biography offers useful orientations for understanding the conditions that motivated so many young people to protest. The biographical in this sense refers to a linear narrative of a life, where an individual is born 'free' according to the legislated promise made at the end of apartheid. As the story goes, this young and 'free' South African comes to recognize the impossibility of this deal, often felt through experiences with poor education and poor delivery of infrastructure and services such as water, electricity and shelter. The image of a free South Africa, post the racial makeover of 1994 that so starkly shaped the promise this generation carried for the present / future, collapses due to these lived experiences. This biographical tone is also a narrative of becoming, or *bildungsroman*.

We can use the recent biography by Malaika wa Azania (2014) as an example. *Memoirs of a Born Free* takes waAzania's account of her life as evidence of why the 'Rainbow Nation' is a lie, because it offered a democracy made empty by the absence of economic freedom. WaAzania's account of the disappointing present takes specific aim at education. This should not surprise us, as it could be assumed that, under democratic conditions, previously disadvantaged populations would have increased upward mobility through education. The evidence is to the contrary, as a combination of the legacy of apartheid and neoliberal economic policies have instead produced a public education system that systematically continues to reproduce inequality (see Alexander and Vally 2012).

Describing a schooling landscape, Aslam Fataar (2009) refers to the long distances that black students travel from informal settlements and townships to the suburbs and inner-cities where they can study at more desirable, private or former 'white-only' schools. Fataar reads these movements as a refusal to be "trapped by geography within what they understand to be the anti-aspirational material of township schools" (2009, 3). The experience of moving through these various geographies produces what Fataar describes as "an affective disconnection, born of a disjuncture between their places of living and their spaces of schooling." (ibid.) Vuyani Pambo, a student at the University of the Witwatersrand recalls this very experience as "bipolar". Vuyani travelled from the township of Soweto to a private boy's high school in Sandton, an upper income suburb, every day:

You move around with a permanent sense of exile. You don't belong. In your neighbourhood or at school. You try and negotiate two worlds which don't come together, set apart geographically, economically, in a way that they never meet. And here you are, communicating [with] both

in the physical and the psychological, in the questioning and answering of these two spaces.

CHIGUMADZI 2015, 3

In Cape Town in March 2015, Chumani brought a bucket of shit that was sitting on the side of the road in Khayelitsha and travelled with it to the university campus where he was studying Political Science and Sociology. As he hurled the bucket towards the face of the bronze statue, he was heard shouting, "Where are our heroes and ancestors?" A great deal of commotion followed as students mobilized around this event, calling their movement #RhodesMustFall. This movement demanded that along with the removal of the statue, the university should be forced to practice its commitments to transformation. Transformation in South African public discourse is often understood to refer to *inclusion*. #RhodesMustFall would get mobilized by young, black, queer womxn whose insights into the project of the university as concerned with transformation *as inclusion* would recognize it immediately as problematic, or "sticky" (see Ahmed 2012). #RhodesMustFall was led by black queer womxn who took that stickiness on through their occupation of a university building now known as Azania House where they read, debated and considered what a radical curriculum, pedagogy and institutional life for the university might look like (Sebambo 2015).

Sianne Ngai (2005) describes 'animatedness' in a useful manner. Ngai begins with stop-motion animated technologies, referring to states of being in stop and being in motion, or being moved in all the senses implied. For many people, it was through various animated technologies that they came in closest proximity to student protests in South Africa (see Benazir 2015, Hendricks 2015, Mnisi 2015, Patel 2016 and Pilane 2015 for example). To animate is to give life to something. Ngai gives us ventriloquism and other manipulations of the body, in which cases the body moves 'automatically'. As a young academic and teacher at Wits, Ngai's definition struck me as particularly useful as a means to understand what our students were doing in the months leading up to the arrival of a national movement in October of 2015. Students took to repeating songs and images as a means of triggering feelings that existed in their bodies and experiences, which produced such spectacular and unexpected results. The repetition of these automations trigger densely in ways that I hope to explore in this chapter.

The film *Decolon I Sing Wits: An Act of Epistemic Disobedience* (Kaganof 2015) is an example of such triggering. The film features Wits student activists as they confront the university management about poor infrastructure for

students with limited mobility. The film also captures student reading groups, and their demands are often animated through references to figures like Steve Biko who, as a student activist himself, articulated the political discourse of Black Consciousness (see Biko 1987; Naidoo, L 2015) that students are communicating with today. The film uses symbols, art, architecture, statues and language to animate the audience. Students appear automatic in their repetition of these very same symbols, for instance, when they are presented repeating freedom songs from the 1970s and 80s. These automatic repetitions are rather spectacular, and they move the viewer from one state of being to another. As minor subjects, they are presented through hypervisibility, part-emphasis of the gaze of the camera being laid on the anxiety that the performance of black racial difference induces.

I was never actually ready for what happened at Wits on 14 October 2015. I was driving to work and was stopped from entering. Students had blocked all of the entrances in demonstration of what it is like for them, to feel like they do not belong at the university, or what I describe as “the violence of living-in-being-stopped” (Mupotsa 2015a). The protest was mobilized around the university senate agreement to increase student fees, which would ostensibly affirm the exclusion of many poor black students. This protest followed one a week earlier when students and workers protested against outsourcing. As such, while many of us could not have anticipated that this day would be the beginning of a national shutdown, there were important discussions in place that demonstrated that students understood the connections between the absence of transformation of the university and the treatment of workers.

The student activism at the University of the Witwatersrand can be analysed in the context of a national movement, where students took up the category ‘I’ to articulate aspects of private life that animate moves against structural injustice. I read these various animations of ‘the political’ in the same register that I read *A Question of Power*. In this novel, the protagonist is a South African woman living in exile in Botswana. Elizabeth’s narrative of a life mirrors that of the author, which is why it is often read as autobiography. Like Head, Elizabeth is exiled because she has a black father and a white mother, making her birth illegal.

What the novel demonstrates is an account of racial, sexual, gendered, economic and cultural colonization and inequality, yet the narrative lays emphasis on her psychological struggles. Michela Borgaza (2010) describes this book as presenting a trauma as a “life world”, where structural conditions are presented through dialectical struggles with different and often contradictory temporalities. I want to consider the biographical as a strategy used by students to animate their political movement. I want to suggest that, while we can in part see their activism as made in a ‘moment’ of awakening to the failed promise of

democracy, there are perhaps other uses or purposes to this strategy. I do this in part due to the way that the biographical carries a sentimental tone, a tone that we see mirrored in South African consumer publics that animate the idea of the 'rainbow nation'. To this end, the use of sentiment to animate a political movement or revolution is something that should present different characteristics, should it offer different results. Through a reading of the aesthetics and performance of protest, I want to suggest that the questions of power that students have demonstrated to universities are caught in dialectical struggles about the university, its promises and institutional life; with their awareness of the impossibility of recognition.

"African Lives Are Still Cheap in Africa"

On 6 October 2015, students, academic staff and workers marched through the city of Johannesburg to the entrance of the university to protest against outsourcing (Patel 2015). A coalition assembled from these various parties had long existed, following the introduction of outsourcing in 2000. Outsourcing meant that workers who were formerly employed by the university had their services sold to various private companies that since this point have brokered their labour. The services that the university sold to these labour brokers included: cleaning, landscaping, moving, catering, electrical, plumbing, waste removal, welding, carpentry and building, painting, air-conditioning and lift maintenance services (Wits Workers Solidarity Committee 2015).

If we need a perverse example of what neoliberal policies can do in furthering the extent of unequal conditions and relations at an institution, the case of outsourcing at Wits is a strong one. A report published in 2011 (Wits Workers Solidarity Committee 2011) demonstrates this by highlighting how workers were systematically segregated from the university community through this process. This point is one sentimentally re-articulated in the poem written by Wits student Anzio Jacobs titled "Why Can't My Grandmother Use that Toilet?"

The repulsion I felt the day I was told by the head of my department that the work of people who had skin that resembled mine could not be understood – had my insides knot.

JACOBS 2015

On 6 October, this coalition delivered a Workers' Charter to university management. The Charter illustrates the ways that the university continues to reproduce apartheid, making the following demands for workers: a living wage;

a secure job; decent, safe and healthy working conditions; democratic collective organization so that they can speak and act together; a safe place where they can leave children who need care; and access to the education facilities (Wits Workers Solidarity Committee 2015). Thembi Luckett, a Wits student, and Deliwe Mzobe, an outsourced worker, both actively involved in the protests that came to be known as #FeesMustFall, demonstrate that while the protests are largely understood through the lens of a student movement, outsourced university workers were also key actors (2016, 94). Workers occupied buildings and marched with students, amplifying both the number of hashtags in circulation, adding #OutsourcingMustFall #EndOutsourcing, but also amplifying the range of demands that students were making to universities and to the state. Along with other victories, the decision in principle for universities to commit to insourcing outsourced support staff members is one very important victory that has been made. In Thembi and Deliwe's conversation, they discuss the relationship between workers and students, and why these figures would place their bodies on the line, so to speak, for each other (Luckett and Mzobe 2016, 96). The Charter plays the same relation too, also re-figuring the worker as family relation (Wits Workers Solidarity Committee 2015).

One of the *bwos* involved in organizing the October 6 Movement was the anonymous art collective known as Project Hoopoe¹. Project Hoopoe had been producing street art on the Wits campus since August of 2015 when they made work concerned with the anniversaries of the 1945 Hiroshima, the 2014 Gaza and the 2012 Marikana massacres. The series of images sequentially titled "Fig. 2.1. African Lives are Cheap in Africa", "Fig. 2.2. Suspended Evolution" and "Fig. 2.3. #Oct6" features their work. Project Hoopoe describes their project as one inspired by the apathy and elitism of students at Wits and their work specifically intends to interrupt this apathy by making sharp comment on questions of power. As such, their intention is to agitate politically.

Writing against the use of sentiment in or as a strategy of protest, James Baldwin's (1984) essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel", describes a particular kind of expression that dishonestly makes us 'feel'. Lauren Berlant describes this more specifically as a "liberal sentimentality that promotes individual acts of identification based on collective group membership", one that in this particular structure "has been deployed mainly by the culturally privileged to humanize those very subjects who are also, and at the same time, reduced to cliché within the reigning regimes of entitlement of value" (1998, 636). I do not read Anzio's poem or the various expressions of familial relation made between the

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Project Hoopoe: for generously sharing your work for this chapter and the cover of the book; for your work in general.

FIGURE 2.1 *African lives are cheap in Africa*
IMAGE: PROJECT HOOPEE

FIGURE 2.2 *Suspended evolution*
IMAGE: PROJECT HOOPOE

FIGURE 2.3 #Oct6
IMAGE: PROJECT HOOPOE

worker and the student as operating within this structure, but I can offer one good example of what Baldwin and Berlant might be referring to. Following several statements and complaints made by academic staff about the presence of private para-military security on campus in 2016, the vice chancellor of the university published an open letter in response. This response offers us the figure of the ‘grandfather from Limpopo’:

Let me explain the net effect of stopping the registration process. We have two forms of registration, online and face-to-face, with telephone registration as a back-up to be instituted when required. Forcing us to cancel face-to-face registration adversely affected the poorest of those who wanted to register. Online registration enabled the middle and upper middle classes to continue with the process. They have online facilities and they have credit cards. They were not adversely affected, even if some may have been slightly inconvenienced. But the old man from Limpopo, who scraped whatever monies he could raise from family, friends and his community to ensure that his grandson registered, was severely impacted. He and his grandson travelled for hours, only to be told that he could not register because some group of activists had decided that they would shut down registration unless all historic debt had been cancelled and free education immediately granted. There were many such people on that day, and there were many more throughout the week. All attempts to get protesters to allow the registration to proceed came to naught.

HABIB 2016

This open letter, while directed at colleagues, was published in national media, suggesting that it was not necessarily colleagues or protesting students that were meant to be moved by it. The story of the Limpopo grandfather was meant to move a broader public that might otherwise find the presence of para-military security on the university campus to be in poor taste. Many important responses to Habib followed (see Vally and Godsell 2016; Böhmke 2016). As a performance in liberal sentimentality, Habib’s intervention was mechanical, lethargic and unmoving precisely because it so openly serves the interests of settling the guilt of his actual audience.

“Fig. 2.1, African Lives are Cheap in Africa” is the title I am using to refer to a series of works that Project Hoopoe produced in August of 2015 just after the group was formed. In the top left corner we are under a bridge that connects east and west campuses where the group has placed a number of their pieces. On one wall, the graffiti features their mark, the hoopoe bird, and written in free hand are the words “AFRICAN LIVES ARE CHEAP IN AFRICA,” while on the other side it is written “REMEMBER MARIKANA.”

Just below this image is another piece that features 'Mambush'. Mgcineni Noki, known as Mambush, was one of the thousands of miners who went on strike in August 2012 in Marikana. What followed was a state-sanctioned massacre of thirty-four of these miners. The stencilled figure of Mambush that appeared all over the city of Johannesburg, before it appeared here, connects the Wits campus and its struggles with various other social movements that use his apparition to mark their connected dispossessions. As Prishani Naidoo demonstrates, "Marikana inaugurated a new cycle of struggles" for us in South Africa (2015, 441).

Project Hoopoe repeats the stencil of Mambush but does something else, through the use of a different form. They produce two bank notes, a ten rand and a one hundred rand. The ten rand note features Mambush and the other miners, and above the note they connect the lack of value placed on the life of the miner in relation to the life of the white rhino. The advocacy around the white rhino in South Africa has been described as the conservation success story of the twentieth century and it is a strong example of how liberal sentimentality works. Various campaigns that spread particular kinds of affects in consumer publics are what these students are playing with, or rubbing against. On the 'more valuable' one hundred rand note we instead have the image of Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, who serves on the board of Lonmin, the company that the miners were striking against. Ramaphosa allegedly sent emails to senior government officials during the strike asking them to forcefully deal with the miners, whom he described as "criminals" (Desai 2013). Ramaphosa is a figure of post-apartheid's neoliberal structural adjustments and its successes. He was once the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers during the insurrectionary period of the 1980s, when he led miners in protests that were meant to make the nation ungovernable (see Moodie 2010).

The image of Mambush 'agitates' or animates us in Ngai's (2005) sense. His image is reproduced through a stencil, which is an easily reproducible technology, offered as a still image that moves *around* in its reproduction but also moves *us* in a "surprising interplay between the passionate and the mechanical" (2005, 91). Ngai's project is not simply concerned with how emotions are made, or how affect is spread but is more precisely concerned with foregrounding the connections between race and emotions; that is, in the relation between 'animation' and 'agitation' from which we might become a 'political agitator'. This shift would more specifically refer to a transition from being a body that moves automatically, to one that moves towards "an oppositional consciousness required for the making of a political movement" (Ngai 2005, 96).

Let us turn to the second series of images that I refer to as "Fig. 2.2 Suspended Evolution" in direct reference to the posters made by Project Hoopoe on the bottom left corner. These posters re-produce the cover of Habib's (2013)

book *South Africa's Suspended Revolution*, where he offers an account of the failed promises of the transition to democracy. This series of works went up in September 2015 in commemoration of Steve Biko, whose face is featured in the middle of the piece on the bottom right, between the faces of Patrick Lumumba and Thomas Sankara. When Project Hoopoe posted a photograph of the image on Twitter they included the hashtags #BeMartyrWorthy #WhereAreTheLeaders? (Project Hoopoe 2015). The comment on Habib's institution made through the posters sits neatly against the question of who the political agitators of our present might be. Together, these pieces place the question of the university's intellectual and political project in direct conversation with the failures of the democratic project. These images respond then, not co-incidentally, to the piece shown in two frames in this series that presents an image of the vice chancellor turning a young black child away from the university.

In September 2015, Wits scientists at a research centre that is remarkably named The Evolutionary Studies Institute announced the discovery of a new human ancestor that they named 'Naledi', which means 'star' in SeSotho. This discovery was followed with an elaborate celebration of the university's 'excellence' at an event that featured speeches by both Adam Habib and Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa who was photographed kissing the mouth of Naledi's fossil (Wits News 2015). Project Hoopoe offers us the evolutionary scale from homo primus to homo sapiens. The figure that follows has the title WITSUS STUDENTUS, who is turning backwards and away from HABIBUS IGNORAMUS. Naledi is not 'homo', which we might presume to indicate that she is a figure that exceeds the aspiration for the category of the human made within this teleological structure. Witsus Studentus has written above her head, "find one old star, lose a thousand others". This piece was only up for a few hours, as university management had it painted over almost immediately, which is what we see on closer inspection of the posters of South Africa's suspended evolution: the image of the worker who paints over this work.

The series "Fig. 2.3 #Oct6" repeat the image of the worker painting over Project Hoopoe's work, with the image of Habib pointing his finger to direct him to this task. This image is again featured in the posters made for the protests on 6 October. The posters plastered on the walls of the university give testimony of the difficulties that workers face, along with their demands. The canvas under the bridge with this later body of work that frames these posters now reads "African Lives are *Still* Cheap in Africa". Students and workers carried these posters as they sang and marched on that day, animating what would come a week later.

The subtle work of Project Hoopoe demonstrates a use of biography and sentiment that agitates precisely because of its perceptive relation to language and repetition. The repetition of a figure like Biko or Mambush, read with the 'girl

child' Naledi, do not act as simple referents to make us identify with an abstract and suffering other. Witsus Studentus, in turning away from evolution, becomes a figure of animacy rather than 'life' in Mel Y Chan's provocative way. For Chan, animacy refuses the binary systems of difference in which she includes "dynamism/statis, life/death, subject/object, speech/nonspeech, human/animal, natural body/cyborg" (2012, 3). This vision or version of biopolitics also troubles teleological configurations of the human. It is this consideration that I would like to take forward in my discussion of the university as an institution.

Conclusion: Solomon's House

Wilfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down, where simply to "keep going" or to "keep coming up" is to be stubborn and obstinate. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience.

AHMED 2014, 1–2

32. This is love for comrade bae. The clever people will write and speak about you in poor accounts of "the students," "the workers," "the teachers" and accuse you of wishing without evidence. But I see you and your dense will and imagination. I see you taking knowledge/power on like a badass.

MUPOTSA 2015b

On 14 October 2015, students blocked various campus entrances at Wits, refusing to be moved. They explained that they were rejecting the senate decision on fee increases because it meant their exclusion from the university. For me personally, the first day and night were remarkable because it felt like nothing I had ever felt before. In his initial comments on the protests, the vice chancellor dismissed the protest as a couple of hundred students. But it was thousands, who were joined by further students from other campuses in the city in the following days. By Friday, the university was shut down. Other universities initiated their own shutdowns in the days that would follow. When the Minister of Higher Education announced a 6% cap on university fee increases which the students refused, students took their protests off-campus.

On 21 October, students from UCT and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology CPUT made their way towards Parliament, with the intention of being heard by the Minister of Higher Education. At Wits, students had settled into their occupation of Solomon House, the main administrative building formerly known as Senate House, when they received images of the chaos in Cape Town. Tyres were burning over the statue of Louis Botha that stands at

the entrance of the parliament building. Louis Botha was the first president of the Union of South Africa, marking the end of the colonial period. Under his leadership, the logic of racial difference would be articulated in policies such as the 'racial colour bar' that limited the professions that black people could take up, for instance. These policies and the affective / intellectual work they produced would be foundational to the formal legislating of apartheid in 1948.

Enraged by the face of Botha, students continued, breaking in through a gate with their placards, singing the demand "Fees Must Fall!" The riot police were agitated, so a group of white students formed a human shield to protect black students at the front. This strategy was one that students at many universities had been using when confronted with violence. The riot police fired stun grenades. The students ran. For those of us on the other side of the country, it was like a dream. We received digital messages of broken skin, as we called around for legal and medical expertise. While these students ran, they continued to sing freedom songs, "*siyaya, noba besidubula*" (we move ahead, even as they shoot us). And they did. As did students in other parts of the country, despite the intimidation that they faced from the army and the police.

Solomon Mahlangu was an Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) cadre who was hanged by the apartheid government for a crime he had not committed in 1979. Mahlangu was only twenty three years old and is supposed to have said these last words: "My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. Tell my people that I love them. They must continue the fight." Soon after his death, the African National Congress (ANC) used a small piece of land on a farm in Tanzania to open a college that they named Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO). This college would see the arrival of many student activists in exile, but would also be a place of experimentation with regards to curriculum and pedagogy (Serote 1992).

Fig. 2.4 Solomon's Face, is a final series of images that features the work of Project Hoopoe. They are all images of the same thing, which was made through the stencilled figure of Solomon's face. Solomon's face was also stencilled onto the central administrative building of the university to mark the students' occupation of that space. The piece was placed at the same time as the words "Free Education Now" were written onto the back wall under the bridge. The work of mourning / memorializing political figures often instigates the forms of sentiment that Baldwin and Berlant critique as lethargic. In contrast, the image of Solomon's face has an atmosphere.

During the protests, it was through freedom songs that revolutionary ideas from the past / present filled the atmosphere. *Iyhooh* Solomon thunders through the body forcefully still, even though the occupation is currently over. Teresa Brennan begins her book with the question, "is there anyone who has

FIGURE 2.4 *Solomon's face*
IMAGE: PROJECT HOOPOE

not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” (2004, 1). For Brennan, the “transmission of affect” refers to the relation between the body and signification or, in our case, the body that gets moved, and the sign like that of Solomon’s face. Affects are, in her sense, judgements, which make them different from feelings: “by affect, I mean the physiological shift accompanying a judgement” (Brennan 2004, 5).

The proposed fee increase was scrapped by the end of October 2015. Despite this, many students continued their occupation of Solomon House because it was a space where they could imagine the project of the university. It was in meetings at Solomon House that several workshops on labour, knowledge, sexual difference and power would occur. #WitsFeesMustFall would later create a free library where photocopies of books were shared and read amongst students. The space was one for communication, with a large screen that broadcast live tweets and images related to the national movement. Some students accepted the 0% deal and made the move to continue with business as usual, but others continued with the purpose of free education. Early one morning in January 2016, the group of students that had continued to live in the central concourse of Solomon House was forcefully removed by private security forces. The free library was destroyed. The image of Solomon Mahlangu was painted over. Defending these actions, the university management denied that students had been assaulted and referred to them as ‘hooligans’.

In the performance of liberal sentimentality, the mourning of memorialized others operationalizes their loss to the work of national rhetoric, or “national sentimentality” (Berlant 2001, 53) where “others” are ghosted for a good cause” (ibid., 51). The symbolic erasure of Solomon House arrives at the same time as the grandfather from Limpopo, ‘ghosting’ the living subjects, or living students. As a response to their evacuation and the subsequent presence of private security on campus, students offered a performance theatre piece. Along with the singing, students arrived with cardboard tombstones. On these tombstones were the student numbers of financially excluded students. The second number indicated their current debt to the university. Said another way, these students took up the social deathmaking that structures their relationship to the university, and rather than let the university grieve the loss of their exclusion – as it does every year, while it continues, through these actions, to mourn the loss of a grounding object that is in this case, the self – they refuse the aggression of the university’s usual practice of sentimentality.

In the months leading up to the protests in 2015, many students took to reading groups. One of the preoccupations of their reading was the intellectual and political field of Afro-pessimism. Black Consciousness marks a move against the category of being ‘non-white’ toward Blackness as a political, intellectual and cultural identity. Afro-pessimism makes a different move, as blackness

comes to signal a structural and libidinal position that carries disposability, or the site of ontological death. The conversations that students were having in Solomon House sat in this point of intensity as they considered the institution of the university. Fred Moten writes from this bundle of wills, describing his preference for *life* and *optimism* over *death* and *pessimism*, Moten chooses “exhaustion, as a mode or form of way of life, which is to say sociability” (2013, 738, emphasis original).

I will reassemble the set of images I collect in this essay: the biographical, where one comes of age to realize the failure of the rainbow nation; the biographical-familial, where one calls upon oneself in relation to one's figurative kin-and-as-other; the haunting-and-as-mourning of revolutionary figures like Biko, Mambush, the worker, Naledi, Solomon and the student; and finally, the performance of protests as both living and dying, or “exhaustion” in Moten's sense. Naledi as a figure that accumulates this assemblage turns away from the humanizing gesture of uplift and inclusion, just as she is sent away. This kind of mourning animates and agitates a range of questions of power that the failed democracy continues, sentimentally, to misrecognize.

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