

Dirty Work: An Ecocritical Reflection on Human Feces as a Tool of Protest and Performance

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On March 9, 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a University of Cape Town (UCT) political science student, hurled the contents of a portable toilet at a statue of British mining magnate and white supremacist Cecil Rhodes. Maxwele's act triggered two weeks of intense protests. Students occupied UCT's administrative building on March 20. The university's senate voted to remove the statue on March 27. On April 9—a month after Maxwele doused Rhodes—workers lifted the statue off its plinth, placed it on a truck, and drove away.¹ By then, Maxwele's provocation sparked the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement, which mirrored US American efforts to dismantle Confederate monuments. #RMF spread to other South African universities, spawning sister decolonization movements at the University of Stellenbosch (#OpenStellies), Wits University (#WitsSoWhite), Rhodes University (#RhodesSoWhite), and across the globe in Oxford, England, where students tried unsuccessfully to remove a similar Rhodes monument (#RhodesMustFallOxford). #RMF also set the stage for the October 2015 #FeesMustFall movement against proposed fee increases, which began at Wits before engulfing the country.

At nearly a decade's remove, Maxwele's controversial act continues to reverberate. Yet, he has lamented, "Not only did academics, both Black and White create a meaningless discourse around the 9th March 2015 event, they continue to turn a blind eye to the so-called 'politics of poo'."² Even the phrase, "politics of poo" euphemizes the material circumstances faced by many Black South Africans. The "meaningless discourse" concerned the appropriateness of using feces as the medium of protest. A leading voice in this debate, Jonathan Jansen, former vice chancellor of the University of the Free State, likened the protest to videos of Islamic State beheadings, arguing that Maxwele "diminished himself, and the dignity of protest."³ Maxwele responded, "Professor Jansen not only undermined my intelligence as a university student, he also sought to insult me in the process."⁴ By desecrating Rhodes in effigy, Maxwele recalled the "poo protests"

¹ The 1934 statue by sculptor Marion Walgate survived earlier calls for its removal. In the 1950s, Afrikaner students, descendants of Dutch colonists, objected to the monument because it celebrated a British imperialist. See: John Griffiths, ed., *Empire and Popular Culture: Volume II* (London: Routledge, 2020), 1.

² Chumani Maxwele, "The Solitary Protest That Gave Birth to #RhodesMustFall," *Herri* no. 5 (August 2021), <https://herri.org.za/5/chumani-maxwele/>.

³ Jonathan Jansen, "The Big Read: Poo Protest Unfit for a King," *Sunday Times*, March 20, 2015, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/amp/news/south-africa/2015-03-20-the-big-read-poo-protest-unfit-for-a-king/>.

⁴ Chumani Maxwele, "The Solitary Protest."

of two years earlier.⁵ Activists dumped feces on the steps of the Western Cape provincial legislature to grieve the lack of proper sanitation in Khayelitsha, a nearby Black township. Like these earlier environmental protests, Maxwele's act was carefully crafted for maximum impact and mass media consumption. Costumed in a pink construction helmet with a sign across his bare chest that read, "Exhibit White Arrogance @ U.C.T.," Maxwele blew a whistle and banged a drum before tossing the feces on the statue while reportedly shouting, "Where are *our* heroes and ancestors?"⁶ Though often portrayed in media as the rash gesture of a dispossessed Black youth, the event was a meticulously stage-managed piece of ecocriticism that symbolically and literally rubbed Rhodes' face in his own mess.

In their survey of South African ecocriticism, Brooke Stanley and Walter Dana Phillips argue, "Navigating the imbrication of environmental and social problems is central to South African ecocriticism, given conservation's troubling links to colonialism, apartheid, and more contemporary inequalities."⁷ By this definition, throwing kak on Rhodes qualifies as ecocriticism. Maxwele's performance art played with the ironies of the monument commemorating Rhodes' "gifting" the land on which UCT now sits. Further ironies lie in how Black academics, such as Jonathan Jansen, criticized the protest because Black workers were tasked with cleaning the statue afterward.⁸ Maxwele responded, "Our parents [. . .] have cleaned the shit of White people without any complaints."⁹ By bringing the daily discomforts of Khayelitsha residents to the white-coded UCT campus, Maxwele interrogated who South Africans choose to honor on their landscape and how their landscapes reflect their history.

Maxwele also implicitly asked, "Who gets to play with shit?" Bodily functions and disgust have fueled many performances and conceptual works of Western art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dadaists wore turd lapel pins in 1917. Piero Manzoni created canisters of "artist's shit" (1961), one of which sold in 2007 for £84,000. Performance artist Vito Acconci masturbated himself to exhaustion under a wooden platform while people walked above him in *Seedbed* (1972). Andy Warhol pissed on his paintings in 1978. Herman Nitsch and the Viennese Actionists disemboweled animals and rubbed their entrails on crucified participants in 1984. In 1987, Andres Serrano upset conservative Christians by floating a crucifix in a jar of his own urine. Karen Finley covered her nude body in chocolate frosting in *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990). In 2000, Belgian artist Wim Delvoye created *Cloaca*, a machine that mimics the

⁵ Rebecca Davis, "The Man Behind Cape Town's poo protests—but who does Andile Lili Represent?" *Daily Maverick*, December 4, 2013, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-12-04-the-man-behind-cape-towns-poo-protests-but-who-does-andile-lili-represent/>.

⁶ Aly Verbaan, "UCT student in poo protest" *IOL*, March 10, 2015, <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/uct-student-in-poo-protest-1829512>.

⁷ Brooke Stanley and Walter Dana Phillips, "South African Ecocriticism: Landscapes, Animals, and Environmental Justice," in *Oxford Handbook Topics in Literature*, Oxford Academic, online ed., February 6, 2017, accessed February 15, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.154>.

⁸ Jonathan Jansen, "The Big Read."

⁹ Chumani Maxwele, "The Solitary Protest."

processes of the human digestive system. Its product is then vacuum-sealed and sold. All this play with bodily fluids has been sanctioned, lauded, and theorized as legitimate critiques of late capitalism and global exchanges by a host of US American and European intellectuals, curators, and tastemakers.

Given the wide-ranging impact of Maxwele's performative protest, it is significant that his catalytic act is virtually absent from academic discussions of the #RhodesMustFall movement. "Today we talk about #RMF," writes Maxwele, "we talk about institutional racism in Universities, we talk about lack of transformation, without delving deep into the act of throwing shit itself and what that act means for our struggle as Black people."¹⁰ While Carli Coetzee's *Written Under The Skin* skillfully analyzes Maxwele's use of excrement, many academics, me included, have retold the origin story of #RMF without critically reflecting on Maxwele's performative act.¹¹ In many scholarly accounts, the event serves as a curiosity—a means of grabbing the reader's attention before the author moves on to their subject.¹² The erasure, cooption, absorption, and sanitization of Maxwele's radical protest raises important questions about who can create ecocriticism, who can perform, and what it means when a Black activist uses human excrement and disgust as the medium for protest.

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¹⁰ Chumani Maxwele, "The Solitary Protest."

¹¹ Carli Coetzee, *Written Under the Skin* (Suffolk: James Curry, 2019): 103-106.

¹² See: Gibson Cima, "After Revivals: New Protest Theatre by 'Born Free' South Africans," in *Routledge Handbook on African Theatre and Performance*, edited by Kene Igweonu (London: Routledge, 2024); Louise Green, *Fragments from the History of Loss: The Nature Industry and the Postcolony* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020): 74. Jonathan Jansen, *As By Fire: The End of the South African University* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2017), 47; Vicki Trowler, Review of *As By Fire: The End of the South African University*, by Jonathan Jansen, *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6, no 2 (Winter 2018): 131, DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i2.3316.

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