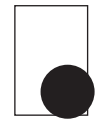

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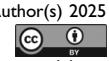

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Fire is good to think with: Protest as a mode of theorizing

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Abstract
This article discusses the South African student movement of 2015/2016 through the lens of fire. At the peak of the movement, campuses were literally burning, and the universities became a major site of struggle over decolonization and social justice. These protests have drawn together matters of knowledge, representation, and memory with issues of inequality, discrimination, and race. Zooming in on fire as a contradictory force - destructive and generative at the same time - helps us to rethink the dynamics of protest and the politics of knowledge more broadly. Taking fire serious means keeping the tension between multiple positions in place. By not brushing over contradictions but rather emphasizing their discomforting co-presence, fire invites epistemic disconcertment that denies the comforts of anterior or predictable knowledge and thus allows for newness to emerge. It is a space where activist practice becomes a form of theorizing in its own right.

Keywords
South Africa, protest, fire, politics of knowledge, epistemic disconcertment, race, activism, critique, decolonization, #RhodesMustFall, #Shackville, contradiction, whiteness, black pain, anger, affect

Introduction

In 2015 and 2016, extensive student protests erupted throughout South Africa. Campuses were literally on fire, with universities emerging as significant sites of struggle over

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decolonization and social justice.[1] In short, the meaning and conditions of the postapartheid future were at stake. Or, as some have framed it, South Africa was on the brink of a "post-post-apartheid era,"[2] where the ideology of liberal non-racialism and reconciliation that dominated the ANC-led transition from the liberation movement toward the rainbow nation would no longer suffice. Students protested the continued marginalization of black people in historically white universities, thereby addressing multiple inequalities on a broader scale.[3] As the movement expanded across the country, it widened its scope to address a growing array of concerns, including a critical review of the curriculum, demands for free tertiary education for all, alongside support for cleaners and maintenance workers (insourcing) as well as a forceful critique of the neoliberal regime through which universities (not only in South Africa) are currently governed (Bhambra et al., 2017). The student protests have intertwined matters of knowledge, representation, and memory with issues of inequality, discrimination, and race. These issues resonate far beyond South Africa, as the liberal university model seems to have reached an impasse, with its foundational assumptions of meritocracy, equal opportunity, and intellectual freedom no longer aligning with the pressing issues raised in these protests and further critiques. Consensus appears out of sight, and contradictions abound.

In this article, I theorize the notion of *fire* to think about these epistemic and material contradictions without getting stuck in binary oppositions. As Gaston Bachelard (1964: 7) writes in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*:

> Fire is the ultra-living element. It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide there, latent and pent-up, like hate and vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. (…) It is well-being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation.

Bachelard stresses the copresence of contradictory principles in fire and emphasizes that it is impossible to get to this multiplicity by means of what he terms "pure objectivism." Instead, he is intrigued by the layeredness and contradictory nature of fire—in psychoanalytical terms (as suggested by the title of his book) but also reflecting on knowledge production more broadly. To think from the space of contradictions does not imply commensurability, nor is it particularly comfortable. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted in his account of power and the production of history in the light of the Haitian revolution, the transgression of categorical boundaries (in his case between "slave" and "revolutionary subject") may be unthinkable and unheard of, and yet this transgression through spontaneous deeds and affective mobilizations may lead to an emergent political practice that gives way to fundamental change and "intellectual and ideological newness" (Trouillot, 1995: 89).

I take up these ideas to think further about ways in which we can bring forth contradictions as a mode of analysis that starts from uncertainty and a profound sense of

discomfort and disconcertment to arrive at such "newness." In doing so, I aim to pause and reflect not only on the dynamics of protest but also on their impact on broader politics of knowledge and modes of theorizing.[4]

Fire here is not merely a metaphor. In fact, fire plays a significant role in everyday life and politics in South Africa. Each year, massive fires pose a terrible threat in the Cape Town area—hitting particularly hard on densely populated townships and "illegal settlements," destroying the livelihoods of people who are already on the margins of society. At the same time, fire is also a widespread and powerful means of protest (Brown, 2015) with deep roots in antiapartheid strategies of ungovernability. As Kerry Ryan Chance (2015: 25) put it so compellingly: "where there is fire, there is politics," that is, a means of political articulation and claim-making and a radical disruption of the status quo. As an energetic and transformative force, fire is both destructive and generative, evoking a sense of urgency that eliminates complacency as an option.

This immediacy seemingly contradicts the reflexive nature of academic knowledge production, which is typically constructed on a temporal horizon that is not bound to prompt utility or the pressure to act. While staring at a (controlled) fire also holds the potential for such contemplation as a "very special kind of attention which has nothing in common with the attention involved in watching or observing" and thus ultimately marking the "attitude of the Thinker" (Bachelard, 1964: 14–15), the force of fire in protest follows a different choreography. It is a call for action that brings the multiple tensions of activism and scholarship to the fore, namely longstanding inequalities between academia and subjects of research, institutional marginalization of various kinds as well as differing temporal horizons and modes of knowledge production that may also imply divergent priorities.

With Charles Hale, I argue that focusing on the "inherent contradictions between the two parts of the dyad of activism and scholarship" (Hale, 2008: 13) directly impacts both methodology and theory building.[5] For Hale, engaging with epistemic contradictions at the intersection of scholarship and activism is crucial for overcoming those widespread claims of objectivity in academia that "sound like self-serving maneuvers to preserve hierarchy and privilege" (Hale, 2008: 3; see Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi, 2008). In line with feminist calls for "strong objectivity" (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992), he argues that disclosing one's politics does not indicate a bias to be eliminated in pursuit of the ideal of objectivity but rather represents a necessary precondition for achieving it. Notably, there are intriguing parallels to conceptual work developed in feminist and postcolonial science and technology studies (STS) that establish incommensurability, trouble, and friction as *starting points* for intellectual engagement. This scholarship emphasizes the relationality, messiness, and multiplicity of the world and our knowledge of it. Engaging with "fire objects," as proposed by John Law and Vicky Singleton (2005), allows us to recognize the complexity and discontinuity of our objects of inquiry with a methodological humility that seeks not to dissolve this messiness but to acknowledge its generative potential.

In South Africa, it was precisely the critique of detached and seemingly neutral notions of knowledge and expertise that has been addressed in the protests and ensuing calls to decolonize the university.[6]Practices of research, teaching, and administration have

become the very subjects of contestation and heated debates—with profound effects on disciplinary and institutional matters of course (Mangcu, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). In response to these challenges, I do not aim to offer yet another explanation of the protests but rather to pay closer attention to different knowledge practices that have emerged in these highly contested spaces. How can we theorize from here? Can we perhaps begin to think with and about fire in generative terms?

In the first part of this article, I will set up the stakes and discuss how students' demands and ensuing debates impacted my own research and knowledge production. In the second step, I focus on the possibilities for a critique that does not jump ahead of itself or assumes a moral high ground. I particularly consider the importance of stepping out of one's academic and personal comfort zones to allow for epistemic disconcertment, as Helen Verran has encouraged us to do in her postcolonial take on STS (Verran, 2013, 2014; Wintherheik and Verran, 2012). In the third part, I will discuss two related and highly evocative incidents that marked decisive moments of the student movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT). The first incident, which ignited the entire movement in February 2015, gained traction under the hashtag #RhodesMustFall. The second event, #Shackville, occurred a year later, when the #FeesMustFall movement had already developed into a broader alliance.[7] I am interested in the ways in which both #RhodesMustFall and #Shackville highlighted the antagonisms and contradictions of political and institutional transformation. What can we learn from these concerns for our academic knowledge production more broadly?

Setting the stakes

For the past 15 years, I have conducted research in South Africa, a place where the challenges and contradictions of our contemporary world stand out in an exceptionally sharp manner. These include the burden of colonial and apartheid pasts and their manifold reverberations in the present—from widespread racism and xenophobia to extreme economic and social inequalities. My specific research interest has been in the practice of the sciences of human origins and their mobilization in the cultural politics of postracialism. Whereas the South African state and scientific elites have argued that race could be undone by the sheer power and authority of enlightened scientific thought, things turn out to be messier and more troubled on the ground—particularly regarding how versions of race continue to manifest in laboratory and sampling practices as well as the multiple and difficult translations between the political and scientific realms. In my work, I have examined the multiple and ambiguous articulations of race within the postapartheid landscape.

In my engagement with historical genealogies of knowledge and contemporary scientific and political practices, the university has been a primary site of fieldwork for me.[8] Therefore, when the student protests began to unfold, I could hardly ignore them, as they raised methodological and theoretical issues (alongside political ones) related to my original subject: race. First, the protests focused on the interrelations of knowledge production, materiality and the negotiation of a post-(post-)apartheid politics of heritage and memory, which formed part of my own thematic focus. Second, these protests also

reflected on race as a contradictory and troubling matter of concern that cannot be taken for granted as a stable and self-evident point of reference which could be factually disproved through appeals to scientific or political authority (see M'charek et al., 2014). Third, the protests were a reminder of the profound effects of racism and the urgency of social justice that must be considered when dealing with race and knowledge. While I was present during some of the events in October 2015 and again in July and September 2016, my involvement was sporadic and unsystematic. I had a chance to join in some of the demonstrations and to converse with several organizers, student participants, and colleagues. I also followed the discussions on social media and collected posts and articles on specific events, including the ones discussed below. In the years since, much more has been said and written about the protests, including an avalanche of academic pieces.[9]In this article, however, my goal is not to treat the protests as yet another site of research but rather as a theoretical contribution and epistemic challenge in their own right.

So, what was and is at stake? In many places, particularly in historically white institutions of elite learning, such as the UCT, student activists have wrapped their concerns in a narrative of black pain, and increasingly so as the movement gained traction. This notion of black pain has several reference points. There is the ongoing and increasingly pronounced economic and political inequality that calls into question the harmonious and reconciliatory promise of the postapartheid rainbow nation. In institutions of higher education, this disparity becomes evident in social and epistemic exclusions as well as in the very ways in which the terms of debate are often set.

"Black pain" (and anger, for that matter[10]) concerns the proliferation of institutional racism, the strikingly low number of black professors on campus and the open racial slurs that black people continue to face on a daily basis—be it in their classrooms, on the street, at the beach, or in supermarkets and restaurants off-campus. It also refers to a lack of recognition of the complex historical configurations of blackness and the imposition of explanations and analyses from outside a black experience, as shaped by the violent classificatory regimes of apartheid and colonialism and their aftermath. Francis B. Nyamnjoh captures the frustration that reverberates with the notion of black pain through an apt metaphor: "The students had had enough of repeated claims that transformation cannot happen overnight, as if the institution were some kind of science fiction setting where a night is longer than 21 years" (Nyamnjoh, 2017: 73).

Thus, the so-called "white liberalism" that would don an antiracist attitude while being reluctant to account for, reflect upon, and eventually target white privilege became one of the key points fueling and guiding the protests. At first glance, this opposition between "black pain" and "white privilege" might suggest a troubling reification of subject-positions along racialized collectivities, as some critics of the movement have indicated (e.g., Habib, 2019). However, the contrasting notion of color-blindness together with the "myth of a postracial consensus" (Mangcu, 2017), is highly antagonistic and misses the point of friction. Xolela Mangcu traces two distinct trajectories for this reluctance to confront race as an ongoing trouble: on the one hand, he points to a liberal consensus that insists on the fictitious character of race; on the other hand, he identifies the enduring

legacy of a Marxist tradition that prioritizes class over race.[11] In Mangcu's view, both positions tend to ignore "the political signification of race in South Africa" (2017: 254) and the legacies and intellectual significance of black consciousness for the present moment.[12] A failure to recognize the dynamics of oppression and privilege would hinder the goal of transformation.[13]

Another aspect missing in the sweeping critique of student protests as a form of affective identity politics was the fact that the protests were highly diversified and multilayered. From the beginning, they included vocal groups of black women* and LGBTIQ+ activists who called for the consideration of intersectional forms of discrimination and exclusion, also pointing out the sexist and transphobic violence that had occurred *within* the movement. As Ndelu et al. (2017) describe it in their analysis of "womxn's and nonbinary activists' contribution to the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall student movements," the centering of "black pain" and the profound critique of white privilege was not isolated from broader struggles.[14] Citing the mission statement of #RhodesMustFall (UCT RMF, 2015), they emphasize the movement's insistence on "an intersectional approach to our blackness." This would necessarily take into account that "we all have certain oppressions and certain privileges," and that it was important to acknowledge these so that "no one should have to choose between their struggles" or be silenced (Ndelu et al., 2017: 2). However, they also criticize the persistence of patriarchal structures that impeded on queer-feminist politics (see also Xaba, 2017).

Ultimately, neither "black pain" nor "white privilege" can be separated; rather, they are intricately intertwined. This understanding of a complex and reciprocal relationship carries methodological and epistemological implications, as Sakhumzi Mfecane highlighted in an email exchange with Francis Nyamnjoh:

> Black pain is a direct product of white privilege … if our analysis focuses simply on black pain, it may reproduce the same problem of rendering blacks as easy anthropological objects of analysis and render whiteness – again – invisible to the anthropological or sociological gaze. (quoted in Nyamnjoh, 2017: 90)

What Mfecane calls the "anthropological or sociological gaze"[15] is related to a colonial understanding of knowledge as a kind of dissection. Édouard Glissant describes this form of knowledge or grasping (*apprendre*) as having a "fearsome, repressive meaning" (Glissant, 1997: 26) that is closely linked to the colonial trope of discovery. Glissant advocates for an alternative approach to knowledge and esthetics that takes multiple relations, errant movements, and imaginations as its starting point. Opacity, defined as the refusal to seek explanatory clarity, thus becomes an epistemological route to generate other knowledge and potentially other worlds (see Escobar, 2009).

And yet, much of the discourse surrounding the protests concentrated less on the imaginary spaces emerging in student activism or the *dynamics* of black pain and white privilege, and more on the problematics of binary positioning. Some analysts, journalists, and academics alike accused students of employing essentializing and antagonizing identitarian strategies that would reify race and, therefore, prove counter-productive to the eventual goal of transformation and decolonization. A sharp antagonism between a

"race matters" and a "race poisons" position unfolded, spiked with warnings against the limited and exclusionary understanding of racialized subject positions, particularly from an older generation of intellectuals with varying antiapartheid struggle credentials. If whiteness were reduced to pigmentation (as slogans such as "Fuck white tears" seemed to suggest), this would fail to capture the complex entanglements that Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko had addressed in their profound critiques of colonialism and ensuing calls for black consciousness.[16] In other words, a widespread critique from established professors was that students needed to study more carefully and not be taken away by affect and anger. As Achille Mbembe (2015) has articulated in eloquent terms:

> Invoking Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko and countless others will come to nothing if this ethics of becoming-with-others is not the cornerstone of the new cycle of struggles. There will be no plausible critique of whiteness, white privilege, white monopoly capitalism that does not start from the assumption that whiteness has become this accursed part of ourselves we are deeply attached to, in spite of it threatening our own very future well-being.

Mbembe rightfully points out that (a) whiteness possesses a systemic quality and does not only reside in white bodies; (b) nationalist sentiment and exclusiveness are part of that very ideological formation of whiteness; and (c) we should thus demythologize whiteness. Instead of dwelling on the past and advocating for a "retrospective politics," he proposes a future orientation of conviviality that also challenges the imagination, namely, an "anticipatory politics" (see Appadurai, 2013). In Mbembe's view, to transcend the violent regime of race one would need to substitute pain and victimhood with another sense of political subjectivity that would be less preoccupied with whiteness.

Mbembe warns against what he terms the "politics of impatience (…) a new form of militancy less accommodationist and more trenchant both in form and content." This, he argues, seems to underlie the current state of political life in South Africa. His critique of the student actions targets their apparent lack of sophistication and potential destructiveness.

I would like to pause here and consider a different mode of critical engagement with the student movement and the political demands it articulated. Mbembe's critique starts from the vantage point of analytical oversight, though, of course, he does not pretend to be neutral—quite the opposite. Yet his careful explanatory gesture—in Bachelard's terms, "the attitude of the Thinker" (Bachelard, 1964: 15)—somewhat remains within the limits of an academic comfort zone,[17] especially when he contrasts critical reflection with affective and emotional responses and actions. Mbembe explains the more radical student actions in terms of a destructive path and false ideology. I do not intend to quarrel with Achille Mbembe over those worries and the broader implications of the education crisis.[18] Nor do I question the dangers of collective violence in a fragile institutional space. Yet I think that his analysis and criticism move a bit too fast; Mbembe himself demonstrates his impatience with the students. He neither accounts for the violent actions of the state and private security forces against students, nor does he engage with the gendered dimensions of violence that have been critically brought up

by black queer-feminist writers who have been part of the movement themselves (see Davids and Matebeni, 2017; Ndelu, Dlakavu, and Boswell, 2017; Xaba, 2017).[19]

Rather than taking the meaning of black pain for granted and countering it with analytical oversight, I propose we take the unfolding space of contradiction seriously thus leaving the comfort zone of academic detachment. The question I want to pose is: what if we reimagined the "politics of impatience" in a way that considered the destructive force of fire *together with* its generative potential?

Burning issues and firing regimes: Embracing epistemic disconcertment

One of the key ethnographic moments in postcolonial science studies is Helen Verran's brilliant account of alternative firing regimes of Yolngu aboriginal landowners and ecological scientists in postcolonial Australia (Verran, 2002). The starting point of her analysis is a joint field trip, where the different protagonists come together for a firing workshop (*worrk*) to learn from one another. The scientists in this scenario are particularly keen to understand and incorporate Aboriginal firing expertise into their own practice, thereby attempting to recognize the value of indigenous knowledge practices. However, the workshop unfolded differently than the scientists had expected. The big fire gets ignited in passing, while none of the scientists is present. Instead of addressing the technicalities of land use and slash-and-burn methods, Yolngu participants discuss matters of kinship, spiritual relations, and food distribution. The scientists are disappointed and highly irritated. Verran, as the author of the text, refuses to "translate" the aboriginal "perspective" to the scientists or to her readers, for that matter. Instead of predefining the object of concern, she starts from the space of uncertainty and discomfort. What she offers us is a symmetrical discussion of the different knowledge practices of the main protagonists of her story, including a detailed ethnographic account of the scientists' own routines. In another episode from the same workshop, Verran (2013) narrates a disagreement between a senior scientist and a Yolngu elder over whether two plants used to make fire are the same or different. Whereas the scientist insists on a taxonomic distinction between the two plants, the elder draws on kinship relations to argue that they are the same.

In both cases, Verran makes a radical suggestion for how to "work with those who think otherwise" (Verran, 2014). Instead of an explanation that would either privilege one's own frame of reference, proceed through the gesture of relativism, or apply the "balm of allegory" (Verran, 2013: 148), all of which would try to make difference disappear, she is interested in the very space of incommensurability and contradiction. For Verran, it is precisely the point of profound epistemic disconcertment (described by her as a deep, bodily sensation that cannot be glossed over) that marks the beginning of new relations and thereby offers the potential for a postcolonial project that does not ignore the effects of colonial violence and power hierarchies but transcends them.

Verran views the epistemic disconcertment that emerges from contradiction and disagreement as a moment of becoming, which is generative and thus *not* immediately

useful, logical, or functional. Hers is an "infra-critique, gesturing at possible generative tensions, while explicitly refusing others" (Verran, 2014). In it, she acknowledges the comforts of "epistemic rightness" (Verran, 2013: 146) but nevertheless dares to abandon this comfort zone of academic modes of justification to explore new avenues for "doing difference together."

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Povinelli has analyzed the power effects of liberal strategies of commensurability that seek to tame and consequently undo radical worlds. She argues:

> If the message addressing the liberal public might be 'begin with the doable,' the message addressing radical worlds is 'be other so that we will not ossify, but be in such a way that we are not undone, that is make yourself doable for us.' And the message conveys the stakes of refusing to be doable, and thereby, the stakes of forcing liberal subjects to experience the intractable impasse of reason as the borders of the repugnant – actual legal, economic, and social repression. (Povinelli, 2001: 329)

What does this imply for rethinking the "politics of impatience" as a theoretical contribution in its own right? Can we stick to the generative potential of epistemic disconcertment in a setting where the stakes are evidently so high, and the destructive force of fire seems overwhelming? When the matter of concern are not different modes of knowledges and contrasting "firing regimes," as in Verran's encounter between Australian Aboriginal firing experts and ecological scientists, but rather "burning political issues" that led, in some instances quite literally, to burning campuses?[20]

Both Verran and Povinelli criticize a liberal model of containment or tolerance that only reaches so far as it fails to question its own epistemic authority. They contend that the strategies of commensurability silence and eventually crush other worlds or the imagination of such. Epistemic disconcertment or, in Povinelli's (2001) and Trouillot's (1995) terms, "inconceivability," are radically different and potentially risky methodologies. They are invitations to leave the comfort zone of "explanation" and to engage more closely with difference. However, these positions do not imply giving up one's metaphysical commitments and becoming an other (a naïve endeavor at best), but to begin to think from and theorize with tensions instead of trying to erase them.[21] These authors are also clear that this is not a neutral endeavor, nor do they presume that all tensions would be generative. Their critique, therefore, not only targets liberalism but also forms of exclusive we-ness, emerging, for example, in nationalist or patriarchal social imaginaries (see Lorde, 2012).

Clearly, there were multiple tensions present in the South African student movement, including internal struggles and political faction fights (Ndelu, Dlakovu, and Boswell, 2017). Moving forward, I want to focus more closely on those moments of action that caused literal discomfort by disrupting the established patterns of negotiation and debate. Instead of dissolving the contradictions unfolding in this space, I aim to cultivate epistemic disconcertment in Verran's sense—as a potential opening for new relations to emerge. How can we think with fire?

#RhodesMustFall: Into the heat

So here is a starting point, an incident that caused a big stir, indeed a shit-storm that spread throughout academic institutions in South Africa and beyond and that has been reiterated in numerous discussions of the student movement. On 9 March 2015, UCT student Chumani Maxwele flung a bucket full of human feces onto the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. He was wearing a pink helmet and two placards around his body, one saying, "exhibit black assimilation," the other stating, "exhibit white arrogance." The statue, which was unveiled in 1934 in the middle of the UCT campus, commemorated Rhodes for bequeathing the land for the building of a national university—a settler-colonial irony. Twenty years after the end of apartheid, Rhodes still appeared as the founding father of UCT, a heritage icon that embodied the core of the institution.

But not everybody regarded Rhodes in such a favorable light. Black students, in particular, felt offended and intimidated by his uncontested presence. Thus, Maxwele expressed a collective sentiment when he performed this action. In the manner of what has become known as "poo-protests" in the Cape Town area (Robins, 2014), he had collected human waste from the Black township of Khayelitsha, where living conditions remain extremely poor and sanitation is inadequate, and brought it to the center of elite learning. Through this powerful symbolic and material transgression, he called into question the invisible barrier between the university and the city.

However, the university management reacted harshly, speaking of the desecration of heritage and condemning it as unacceptable and reprehensible. In a statement issued by the acting VC, Deputy Vice Chancellor Sandra Klopper, UCT declared that it "endorses freedom of expression. We encourage open debate, as all universities should do, and urge our students and staff to participate in discussions that contribute to responsible action." (quoted in Nyamnjoh, 2017: 72) However, this strategy of commensurability, which sought to render protest "doable" in Povinelli's critical sense, did not succeed.

Over the following weeks, students continued to voice their demands for the removal of the statue and other symbols of white supremacy from campus as well as claims for recognition of their broader concerns to decolonize the university. Their actions and the forcefulness and urgency by which activists expressed their anger with the slow pace and the timid terms of debate around "transformation" largely overwhelmed the university management. Administrators and university leadership insisted on a dialogue that would involve all stakeholders, including the alumnae of UCT as a historically white institution, many of whom were now affluent and influential donors to the university (indeed embodying "white privilege" in many instances). Management treated the struggle like a debating exercise where everyone should have an equal opportunity to voice their opinions and present their thoughts. The arguments of the opponents of the removal of the statue went in two directions. More moderate voices asserted that Rhodes was part of a white English heritage and should, therefore, have an equal place in the new South African heritage landscape where all South Africans ought to be represented and be allowed to hold dear what they considered crucial to their collective identity. This position largely ignored the postcolonial entanglement that the Rhodes statue on campus exemplified. It produced a sanitized version of heritage that placed all potential

antagonisms safely in the past and supported a status quo. By drawing the issue of race and racism into the temporality of the present and giving it concrete material form through the statue and its symbolic power, students actively disturbed this status quo. In their activist practice, they also developed new approaches to theory: rejecting the perspectivism of the liberal stance and insisting instead on the multiple relations between knowledge, power, space, and racialized subjectivities.

There were also those defenders of the statue who were much less attuned to the tone of rainbowism, but rather employing racist slurs (Mudavanhu, 2017). These voices (mainly spread via social media) accused the black student protesters of being ungrateful; arguing that their actions proved that they were out to destroy the university and that their protests were a clear demonstration that they did not belong there. This version of an angry black subject that needed to be contained corresponded closely with the apartheid logic that had protected and reproduced white supremacy. The fact that this position was publicly articulated and widespread also demonstrated that the concerns of students were real and pressing.

Neither those who criminalized black protesters, nor those who regarded the statue as a heritage icon, acknowledged "black pain" at all; they focused solely on the anger to which they responded with consternation, shock and outrage. The underlying polarization of "black violence" and (unmarked-slash-white) "civilized conduct" brought race and racism into sharp relief (see Blom Hansen, 2018).

But it was not just academic liberalism or white privilege that came under fire. A year into the protests (which by then had evolved into a nationwide movement #FeesMustFall), photographer Wandile Kasibe, who was also a PhD student at UCT and active in the protests, opened his exhibition on #RhodesMustFall, titled "Echoing Voices from Within," on the UCT campus. It featured various iconic images, including those of Maxwele's action. This exhibition was disrupted by a protest led by a group of queer activists, "The Trans Collective," who had painted their naked bodies in red and also spilled red paint on the photographs. Their protest was directed at a homogenized narrative of the student movement that privileged cis-male, heteronormative, and patriarchal voices. The Trans Collective called out against the sexual violence against female and nonbinary bodies and positionalities and drew specific attention to pending rape charges against Maxwele himself. This protest also questioned the format of the exhibition that potentially ossified a fluid social movement by creating a single story and sidelining the heterogeneity and "leaderfulness" (Sharma, 2024) of the movement along with the unique experiences of "Black African womxn and their agency in relation to systematic biases against them" (Ndelu, Dlakavu, and Boswell, 2017: 3). Moreover, an exhibition that featured the eventual removal of the statue as a success of the movement suggested that the issue was closed whereas the Trans Collective pointed toward the ongoing urgency of protest.[22] Putting their own bodies upfront, they articulated a vulnerability that transcended mere (black) pain. Simultaneously, the actions of the Trans Collective invoked a troubling discomfort that could not be easily contained. By "vandalizing" the exhibition, they produced a heat that kept the unresolved contradictions and troubles of discrimination and inequality alive. Their affective politics of impatience and multiple points of departure, including the initial "desecration" of the Rhodes

statue, could not be reconciled by strategies of commensurability. It could not be dismissed or explained away.

#Shackville: Burning and breathing

A month before the disruption of the exhibition, in February 2016, another incident occurred that powerfully demonstrated the ongoing urgency and unresolved political issues addressed by the protests. Confronting the housing crisis faced by many students, who could not find a place in the university residencies nor afford proper housing on top of tuition fees, a group of activists came together to construct a shack from scrap metal, wooden slats, and corrugated iron. They erected the shack right in the middle of one of the campus roads, just a few meters away from the pedestal where the Rhodes statue had once towered. Next to the shack, they placed a portable toilet, drawing on the fecal symbolism of earlier protests. Evoking the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, where police had killed 69 people protesting the apartheid pass laws, #Shackville stood as a reminder of ongoing discrimination and exclusion.

As the protest unfolded, activists declared #Shackville to be "a representation of Black dispossession, of those who have been removed from land and dignity by settler colonialism, forced to live in squalor" (UCT RMF, 2016). The fragile shack, standing opposite (and below) the impressive landmark building of Jameson Hall (the main university building) was unmissable; it clearly disrupted the vision of "normal campus life," sticking out like a scar—an eyesore to the dominant representational regime on campus. As commentator Sisonke Msimang remarked, the shack was a powerful symbol to "disrupt the complacency that says shacks must stay in their place" (Msimang, 2016). Like the act of throwing "black shit" (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019: 235) onto the Rhodes statue had brought the material-semiotic dimensions of inequality to the fore, the shack was another reminder of the disturbing qualities of categorical transgression and matter out of place (Douglas 1966). In the case of the "desecration" of the Rhodes memorial, it was the feces, whose stench and health hazard has been seemingly "normalized" in the underserviced townships, which became a matter out of place in the center of elite learning: a multilayered symbol of protest and nonacceptance of such a status quo. In the case of #Shackville it was the township itself, so to speak. When the university threatened to demolish the shack, as it "obstructed traffic," the situation escalated. One of the core activists of the movement recalled the situation in an interview we had six months after the event, "There was a call out, saying: 'Everybody who believes in the movement should come and guard the shack'" (interview, 3 November 2016).

The demolition order mobilized students who came to protect the shack and their comrades. At one point, some students entered the nearby luxury university residencies (Fuller and Smuts Halls, primarily reserved for affluent students), and helped themselves to the food of their peers. In the heat of that moment, a group of students seized several of the paintings and portraits they identified as "symbols of the colonizer" from the walls and carried them outside to burn on a large and blazing pyre. On the evening of that day, private security forces and police came in to bulldoze the shack. Activists trying

to protect it were dispersed with stun grenades. Later, some of the students involved in the burning of the artworks were expelled from the university, leading to further protests.

So, what to make of the fire, its antecedents, and its aftermath? How can we relate the force of burning and destruction to the problem of academic comfort zones? Can we theorize from this troubled space? Clearly, the construction of the shack and the burning of the artworks cannot be isolated from broader discussions around the marginalization of black bodies, epistemic and institutional violence, as well as a politics of impatience that would refuse assimilation and complacency (see Makhubu, 2020). The act of the burning, however, was not easily readable or translatable. It did not mark "doability"—neither in the sense of Povinelli's politics of liberal commensurability, nor in terms of movement tactics, as some activists also acknowledged in retrospect.

Both the shack as a material structure and the act of burning, along with its aftermath —the criminal charges against some students and their expulsion from the university— brought the contradictions of a black presence in a "white" institution to the fore. #Shackville operated largely on the premise of woundedness. This trope cuts through different layers. It encompasses the notion of black pain, the trauma of colonialism and apartheid, along with the perceived identity crisis associated with it, the deep divisions that characterize South African society as profoundly unequal, and the threats to physical and mental integrity for people of color in the unsafe environment of the Cape Flats—and by extension in the city of Cape Town at large, including the university campus. Standing in stark contrast to the surrounding colonial edifice of the university, the shack was an outcry against this ongoing crisis (nobody should live in shacks). At the same time, students described #Shackville as a "safe space," essential for acknowledging the wound at all. It needed to be protected and defended against the onslaught of the institution. The shack's eventual destruction (along with the interdict against some of the students) therefore equaled "the death of a dream" (Daily Maverick, 2016) in the eyes of protesters.

The burning of the paintings also assembled multi-layered and contradictory points of reference. The artworks hanging undisturbed in a residence exemplified the ongoing power of whiteness, and their destruction clearly marked a politics of impatience. Gillespie and Naidoo speak of the burning as a technique, "to break the hold the assimilationist project had over [the students'] imaginations. They created a black scene, a riotous controversy, at the site of their assimilation into a social order unable to overcome its violent history" (Gillespie and Naidoo, 2019: 237). However, the burning was not necessarily cathartic. As Sisonke Msimang (2016) carefully argues, it rather threw the problem of critique in political protest into sharp relief. Msimang rejects the "false need for agreement" that characterized much of the debate around the protests. She contends that the image of the destructive and violent burning of artworks (likened by some commentators to the burning of books in Nazi Germany) could not be separated from the violence of the status quo. To her, the sight of the paintings as homages to a colonial past was "sickening," but so was the sight of them being burned, as this equaled a desire for erasure rather than a rage against forgetting. Consequently, the burning seemed "like an act of woundedness rather than an act of strength" (Msimang, 2016). What Msimang offers here, is a positioned critique that speaks from a zone of discomfort and worry, but insists on keeping the various ends of the story in tension and their contradictions in place.

I would like to slightly shift the perspective and consider the emphasis on woundedness not as a form of victimization but rather as an opening, a point of intersection, or "suture" in Stuart Hall's (2011: 6) fitting terms. #Shackville might not have been "successful" in the sense that it neither "solved" the housing crisis nor did it necessarily strengthen the position of the activists involved. Nevertheless, we can learn a lot from its affective politics and heated mobilizations. #Shackville focused largely on pointing the finger at the wound (housing crisis, large-scale inequality, etc.) and eventually rubbing salt into it by burning the colonial paintings. In many instances, students have described the situation on their campuses as suffocating. Fire, and the violence associated with it, while potentially devastating, can also be seen "as a response to suffocation, as a desperate effort to … produce room to breathe," as Kim Fortun (2001: 171) phrases it.[23] Students also made these associations themselves when quoting Frantz Fanon's "combat breathing" (Fanon, 1965: 65), which he, as well as they, associated with a dying colonialism. Surely, neither the burning nor the shack's demolition solved any of the trouble but kept it sharp and stinging. No comfort in sight.

Conclusion: Fertile grounds

While the campus fires have cooled down, the issues raised during the protests remain highly relevant, whether in the South African political setting or on a global scale in discussions about decolonization and "epistemic freedom" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). In the years following the events featuring in this article, South Africa (and the world at large) has witnessed new waves of protest, and it remains uncertain what the future will hold. Amid burning streets, forests, and libraries—when the impulse is to extinguish the flames and to preserve what exists and what is known—it is hard to imagine fire as an opening for reconceptualizing critique, as I have attempted in this article.

Nevertheless, I want to insist with Elizabeth Chin (2021) that we should become pyrophytes or fire-lovers in our critical and theoretical endeavors. Her appeal refers to a review essay by Ryan Cecil Jobson (2020) who provoked quite a stir in the discipline of anthropology when he put forth "the case for letting anthropology burn." Jobson strongly critiques the liberal assumptions that have dominated discussions in anthropology for a long time. He argues that neither cultural relativism (under the long shadow of the "Boasian fix") nor the push for a "decolonial fix" focusing solely on representations is suitable for confronting the challenges of the present. For Jobson, burning paves the way for an abolitionist practice that merges epistemic and activist positionalities in new ways.

In this article, I have suggested to consider the articulations of #Shackville and #RhodesMustFall as a yet another starting point to think in generative terms about the transformative potential of fire as a contradictory force. Taking fire seriously means keeping the tension between multiple positions in place (Bachelard, 1964). This analytical gesture not only helps us better grasp the urgency of what is at stake in social movements such as the South African student protests. By not brushing over contradictions but rather emphasizing their discomforting copresence, fire invites epistemic disconcertment that denies the comforts of anterior or predictable knowledge. It is a space where activist practice becomes a form of theorizing that may resonate in interesting ways with our academic knowledge production.

Or, in Faye Harrison's terms, it can be considered an "ex-centric site" (Harrison, 2016)of theorizing that calls into question the "epistemological apartheid" (Mafeje, quoted in Harrison, 2016: 161) that restricts the "theory-formulating landscape" to Western academia. Attention to fire also requires careful listening. You cannot sit inside the fire; you need to move and act. These actions may be unpredictable and highly contradictory. While dissolving such contradictions may be impossible, from the ashes, new seeds may grow.

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Notes

1. This trope is mirrored in recent student protest camps globally calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. The massive backlash against these protests (and the bombing and burning of Gaza that is at the core of it) has also been the subject of (anthropological) theorizing and critique, see Fassin (2024) and Mishra (2025).
2. Thanks to Greer Valley for pointing out this phrasing ("post-post-Apartheid") to me. For an analysis of the "pitfalls of partial decolonization" associated with the politics of nonracialism and the ongoing political crisis in South Africa, see Ngqulunga (2023).
3. It is important to note that the protests of 2015 were not the first of their kind; yet they gained national and global media traction largely because of their "proximity to whiteness" at elite universities, as Wandile Ngcaweni (2016) puts it.
4. In an essay for this journal (*AT*), Tania Li situates "the capacity for critical politics" in "the contradictions embedded in our everyday lives" (Li, 2019: 47). The temporality of her analysis differs from mine. Whereas she is concerned with the moment in which politics emerges as critical capacity—often unspectacular and unnoticed—my discussion leads to the scale of public protest and the immediacy of an outburst in fire. Nevertheless, we share our point of departure in contradictions as the space of theorizing.

5. On profound indigenous critiques of research practices that do not account for these contradictions, see Deloria Jr. (1988); Tuhiwai Smith (1999); TallBear (2014); Moreton-Robinson (2017).
6. These calls for decolonization of higher education are not merely "metaphoric" as suggested by Tuck and Yang (2012) in their critique of such efforts, but, as I will demonstrate throughout this article, they are existential.
7. Since the protests were mainly organized and gained traction via social media, I stick to the hashtag when referring to them. See also Bonilla and Rosa (2015) on digital protest and hashtag ethnography.
8. My fieldwork largely took place at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I have also had shorter research periods at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and have worked with colleagues at Stellenbosch University. All three universities are so-called historically white universities and elite institutions, facing major challenges of transformation. While both UCT and Wits are English-speaking and associated with academic liberalism, Stellenbosch was one of the leading Afrikaner universities, with Afrikaans as the main medium of instruction. Stellenbosch University played a major role in the intellectual foundations of apartheid.
9. For an important critical analysis of the movement led by students themselves, see Langa (2017); see also Naidoo (2020).
10. Audre Lorde (2012) gave a brilliant analysis of the complexities of anger in antiracist struggles. See Cherry (2021) for further exploration.
11. The latter position was strongly held in the antiapartheid struggle and central in its rejection of the racial regime, see Alexander (2013).
12. The Black Consciousness movement was founded by Steve Biko who argued for Blackness as a positionality born out of struggle, that is, a political position (Biko, 1978). Biko was murdered in 1977 by the apartheid regime.
13. It should be noted that transformation also became a highly contested term, as it was largely associated with liberal thought and politics and thus antithetic to more radical change. But see Ntloedibe (2019) for a contrary position.
14. The critique of white privilege and of the assumed universalism of whiteness is not only relevant in South Africa. For critical analyses of the centering of whiteness in scholarship and academic institutions, see Ahmed (2007).
15. This description serves as a shortcut for an epistemic practice that centers around othering. It has been the object of profound (postcolonial) critique within anthropology from the 1980s onward, see Trouillot (1991), Minh-Ha (1989), Rosaldo (1989).
16. This is a point that is emphasized by Xolela Mangcu (2017) in reaction to personal attacks against him by some of the student voices.
17. In her presidential address for the American Anthropological Association, Virginia Dominguez (2011) also speaks about comfort zones and their dangers and questions the self-righteousness of anthropologists who seldom direct their critical analysis of power at their own institutional spaces.
18. There has been a substantial backlash against Mbembe after the publication of this piece. For a profound critique that addresses the question of trauma and black pain in particular, see Njovane (2015).
19. See Gillespie and Naidoo (2019) who also argue against such a negative reading of student protests. Instead, they insist on the various forms of protest, including the fires, as profound critiques of racial capitalism and powerful articulations of black subjectivities.

20. In the 20 years since the publication of Verran's text, huge wildfires in Australia, Siberia, Amazonia, California as well as South Africa have constantly increased and become a visible sign of anthropogenic climate change as the urgent crisis of our times—truly a burning issue in its own right. See also Petryna (2018).
21. This is a feminist position that is shared by other authors, for example Haraway (1988), Star (1990), and Tsing (2005).
22. For a different attempt at bringing arts and activism together, see the Open Forum Initiative https://www.facebook.com/openforumarts/; accessed March 12, 2021); Schramm et al. (2019).
23. Fortun writes about activism and advocacy after the Bhopal disaster—suffocation, in her case, was not merely a metaphor but a deadly reality. Nevertheless, the association of activism, disruption and breathing was strong among students—a good example being the exhibition project „Phefumla!/Breathe!" that emerged from the Open Forum initiative at Stellenbosch University (https://vimeo.com/220044716).

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