

## The Space of the University: Time, and Time Again

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*Scholarly analyses of the South African hashtag campus movements of 2015–2016, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, have evaluated them in terms of their success in bringing about political change in a linear causal fashion. Through a reading of Thando Mgqolozana’s novel, Unimportance (2014), the history of the University of the Western Cape, as well as scholarly commentary on #RMF and #FMF, this article argues that an attention to the cyclical nature of time as it unfolds within the space of the university is crucial for properly understanding the events of 2015–2016.*

**Keywords:** University, South Africa, Mgqolozana, Thando, University of the Western Cape, #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall

When the critical eye turns toward the space of the university, it is apt to detect anomalies and to rest on places where things do not join up, or at which they terminate abruptly. This disjuncture and incompleteness can be physically palpable on campus—as with the flight of steps at the University of Zambia in Lusaka, which ascends into thin air, only to be blocked by a wall. The story has it that the Israeli builders, who stopped work after Zambia severed diplomatic ties with Israel in 1973, the year of the Fourth Arab-Israeli War, took the architects’ plans with them when they left the country, leaving their successors with no idea where those stairs were meant to go.<sup>1</sup>

Having grown up in Cape Town, where a freeway flyover ends in space a couple of stories above the ground, its construction having been suspended in 1977, I know how such structures can become unintended monuments to plans and ambitions thwarted or curtailed.

The anomaly need not, however, be physically palpable. It can be a deviation of a more abstract order—say, in the conventionalized ordering of space—that arrests the critical eye, which then, noting the anomaly, and powerless before it, moves off, in a train of association, to a topic for which criteria are more readily available.

This is what appears to take place when the narrator of Thando Mgqolozana’s 2014 novel, *Unimportance*, observes: “*There is no I-block; from H you tunnel through to J. Whoever planned this university wasn’t well acquainted with the alphabet, and it*

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1 Manuel Herz, Ingrid Schröder, Hans Focketyn, and Julia Jamrozik, eds., *African Modernism: The Architecture of Independence: Ghana, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Zambia* (Zurich, Switzerland: Park, 2015), 552–53.

is safe to assume that it was a ‘he,’ since we are not told of women building apartheid universities in the sixties, although they might have been.”<sup>2</sup>

The University of the Western Cape (UWC), although not named in the novel, is where *Unimportance* is set. Zizi, the narrator of the novel, is describing the Ruth First residence where he lives. Ruth First, in fact, does not have an I-block.<sup>3</sup> Less easily established than this fact are criteria for judgment—in other words: What to make of the elision of “I”? An architect could tell you that the letter “I” is customarily omitted from alphabetical series in plans and on scale models because it is easily mistaken for the number “1.”<sup>4</sup> It is not impossible that at UWC the architect’s plans were executed to the letter.

Zizi displays no knowledge of architects’ practices, however. And his quip about the planner of the university not knowing the alphabet is unconvincing, absurd, even to him. So he moves to another terrain: “it is safe to assume that it was a ‘he,’ ” and a received narrative—acceptable to his audience because its underlying criteria are hegemonic—but the veracity of which is in doubt: “although they might have been.”

*Unimportance* is a novel about men and women, in which “he” is under constant interrogation by Zizi, who, as his organization’s candidate for Student Representative Council (SRC) president in the upcoming election, faces possible exposure for assaulting his girlfriend, Pamodi, and possibly even a criminal complaint; at first, he fears exposure, then he realizes that he has to tell the truth and to let the voters make their choice.

The novel itself is the extended speech that Zizi delivers as candidate. The lesson toward which it builds is his own unimportance, which is comprehended and realized through the process of writing and giving his three-hour address: “But it is not the consequence of truth-telling that matters, it is the act itself. I don’t matter (although before last night I did): it is what I have done that does. We will soon find out what the function of truth in politics is.”<sup>5</sup> In a story about an “I” ceasing to matter, it is not insignificant that, when the speaker’s eye turns to campus space, of all the letters of the alphabet, it is “I” that is elided.

An elision of the “I” can lead to fundamental questions about the university, as an institution founded on the principle of reason—which demands that reasons be given,

2 Thando Mqgqolozana, *Unimportance* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana, 2014), 25. Mqgqolozana is the author of two previous novels, *A Man Who Is Not a Man* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009) and *Hear Me Alone* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana, 2011). He also cowrote the screenplay for the film, *Inxeba [The Wound]* (2017).

3 I thank Chantall Botes, of Residential Services, University of the Western Cape, for confirming this, and for informing me that the “tunnel,” a passageway connecting the two blocks, was renovated and converted into communal kitchens a few years ago. Email to author, July 11, 2018. The first two of UWC’s student residences, Cecil Esau and Cassinga, designed by the Public Works Department and built in the 1960s, were among the campus’s original buildings. The campus was remade in the 1980s, with the addition of several new buildings. These buildings, including a meeting hall, library, student center, as well as new student residences, were designed by various leading South African architects, including Julian Elliot (1928–2015), who designed the campus of the University of Zambia; see Noëleen Murray, “A Campus Apart,” in *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid’s Legacy* 2e, eds. Premesh Lalu and Noëleen Murray (Bellville, South Africa: Centre for Humanities Research, UWC, 2013), 63–87. This edition, from which I quote throughout, was dedicated to Jakes Gerwel, who died in 2012. The first edition, published in 2012, omits its date of publication from the copyright page, and, because it does not include the front matter dedicating it to Gerwel, follows a different pagination.

4 I thank Matthew Cooke for informing me of this.

5 Mqgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 144.

and consequently occasions an inquiry into origins, and an investigation of cause and effect—although that inquiry can stop short of asking about the origin of that demand itself.

Referring to Heidegger in “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” (1983), a meditation inspired in part by the unique topography of Cornell University, with its steep ravines, Derrida observes that “[t]he modern dominance of the principle of reason had to go hand in hand with the interpretation of the essence of beings as *objects*, an object present as representation (*Vorstellung*), an object placed and positioned *before* a subject. This latter, a man who says ‘I,’ an *ego* certain of itself, thus ensures his own technical mastery over the totality of what is.” On the other hand, according to Heidegger, “nowhere [within the university] do we find this principle thought, scrutinized, interrogated as to its origin.” The university’s activities are thus “elaborated above an abyss, suspended over a ‘gorge’—by which we mean on grounds whose own grounding remains invisible and unthought.”<sup>6</sup>

In this light, Zizi’s musings, although they reveal a curiosity about his own university’s origins, also suggest how the self-certainty of the inquiring ego can be undercut by the topic of those musings—a physical topos that reveals, symbolically, both that the subject’s objects are not “before” it and that the masculine subject “I” is itself not grounded.

In *Unimportance*, campus space is being read like a book, and it is full of mistakes. The culprit needs to be identified, although “his” mistakes may never be corrected. In an ekphrasis, what is before the critical eye leads the viewer to invent a narrative. The stones speak, and space is turned into time.

Who is the culprit? It is “he,” and it is apartheid—because this is one of the “apartheid universities.” The university was erected by the government in the early 1960s at a site adjacent to Bellville South, an urban area near Cape Town reserved for Coloured people under apartheid “group areas” policy.<sup>7</sup> It was part of a “nearly realized attempt . . . to create a self-governing homeland for Coloureds,” Zizi tells his audience, “a college that was meant to be exclusive to that group of people.”<sup>8</sup> Zizi free associates from a pair of mating cats on the roof of a student residence to the fact that some of the original land for the college was annexed from the Cape Flats Nature Reserve. Part of the reserve remains, abutting the campus to the southwest.<sup>9</sup> “Thus,” Zizi observes, “we find ourselves in a nature reserve in search of higher learning.”<sup>10</sup> For a long time, UWC was known colloquially as “Bush,” which explains why, in *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town*, Zoë Wicomb would write about UWC as a “clearing in the bush.”<sup>11</sup> Key signifiers in a continuum of negative ones, including the bush and the

6 Jacques Derrida, “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,” in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Jan Plug, et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 139–40.

7 Murray, “A Campus Apart,” 68.

8 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 55.

9 Julia Martin, “An Open Space,” in *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid’s Legacy 2e*, eds. Premesh Lalu and Noëleen Murray (Bellville, South Africa: Centre for Humanities Research, UWC, 2013), 32.

10 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 55.

11 Zoë Wicomb, “A Clearing in the Bush,” in *You Can’t Get Lost in Cape Town* (London, England: Virago, 1987), 37–61.

animal, both *he* and *apartheid* are terms stemming from criteria that Zizi can “safe[ly] . . . assume” to be hegemonic, even if the relevant facts remain in question.

By concentrating solely on its founding moment, Zizi’s history of UWC elides developments of enormous importance. When, in 1987, in his vice-chancellor’s inaugural address, Jakes Gerwel (1946–2012), a scholar celebrated for his work on race in Afrikaans literature,<sup>12</sup> issued a plea for UWC to provide an “intellectual home for the Left,” and declared that “in our orientation we are involved in the creative conceptualisation of a future community beyond the destructiveness of an apartheid order,”<sup>13</sup> this was the latest in a series of challenges made by students and academics at the university to the apartheid state’s rationale for its founding.<sup>14</sup> According to Premesh Lalu:

[T]he shift proclaimed in 1987 was justified by almost two decades of student protests and disavowal of the racial precedents and rationale for the establishment of UWC. . . . UWC would now offer itself to experiment with the idea of communities of the future precisely on the grounds that its students were drawn mainly from the working class in South Africa, and that it did not have to be restrained by the racial project of the state in thinking about productive concepts of community. . . . Critical [to campus protest in the 1970s] was the unifying force of Black Consciousness that would shake the foundations of the racial logic of a university created to function as an instrument of apartheid. . . . The experiment was of course short-lived, as the politics of a united front of the anti-apartheid left diminished the appeal of the project of Black Consciousness. If the 1987 inaugural address may have marked a leaning towards what Gerwel called the broad democratic movement in South Africa, it also demonstrated why he would opt for designating the university in terms in which the left would be aligned to a project of constituting community, rather than in terms of a limited identity claim of blackness as a given community.<sup>15</sup>

The UWC student residences named in *Unimportance* reflect the attempt at remaking the university as a home for the nonracial democratic left: Ruth First, Basil February,

12 G. J. Gerwel, *Literatuur en apartheid: konsepsies van “gekleurdes” in die Afrikaanse roman tot 1948 [Literature and Apartheid: Conceptions of “Colored People” in the Afrikaans Novel Until 1948]* (Kasselsvlei, South Africa: Kampen, 1983).

13 G. J. Gerwel, “Inaugural Address by Jakes Gerwel as UWC Vice-Chancellor and Rector (5 June 1987),” *Jakes Gerwel Foundation*. <https://jgf.org.za/inaugural-address-by-jakes-gerwel-as-uwc-vice-chancellor-and-rector-5-june-1987/>.

14 For another account of this turn, see Harold Wolpe, “The Debate on University Transformation in South Africa: The Case of the University of the Western Cape,” *Comparative Education* 31.2 (1995): 283–86.

15 Premesh Lalu, “Constituting Community at the Intellectual Home of the Left,” in *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid’s Legacy 2e*, eds. Premesh Lalu and Noëleen Murray (Bellville, South Africa: Centre for Humanities Research, UWC, 2013), 111–13. Lalu views the limitations of such a project as one common to the so-called “historically black universities,” in that, although there has long been a questioning of the “instrumental reason” of state racism at those institutions, there is insufficient questioning of a “disciplinary reason” that has meant, historically, that, at those universities, the “‘native question’ was answered from within the disciplinary apparatus locally in terms of the rational prospects confronting the black subject”; Lalu, “Constituting Community at the Intellectual Home of the Left,” 118–19.

Chris Hani, Cecil Esau, Colleen Williams, Eduardo Dos Santos. In Zizi's speech, however, the university is represented as if nothing changed between its founding moment in 1963, and 2007, the year in which Mqolozana's novel appears to be set.

This is a view that may reflect changes since the advent of nonracial democracy in 1994, in which political polarization increased in the Western Cape between Coloureds and Africans; Coloured voters helped to deliver the National Party a majority in the elections for the Western Cape provincial legislature in 1994.<sup>16</sup> It may also reflect a resurgence of Black Consciousness on campus in a form not as racially inclusive as in the 1970s, when Indians and Coloureds affirmed themselves as "Black"—what I think Lalu means when he writes that Black Consciousness shook the foundations of the racial logic of the university. As Lalu also notes, then a lecturer in Afrikaans and Nederlands, "Gerwel himself had participated in the movement's meteoric rise on the UWC campus in the mid-1970s."<sup>17</sup>

If *Unimportance* shows how student politicians read history selectively, *Becoming UWC*, the book in which Lalu's reflections appear, also presents an incomplete account of the university's history. Published to commemorate UWC's fiftieth anniversary, it looks back mainly to the 1970s, and especially to the 1980s, the years that another contributor to the volume calls a "heroic, mythic decade."<sup>18</sup> The subsequent two decades are referred to in a cursory way, as if giving a nod to those already well informed,<sup>19</sup> but they are never the object of the kind of sustained analysis directed at the seventies and eighties. The silences and elisions, in *Becoming UWC*, as well as in *Unimportance*, are signs of a contest, ongoing and unresolved, over UWC's history.

16 For some, the 1994 election result became an occasion for soul searching. See Zoë Wicomb, "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa," in *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, eds. Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91–107.

17 Lalu, "Constituting Community at the Intellectual Home of the Left," 113. See also Premesh Lalu, "Campus: A Discourse on the Grounds of an Apartheid University," in *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid's Legacy 2e*, eds. Premesh Lalu and Noëleen Murray (Bellville, South Africa: Centre for Humanities Research, UWC, 2013), 53–56.

18 Martin, "An Open Space," 30.

19 For example, in his concluding remarks to the *Becoming UWC*, Lalu writes that "below the uneasy calm that descended upon UWC following the difficult years of the 1990s lay an enormous struggle for the redefinition of the university. There were many indications across its faculties that some change in the orientation of UWC was indeed demanded. Instead, by 1995, with relations strained both between students and academics, and between academics, non-academic staff and senior management, UWC faced the gloomy prospect of becoming yet another project that lagged behind in the transformation of black institutions in post-apartheid South Africa." See Premesh Lalu, "Becoming UWC," in *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid's Legacy 2e*, eds. Premesh Lalu and Noëleen Murray (Bellville, South Africa: Centre for Humanities Research, UWC, 2013), 187. According to Andrew Nash, writing in 1993, "[t]he claim that UWC is striving to become an 'intellectual home of the left' is still part of the official rhetoric of the university. But very few students and academics believe that UWC is actually moving in this direction. If the new direction of UWC had to be summed up in a single phrase, we could say that its management, and those closest to them, are 'preparing to govern.' While doing so, they preside over a large degree of political disintegration: no SRC has been elected for the past three years, nor have students been able to organize themselves effectively in other ways; the staff association has practically ceased to function; there is increasing distrust and resentment of the university management." See Andrew Nash, "The 'Intellectual Home of the Left' Prepares to Govern: UWC and the New South Africa," *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (May/June 1993): 14.

What would an analysis of the years after the 1980s show? One such analysis contends that, perhaps by the late 1980s, and certainly by the early 1990s, the democratic nonracialism espoused by Gerwel had foundered on the realities of campus politics—realities surely shaped in part by the view, accepted by Gerwel and guiding his ideological alignment of the university, that “in the Congress tradition . . . non-racialism in South Africa implies ‘non-racialism under the leadership of the African majority.’”<sup>20</sup> When Lalu tells us that nonracialism diminished the appeal of Black Consciousness,<sup>21</sup> what he does not explain is that the former effectively reintroduced and reinforced a racial division between Africans and Coloureds that, in the 1970s, the latter had done something to address. In addition, African students, who constituted a majority at UWC by 1994, had begun to advocate for issues that were, in general, understood as distinct from the main material concerns of Coloured students.<sup>22</sup>

One of these issues was fees, which, for African students studying far from home, included the cost of living in campus residences; new ones were built in the late 1980s to accommodate the increase in student numbers after the university adopted a policy of open admissions in 1982. It is thus no accident, assuming that this situation persists more or less unchanged into the new millennium, that, in the space of the university as described in *Unimportance*, the student residence is the locus of maximum investment, socially, politically, and psychically. At one level, this is typical: the division, in South Africa, between town- and hostel-dweller, produced by the migrant labor system, but in this case also by the particular geographical location and admissions policy of the university. The division, which, at UWC, is broadly a division between African and Coloured students,<sup>23</sup> does not disappear with the naming of the residence buildings after Coloured, African, and White struggle heroes. A reduction in the apartheid government’s subsidies in reaction to UWC’s open admissions policy led to a fiscal crisis and the raising of fees by the university administration, resulting in the exclusion of students unable to pay, which in turn led to protests, including a series of class boycotts in 1992. Under the leadership of African students, and broadly opposed by Coloured students, despite boycott having been used as a strategy in the 1960s and 1970s against the white-dominated university administration of those days, the boycotts further deepened racial divisions on campus.<sup>24</sup>

20 “Nie-rassige, demokratiese Suid-Afrika die doel, sê Jakes Gerwel” [“Non-racial, Democratic South Africa the Goal, says Jakes Gerwel”], *Die Suid-Afrikaan* [October 1989, supplement]: 9. My translation. Embedded phrase in English in the original. On this point, see Gregory M. Anderson, *Building a People’s University in South Africa: Race, Compensatory Education, and the Limits of Democratic Reform* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 66–67.

21 Lalu, “Constituting Community at the Intellectual Home of the Left,” 113.

22 I draw in the next paragraph on the analysis provided by Anderson, *Building a People’s University in South Africa*, 58–82.

23 On this question, also see Siphon S. Maseko, “Student Power, Action and Problems: A Case Study of UWC SRC, 1981–92,” *Transformation* 24 (1994): 81.

24 The decision in 1991 by the university to make English its “formal academic language” also contributed to divisions between Coloured students, many of whom spoke Afrikaans as their mother tongue, and African students, most of whom spoke neither Afrikaans nor English as their first language. I am grateful to Jane Taylor for alerting me to this point. For a sense of the complexities of how UWC’s language policy reshaped racial divisions, see Anderson, *Building a People’s University in South Africa*, 164–69.



Mgqolozana's *Unimportance*, insofar as it is aligned with Zizi's perspective, depicts Coloureds as controlling the upper levels of university administration, and Africans as dominating student politics.<sup>25</sup> This depiction may be broadly accurate in fact, given what is known about UWC, and, although Zizi's interactions with university administrators are by no means confrontational, it may also serve the political need for a clearly defined adversary, especially in contemporary politics in the Western Cape, where the African National Congress was in power from 2003 to 2009 before the Democratic Alliance began its current period of dominance. Whatever its motivation, when Zizi's speech highlights UWC's founding as an "apartheid university" for Coloureds, without mentioning subsequent changes in its orientation, including a questioning of its act of foundation, it oversimplifies the history that has made it distinctive among South African universities, and continues to complicate any assessment of its achievements.

A reference to the past automatically provides criteria for decisions in the present, even as that reference draws on current criteria. But there is a nagging suspicion that the spatial anomaly noted by the critical eye is not explicable by them, or at least not convincingly, because the narrative to which they give rise may not be accurate.

The years 2015 and 2016 saw the rise of the South African campus movements #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FeesMustFall (#FMF). Emerging at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, respectively, they soon spread to other universities, gaining differing degrees of support and influence.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the SRCs, and the existing student political organizations from whom many of their participants came, they were loose in structure and leaderless after the style of Occupy Wall Street and similar movements.<sup>27</sup> For mobilization and publicity, they employed social media in distinctive ways. The actions of participants in the movements were at times violent, notably in the destruction of university buildings, but on occasion also included intimidation and assault.<sup>28</sup> Some justified the violence by referring to the writings of Frantz Fanon.<sup>29</sup>

25 As Gerwel noted in a 1989 interview, African students had begun to play a leading role in student politics at UWC by the end of the 1980s: "In our SRC . . . nine out of the eleven are African students [*African-studente*]. This is a potentially very significant development, this manifestation of African leadership [previous two words in English in the original], especially in the Western Cape. On the other hand, the question remains: Is it a sort of abdication on the part of brown activists?" "Nie-rassige, demokratiese Suid-Afrika die doel," 9. My translation.

26 Some have questioned the durability of #FMF as a "movement"; see, for example, David Everatt, "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants? Successive Generations of Youth Sacrifice in South Africa," in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 135.

27 Catalysts for the emergence of the hashtag movements differed, depending on campus. For an account of the inception of #FMF at UWC as having followed a disputed SRC election result, see the remarks by Tyrone Pretorius, UWC's rector and vice-chancellor, quoted in Jonathan Jansen, *As By Fire: The End of the South African University* (Cape Town, South Africa: Tafelberg, 2017), 110–11.

28 Jansen, *As By Fire*, 208–09. For the view that the students' violence was isolated, or a reaction to the presence on campus of police and private security guards, see Gillian Godsell, Refiloe Lepere, Swankie Mafoko, and Ayabonga Nase, "Documenting the Revolution," in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 115–16.

29 Jansen, *As By Fire*, 79–80; Susan Booysen, "Two Weeks in October: Changing Governance in South Africa," in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 33, 46.

*Unimportance* was published the year before these movements emerged, and, in fact, appears to be set earlier than 2014, perhaps in the second half of 2007, as the Jacob Zuma-Thabo Mbeki African National Congress (ANC) succession struggle was at its height.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore fascinating how Mgqolozana's novel anticipates some of the profound questions raised about the university in South Africa by #RMF and #FMF,<sup>31</sup> and, in so doing, also helps its readers to place the hashtag movements in historical perspective.

Reading campus space, Zizi divines something about time, producing a historical narrative as a linear succession of causally related events, although he has doubts about the ultimate veracity of the history that he asks his audience to entertain.

#RMF also cast a critical eye toward campus space, turning a monument into a history governed by criteria as hegemonic as those Zizi applies to "I-block." A difference is that Zizi's musings do not mandate change, whereas #RMF was clear about the ekphrasis voicing an imperative: the statue of Rhodes is a sign and synecdoche of colonization; if there was colonization, there must be decolonization; if the university is a colonized space, it must be decolonized. The call is for the reversal of a linear causal sequence. That reversal, so the story goes, began in March 2015, with the throwing of feces at, and removal a few weeks later, by the University of Cape Town, of the statue that it had erected in 1934 in honor of Cecil John Rhodes.<sup>32</sup> But there is a twist in how this reversal gives rise to "history." When criteria are applied retrospectively, "colonization" and "colonialism" are given meanings dependent on what policies and actions are styled as "decolonizing" for those who advocate and strive to define them. The danger is that, even if what is being advocated is just, the history that ensues may turn out to be flawed or false.

After #RMF, according to the restricted chronology of the first draft of history, came #FMF. At one level, this was simply a verbal repetition, a play of hashtag witticism that would produce other "MustFall"s in 2015 and 2016,<sup>33</sup> urging the coinage of the new political terms *Fallism* and *Fallist* so that the flux of ideas and events could be given a name. At another level, however, the meaning of *fall* changed from being a spatial metaphor (applied to another metaphor: *Rhodes*) with a mandated finality, to a spatial metaphor applied to change according to a measurable periodicity.<sup>34</sup> In other words, as "Rhodes" gave way to "fees," linearity gave way to cyclicity.

30 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 58.

31 Mgqolozana has called himself a "Rhodes Must Fallist." See Kwanele Sosibo, "Thando Mgqolozana—I'm Not Going to Wake up to a Decolonised SA," *Mail & Guardian*, June 19, 2015. <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-06-19-thando-mgqolozana-im-not-going-to-wake-up-to-a-decolonised-sa>.

32 Jansen, *As By Fire*, 47.

33 "#FMF was about a mimetic politics." See Vishwas Satgar, "Bringing Class Back In: Against Outsourcing During #FeesMustFall at Wits," in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 217.

34 Although identifying a "strategy of metaphorical campaigning," which he regards as a signal contribution of #RMF and #FMF to "activism and mobilisation," Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh does not draw a clear distinction between the metaphors; Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh, "The Game's the Same: 'MustFall' Moves to Euro-America," in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 83.



Much debate has occurred as to the relationship between #RMF and #FMF. We are probably beyond the simplistic idea that #FMF developed out of #RMF, based on the fact that #RMF was chronologically first in the restricted timespan of 2015–2016. More seasoned commentators point to the fact that, at the campuses that *Unimportance* refers to as “apartheid universities,” protests against fee increases and the financial exclusion of students long predated 2015.<sup>35</sup> At UWC, as we have observed, they date back to the late 1980s. An *annual* occurrence, they assume a *cyclicity*, and even a *seasonality*.<sup>36</sup> This cyclicity is now understood as a general feature of the campus movements.<sup>37</sup>

For more astute political analysts, the question then becomes: At what point do events that occur with this cyclical regularity move off at a tangent—which then has the linear effect of “making history” by, for example, confronting neoliberal tendencies in ANC governance? These effects are at the heart of the published academic debate about #FMF.<sup>38</sup> Answers include: forcing President Zuma to declare a 0 percent fee increase in October 2015; an increase in government subsidy for higher education; successful opposition to outsourcing of campus support staffing, and so forth. There is a degree of consensus among the participants as to what kind of outcomes need to be monitored and measured. And comparisons are drawn with the politics of student uprisings in North Africa and other sub-Saharan African countries.<sup>39</sup>

I would maintain, however, that the temporality of the events has not been correctly analyzed in terms of the relationship between a linear time of cause and effect, and a cyclical time of periodicity. The weight falls for analysts on the tangent, when it is the circle itself that, like a planet, provides, at certain points, the energy needed for the tangent to overcome the force of gravity that would lead, otherwise, to simple periodic repetition.

It is the energy of the cyclicity, of the periodicity, that I wish to explore. If there is a *space* that is distinctly *of the university*, then that space is “com-possible” with this cyclical time. It is what has the potential for making the space of the university dynamic.<sup>40</sup>

*Unimportance* anticipates the terms and problems of on-the-fly and after-the-fact analyses of #RMF and #FMF. As a narrative, the novel has a circular structure; it

35 See Booyesen, “Introduction,” in *Fees Must Fall*, 3; Gillian Godsell and Rekgotsofetse Chikane, “The Roots of the Revolution,” in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booyesen, 60; Lynn Hewlett, Nomagugu Mukadah, Koffi Kouakou, and Horácio Zandamela, “Learning from Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booyesen, 160–61.

36 Jansen, *As By Fire*, xvii, 119.

37 Booyesen, “Introduction,” *Fees Must Fall*, 19.

38 See Booyesen, ed., *Fees Must Fall*.

39 See Hewlett, et al., “Learning from Student Protests.” Also see William Gumede, “Unfinished Revolutions: The North African Uprisings and Notes on South Africa,” in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booyesen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 148–68, 169–90.

40 Writing insightfully that “[s]tudent direct action has benefited from their being more centrally positioned than their community-member counterparts,” Susan Booyesen employs a different explanatory metaphor. See “Two Weeks in October,” 46.

begins near the “end,” and, through a series of analepses, relating to a three-week period leading up to the time of narration, and to earlier events, on campus as well as from Zizi’s childhood and Pamodi’s youth and early adulthood, circles back to its beginning. A few pages from the end, we learn that the narrative we have been reading is, in fact, the speech—unusually long, to be sure—that Zizi has just given as candidate for SRC president.

As *Unimportance* informs us, at South African universities, the SRC has a statutory role, underwritten by national legislation, in university decision-making,<sup>41</sup> along with the university administration, senate, council, and other executive bodies. It is therefore a key site of party-political organization and campaigning—for students, as well as by academics seeking election to university bodies on which SRC members have a vote.<sup>42</sup> Mgqolozana himself twice served on the executive committee of the South African Students Congress and on the SRC at UWC,<sup>43</sup> where he studied nursing.<sup>44</sup>

The main cyclical process described in the novel are the SRC elections, which take place each year. The novel associates them with the coming of spring, an association reinforced by the gift from the outgoing SRC president to Zizi of the poetry anthology, *Seasons Come to Pass*.<sup>45</sup> The title of this anthology, designed for students, comes from a phrase taken from a short poem by Mongane Serote, “For Don M. –Banned,” which was also the source for the title of André Brink’s 1979 novel, *A Dry White Season*.<sup>46</sup> Addressing “Don M.”—the Black Consciousness poet Don Mattera, who was subject to a banning order from 1973 to 1982—the poet-speaker concludes: “it is a dry white season/ but seasons come to pass,”<sup>47</sup> in other words that, just as the winter, a cold and

41 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 59.

42 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 94. It should be noted, however, that campus protests of the early 2000s, for example, against fees increases and financial exclusion, have been attributed, in part, to the failure of SRCs, which are mandated by the 1997 Higher Education Act to work with university administration and governing bodies to resolve these issues, due to a “clear discontinuity between the deliberative democracy imposed by the 1997 HE Act and the concept of representative democracy that previously underpinned reliance on mass meetings.” See Charlton Koen, Mlungisi Cele, and Arial Libhaber, “Student Activism and Student Exclusions in South Africa,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 26 (2006): 409. With #FMF, in 2015–16, there was, likewise, on several campuses a questioning of the representativeness of the SRC; see, for example, remarks by Max Price, vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, quoted in Jansen, *As By Fire*, 33.

43 Percy Zvomuya, “Thando Mgqolozana,” in “200 Young South Africans: Arts and Culture,” *Mail & Guardian*, June 14, 2010. <https://mg.co.za/article/2010-06-14-200-young-south-africans-arts-and-culture>.

44 As a researcher at the Human Sciences Research Council, Mgqolozana co-authored studies of the nursing profession. See Mignonne Breier, Angélique Wildschut, and Thando Mgqolozana, *Nursing in a New Era: The Profession and Education of Nurses in South Africa* (Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press, 2009); “Nurses,” in *Skills Shortages in South Africa: Case Studies of Key Professions*, eds. Johan Erasmus and Mignonne Breier (Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press, 2009), 132–51.

45 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 141.

46 André P. Brink, *A Dry White Season* (London: W. H. Allen, 1979).

47 Mongane Serote, “For Don M. –Banned,” in *Seasons Come to Pass: A Poetry Anthology for Southern African Students*, eds. Es’kia Mphahlele and Helen Moffett (Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford University Press, 1994), 237. “Under the terms of the banning order, Mattera’s career as a journalist was strictly curtailed: he could no longer work as a reporter on the *Johannesburg Star*, only as a sub-editor. He was not allowed to publish in South Africa or send his work abroad for publication. His spoken words and opinions could not be quoted by others. His private life was circumscribed by police controls, and he was forbidden to attend meetings.” In this context, Serote’s poem may be read as “quoting” Mattera, whose

dry season in much of the country's interior, will pass, white rule will someday come to an end. The election about to be held in *Unimportance*, however, takes place outside of the ordinary cycle.

Other significant cyclical processes described in the novel are the alternation between term-time and vacation-time,<sup>48</sup> and the annual pleas for readmission, by, and on behalf of, failing students—which emerges in one of the longer episodes in the book.<sup>49</sup> The annual negotiations by the SRC to have the university admit or readmit students who don't have money to pay their fees are mentioned briefly.<sup>50</sup> *Unimportance* does not, however, describe the customary annual negotiations between SRCs and university administrations to set fee increases, a cyclical process that drew considerable attention in 2015–2016.<sup>51</sup>

*Unimportance* is troubled by repetition, and by the question of how a cycle might be broken: a cycle of partner-violence, in Zizi's own case, and how breaking it, and breaking with it, assumes greater and greater importance. The telling of it, however, uncovers a secret from the past—from the “homeland”—as if the players are locked into a painful pattern of repetition with which leaving home does not break.<sup>52</sup> We find a similar scenario in another notable post-apartheid South African campus novel, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001)—in which rivalries and suspicions originating in the rural heartland continue to play out in the city and on campus, in South Africa as well as overseas.<sup>53</sup> If the South African narrative genre par excellence used to be the “Jim Comes to Joburg” story, in which the country bumpkin is corrupted by the city, it now appears to have been displaced by the story of somebody who has come to town being haunted by the unfinished business of the rural homestead, village, or township. Like *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Unimportance* views truth, and its disclosure, as the way to end an injurious cycle of repetition.

Yet there is also the sense that, even if cyclicity can mean the repetition of violence when things are kept secret—or when euphemism conceals fact, as in Mpe's masterpiece—the cycle of the university year has, at key points, the energy to launch acts and events at a tangent—to “make history,” in other words, in a linear fashion.

poetry includes figures of seasonal rebirth; for example: “The sun has died, the sun had died/ the sun has died/ But the sun will rise again/ And with it shall rise the dreams/ Of men and the hopes of children/ For this is a law winter carried out/ Since the beginning of time.” Don Mattera's interview with Essop Patel can be found in Don Mattera, “Out of the Twilight,” *Index on Censorship* 12.3 (1983): 7–10.

48 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 31.

49 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 88–105.

50 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 101. On negotiations with students on payment of fees, and on readmission after academic failure, also see Jansen, *As By Fire*, 27–28, 38–40; Anderson, *Building a People's University in South Africa*, 65; Koen, Cele, and Libhaber, “Student Activism and Student Exclusions in South Africa,” 409.

51 For a vivid account, see Patrick FitzGerald and Oliver Seale, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: University Management and the #FeesMustFall Campaign,” in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 248–51. Also see comments by Max Price, quoted in Jansen, *As By Fire*, 32.

52 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 108–15; see also 38.

53 Phaswane Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of Natal Press, 2001). Other notable post-apartheid South African campus fictions include Mpe's posthumously published *Brooding Clouds* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008); Niq Mhlongo, *Dog Eat Dog* (Cape Town, South Africa: Kwela, 2004) and *After Tears* (Cape Town, South Africa: Kwela, 2007); and J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Viking, 1999).

*Unimportance* consequently agonizes about how, having been students, young men and women will conduct themselves following graduation—or after leaving before graduating, as Steve Biko did.<sup>54</sup> In one version, the tangent launches the graduate into an ambiguous trajectory of upward mobility: “when one graduates [one] can afford to run away from home forever. It seems as though successfully escaping from a township is an accomplishment. You’ve made it if you’ve run as far away from yourself as it is possible.”<sup>55</sup>

“[W]e are youth in transition,” Zizi observes, “we are an emerging elite, aspiring bourgeoisie—that’s why we’re at university.”<sup>56</sup>

In *Unimportance*, the trajectory of upward mobility can, however, circle back in aberrant fashion—the planet’s force of gravity reasserting itself, as it were—as certain graduates return, not to get a degree or diploma, but to capitalize on their ties to the university. The wealthy “twins who had graduated in the nineties” lurk about campus trying to corrupt the tender process: “They were the self-indulgent ex-comrades who found it impossible to outgrow the campus, even with their elephant-size pockets as businessmen in the ‘real world.’ . . . They had been counting on Sindane [Zizi’s chief political rival] to be elected Chair, and later President of the SRC, so that they would get the student service tenders for their businesses. . . . They are always trying to infiltrate our ranks. On any random evening, you could find their BMW X5 parked outside Chris Hani, and there’d be fly girls buzzing around it.”<sup>57</sup> The juxtaposition of a luxury SUV and the name of the assassinated leader of the South African Communist Party, after whom this student residence is named, is supposed to be jarring. The “twins” are out of place.

Different, and more favorable, outcomes are alluded to briefly, such as the fact that the outgoing SRC president has been “recruited by the Institute for Democracy and Governance”—which is why the election is taking place out of its regular cycle.<sup>58</sup> More generally, the idea of a trajectory taking students along different paths emerges in Zizi’s account of how “[t]ogether with the Youth League, the Young Communists and the Congress of the Pupils, our organization forms the Mass Youth Alliance of the Mass Democratic Movement as led by the mother body. If the Youth League is sons and daughters, we are the bastards.”<sup>59</sup> Zizi’s organization is not considered dependable

54 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 92. According to Donald Woods, “In 1966 [Steve Biko] enrolled as a student at the University of Natal to study medicine, but after initial academic success became so involved in politics that his grades suffered and he was barred from further study. By this time, however, he was an acknowledged leader in several bodies he had founded or had helped to found, including the South African Students Organization (SASO) and the Black Community Programs, and became a fulltime organizer for these bodies, spreading the creed of the Black Consciousness movement he had launched, which had been the motivating philosophy behind the formation of these associations. Shortly thereafter, he had been banned and restricted to the King William’s Town area.” See Donald Woods, *Biko* (New York: Paddington, 1978), 49.

55 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 31.

56 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 54.

57 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 70–71; cf. 138–39. The renewal of the contract for managing The Barn, a popular campus bar, is also subject to political machinations linked to the SRC elections; Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 67. For further examples of how student politics can be corrupted by business interests linked to the competition for tenders, see Jansen, *As By Fire*, 100–103.

58 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 140.

59 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 57. The phrase “mother body” is typically applied to the ANC as a national or provincial political party. The alliance described by Zizi broadly reflects the structure of the

because “we reserve the right to criticise the mother body, our membership does not *have* to join or vote for the mother body; and finally, because our constituency grows up and becomes labour force for which we cannot account.”<sup>60</sup> Reserving the right to criticize, to withhold one’s vote, and to decline to account to the party, are assertions of democratic right. It is telling that the former SRC president has joined, presumably, a think tank with *Democracy* in its name, just as Zizi refers to a “Mass Democratic Movement,” which in the late 1980s was an alliance between the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, but which in the new millennium can probably be read as a placeholder for a set of ideas, among which is a reserve in relation to a future “for which we cannot account.”

Although its chief emphasis is on elections, and the contest between the tendencies within Zizi’s organization, read along with the ensuing published commentary the events of 2015–2016, *Unimportance* brings into relief how on those events, especially the emergence of #FMF, emerged at a cyclical node of energy specific to South African universities, and of greater force at some than at others—namely the annual fees negotiations and protests over fees and the financial exclusion of students.

The space of the university—as Zizi’s attempt to read it shows—not only reveals anomalies, but misleads the critical eye by making it look for criteria in stories about the past that, although the criteria informing them are hegemonic, are not necessarily true; or, if they are, in some measure, true, they are not necessarily relevant. Linear cause and effect prove absurd, especially when the eye turns from the past toward an unaccountable future. The self-certainty of the “man who says ‘I’” comes into question. And instead of insisting on a knowable linear cause and effect, the power of repetition is registered and space is raised to another level—the elided “I” beset by a secret that “he” is only gradually able to acknowledge. This enters into a cyclicity at the level of external events—truth-telling also has its season—which gives us insight into #RMF and #FMF by showing us how it is the very space of the university that, by being activated and dynamized (or not) at specific nodes in a temporal cycle that is typically annual, contains the possibility—not always realized—of historical effects. Time, and time again—let this be shorthand for the possibility.

But there is another element to consider—the cyclicity, or periodicity, of the fiscus, and of banks. These entities have no time—excuse the pun—for criteria relating to, or applied to, the past. They look to future return, or at least a manageable rate of future loss. Student loans and resulting debt are, as *Unimportance* emphasizes, structured as a spreading of risk against the future: “What you definitely come out with is heavy financial debt, so that when you eventually qualify and get employment, for a decade you are the least credit-worthy candidate.”<sup>61</sup>

ANC’s Progressive Youth Alliance, which is made up of the ANC Youth League, the Young Communist League, the Congress of South African Students, the South African Students Congress, and other organizations. Whereas the Congress of South African Students represents secondary school students, the South African Students Congress represents students in higher education. *Unimportance*, however, describes “a vicious campaign at the national level of the mother body to launch official branches of the Youth League on campuses to replace us.” In the novel, this “New Tendency is led by Sindane,” Zizi’s political rival; Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 58. The “Azanians” are probably PASMA (Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania); Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 137.

60 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 57.

61 Mgqolozana, *Unimportance*, 54–55. Also see Jansen, *As By Fire*, 41.



South African student loans and bursaries are administered under the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). It was observed in the wake of 2015–2016 that NSFAS “can only “mobilise [the close to R10 billion a year that it needs] . . . from the private sector [*sic*], from development finance institutions such as PIC [Public Investment Corporation], Development Bank [of Southern Africa] and so on, if there is a yield for those who put money in; they don’t want to put money into a bottomless pit. There needs to be some recycling of that fund.”<sup>62</sup> It is clear from this formulation how a cyclical concept of investment and return is powerfully operative.

A public asset manager, the PIC invests money from state-employee pension funds, unemployment insurance funds, and other funds, whereas the DBSA invests state funds in infrastructure and development projects, including higher education.<sup>63</sup> Before recent policy changes, fees were paid with money from student bursaries and loans, for those who qualified for them,<sup>64</sup> and, at a few institutions, partly also out of university funds.<sup>65</sup> #FMF—which demands free education for all students—has, in this light, been a rebellion against what has increasingly come to be viewed, from the perspective of many students and their families, as a spreading of risk that is inequitable. If the periodic payment of fees would have been unsustainable without borrowing, how should the periodic repayment of a loan following graduation be any more sustainable in a climate of diminishing job prospects that, as *Unimportance* portrays it, makes repayment long and onerous? The government has now replaced student loans with grants for means-eligible university and technical vocational education and training (TVET) college students,<sup>66</sup> a decision that keeps South African higher education within a cyclical logic of debt—even if it is now not the student but the state that has become the debtor.<sup>67</sup>

62 Ihron van Rensburg, vice-chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, quoted in Jansen, *As By Fire*, 35.

63 See the websites for the Public Investment Corporation at <http://www.pic.gov.za/> and the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) at <https://www.dbsa.org/EN/Pages/default.aspx>.

64 Hence the predicament of the “missing middle.” “The ‘missing middle’ is a term used during the fees protests to refer to students whose parental income is above the then NSFAS ceiling of R120 000 to qualify for government bursaries and loans, but still low enough to cause these students financial stress during their studies. Put differently, students in the missing middle are neither poor enough to qualify for financial support nor wealthy enough to pay for their own studies.” See Jansen, *As By Fire*, 256 n.1. See also remarks by Max Price, in Jansen, *As By Fire*, 32–33.

65 See Jansen, *As By Fire*, 32–33, 43–44.

66 “‘What has changed is that government will support poor and working-class students through an expanded bursary scheme, which replaces the previous loan and partial bursary scheme,’ said [Minister of Education Naledi Pandor]. Students entering universities or TVET colleges for the first time will not be expected to pay back their bursaries, but: ‘They will be expected to meet certain conditions and expectations, including those relating to satisfactory academic performance and service conditions.’ She said the exact details of this were still being finalised. . . . The full cost of study of the bursary scheme . . . is being phased in from 2018, starting with first-time entry students from families with a gross combined annual income of up to R350 000. ‘All continuing existing NSFAS-funded university students will receive their funding in 2018 and for the completion of their studies as grants rather than as loans.’” See Jan Gerber, “Here’s How Many Billions Government Has Unlocked for Free Higher Education,” *News24*, April 24, 2018. <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/government-unlocks-billions-more-for-free-higher-education-20180424>.

67 For an argument in favor of increasing state borrowing, and for lowering interest rates in order to increase investment in social spending, see Patrick Bond, “To Win Free Education, Fossilised



Whoever built it, the university—the space of the university, you could even say its halls and dormitories and libraries and common rooms—is wise to these economics, even if the sojourners within its walls are led to believe that study of the past, and of origins, will enlighten and provide criteria—and it is therefore the place to come to comprehend the periodicity and cyclicity that are sometimes elided in political analysis in favor of the linear—back- and forward, rise and fall. But the latter can also be conceived as an alternation.

Thando Mgqolozana's *Unimportance* reminds us that the cycle is the time of democracy—the SRC election, and also the popular uprising in its season and seasonality.<sup>68</sup> As with the fees protests of the past, with #FEMF the cycles of democracy and debt touch. Tangent becomes cycle again, as the making of history in the form of a frozen fee increase and a new government grant scheme, which afford access for greater numbers of students to higher education, spins out into a new cycle of sovereign debt—meaning that, with the promise of democracy,<sup>69</sup> without which there is no tomorrow—and not just for the university—also comes the danger that, with another turn of the cycle,<sup>70</sup> what will have been gained will one day be lost.

Neoliberalism Must Fall,” in *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*, ed. Susan Booysen (Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2016), 207–09.

68 For a brief discussion of #FEMF and democratization, comparing direct action with voting, see Booysen, “Two Weeks in October,” 45–47.

69 Read the present essay as a counterpart to my “Democracy in the Paranoid Style,” paper given at the Modern Language Association annual meeting, New York, New York on January 7, 2018.

70 “The cutbacks in funding for higher education driven by SAPs and government compliance with them translated into the end of the free fees era in many countries, affecting the less wealthy students. This . . . had severe implications for educational conditions and access.” See Hewlett, et al., “Learning from Student Protests,” 155.