Decolonising Space and the Self
A Post-Colonial Reading of Activism on Statues

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Abstract This article discusses recent activism on public statues from a post-colonial perspective. First, it outlines a post-colonial concern with the notion of subaltern space, focusing on the relation of space-making to subjectivation. Then, it analyses distinct theoretical insights coming from post-colonial literature that deal with the theme of political space and resistance, addressing in particular the thought of Mbembe, hooks, and Ahmed. Finally, it discusses activism over colonial statues in light of this theoretical approach, interpreting activism on statues as a decolonial intervention that directly addresses questions of representation and democracy.

Keywords Decolonisation. Political space. Post-colonial studies. Statues. Subalternity.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Subaltern Space. – 3 Post-Colonial Perspectives on Political Space. – 4 White Entrapment and the Decolonisation of Space. – 5 Decolonising Statues. – 6 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

This article discusses activism performed in and over public space in the context of battles over decolonisation and memory. The main research question addressed by this article concerns the proper interpretation of activism on colonial statues, in the light of which it is possible to interpret with due attention the recent phenomena of activism on statues. In light of recent, very much discussed events where public statues and monuments have been the object of activism, being damaged, vandalised or straightly toppled down, such as the removal of the statue of Rhodes in South Africa in 2015,[1] the attempts to do the same in Oxford,[2] or the colouring in pink of the statue of Montanelli in Milan in 2019,[3] important questions have been raised and dis-

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[1]   Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was the target of a huge campaign known as *Rhodes Must Fall*, involving students, teachers, and other activists, that asked for the removal of the statue from the university campus, claiming that Rhodes (1853-1902), founder of De Beers mining company in South Africa and conqueror of a territory in southern Africa, that eventually was called Rhodesia after his name, was symbol of southern African colonisation, racism, and slavery. The campaign succeeded in having the statue removed by the university council on 9 April 2015, at the presence of many people cheering and jumping on the plinth in celebration (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32236922). However, this is not the only South African statue that has been object of such intervention: activists protested against other statues celebrating colonial men in South Africa, including other statues of Rhodes. For example, a statue of Rhodes was beheaded in Cape Town on 15 July 2020 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53420403). The fact that Rhodes' statue at UCT was removed after a decision taken by the university council, upon the requests expressed by a popular movement, was also seen as a case of co-optation of the movement by the institution, the uplifting of the statue symbolically expressing the co-optation of a popular desire from below. In this sense, the institutional appropriation of the act of removal can be seen as an attempt to maintain a monopoly over the means of violence, just as the latter were sought to be socialised and reappropriated by the people.

[2]   A statue of Rhodes can also be found at Oriel College in Oxford, where Rhodes was a student and donor. In the wake of a campaign similar to that in Cape Town, again under the name of Rhodes Must Fall, that asked for the statue to be removed, Oriel College council decided not to attend to this request, on the basis of the "financial challenges" the removal would require, also arguing that history is not to be censored, but learned and explained. Subsequently, an explanatory plaque was appointed under the statue, yet activists lamented that the plaque "trivializes the pain and suffering Rhodes caused" (https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-58885181).

[3]   During a feminist manifestation in 2019 in Milan, the statue of the Italian journalist Indro Montanelli was coloured in pink (https://www.ilpost.it/2019/03/10/statua-indro-montanelli-imbrattata). A supporter of the fascist regime, Montanelli participated as a volunteer in the colonial conquest of Ethiopia, where he bought and "married" a 12-year-old girl. Years later, when the feminist Elvira Banotti publicly asked him about this underage war "marriage", Montanelli justified himself by claiming that, given their civil, cultural, and moral backwardness, children rape was just not an issue for Ethiopians, while on the other hand he would not have done anything similar in Italy. For a comment on this event, see https://www.dinamopress.it/news/montanelli-colonialismo-italiano-gli-intellettuali-orfani-del-padre/?fbclid=IwAR3B9prIA_2E1XO-oF4kkWd0gJ41Er0tRUx8mTtl4wPhnj_9tU7kJpGvXTE. For a discussion on the Italian debate about statues and public memory, see Por-

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cussed, all over the media as well as in academic discourse: what are statues built for? Who has the right to take decisions over their building and removal, and who has not? What is their meaning and function in public space? Why do statues matter? This article will reflect on major theoretical concerns underlying these kinds of questions, through a specific reflection on colonial and post-colonial space. Indeed, addressing similar questions requires a preliminary analysis, aimed at developing a framework of categories suitable for understanding the phenomenon at stake. The article, therefore, develops such a preliminary analysis, elaborating on the categories that may be used to understand recent activism on colonial statues, while it interrogates the proper interpretation of this phenomenon.

In more detail, the argumentation provided in the course of the article leads to the following main hypothesis: that activism performed in and over public space in post-colonial contexts is best seen as a decolonising intervention, namely, an active intervention aimed at the decolonisation[4] of the space marked by statues. More specifically, un-

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telli 2020. After the manifestation, the city council removed the pink ink from the statue. Subsequently, the statue was painted red once more in 2020 (https://www.money.it/Indro-Montanelli-statua-perche-abbattere-cosa-ha-fatto). The three episodes of activism on statues we just mentioned are just a few examples, not exhaustive, among many. We decided to mention them because of their media relevance and because they all, albeit differently, represent cases of public contestation over colonialism and memory. It should be noted, however, a slight difference that distinguishes the first episode mentioned (relating to South Africa) from the other two (relating to the United Kingdom and Italy, respectively). While the former took place in a formerly colonised country, the others occurred in formerly colonising countries. It is possible to wonder, therefore, if the three cases share the same project of 'decolonisation', given that the second ones do not concern the kind of colonial occupation and structuring of space we will discuss later in the article. However, it is possible to argue that all the cases listed aim at the removal of a colonial symbol from a space that has been deeply structured by colonialism, whether in a colonising or colonised country: therefore, they all participate in a decolonising project and a memory-questioning operation, albeit situated in specific historical circumstances. Moreover, this kind of decolonising intervention on colonial statues directly addresses the racial logics that still inform the post-colonial world in all its parts, affecting, for example, how migrants perceive public space in formerly colonising countries.

4 The post-colonial and the decolonial perspective are not the same. The latter was also developed in critical response to the former, as post-colonial studies have been object to several charges, such as: firstly, to focus only on the Indian subcontinent and Africa, lacking to theorise colonialism and its aftermaths in Latin America; secondly, to sustain the view that colonialism is over, given the ambiguity of the particle "post-" it adopts, therefore lacking a serious political commitment to fight coloniality; thirdly, to formulate too complicated and sterile theoretical elaborations, concentrating too strictly on issues of culture and representation, failing to address the materiality of oppression, and adopting a post-structuralist, post-modernist tone that dilutes the radicality and efficacy of the writings of its own predecessors, i.e., the first theorists of anti-colonial struggle, such as Fanon and Césaire. Decolonial studies claim to overcome all these lacks, elaborating a comprehensive view of coloniality and the responses to it, namely, decoloniality (Mignolo, Walsh 2018). On the other hand, a response to these charges from a post-colonial perspective has been made, also commenting on several

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derstanding activism on statues as a decolonising intervention implies conceiving statues as symbols that practically affect how space is lived and perceived, both in public memory and in everyday life. In more detail, actions against colonial statues qualify the targeted statues as symbols that, even after processes of formal decolonisation, continue to affect and structure public spaces, impacting on the subjectivation of those who live in and through such spaces. Moreover, these actions are to be interpreted as challenging ongoing processes of memorialisation and celebration of colonial heroes.[5] As the following sections argue, statues symbolically reproduce or maintain the subaltern space created by colonial powers, thus reproducing processes of subalternisation. In order to understand this main point, the article will discuss the construction and use of public space

problems inherent to the decolonial approach (Colpani, Mascat, Smiet 2022). Despite this serious theoretical divergence, in this article we do not distinguish too strictly between the two currents, rather stressing their common concern with issues of colonisation, anticolonialism, and the problematic afterlives of the colonial regimes. Moreover, most of the authors we will discuss do not strictly fall under any of the two labels, yet they think extensively about colonialism, racism, decolonisation, and struggle. We are more interested in the productiveness of the debate that has been going on between the two currents, rather than on their mere opposition. This is not to ignore the divergences among the authors we discuss, but rather to point to their convergence in delineating a perspective on space and the intervention on statues, that seriously addresses questions of colonialism and anti-colonialism.

[5]   The issue of activism targeted at colonial statues must also be addressed in the light of a recent historiographic debate concerning colonial heroes and their legacy in postcolonial societies. A specific research field on this topic has been developed, namely that of heroic and celebrity studies in imperial contexts: see for example MacKenzie 1992; Bernault 2010; Jones et al. 2017; Sèbe 2019; Von Tunzelmann 2021. The field is critically concerned with the public memory of heroic figures of colonialism and imperialism in post-colonial societies, so as to interrogate the complex relationship between the former metropolises and the former colonies, as to their mutual remembrance of such figures, in a way that directly involves cultural as well as political processes (Bernault 2010; Jones et al. 2017). This historiographic field has been highlighting the crucial role of monuments and statues in providing "ways in which older imperial fantasies survived the decolonization era" (Bernault 2010, 373). This was done by historically addressing the role of public symbols in giving shape to the materiality of politics as well as of everyday life. More specifically, a recent re-evaluation of colonial figures in former colonies has been highlighted, which overcomes the anti-colonial repudiation of such men, pointing to the emergence of new features of post-colonial nation-building that seriously challenge the strong anti-colonial character of post-colonial national narratives (Sèbe 2019). As it were, the new erection of monuments celebrating colonial figures in the ex-colonies "dwarfs the previous [...] monuments dedicated to the history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle" (Bernault 2010, 381). In response to this phenomenon, the article seeks to address activism from below as a de- or anti-colonial intervention that actively responds to such reappraisal of colonial memory, ambiguously and recently undertaken by post-colonial nations, as the Rhodes Must Fall movement for example shows. Although this article does not directly contribute to the historiographic debate concerning this topic, it addresses the general issue of the relevance of monumentalising processes and memorialisation of colonial figures in postcolonial societies, by way of providing a theoretical analysis of decolonial interventions that challenge these processes from below.

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in contexts of colonisation and decolonisation, and the role of symbols in giving shape to the materiality of everyday life in such contexts, based on the assumption that "architecture and urban forms are key players in definitions of culture and identity" in (post-)colonial situations (Çelik 1997, 1).

Discussing the main hypothesis on activism as a decolonising intervention, the article is structured as follows: first, a nexus between the construction of subaltern space and the construction of a subaltern identity will be explored, thus revealing how the decolonisation of space is linked to the decolonisation of the self (§ 2). A post-colonial insight on political space reveals it both as an instrument of colonisation and subjugation, and a dimension actively reworked and acted upon for resistance and struggle. In the following sections, this twofold dimension of post-colonial space will be explored to understand what decolonial activism on statues does. The peculiarity of the organisation and structuring of space under colonial rule, as well as the possibility of resisting it, will be highlighted (§ 3). On this basis, the article discusses the necessity to articulate relevant strategies to decolonise space (§ 4). Subsequently, it will be shown how the actions targeting statues represent relevant instances of similar strategies (§ 5), thus showing that activism involving statues is to be conceived, in line with the hypothesis introduced above, as a decolonising intervention.

Carefully interrogating the post-colonial space will therefore enable us to tackle the issue of activism on statues and interpret it from a post-colonial perspective as a decolonising intervention. In more detail, the question of post-colonial space will be discussed in relation to authors such as Mbembe, Ahmed, and hooks.

2 Subaltern Space

In order to discuss the aforementioned questions on statues and symbols, it is important to theoretically address the relationship between space and subalternity, focusing on the construction of subaltern spaces and subaltern selves in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This focus will allow us to develop a specific perspective on activism over statues in post-colonial contexts. From this perspective, the article interprets subalternity as a distinct feature of colonisation. While addressing the construction of subaltern spaces, space is to be analysed as an instrument of colonial subalternisation and, as a consequence, subaltern experiences of public space are to be put in due light. From this point of view, it is important to acknowledge how urban studies have argued that "architecture and urbanism in the colonial context should [...] be viewed among the practices that make up the colonial discourse" (Çelik 1997, 6).

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As a starting point, it is important to consider conceptually subaltern spaces, with reference to distinct notions of 'subalternity' that have been deployed within the field of post-colonial studies. The original formulation of the category of subalternity was provided by Gramsci (1975), who used it as a historically determined category to designate the oppressed classes, a subordinate social position within a hierarchy and, therefore, a relational category, since subalternity is always in relation to, and opposed to, hegemony. Secondly, the category 'subaltern' met an important development, as it was adopted by the Subaltern Studies collective, that applied it to the reality of post-colonial India:[6] the Subaltern Studies project adopted subalternity as a historiographic category capable of uncovering the peasants' role in the Indian struggle for independence from the British domain and, more generally, to address figures and groups that are not easily accessible through official records and archives, escaping standard representation (Guha, Spivak 1988; Chaturvedi 2000).[7] As Guha put it, the subaltern is:

> the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. (Guha, Spivak 1988, vii)

Moreover, Spivak expanded on the notion of subalternity with reference to the Subaltern Studies project, to which she contributed (Guha, Spivak 1988; 2005) but from which she also departed, as "a sometime member" of the group, according to her own statement (Spivak 2000, 327). In fact, Spivak developed a rather different theoretical conceptualisation of the subaltern, a feminist one, most notably in her ground-breaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), the first edition of which, admittedly, was written in 1983, before Spivak became aware of the work of the Subaltern Studies group, and which was later modified after her encounter with Guha and other subalternists.[8] In this text, Spivak questioned the very possibility that the Indian subaltern woman, caught within patriarchy and development, can actually speak her voice and be heard, especially as the Western left-wing intellectuals assume her to do so without problematising this possibility, falling into the risk of ventriloquising the subaltern, so that she always invariably fails representation. Spivak's connota-

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6 However, it should be noted that the Subaltern Studies elaboration on subalternity has been criticised for misunderstanding the notion of the subaltern provided by Gramsci (Green 2002).

7 Moreover, the project of the Subaltern Studies collective has been expanded and adapted to other post-colonial contexts, most notably making the case for a Latin American Subaltern Studies project (Rodriguez 2001; Coronil 2000).

8 https://www.uctv.tv/search-details.aspx?showID=8840.

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tion of the subaltern woman changed over time, as the first elaboration of the subaltern woman in the above-mentioned text shifted towards slightly different considerations in more recent interventions, where the subaltern woman is discussed as a target of new modalities of exploitation, such as biopiracy and genetic engineering (Spivak 1999; 2000). In the course of this shift, the main point of Spivak's intervention on the subaltern turned to the notion of "learning to learn from the subaltern", rather than studying the subaltern as someone who has been cut off the lines of social mobility.[9] It should be noted, however, the continuous spatial underpinning of the notion of the subaltern by Spivak herself throughout this reorganisation. If in her early writings, Spivak characterised the subaltern woman as occupying a space of radical alterity and heterogeneity (1988; 1996a; 1999) and "the name for a space of difference",[10] in a later text she described the subaltern as a diasporic figure, "displaced to the global political sphere" (2000, 332) and, more recently again, a "position without identity" (2013, 9) and "an absence from the structures of the state" (11). All these different connotations share a spatial marking of the subaltern, whose position and location or, rather, whose aporetic non-place is highlighted,[11] either because it marks a space of difference, or because it constitutes an absence within state structures, or because it describes a diasporic dislocation (Spivak 1996b).

Postcolonial reflection on subalternity, which has historically used this category to discuss colonisation and its structures, as well as resistance to them, is a most relevant one, in fact, essential to grasp current interventions in post-colonial spaces. However, post-colonial studies have also been accused of conflating resistance and subalternity too simply (Mbembe 2021, 126), thus failing to address lack of agency and difficulty to resist in contexts of colonisation. In fact, Spivak's notion of the subaltern woman problematises exactly this absence of agency and speech in the subaltern. Notwithstanding this critical appraisal, the notion of subalternity is quite useful in identifying both the historical construction of a category of oppressed and the emergence of resistance and upheaval. At the same time, the notion that the subaltern escapes representation is quite a compelling one, and poses serious challenges to decolonial activism, as we shall see later.

The post-colonial theoretical formulations on subalternity that we just mentioned also laid the foundation for a body of geographical work that has been exploring the conceptual couple 'space and sub-

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9   https://www.uctv.tv/search–details.aspx?showID=8840.

10   https://www.uctv.tv/search–details.aspx?showID=8840.

11   For a detailed discussion of Spivak's spatial connotations of the subaltern, and a thought-provoking attempt to rework her aporetic location, see de Jong, Mascat 2016.

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alternity' in contexts of colonialism and post-colonialism. Critical geography uncovered the spatial nature of the concept of 'subalternity', with the aim of translating the historiographic notion of subalternity into a geographic one, thus suggesting that, in fact, "subaltern studies was always already spatial" (Jazeel, Legg 2019, 5) and that "critical engagements with colonialism and its afterlives are always already spatial" (3), as they have always been dealing with problems of space and, moreover, with the question of representation of space. On this basis, the aim of such geographers has been to develop "a rigorously geographical engagement with the concept of subalternity" (3). Critical geography, therefore, has been treating subaltern space as follows:

> subaltern space pertains to issues of subordination and oppression, and their relation to questions of voice, agency, representation, situated knowledge and imagined community. (Clayton 2011, 246)

More specifically, "the task of exploring the spatial invisibilities that power precipitates" (Jazeel, Legg 2019, 6) has been put on the agenda by critical geographers, who have been pursuing this task with reference to a wide array of different contexts and case studies, trying to recover forgotten places and their non-hegemonic representations.[12] Among other things, such studies have been focusing on "the historical significance of place-making on subaltern-making" (27), thus identifying a close connection between the construction of space and that of political identity, albeit in a non-deterministic way. This connection added a specific spatial light on questions of subjectivation, meant as the multifarious and heterogeneous arrange of processes leading to the never-ending formation of the subject, endowed with an inherently spatial dimension. This happens because the formation and transformation of political subjects and identities is possible thanks to spatial experiences and structures. In this sense, the construction and experience of a subaltern space, that power precipitates, and the formation of a subaltern subjectivity are linked to one another. Thus, the spatial construction of subalternised selves is to be carefully investigated, scrutinised, and challenged. A concern with a "subaltern territorialization of space – living it, knowing it, claiming it, and being restricted to it, with all the political failures that it entailed" (6), has therefore been central to investigating the spatial dynamics of subaltern subjectivation in colonial and postcolonial contexts. In more detail, the relevance of subaltern experiences of space and places for the making of the subaltern self is one main consequence of this theoretical approach.

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12 For example, see Robinson 2003; Sharp 2011; 2013; Jazeel 2011; 2014; Sidaway 2000.

Different notions of 'subaltern space' have been identified with reference to the work of geographers: most importantly, it has been pointed out that

> in short, geographers treat subaltern space as both a delimited space of oppression and a liminal space of becoming and critical position on the margins. (Clayton 2011, 251)

The ambivalence between these two main attributes of subalternity – on the one hand being oppressed, on the other hand being able to engage in a critique –, albeit problematic and sometimes contradictory, is quite relevant and eventually an enabling one, as we shall see in more detail in the following sections. Moreover, an important ambivalence has been outlined, as to the fact that

> the subaltern can be located both outside (exterior to) and at the margins of (but still inside) a social and spatial formation, and, congruently, as both separate from, and an effect of, power. (247)

Consequently, the following paradox emerges in the form of a question,

> whether the aim to subaltern resistance and critique is to identify and protect the subaltern's exteriority or dissolve the subaltern's interior marginality. In other words, subaltern politics of knowledge are inextricably linked to how the subaltern is placed, ontologically, existentially and geographically. (247)

As we will see, the paradoxical ambivalence of being, as mentioned, "both separate from, and an effect of, power" (247), depending on how subaltern positionality is conceived of in the first place, can also be an enabling tool for the development of a politics of resistance that acts on the structures and means of oppression – however difficult it may be to determine such a politics.

Based on the above-mentioned elaborations on the notion of 'subaltern space' and its critiques, it is important that we consider the political implications of such an understanding of subaltern spatiality; for example, considering what it means that a subaltern identity claims space, and how a subaltern space is to be represented and transformed. To put it more clearly, it is important to wonder how a spatially informed understanding of the self as a subaltern constructed identity can help to challenge that very construction, and the oppressions it entails. To address this question, it is important that we linger more extensively on that of political space from a post-colonial perspective.

3 Post-Colonial Perspectives on Political Space

The spatial underpinning of post-colonial notions of subalternity also has to do with the fact that post-colonial critique and geography adopt the notion of subalternity to study spaces and processes of subjugation, and to address the colonial construction of spaces that are meant to be the environment, as well as the tools, for the oppression and annihilation of the colonised people: most notably, the space of the colony itself. This kind of analysis is fundamental to understand how the construction of colonial space is an essential feature in the construction of a fragile, subalternised identity.[13] For example, Achille Mbembe[14] discussed the spatial 'qualities' that characterise colonial territory and which are the objects of its control and governance (2001, 33). Through his reading of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where the author described the urbanistic structures governing the colonial city of Algiers,[15] Mbembe argued that

> colonization is, above all, a labyrinth of forces at work. These forces are inscribed in the first place in a space they endeavor to map, cultivate, and order. (2001, 174)

Following Mbembe's argument, the spatial organisation of the colony aims at the most brutal economic exploitation of the territory and its resources, including the human beings that populate it, who "constituted the raw material, as it were, of government" (33). The ordering of the colonised territory is at work to dehumanise and annihilate the colonised people, according to "an imaginary of the native and

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[13]   The notion of 'subalternisation', meant as the process of production of subalternity, has been defined as "the process through which the colonized peasantry is made into a subaltern figure" (Chattopadhyay 2012, 90-1). Subalternisation has also been defined as "the process by which minorities, ethnic groups and communities are rendered subalterns, mostly by acts of omission or commission by the postcolonial state" (Nayar 2018, 70). I insist here on a subalternised identity, as opposed to a subaltern one, to stress the production of subalternity.

[14]   In this article, we implicitly discuss Mbembe as a post-colonial thinker, although he rejected this label on the basis of several critiques he makes of post-colonial studies (Mbembe 2021, 126). If we analyse his thought as 'post-colonial', it is not to suggest that Mbembe belongs to the post-colonial studies he critiques, but rather to consider his own use of the term. In this article, we employ quite a broad understanding of 'post-colonial literature' that is not restricted to the authors who identify themselves as belonging to post-colonial studies, but that encompasses all those who think about issues of colonialism, its aftermaths, and decolonisation.

[15]   On the history of colonial urbanism as a feature of colonial administration and rule, a huge scholarship has been exploring the colonial and racial logics underpinning the structuring of urban space during colonial occupation. See for example: Njoh 2008; Çelik 1997. In more detail, Çelik discussed Algiers as "the colonial city par excellence" (1997, 1), like Mbembe, on the basis of its relevance in the work of Fanon.

a set of beliefs regarding his or her identity" (33) that precede and guide the domination over them. Regarding this last point, Mbembe explored those features in the space of the colony that play a role in the construction of the colonised human being as a fragile, exploitable, dehumanised subject, investigating the subjectivation of human bodies through spatial infrastructures. Not only in the colony, but in the African post-colony[16] as well, identity is often structured along questions of belonging and descent, making the condition of being bound to a specific location a fundamental feature in the constitution of identity and in the shaping of conflicts (86). Among the spatial features creating the conditions for the subjugation of the colonised people, Mbembe discussed the particular administration of borders and boundaries in the course of African history, making the case for different borderisation processes at different times. In particular, he showed how, in pre-colonial times, borders were not lines of demarcation separating distinct territories, insofar as "spaces of encounter, negotiation, and opportunity for Europeans and Africans" (2000, 265). It was only with colonial conquests that borders started to perform the function

> to mark the spatial limits that separated colonial possessions from one another, taking into account not ambitions but the actual occupation of the land. (265)

Contrary to the most common assumptions, though, post-colonial borders are not just the direct result of the colonial ones, but rather "devices of discipline and command, modeled on those of chiefdoms" (265).

Therefore, post-colonial borders often become internal to states, rather than only separating them externally, resulting in "the exacerbation of identification with particular localities" (Mbembe 2001, 87) and, consequently, of conflicts. Post-colonial borders, therefore, facilitate the association of identity to a particular place, thus making movement difficult and conflictual. According to Mbembe, the colonial regime introduces a new, distinct deployment of borders,

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16 The 'post-colony' is a notion that Mbembe deployed to conceptualise the post-colonial African states and their ages (Mbembe 2001). Although widely associated with this author, the post-colony is not a notion that Mbembe himself invented, but one that he adopts from J. Comaroff and J.L. Comaroff (1999). The post-colony is introduced by Mbembe with the aim of problematising the very distinction between a before and an after of colonisation (Mbembe 2001, 15). Mbembe characterises the post-colony as a notion that "identifies a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves" (102). Identifying "a distinct regime of violence" in the post-colony, Mbembe sees the post-colony as "a particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline" (102-3).

making them uncrossable for the first time in Africa: a distinct process of borderisation transforms some spaces into uncrossable places for specific classes of people, so that, in the colonies, movement is actively slowed down. For this reason, the colony is a space for the entrapment of people, affecting their capacity to move, in fact denying it. Furthermore, boundary control practices reinforce a close association between the human body and identity, making the individual body itself a boundary to be controlled, a source and repository of quantifiable information and data to be extracted (Grossi, Lepratti 2021). On the one hand, through the act of colonisation the colonised is entrapped and made unable to move; on the other, the subjectivation of the coloniser is quite limitless. In order to experience their absoluteness and absence of limits, the coloniser needs to continually create and destroy what they tame: hence, the violence that characterises colonial government (Mbembe 2001, 189). Mbembe highlights how the space of the colony is institutionalised as a space for violence, where violence is configured as a spatialised presence:

> the colony is primarily a place where an experience of violence and upheaval is lived, where violence is built into structures and institutions. (174)

Colonial violence, lived in the space of the colony through its institutions, entails a relationship of spatial contiguity among the human bodies that inhabit it, physical contact being

> that direct character necessary for the colonial regime to open itself out, to have physical contact with its subjects, to maintain with them a bond of subjection. Thus, there is no violence in a colony without a sense of contiguity, without bodies close to one another. (175)

The violence based on bodily contact makes the colony a space saturated with contiguity, from which it is impossible to move or escape. Yet, bodily contiguity marks the space of the colony at the same time that this space is segregated according to a racial logic, which strictly divides blacks from whites. The notion of a spatially organised colonial segregation was first set out by Fanon, who, as mentioned, is a key source for Mbembe in this regard. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon analysed the spatial segregation taking place in the Algerian colony, notably describing it as ruled by a Manichean logic. The Manichean logic divides blacks from whites, which is to say, the colonised from the colonisers and the poor from the riches, where the first item in the couple is identified with evil, irrationality, wilderness, and backwardness, while the second one is identified with the positive pole, its attributes being goodness, rationality, civilisa-

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tion, and modernity.[17] Specifically, Fanon (1961) describes the Manichean logic taking place in the colonial city of Algiers, a city drastically divided into two parts where no exchange is possible.[18] The racial segregation organising the colonial city of Algiers outlined by Fanon has also been discussed by subsequent historiographic scholarship, arguing that

> separation plays an important part in defining otherness and allows for a critical distance needed for surveillance. Racial, cultural, and historical otherness constituted the main paradigm that dominated all building activity in Algiers during the French occupation, and spatial separation in the most concrete sense reinforced the difference. (Çelik 1997, 5)

In more general terms, Mbembe expanded on the notion of a Manichean spatial logic, elaborated by Fanon in the case of Algiers, arguing that Manichean segregation creates a space of terror in the African colony (Mbembe 2001, 81), where the colony produces the annihilation of the body and the mind of the colonised: racial segregation is an essential feature in the implementation of a regime of terror and violence, as the Manichean colonial space is a space of terror.

The racial divisions enacted in and through the physical space of the colony are also discussed by Paul Gilroy, who described the colony as a special, unique space where no citizenship – meant as the universal attribution of rights – is possible, insofar as racial divisions rule. The colonial project produces a new, distinct type of geopolitical space, filled with new racialised characters (Gilroy 2004, 53), as opposed to citizens. Therefore, according to Gilroy, the colonial configuration of space is not a political issue, in the sense that, in fact, it marks a suspension of political relations, substituted by technologies and procedures that are, rather, para-political. Interestingly,

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17 Historiographic scholarship highlighted different strategies of segregation, according to the distinct ideology and needs of the colonising country. For instance, Njoh explored in depth the different approaches to colonial urban planning that characterised respectively the French and the British occupation of sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth century: while the former enacted a type of cultural segregation that, in fact, reproduced a *de facto* racial segregation, the latter implemented an explicitly racial type of segregation. As Njoh argues, the result was, however, the same: "Despite the diametrically opposed spatial development strategies of the two colonial powers, colonial cities throughout Africa were equally segregated along racial lines" (2008, 598).

18 The notion of a Manichean logic that rules colonial relations is also discussed by Jan-Mohamed (1985). According to JanMohamed, colonial ideology is characterised by a fundamental Manichean allegory responsible for the dichotomisation and, therefore, the opposition of races. JanMohamed explores the epistemic consequences of this, focusing his analysis on the textual aspects of colonialism and its literature. The author argues that colonial literature is basically speculative, in the sense that it makes the native into a mirror in which the coloniser can look at their own image thanks to a Manichean allegory.

such distinction between the political and the para- or pre-political is contested by Judith Butler, as something that unwillingly ratifies power and its claim to be the only source for the definition of the political – keeping in mind that Butler's reflections on political space do not concern colonialism. On the contrary, according to her, social movements and assemblages would question the very determination of a particular space as political, insofar as this determination is set by power, and politicise it anew by way of making appearance into that space (Butler 2015, 205-6).

A second outstanding example of an analysis of space, in which space is analysed both as an essential tool for oppression and racialisation, and a means for resistance, is to be found in bell hooks' discussion of the margin. It should be noted that hooks does not adopt the notion of subalternity in her reflections on the margin; yet, a proximity between feminist notions of subalternity and marginality can be productively identified and explored, as done by Mascat (2012).

In the context of racial segregation in the US South in the second half of the twentieth century, the black feminist theorist and activist hooks described the racial segregation she was subjected to in the town where she was born in 1953, in Kentucky (hooks 1989). hooks describes the urban racial segregation she and the black community she belonged to faced daily, stressing how urban racial segregation compelled the black people to daily cross the margin separating black spaces from white spaces in the city, a margin that physically took place in the suburban railroad tracks. Black people had to cross this margin to go to work as service workers in white neighbourhoods, and afterwards they had to return to the ghettos where they lived, as they could not stay in white neighbourhoods except for work. hooks emphasises how this particular crossing of the railroads was a daily experience that only black people had. Although facing marginality on a daily basis was a painful and humiliating experience, hooks also contends that to be put in the margin paradoxically provided blacks with an epistemic vantage point: whereas the whites living in the centre of urban space only know that centre, the marginalised blacks know both the margin and the centre, by way of crossing that margin itself. Therefore, their vision of reality is a more inclusive and complete one, comprehending both the spatiality of the dominants and the spatiality of the dominated. By way of acknowledging the fact that they are an integral part of a whole, in fact an essential one, marginalised people are offered

> an oppositional world-view – a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (hooks 1989, 20)

In this case, the self-understanding of being marginal provides the marginalised with a mode of seeing and knowing that is totally theirs. Moreover, this special epistemic point of view allows the marginalised community to develop a strong sense of the self and solidarity. It is important to note that the ambiguity that Clayton identifies in the geographic notion of subalternity recalled in the previous section (subalternity being both exterior to and inside a social and spatial formation, both separate from, and an effect of power) is to be found in hooks' notion of the margin: while the margin takes place inside a certain socio-spatial formation, it also maintains a critical exteriority from it, one that allows the marginalised an oppositional world-view, a distinct mode of seeing and knowing. Moreover, the dichotomous question that Clayton poses as a consequence of this ambiguity, namely "whether the aim to subaltern resistance and critique is to identify and protect the subaltern's exteriority or dissolve the subaltern's interior marginality" (2011, 247) leaves no room for a third option, which is in fact elaborated by hooks, namely to transform the experience of marginality so that it is not defined by the centre, nor does it indicate the move towards the centre as a move to escape oppression. The connection of space to subjectivation is explored by hooks in a way that stresses the potentiality of the dispossessed to occupy their own place and elaborate a whole new knowledge of it, one that contributes to the creation of a distinct and empowering "sense of self", that does not depend on the white elaboration of black identity as inferior.

As her autobiographical narration goes on, after leaving the space of painful marginality, segregation, and poverty where she was born, hooks went to university in California only to discover that her marginalisation was far from over in a place where, on the contrary, black people had the right to access and live. In fact, once she reached university, she found out that she was only allowed to speak of her marginality as a site of dispossession and pain, so that the hegemonic discourse of "radical critical thinkers" would appropriate her story and retell it to her, only with an authorising voice (1989, 22). For this reason, hooks argues that she was silenced into the centre, not into the margins. Interestingly, hooks' narration of being silenced into the centre by radical intellectuals, who would only listen to a story of oppression to retell it with an authorising voice, is close to Spivak's analysis of the subaltern who is silenced and ventriloquised by Western left-wing intellectuals. Based on her own experience of marginalisation, hooks engages in a process of re-signifying the very concept of margin, reclaiming the margin as "a site of radical openness", where the capacity for resistance can be nurtured, as opposed to the margin as a mere site of subjugation. Her experience of the margin meant that hooks wanted to speak about the margin and from the margin as a space of resistance, not a space of oppression. From this point of view, hooks qualified the margin not as

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a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (1989, 20)

The margin is described as a place where hooks could develop an inclusive view of reality, a place where she could find care and a strong sense of community. hooks here gives a new meaning to the concept of margin, from a space of dispossession (which the margin continues to be: hooks clearly explains that hers is not an attempt to romanticise the margin) to a space of radical openness and resistance: "that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor, is located in the margins" (21).

Through the autobiographical narration of her experiences of being enclosed into the space of the margin at different stages in her life, hooks takes a radical stance and chooses to defy the definition and narration of the margin told by power – power being that which structures the relation of centre-margin in the first place. Rather than accepting the construction and definition of the margin as a space of oppression, domination, and alienation, from where it is only desirable to escape to go into the centre, hooks argues that it is possible, and desirable, to keep a sense of marginality even while in the centre. Because the centre is a space in which she has been silenced, maintaining a sense of marginality while in the centre allows hooks to speak her voice and articulate a different experience of margin and centre altogether. On this basis, hooks redefines the margin as a space of resistance and struggle: a space of radical openness from where to see and know power relations in a way that power, locating itself only in the centre, cannot see, and where to develop a strong sense of resistance and care. hooks argues that it is necessary that people who want to resist power "identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" (1989, 15), finding a voice for themselves that is not already spoken by those in power. As hooks put it, rather than seeing it only as the position of subjugation, a location to be ashamed of, "understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people" (21).

hooks' theorisation of the margin as a space that can be turned into the space of resistance, rather than a mere condition one is bound to want to transcend, is thus a reflection on how it is possible to act on the structures that facilitate subalternisation and colonisation in order to challenge them, to act on the spaces in which one is trapped in order to elaborate new images of oneself and nurture one's capacity to resist, to build new worlds, rather than enter an unequal one. hooks therefore theorises the possibility of acknowledging how one's identity and positionality have been constructed

and determined by power, and act on them in a way that power does not foresee. With this critical operation, the possibility to elaborate a whole new knowledge and meaning of one's own place is positively affirmed as a means of resistance.

4 White Entrapment and the Decolonisation of Space

As we saw in the previous section, Mbembe identifies entrapment as a distinctive quality of the spatiality of the colony. Furthermore, the author also discusses entrapment as something that characterises "the white version of history", meant as that particular construction and narration of history, produced by white supremacy, according to which "to be black is a liability" (2015, 2). Insofar as the 'white myth'[19] of black liability makes us think that it has no outside and takes place everywhere, it is an entrapment in which we are caught (3). Such entrapment into white mythology did not stop with the end of formal colonial domination, as it were, in fact continuing nowadays most utterly through narrations of white superiority, racial structures, and symbols, as well as through the exploitation of racialised labour. In a similar way, Sara Ahmed discusses whiteness in relation to space in phenomenological terms, as not

> an ontological given, but as that which has been received, or become given, over time. Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space. (2007, 150)

What the two descriptions of whiteness share is a sense of the historicity of whiteness, understood as a particular construction and experience of history, built at the expense and to the exclusion of those who are labelled as "non-white". Whiteness is not an essential quality attributed to someone based on phenotypic features, but rather a historical product with strong material effects: the historical construction of whiteness as superiority has relevant material implications, affecting, as it does, human lives and their very survival, and determining privilege. Moreover, both authors stress the spatial character of the white construction of history: Mbembe describes white

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19 The notion of 'white mythology' is also adopted by the post-colonial critic Robert Young in his *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990). In the course of an in-depth analysis of Western history and the challenges post-colonialism poses to it, Young discusses history as a white mythology, by way of acknowledging Lévi-Strauss' notion that history is the myth of the modern man, rather than a privileged form of knowledge. Young also recalls Césaire's statement that "the only history is white", and Derrida's notion that "metaphysics is a white mythology" (Young 1990, 45).

mythology as an entrapment and an enclosure, while Ahmed is specifically interested in the white capture of space and the world that racial privilege allows. Through a phenomenological analysis, Ahmed explains "how whiteness becomes worldly as an effect of reification" (2007, 150), namely how whiteness constructs a sense of inhabiting the world and being oriented in it as a habit that is the effect of whiteness' own naturalisation, to the exclusion of the "non-whites".

While presenting white mythology in somehow bleak tones, describing it as an entrapment, Mbembe also positively supports the possibility of putting white mythology to rest and escaping its trap, to "open a future for all here and now" (2015, 4). As the white version of history is constructed as a myth, the question is one of demythologising the white version of history in present times: "The demythologizing of certain versions of history must go hand in hand with the demythologizing of whiteness" (3).

Moreover, demythologisation is a question of decolonisation. Mbembe discusses decolonisation lamenting the dilution and weakening of the concept that followed its adaptation and large usage by many "jurists, historians and international political economists", as "the concept has lost some of the incendiary tenor and quasi-mystic exaltation that marked its many trajectories" (2021, 43) in the anticolonial struggles for liberation in the second half of the twentieth century, when the term was first adopted. On the basis of this first use of the term that Mbembe intends to renew to resist its later dilution, he recalls decolonisation as a "full political, polemical, and cultural category" that makes it akin to the notion of 'revolution' (43). The author defines decolonisation as

> a struggle by the colonized to reconquer the surface, horizons, depths, and heights of their lives. Through this struggle [...] the structures of colonization were to be dismantled, new relations between the sacred and the mundane, between the subject and the world instituted, and the possible rehabilitated. Understood from this point of view, the concept of decolonization was a shortcut for departitioning the world and bringing together its scattered fragments and isolated parts. It also referred to the difficult reconstitution of the subject, the disenclosure of the world, and humanity's universal ascent to a 'higher life'. (44)

This lengthy quotation suggests that decolonisation is predominantly a matter of reinvention, necessarily entailing a total reconfiguration of space and the subject, where the linkage between the two could not be tighter. As the spatial metaphors of reconquering the "surface, horizons, depths, and heights" of colonised lives suggest, the rehabilitation of the colonised self is also a question of rearranging their space altogether, so as to reconstitute the relation of the subject to

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the world, by way of reuniting the world that was set apart by colonial domination and rehabilitating a subject that has been dehumanised. The space of the world, in Mbembe's view, is what the colonised have been deprived of, since they have been entrapped in one physical place, dehumanised, exploited, annihilated; with that, they have also been deprived of a relationship with the world. This is why, according to Mbembe, "the principal stake of decolonial thought was the disenclosure of the world" (61).[20]

As the above-mentioned text goes on, bringing together the "scattered fragments and isolated parts of the world" in an act of entanglement and disenclosure becomes part and parcel to the "difficult reconstitution of the subject", which needs to rehabilitate itself after being annihilated and racialised under colonial rule and deprived of its relationship with the world. It is important to notice that the re-invention of space is a foundational purpose of decolonisation, one that is connected to the reinvention of the human self. According to Mbembe, the reinvention of space is to be understood in terms of dismantling the colonial partition and structures, in a gesture of entangling previously scattered fragments to recompose a unity of the world. Regarding the imperative to reinvent space and its features, so that the world may be a place inhabitable by all, which is tantamount to decolonising the world, Mbembe's argument can be put in proximity to hooks' theorisation of the opportunity of critically re-inventing the meaning of the margin, to understand it as a site for struggle and liberation of the racialised self. In one sense, both authors share a concern for reinventing space conceptually as well as physically, dismantling the ways space used to be structured under colonial rule as a fundamental issue for decolonisation and liberation, and an essential part in the reinvention of the colonised self.

Specifically, Mbembe qualifies decolonisation as a de-privatisation and rehabilitation of public space, that democratises access to public spaces, most notably universities (2015, 5). Decolonisation is, therefore, a process of rehabilitation and democratisation of those public spaces that, under colonial rule, were firmly enclosed and turned into the stage for colonial violence and brutality, and that in post-colonial times continue to be a site of privilege, the access to which is unequally distributed and the experience of which continues to be affected by racism. In one sense, the access to public space and the access to privilege go hand in hand. The process of democratisation

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20 Mbembe draws the notion of 'disenclosure' from the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy. Mbembe defines disenclosure as "synonymous with opening, a surging up, the advent of something new, a blossoming. To disenclose is thus to lift closures in such a way that what had been closed in can emerge and blossom" (2021, 61). Mbembe goes on to argue that disenclosure is "at the heart of anticolonial thought and the notion of decolonization [...] even [...] decolonization's fundamental object" (61-2).

of public spaces, according to Mbembe, explicitly requires a whole rearrangement of colonial spatial relations, with particular reference to those that have been analysed by Fanon in terms of Manicheism (Mbembe 2015, 5). Mbembe recalls Fanon's own connotation of decolonisation as a question of self-ownership, where the colonised resolves to reappropriate oneself in a gesture of liberation. In Fanon's terms, to politicise the masses during the struggle for decolonisation is "to invent the souls of men [*sic*]" (1961, 138), an expression that Fanon quotes from his teacher, Aimé Césaire. The reappropriation of oneself under decolonisation takes place through a "dialectic of time, life, and creation" that does not tinker with margins, but rather reshapes forms and matter (Mbembe 2015, 12-13). Starting from this Fanonian connotation of decolonisation as the reinvention of human souls, Mbembe thinks of decolonisation as a politics of difference, as opposed to a politics of imitation and repetition, as difference is a question of invention (2015, 13; 2021, 54). While colonisation forces the natives to repetition, by way of depriving them of time and timing, on the other hand decolonisation means recreating time as difference, thus opening the very possibility of future for the natives, not as a gift of civilisation, but rather as "the possibility to reconstitute the human after humanism's complicity with colonial racism" and "the emergence of the not-yet" (2015, 14). To introduce a new timing as difference and futurity also complicates the linearity of modernity, and questions the possibility, as well as the usefulness, of distinguishing strictly a before and an after of colonisation. The reinvention of the self, in Mbembe's thought, goes hand in hand with the reinvention of time and space, the former being configured as a question of difference and futurity, the latter as a question of opening and disenclosing the world.

In short, the authors mentioned here discuss decolonisation as fundamentally a question of rearrangement and creation, an act of repairing and uniting what was divided under colonial rule in Mbembe's terms. Importantly, such processes of creative rearrangement involve reshaping time and space, as a fundamental part of reshaping subjects. On the one hand, hooks emphasises the strategical importance of reworking the relationship between the margin and the centre, not by way of following the path from the former to the latter – thus leaving intact and accepting their asymmetrical structure, and ending up being silenced and marginalised once more – but rather, fighting marginalisation means to re-qualify the margin, making it the space where one can develop one's own way of seeing and knowing reality, where one can develop another sense of self and nurture resistance. On the other hand, Mbembe qualifies decolonisation as a question of rearranging altogether the spatial and temporal dimensions of colonial rule, so as to make the world truly shared and accessible to all, by way of disenclosing and entangling its scattered parts.

Similarly, Ahmed investigates whiteness as a distinct orientation in space, where privilege is configured as the faculty to access space, inhabit it and naturalise this habit(at). Moreover, the rearrangement of spatial relations is specified by these authors as a question of democratising the access to public spaces.

5 Decolonising Statues

The argumentation just reconstructed relates to Mbembe's comment on the removal of the statue of Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which we mentioned in the first section of this article. Mbembe discusses this event as a question of demythologising whiteness and the white version of history, arguing that, although that singular act of removal does not erase history, it offers one possible way to put that history to rest and open up new possibilities in new, decolonised, spaces (2015, 3), where the access to knowledge is not informed according to racial lines. In Mbembe's view, one possible way to put white mythology to rest is to rework the spatiality of its symbols, most notably statues. Commenting positively on the toppling down of the statue of Rhodes at UCT, Mbembe encourages the removal of statues representing and celebrating colonial men, such as Cecil Rhodes, from their location in public spaces. He also suggests that they should be confined into newly created distinct places, while on the other hand, work is being done on new public spaces, inhabitable by all, that allow for the formation of truly democratic projects. From this perspective, colonial statues are to be removed from their positions and put to rest in new locales that would be new institutions, "partly a park and partly a graveyard" (4). As the statues representing colonisers are put to rest, the possibility emerges "to move on and recreate the kind of new public spaces required by our new democratic project" (4).

A public and democratic space cannot be home to a symbol of oppression and exclusion, however belonging to a formally concluded past, as this symbol not only constantly reminds the formerly colonised of a history of subalternity that, among other things, laid the foundation for public institutions from which they have so far been excluded, and into which they were only recently, yet contradictorily and restrictively, accepted in; it also suggests that there is nothing particularly wrong in commemorating this history and having it there.

Statues and monuments represent something that comes from a past that still asserts itself in the present: hence, they create a connection between the past they belonged to and the present in which they still have, literally, a place. In this sense, statues are both symbols and material space-markers, constituting a traffic between the material and the symbolic that makes them meaningful. As complex

imbrications of symbols and materiality, statues are material references of space, affecting people's orientation in space and how they experience it. Moreover, in order to be meaningful, statues need people to remember their stories. This is why responses to statues are important: people intervening on a statue, either to preserve it, or to topple it down, or claiming for the building of a new one, respond to the meaning of monuments and intervene in the construction and alteration of their spatial and social meaning. Statues are participants in a social discourse embedded in space. For this reason, the power to decide over their building and removal is a power to determine social meaning and to mark the space with that meaning, deciding what should be represented and where it should be celebrated, and what not.[21] Since the construction of a statue is a means to occupy space at the expense of others, it reveals that public space is deeply unequal, the power to build symbols on it being unequally distributed (Rao 2016). For this reason, popular movements made claims to the building of new statues to represent the oppressed and do justice to overlooked histories of subalternity and resistance, for example claiming that "the ideology of white supremacy not only venerates oppressors – it also erases the stories and sacrifices of those who dared to resist".[22]

Thus, obscuring their legacy. These interventions importantly concern the question of representing the subaltern, introduced above. As we saw in the first section of this article, the subaltern was defined by the Subaltern Studies collective as that which escapes official representation and archives but is nonetheless, at least in part, retrievable by reading the archives against the grain. This possibility was further problematised by Spivak (1988), who shed a light on the subaltern impossibility to speak, her voice being already embedded in a discourse that structurally erases it, eventually ventriloquising it. Considering this problem, it is possible to wonder if there is a signifier that can do justice to the subaltern at all, and how is the subaltern to be represented in space and be made meaningful. We will return to this problem later in this section.

As we saw in relation to the notion of decolonisation as "disenclosure of the world" in Mbembe's terms, the decolonisation and democratisation of public space is based on an understanding of it as

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21 For example, the recent decision by the state of Congo to erect a huge memorial tomb to the colonial hero Brazza reveals a post-colonial nation-building from above that is in strong continuity with the colonial past (Bernault 2010), to which activism on colonial statues respond.

22 https://www.vox.com/first-person/2017/8/16/16156540/confederate–statues-charlottesville-virginia. This article argues for the need to have statues representing racialised people who fought for the abolition and resisted slavery in the United States.

a common good owned by everyone (Mbembe 2015, 5). Mbembe argues that the right to belong to public space allows the development of an expansive sense of citizenship, as well as "a logic of self-affirmation, interruption, and occupation" (6) for black people, as opposed to the feeling of being excluded from a space that, however formally public, is not meant to be theirs, especially if marked by a symbol of their oppression. As Ahmed argues, a white-oriented space is not easily inhabitable and occupiable by the non-white.

In more detail, the reconfiguration of space in universities is discussed by many as a question of democratising and decolonising the access to knowledge. Mbembe argues that the rearrangement of spatial relations in universities leads to a new construction of the right to belong to university and, therefore, to participate to knowledge. Following the author, the right to belong to educational space, when distributed among all, is not akin to charity, hospitality, tolerance, or assimilation of those who have been excluded so far, but rather to a relation of share, where knowledge is equally redistributed rather than being made the property of someone. The right to belong to public space in the case of universities therefore entails the development of new "pedagogies of presence", meant as

> a set of creative practices that ultimately make it impossible for official structures to ignore them [black students and staff in universities] and not recognize them, to pretend that they are not there. (6)

Through the development of "pedagogies of presence", the decolonisation of university is part and parcel with the decolonisation of knowledge and pedagogy: Mbembe suggests reinventing a "class without walls", as a space where teacher and student are "co-learners" and various publics converge in new forms of assemblies, from where to redistribute knowledge (6).[23] Mbembe claims that the aim of higher education is the equitable redistribution of the capacity of inquiry (8). In the words of cultural theorist Iain Chambers,

> Contestare una tale situazione non significa suggerire una semplice revoca, ma piuttosto considerare la ridistribuzione delle risorse e della conoscenza in una maniera che supera la loro riproduzione dell'assetto attuale. (2020, 49)[24]

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23 For an example of the reinvention of an African university as a space where to decolonise knowledge and rethink of Africa altogether, see Sharp's discussion of Dar es Salaam University and the role of Tanzania's president Nyerere in it, in Jazeel, Legg 2019.

24 "To challenge such a situation is not to suggest a simple withdrawal, but rather to consider redistributing resources and knowledge in a manner that overcomes their reproduction of the existing status quo" (English transl. by the Author).

The redistribution of knowledge should not reproduce the present condition but rather create a new one.

As we saw in the previous section, Ahmed discusses the habits of those who inhabit and inherit a certain space as that which gives shape to that space: as she puts it, "spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them" (2007, 156), as well as their "skin" (157). Habit structures the qualities of a given space, determining the access to that space and the capacity to act of those who come to inhabit it. For this reason, a space that has been inhabited and ruled by people defining themselves as white, in opposition to those who "fail to do so [becoming white]" (157), is a white space, whiteness being its habit. This is what happens in white universities, where the capacity to act and take habits of black and racialised people is severely affected by a habit of whiteness that shapes that space to their exclusion. On this basis, Ahmed discusses the institutions as spaces that "are shaped by the proximity of some bodies and not others: white bodies gather, and cohere to form the edges of such spaces" (157).

Ahmed discusses universities as institutional spaces that are made white, thanks to the gathering of white people around them, assuming a shape that is white in tone, where racialised people are seen as exceptional, and made to follow the line of whiteness in order to participate to that space (157-8). Ahmed's discussion of the institutional spaces of education, as oriented according to racial lines that thicken around whiteness, normalising it, and consequently making black people want to move to whiteness, reminds us of hooks' narration of being marginalised into a white university, and her subsequent invocation of

> ways [...] of making culture towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible. (hooks 1989, 15)

Whereas the access to knowledge is not unlimited, hooks characterises this rearrangement of space, that makes her choose the margin as a space of radical openness, and defy the definition of *margin* that is set from the point of view of power, in terms of giving "unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing". It is no accident that hooks' autobiographical narration of her own marginalization takes place in an university: it was here that she had her voice coopted by "radical critical thinkers" who made her into "the Other", whose story was them to be told, thus depriving her of her own voice as a passive victim (hooks 1989, 22). The experience of marginalization at university is therefore fundamental in hooks' conceptualization of the margin as a space of radical openness, that we recalled above. hooks' reflection on the margin is thus strictly linked to the question of the accessibility of knowledge and education, as the

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margin is made into a space where to share knowledge on an equal basis so that the "pleasure and power of knowing" is accessible to all. The decolonising intervention in universities is a radical opposition, that necessarily acts at the same time on pedagogy and the curricula, as well as on the spatial structures and power relations that shape the place of education.[25] This is why, according to Mbembe and many other activists, to act on the statue of a white coloniser standing into the campus of the University of Cape Town is no minor issue to the democratisation of South African public culture and education. As the activists of the "Abolish the Racist Seal" movement in University of New Mexico had it,

> symbolic violence translates into material violence, reinforcing an atmosphere that can make Native students feel unsafe and isolated in their homelands.[26]

This is why the sixth of a list of 11 demands that native students at the University of New Mexico submitted to university authorities calls for "the abolition of racist imagery and cultural appropriation"[27] from their university, whose official seal represents in celebratory tones the subjugation of the natives during colonial conquest in the region of New Mexico.

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25 An exhaustive account of the current debates on the decolonisation of education and curricula exceeds the scope of this article. However, it should be mentioned that Mbembe links his discussion of the decolonisation of educational space to the project of decolonising and democratising education itself. The author argues that the decolonisation of universities and education also affects the languages of knowledge and learning. Regarding the latter, Mbembe argues that the decolonisation of African university also entails making its education a multilingual one, while colonialism is closely associated with monolingualism and the imposition of one authoritative language of knowledge and learning, namely the colonisers' language (see also Chow 2014). Moreover, Mbembe claims that decolonising African university and education in this way requires a geographical imaginary that goes beyond the limits of the nation-states, as well as those of the African continent itself (2015, 18), so that colonial boundaries do not affect human relations of share. Such a rearrangement of space and knowledge that decolonisation requires is also connected to rethinking the human subject, which can now be redefined by Mbembe as a subject who shares agency with others, human and non-human. Mbembe suggests that the Anthropocene forces us to rethink the human in light of its finitude and the possibility of its biological extinction, as opposed to its power to control and dominate nature. This is why the author also introduces a re-reading of the notion of 'agency', not as an exclusive attribute of animated beings (whether human or not), but also a property of matter, insofar as a morphogenic capacity of matter is to be acknowledged. On this basis, Mbembe defines democracy to come as "humankind ruling in common for a common which includes the non-human" (29): a whole rearrangement of spatial relations and of the subject underlies this democratic, decolonial project.

26 https://hyperallergic.com/322003/native-american-students-fight-to-remove-colonial-imagery-from-university-of-new-mexico/.

27 https://hyperallergic.com/322003/native-american-students-fight-to-remove-colonial-imagery-from-university-of-new-mexico.

Based on this argumentation and examples, a whole rethinking of the spatial politics of decolonisation is required to make decolonisation and democratisation possible. As it were, "critical engagements with colonialism and its afterlives are always already spatial" (Jazeel, Legg 2019, 3). In one sense, decolonisation requires a whole rearrangement of space and knowledge, as the spatial structures and power relations that affect the distribution and composition of knowledge need intervention.

As is well known, a huge debate has been going on about the issue of removing statues, with many critics questioning the urgency, even the usefulness of concentrating on statues and symbols as an essential part of liberation struggles, arguing that acting on a symbol is not in itself liberating, while priority should be given to more concrete and material issues, such as granting minorities more scholarships and welfare provisions in universities; when not contesting that statues should not be touched at all, as historical monuments having in history their justification to stand.[28] On the other hand, it has been argued that "statues are never merely symbolic, which is also to say that there is nothing mere about symbolism" (Rao 2016, 3). Symbols are understood to be always already material, concretely affecting matter and the materiality of power in everyday life. In other words, symbols do matter, and it is therefore mandatory to acknowledge and act on the material consequences of the symbolic, that affect the materiality of space, and the construction of identities, including of course subaltern identities. Discussing different cases of statue-building, as well as movements against statues in post-colonial situations, Rahul Rao sheds light on the power relations and asymmetries that always concern these statues and monuments, identifying the question of statues as a question of domination over the public sphere. Rao explicitly asks:

> given a context of centuries of oppression and radically unequal contemporary power relations, who needs statues and who does not? Who occupies space to the exclusion of whom? (2016, 4)

as the most urgent questions in addressing such issues. When discussing the Dalit will to build statues of Ambedkar, that in recent years have been multiplying in India, Rao interprets it as "a defiant reclamation of hitherto denied space" (4): following Rao's interpretation, a statue to Ambedkar carrying a copy of the Indian Constitution under his arm, that he contributed to write, is a symbol of Dalit's rights and inclusion in the post-colonial Indian state: therefore, it is not a minor or merely symbolic issue for the Dalit minorities, but rath-

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28 See for instance: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31983634.

er a way of claiming and occupying the space from where they have been excluded so far, affirming their presence and their right to belong to it in non-casteist terms.

Rather than just being a neutral adornment in a public sphere that is equally shared, nor a minor detail in the contexts of movements fighting for more essential and truly material needs, statues, according to Rao, can contribute to forge a "subaltern counterpublics" (5) that is needed to respond to unequal power relations. The notion of a "subaltern counterpublics" is one that Rao draws from Nancy Fraser's notion of the creation of a counter-power at the convergence of class struggle and boundary struggles (Fraser, Jaeggi 2018, 69), in the view that "confronting power requires counter-power, and counter-power requires organization" (181). If the public sphere has been created to exclude some along racial and colonial lines, so that, as Ahmed puts it, public space has been made white, then the creation of a counter-public is needed, to occupy and invest that space with new meanings and a new presence: for this reason, acting on the spatial structures and symbols governing subaltern space is no minor issue to decolonisation.

These arguments can be allied to the reflections of Judith Butler on public space in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Butler's analyses the notion of 'appearance' into public space: the philosopher discusses the collective appearance in mass manifestations of those heterogeneous lives that have been made unlivable, "those who experience their existence as imperiled" (95). Butler interprets this appearance as a plural and performative action,[29] where different, heterogeneous bodies cohere and ally, exerting a common right to political space and belonging. In more detail,

> the specific thesis of this book is that acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political. (9)

Her analysis also involves calling into question of those "reigning notions of the political" that concern political space. Butler identifies specific, implicit spatial regulations, that determine who can appear into public space and who cannot, who is part of "the people" and who is not. In her words,

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[29] Here Butler uses the notion of 'performativity' in analysing how embodied actions signify: she explores the performativity of the coming together of bodies and their actions, as they signify in a non-discursive manner. Butler argues that "the political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse" (2015, 8), as public gatherings signify in excess of discourse. Therefore, "the gathering signifies in excess of what is said, and that mode of signification is a concerted bodily enactment, a plural form of performativity" (8).

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the spatial organization of power [...] includes the allocation and restriction of spatial locations in which and by which any population may appear. [...] This view of the spatial restriction and allocation of who may appear – in effect, of who may become a subject of appearance – suggests an operation of power that works through both foreclosure and differential allocation. (86)

Therefore, power has a distinct spatial organisation that affects which bodies have the right to appear in public, by way of allocation and restriction. The notions of 'allocation' and 'restriction' as spatial operations of power are very close to Mbembe's discussion of the spatial qualities of the colony and the post-colony, as he identifies the entrapment of bodies into distinct locations as a feature of the colonial administration of space, for example thanks to a specific deployment of borders. Given the implicit "spatial organization of power" that operates through allocation and restriction, according to Butler the conflicting appearance into public space of bodies that are not supposed to do so is itself a political act of contestation of the spatial organisation of power. Moreover, the plural gathering of bodies in assemblies is already a means to realise public space, in that the alliance between bodies reclaiming the right to appear already constitutes a political gathering with a distinct performative dimension, one that speaks the right to appear in excess of, and previous to, discourse. In that, the bodies coming together create the very space of their coalition, at the same moment when they claim the right to appear politically. When bodies gather and act together in public spaces, they put into being the spaces and conditions of their appearance and, in doing so, they act politically, thus creating a new political subject. This collective appearance is therefore a morphogenic moment, in that it creates a new political body that was not there before.[30] Following Butler's analysis, mass manifestations in

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30 Activist Bree Newsome, who in April 2015 removed the confederate flag from the statehouse of South Carolina, stated that: "The image of me holding the unhooked flag went viral, and my name appeared in news stories across the world, but I was actually one of several activists and organizers who worked together to make the flag removal possible. Five days before the action, we huddled in a small living room. Half of us in the room had never met the other half before that evening and were brought together by a mutual friend. A small collective of people from various backgrounds and walks of life, we were multiracial with different gender and sexual identities, different faiths and varying political beliefs. What united us was a moral calling and a commitment to doing the right thing, recognizing the power we had as individuals coming together to act as one. With awareness of history and belief in a better future, we decided to attack a symbol of systemic racism with a direct action that symbolized its dismantling. We almost immediately settled on removing the flag, both as an act of civil disobedience and as a demonstration of the power people have when we work together" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/go-ahead-topple-the-monuments-to-the-confederacy-all-of-them/2017/08/18/6b54c658-8427-11e7-ab27-1a21a8e-

the streets and squares claim the public sphere and, in so doing, performatively produce it, by way of occupying and reconfiguring its environment. While collective actions in public spaces rest on already available supports, they also attempt to elaborate anew their function and, in so doing, reshape the space of politics.

Although Butler's reflections on this issue do not refer to activism on statues, as the author rather focuses on other examples of mass manifestations, such as the occupation of squares during the so-called 'Arab uprisings' or the Occupy movement in the US, it is possible to make them resonate with the reflections on the decolonisation of space and statues that we have reconstructed above.

While commenting on Arendt's notion of political space, Butler discusses the role of infrastructures for the possibility of appearance into public space: sometimes, the demands advanced during manifestations are those for platforms and infrastructures that would allow the appearance itself, for example when public goods face privatisation: "at such a point, the condition of the political is one of the goods for which political assembly takes place" (2015, 127).

In fact, the possibility to appear in political space

> depends upon the performative efficacy of creating a political space from existing infrastructural conditions [...] the space of appearance is never fully separable from questions of infrastructure and architecture [...] they not only condition the action, but take part in the making of the space of politics. (127)

In this sense, "the task is actually to let the infrastructure become part of the new action, even a collaborative actor" (127).

The collective appearance of bodies in public spaces is a struggle for the material conditions that make the political appearance of the bodies possible in the first place: a struggle for space to be the support of a political manifestation and appearance, that transforms preexisting infrastructures into a new actor, and a support for the new political subject to appear. From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the collective action performed over public statues precisely as a struggle over the spatial means of politics: an intervention to decolonise political space and make it accessible to the subaltern who occupies it. While statues are not, strictly speaking, infrastructures, they do affect public space and its livability, marking the access to public space and the belonging to it, as well as creating social meanings that are experienced in space, as we discussed above.

`006ab_story.html`). This account seems to give another empirical evidence to Butler's argumentation that the gathering together of previously unconnected lives can create a new political subject.

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On this basis, the intervention on public statues during mass manifestations can be interpreted in terms of creating the infrastructural conditions for the emergence of a new public and a new political space, one that is not already occupied and structured by a symbol of racist and colonial subjugation, but where social meaning and memory are oriented towards resistance and democracy.

In the course of this analysis, Butler reflects on the category of 'vulnerability' and the risks inherent in using it descriptively, namely, the risk that some subjects, most notably women, "become defined by their vulnerability", at the point that "the very problem that the description is meant to address becomes reproduced and ratified by the very description" (139). On the other hand, the fact that, under certain structural circumstances, certain groups of people are more exposed to vulnerability than others, is to be addressed. For this reason, Butler emphasises the opportunity "to think of vulnerability and agency together" (139), praising the view that

> women are at once vulnerable and capable of resistance, and that vulnerability and resistance can, and do, and even must happen at the same time. (141)

In this way, vulnerability does not designate a lack needing rescue, intervention, and protection from above, insomuch as something that can be productively mobilised in resistance, thus recognising agency and the capacity to resist to those who happen to be vulnerable, even to mobilise vulnerability in political terms.

In the previous sections, we discussed hooks' theorisation of the possibility of reworking the spatiality in which one is put into, in order to transform it into a new space in which one can begin to resist and develop a new sense of self. In this framework, the action on public monuments can be seen as a moment when people, gathering together, rework a spatiality that has been shaped by racist structures to exclude them from the domain of the political, and change it into the space of their very political appearance and resistance: in this political space, the symbols of oppression are put to rest, literally making space for a new political subject to emerge and signify. Hence, the subalternity and vulnerability of these subjects is what is mobilised in the first place, giving space to their politicisation, where the creation of a new political subject and a new political space go hand in hand.

6   Conclusion

In the first section of this article, we discussed the notion of 'subaltern space', with reference to the elaboration of the notion of 'subalternity' in the context of space-making during colonisation. We highlighted subaltern experiences of space in colonial and post-colonial contexts, discussing how post-colonial literature examines space as a feature in the subjugation of the colonised others. This understanding of subaltern space sheds light on space as an essential object of politics, highlighting the inequality of access to that public good that is space, in colonial and post-colonial times. Moreover, we discussed the material aspects of cultural and symbolic barriers, as well as the physical ones, that prevent access to public space. This understanding also explores a link that connects space to subjectivation, emphasising how the political construction of space and the multifarious processes of subjectivation go hand in hand, with particular reference to the creation of subaltern selves in, and through, subaltern spaces. On the other hand, we also discussed theoretical elaborations on the opportunity to rework space by way of changing its meaning and experience, notably in the case of hooks' re-signification of the notion and experience of the margin as "a site of radical openness", where to nurture resistance and develop another sense of oneself and one's community. Political space is to be acted upon to "disenclose" a formerly entrapped world, as Mbembe puts it, or to transform the meaning and experience of the space of one's oppression, rather than merely trying to escape it, as hooks had it. In particular, hooks' discussion of the margin explores how the self-understanding of being marginal provides the marginalised with a mode of seeing and knowing that is totally theirs, unavailable to the oppressors. Moreover, this special epistemic point of view allows the marginalised community to develop a strong sense of the self and solidarity. Therefore, hooks stresses the potentiality of the dispossessed to occupy their own place and elaborate a whole new knowledge of it, one that contributes to the creation of a distinct and empowering sense of self.

This analysis of space from a post-colonial perspective allowed us to address the question of activism on statues, arguing that statues are not irrelevant objects adorning streets and squares, but complex imbrications of the symbolic and the material, asymmetrically marking space and directly affecting the access to it, as well as the discursive construction of public meaning. Colonial statues are shown to be colonial spatial markers that act in our post-colonial present to exclude those whose oppression and subalternity they symbolise, contributing to making the access to public space unequal. In the case of university, discussed by Mbembe, Ahmed, and hooks, unequal access to public space is also the unequal access to education

and democracy. For these reasons, action on statues standing in public spaces, particularly in universities, is an action that works to decolonise and democratise that very space, to make it open to all and to decolonise knowledge itself.

However, in the first section we also discussed the problem of the representation of the subaltern, with particular reference to Spivak's questioning of the possibility of the subaltern being able to speak and make her voice heard, as opposed to being ventriloquised by intellectuals and misunderstood. In light of this problem, it is possible to ask if the movements against statues are, in fact, successful in giving representation to the oppressed while erasing the symbols of their subjugation. As we commented in the introduction to this article, the eventual removal of the statue of Rhodes at UCT has also been interpreted as a case of an institution's co-option of a radical movement and appropriation of its instances, by way of undertaking that very symbolic action the movement claimed for itself, thus diluting its radicality in an act of appropriation. Moreover, unlike the UCT case, several requests to remove the statues of colonial men have not been met at all, representation being denied to the subalterns, while their erasure from history and meaning-making was reaffirmed and ratified. In both cases, it is possible to wonder whether the subaltern has spoken at all, or rather if their voices have been ventriloquised by hegemonic power once more. At the same time, it is possible to ask if this is a reason to give up representation at all, and to renounce fighting against the markers of oppression. The important problematisation of the notion of subaltern representation that we have encountered requires caution and encourages critique, but it also pushes towards the elaboration of new strategies and actions for an empowering self-representation in space.

In the light of such discussion, we can address the problem of subalternity in space in relation to activism on colonial statues, dealing with the difficult problem raised by the very notion of subalternity, as that which, almost by definition, escapes representation. While subalternity escapes representation, and always runs the risk of being unheard, misunderstood, ventriloquised, or having its ends co-opted by power, on the other hand it also proves to be a useful concept in grasping the spatial mechanisms of power and the constitution of oppressed selves. For this reason, it is possible to suggest that, as far as distinct subaltern geographies have been identified and explored, distinct subaltern interventions in and on space are also to be recognised and addressed theoretically. The decolonial intervention on statues, whether through the removal or damage of a colonial symbol, as in the case of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, or through the demand for the construction of a new statue representing the resistance and empowerment of subaltern communities, as in the case of Ambedkar statues, can be interpreted as a moment in which subal-

tern subjects, in a struggle to act on the material means of their subjugation, intervene on the symbolic and material markers of public space, in order to unmask its unequal structures and unequal access, and challenge it in order to create a political space open to all and, in so doing, challenge their subjectivation as passive victims.

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