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HALLUCINATIONS

Thank you to the Ruth First committee for the invitation to speak tonight, and to all of you for coming through to be part of this process of reflection.

Running through the Whatsapp feeds of many of us in the student movement is the constant reference to *revolution*. *Revolution* peppers daily expressions of solidarity, discussions of national strategy, media interviews, and student activists' descriptions of their actions and motivations. This language of revolution, of comradeship and war, of tactic and strategy, runs deep in the political life of the student movement. It is in the mouths of RhodesMustFall students, anti-outsourcing student protesters in Tshwane, in the rallying of the new student Pan-Afrikanists. It is a striking fact that warrants some attention.

It warrants attention in particular because it is starkly contrasted by the quick dismissal of talk of revolution by an older generation of anti-apartheid activists. I have heard them say over and over again, 'we are not in a time of revolution', as they shake their heads, knowingly. Or they say, with certainty, 'you cannot justify such action because we are far from the conditions of revolution', 'it's not the time for this or that because we are already in democracy', 'we have already achieved liberation'. Or perhaps most earnestly, they say 'there is no *need* for revolutionary action because the laws and institutions of post-apartheid are sufficient.'

Quite simply – and this is what I wish to discuss tonight in relation to the question of rage and violence – *we are living in different times*. Or at least, our time is disjointed, out of sync, plagued by a generational fault line that scrambles historicity. The specter of revolution, of radical change, is in young peoples' minds and politics, and it is almost nowhere in the politics of the anti-apartheid generation. In fact, even as they criticised young people just five years earlier for being apathetic and depoliticized, they have now thought student activists misguided, uninformed, and *mad*.

You would think that it might be possible to resolve this difference in time by means of a careful reading of what is called the ‘objective conditions for revolution’: are we in fact in a time in which revolution is immanent? No matter the *subjective* experience of time – there must be a way of determining who has the better bearing on history, who can tell the time. What time *is* it? Yet to tell the time is a complex matter in this society. We are, to some degree, *post-apartheid*, but in many ways not at all. We are living in a democracy that is at the same time violently, pathologically unequal. Protest action against the government – huge amounts of it, what in most other places would signal the beginning of radical change – often flips into a clamour for favour from that very government. Our vacillations, contradictions and anachronisms are indication that what time it is, is open to interpretation.

I want to argue that the comrades I have worked with in the student movement are not so much mad as they are *time-travellers*. Or rather, that their particular, beautiful madness is to have recognised and exploited the ambivalence of our historical moment to push into the future. They have been working on the project of *historical dissonance*, of clarifying the untenable status quo of the present by forcing an awareness of a time when things are not this way. They have seen things many have yet to see. They have been experimenting with hallucinating a new time.

The first task in this hallucination has been to kill the fallacies of the present: to disavow, no to annihilate, the fantasy of the rainbow, the non-racial, the Commission (from the Truth and Reconciliation, to Marikana, and Heher...), even of liberation. The second task is to arrest the present. To stop it. To not allow it to continue to get away with itself for one more single moment. And when the status quo of the present is *shut down* the third task – and these have been the moments of greatest genius in student movement – is to open the door into another time. It is difficult to work on the future while the present continues apace. There has to be a measure of shut down in whatever form, for the future to be called.

One of the most important venues for this work on the future has been Occupation. Occupation by definition creates a new space-time. The RMF occupation of the UCT management building in March 2015 changed the building from Bremner Administration into Azania House. It occupied the time and space of university management that both shut

down UCT management's right to continue to oversee the incremental transformation of the university, and created the conditions for a vibrant intellectual space for imagining what could replace it. It was during this three-week occupation that RMF students clarified their vision of a future UCT, where campus was renamed and resignified with other statues, artworks and building names. Where black service staff were a part of the university community, not relegated to the dehumanising practice of outsourcing. They called for a lecture series of black staff only, generated new reading lists and discussed the future of admissions. They experimented with a different version of the classroom in their meetings and educational programme, where black experience, queer experience, trans experience, women's experience, became pedagogically valuable. Where the black student schooled the white professor. All meetings and seminars engaged both the theme or topic under discussion while at the same time engaging the ways in which power was working to silence and alienate certain people in the conversation, and amplify others voices. These sessions were chaired by students who tried to implement in the time of the occupation the philosophies and practices of the movement's three pillars: Black Consciousness, Pan Africanism and intersectionality. They called this work *decolonisation*.

At Wits University, the occupation of Senate House during the October Fees Must Fall shutdown turned it into Solomon Mahlangu House. Here too mass meetings, small group discussions and strategizing, experimented with the birthing of a different kind of praxis in the university. The character of the Wits protests differed from those at UCT because of the strong presence of party-political aligned students. What the occupation of Solomon House did was allow for the emergence of a non-aligned student politics, and an experimentation with politics beyond the party and the leader.

Solomon House became a place in which a different kind of democratic practice started to emerge as the politically aligned student leadership at the forefront of the protests was challenged. While protesting Wits students were asserting their right to be part of the planning and decision-making processes during the shutdown, they were also highlighting their discomfort with representative forms of democracy. This experiment with alternative forms of governance is of extraordinary importance in a country, indeed a world, in which government is by and large alienated from the people it is supposed to represent. Students began developing a critique not only of SRCs, but also of the representation of workers by

unions, the university community by senates and councils, and indeed the people by political parties. Perhaps one of the most important moments in this disruption and reimagining of existing orders of governance was the occupation of a Senate meeting by students and progressive staff, which served as an important claim on the political structures of the university, and on the taken-for-granted processes that reproduce the university in the interests of the status quo.

And throughout the student movement, of course, across the country, emerged a politics of *land*, which is an invocation of an older Pan Afrikanist politics, but put to use as a critique of post-apartheid reconciliation. ‘*Izwe Lethu!*’ [Our Land!] began as a quiet call in the movement, but has become emboldened, energising a politics of redistribution that slashes into the history of white capitalism as much as into the ANC’s class project, and calls out towards a more just future.

But the student occupations were resolutely, and often violently, evicted by our university managements, who could not – would not – see the worth of the work students were doing, and were intimidated by their tactics. University managements, far from behaving in the spirit of university autonomy, criticality and experimentation, have brought the practices of a securitizing state directly onto campuses. They have clamped down on protest and occupation, instituted legal proceedings against students, installed spy cameras, welcomed police and private security forces onto campus. At Wits, our management even brought out a 1959 Trespassing Act against its own students, and currently has in place an interdict against disruption and occupation that is seen by many as unconstitutional. In the name of ‘protecting the university’ they have closed down not only the university’s most important avant-garde, but also the very actors who could force the state to better fund our universities. They have miscast the student movement as an enemy to the university, when in fact it is one of its most valuable gifts. ‘But the students are violent’, they argue, ‘their strategies and methods are suspect. They are not *nice*’. Listen to Noam Chomsky on the student movement of 1968, the last time students shook the world:

I feel that the sharp challenges that have been raised by the student movement are among the few hopeful developments of these troubled years. It would be superficial, and even rather childish, to be so mesmerized by occasional absurdities

of formulation or offensive acts as to fail to see the great significance of the issues that have been raised and that lie beneath the tumult.... Only one totally lacking in judgement could find himself offended by ‘student extremism’ and not, to an immensely greater extent, by the events and situations that motivate it.¹

The stakes of the generational confrontation over the question of what time it is would be perfectly ordinary were it not for the fact that the generation now in control of the reigns of institutions, and of the state, control – indeed at present *own* – the narrative of struggle and liberation. This is what makes the fight awkward and its violence obscene. They are supposed to know better. And we are supposed to learn from them. But when they use their bullets and teargas at the Union buildings, when they spend their money on bringing private security companies on campus, when they interdict us and suspend us and bring their expensive lawyers to put us down, one can but infer that the anti-apartheid generation have become afraid of the future. Many in the anti-apartheid generation have become anesthetized to the possibility of another kind of society, another kind of future. They have become fatalistic, in their ‘pragmatism’, their ‘hybrid models’ and their evasiveness. In fact, it is *they* that are nihilistic, more so than even the Afropessimist students, who at least have the decency to recognise the ways in which the present remains captured by the violence of the past. We have to recognise that the ruling elite, and in that I include the managements of our universities, have lost the capacity to dream us, to move us, into a new time. For you cannot bring a trespassing act from 1959 against students and think you have any relevance for a more just future. They have become advocates of presentism, reduced to what the black feminist Audre Lorde calls ‘changelessness’. And they can no longer be trusted with the responsibility of the future. When they dismiss the student movement’s claim on the future, its experiment with time, when they belittle it, shoot it down, well, then pain becomes anger, anger becomes rage, even fire.

Rage does not emerge in any simple way out of colonial and apartheid violence, although that is its precondition. *The conduit for rage is awareness of another possible world in which that violence does not persist.* The glimpsing of a different way of being, a different kind of

¹ Chomsky. 2003 [1969]. ‘The function of a university in a time of crisis’ in *Democracy and Education*. New York: Routledge.

life is what animates anger. Panashe Chigumadzi at last year's Ruth First lectures gave an account of why the 'coconut' – a particular version of Du Bois's 'double consciousness' – has become such an important and radical figure in this generation. Mediating between worlds, exposed not only to different kinds of life but to the hostilities and hierarchies between them, the 'coconut' gains an awareness that sets in motion a set of antagonisms, refusals, pain and anger.

Time-travellers have a similar kind of doubling: a familiarity with the present, but a willful transgression into the future. The work of sensing the threads of a future world brings a hostility and a resentment to the present that cannot be easily put aside. I have witnessed first hand with many students in the movement the pain that the present causes. And it is not just the daily pain of the black condition. It is the pain that comes from being forced back into the present world after a premonition of a different one, like a trap, or a curse. Maybe this is why so many Fallists talk of suicide: it is the ultimate claim on escape from the present.

We are in the midst of an intense politics of time. It is not easy to accept the burden of a living, prefigurative politics. Immanence is difficult. The fear is intense, and the threat of failure is everywhere. How do we sit, collectively, in the middle of that discomfort, prepared to not know quite where we are going, but be convinced that we have to move?

Audre Lorde, implores us to understand the worth and the purpose of anger. In her words, 'Anger is loaded with information and energy.... Anger, *expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future*, is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification.'² And here, in Lorde's words, lies the challenge for the student movement. If we are to be custodians of a future that will have dismantled the violence of the past and its stubborn hold on the present, then we cannot get stuck in a politics of shut down. Shutting down is indeed necessary for the arresting of the present. But if we do not use the space that shut down grants to work, seriously, on our vision of the future, if we do not allow ourselves, too, to be challenged and pushed, to read, and talk to each other, to work out our strategies, to doubt, and to find a vision of a future world in which the many oppressions that beset this one are in sight, then the door that we have opened will be closed again.

² Lorde, Audre. 1981. 'The Uses of Anger: Women responding to Racism' in *SisterOutsider*.

May we live in a time of difficulty, of critical immanence, and always, always towards justice.