Rhodes Must Fall: An Embodied Rhetorical Assertion
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Richard Marback is a Professor in the Department of English. He is the author/editor of multiple books on rhetoric and citizenship. This talk is part of ongoing research on civic rhetoric in democratic South Africa.

When Chumani Maxwele vandalized the statue of Cecil Rhodes that dominated the main entrance to the University of Cape Town, he sparked protests against colonial statues, plaques, and symbols across South Africa as well as in Great Britain and the United States. Those protests have challenged the continued appropriateness on college campuses of monuments and memorials symbolizing a colonial legacy. Critics of the protest have typically characterized the attention given to symbols as naïve or misguided—if not a manufactured crisis, certainly no more than a distraction from the goal of decolonizing higher education.

In my presentation I argue that subsequent protests and debates fail to recognize the radical potential of Maxwele’s initial act. By seeing statues, plaques, and other objects such as paintings as representations of something else, critics and protestors alike participate in a disembodied rhetoric which privileges knowing over doing. As such protestors and their critics miss seeing Maxwele’s vandalism of the Rhodes statue less as a challenge to a colonial monument and more as a challenge to the disembodied rhetorical strategies of representation through which monuments impose colonial experiences. In arguing for understanding Maxwele’s protest as an embodied challenge to disembodied rhetorical strategies, I make the case that decolonizing universities involves generating alternative strategies of rhetorical embodiment.

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