

Feminist Reflections on the Rhodes Must Fall Movement

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The year 2015 was undoubtedly one of the most memorable years for me in post-apartheid South Africa. Just six weeks short of the country's 21st-anniversary celebration of the advent of democracy, a movement that was to have a lasting impact on the history of the University of Cape Town (UCT), and the country, was brewing in the second-floor foyer of the Leslie Social Science Building. South Africa was in the year that marked two decades of a “rainbow nation”, a nation that was able to transcend the pain of racial segregation and discrimination to live together in peace and harmony. This was a year in which young people born post-1994 wore the badge of “Born Free” proudly because they were the generation that no longer had to bear the intergenerational pain and trauma of systematic exclusion and oppression. South Africa was “alive with possibilities” that were open to all.

The University of Cape Town is situated in the southwestern part of South Africa. Cape Town is considered one of the least transformed cities in the country, with very little shifting in it since the dawn of democracy. One of the clear indicators of the lack of transformation of the city is the very obvious white minority who occupy the majority in the city centre and industry. Other indicators include the rising levels of gentrification where people of colour are being pushed out of their homes to provide more of the expensive housing and recreational facilities for richer white occupants. Then there is the very prevalent spatial apartheid where Black people have remained within the peripheries of the city in townships that have seen little transformation since the end of apartheid.

So it is no surprise that the University of Cape Town would somehow be a reflection of the city it finds itself in and that it would be the site where calls for decolonisation would ring louder than before 1994. UCT, very much like the city of Cape Town, has lacked real transformation and has never imagined decolonisation as an institution. Higher education has always been a contested space in South Africa, particularly in former white universities. The

latter have played a key historical role in safeguarding colonial and Western education, and have constituted themselves as a place for white men to centre themselves as primary knowledge makers. Under apartheid, the universities took on a different but similar role of being a “creature of the state”. Although some fought for their autonomy from the state, the University remained a space that was exploited by the apartheid government as a tool to further its segregation and divisive rule.

Almost 21 years after the start of the journey towards democracy, the calls for a decolonised university and country began growing in the University of Cape Town. Students challenged the University on the number-obsessed transformation agenda that has yielded very little change. Black students spoke of the systematic exclusion that manifested itself through a Eurocentric curriculum, minimal staff transformation – where the majority of academics in senior positions and management were white – and, more shocking, that the University of Cape Town did not have a Black womxn¹ professor in 2015. Students also spoke about the physical and existential exclusion that manifested itself through the culture of the University, which creates comfort for white, middle-class, heterosexual students, and causes great discomfort for students who do not fit the mould. The names of buildings and symbols were also an aspect of exclusion. The statue of Cecil John Rhodes which occupied the centre of the campus was a representation of all of these things to the students and its removal became an important start to the decolonial project.

The story of the Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) movement is widely contested. Many people believe that #RMF began when a student threw faeces at the Rhodes statue as a form of protest against what the statue represented and how it contributed to the exclusion of Black students. That student was joined by many other students later that day. Many others argue that #RMF is the result of the prior intellectual work of several other students, years before, which finally reached its logical conclusion. The years leading up to the formation of #RMF were marked by students’ growing impatience with the University administration for its slow transformation of the University space as well as growing disaffection with the state of South African democracy and how it left many South Africans behind. Students at UCT began to engage with the importance of moving past the “rainbow nation” rhetoric. They argued that there was a need for discussions towards an Africanised, anti-racist and pro-poor South Africa.

In my opinion, #RMF tells the story of Black feminists, Black womxn, and queer people who brought the movement to life. Although many of the Black feminists had differing ideas on what decolonisation entails and on strategies for pursuing it, organising under #RMF gave us an opportunity to have conversations about decolonisation, what it meant to us, and how we could achieve it through our feminist politics. Although we never came to a complete consensus on ways to pursue decolonisation, we were in agreement that intersectionality would be an important part of crafting the praxis for decolonisation.

Historically, Black womxn and queer people have been erased from the history of movement-building and of liberation movements. Womxn have often been spoken of as supporters of the revolution, as nurturers and not as active participants. #RMF was a space where Black feminists, womxn and queer people actively organised, sustained the space, and were clear about being recognised for their very important contributions. We were determined to break the cycle of history silencing the voices of Black womxn, Black feminists and queer people.

On the 11th of March, 2015, the first meeting of the movement, fewer than ten people showed up. This presented an opportunity to come out of our enclaves of safety – to meet in our living rooms, homes and small lecture theatres at the University to reflect on our days, find solace in one another's presence and unite in conversation. The 12th of March was the day that Black students came together to unite around the banner of the Rhodes Must Fall movement. The first call of duty was the removal of the Rhodes statue. The second, and possibly more important, was the decolonisation of the University. Decolonising the University for us at the time meant challenging and ridding the University of its "inner Cecil John Rhodes". It meant confronting the institution on its racism and unapologetic exclusion.

We wanted to dispute the institutional racism that presented itself through the Eurocentric curriculum, the undervaluing of Black academics and their knowledge. We took this opportunity as Black feminists to contest the single-issue struggle. To us, the statue, and the University by extension, symbolised what bell hooks popularly coined as the "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy". We constantly felt undermined and undervalued because of our Blackness, our womxnness, our class positions and all the other struggles we brought with us. We were also challenged to think beyond limited

understandings of gender, sexuality as well as ableism, and to consider our cisgender privilege, our ableist prejudices and the many other bigoted opinions we held. That is what decolonisation meant: the killing or the purging of colonial ideas or principles that we perpetuated and used to oppress others. Decolonisation needed to be a way of life and not just a buzzword.

It is important to note that Black feminists, Black queer people, and Black womxn did not *ask* to be in the movement. We *started* the movement and, for that reason, the politics that dictated our lives and radicalised our existence had to be a part of the conversation. Being a Black feminist in South Africa and within the movement was never easy. Very often, we had to deal with being told that we are “Black first” and we should leave our gender issues and feminist politics at the door. We were told that feminism is unAfrican and we needed to stop appropriating Western ideals if we were serious about decolonisation. This obviously meant that we constantly had to defend our right to exist within the space, and for Black feminism to be taken seriously in the movement. During the drafting of the founding document on Friday, the 13th of March, with fewer than five womxn in a room littered with men, the discussion on Black feminism as a pillar of the movement was held with great discomfort. There was clear resistance from a group of comrades who had never had to be in a space where feminism was a guiding principle. As much as the discomfort grew, we were determined to educate those present about the importance of Black spaces that accepted Black people as whole human beings who should not have to choose which identity to bring into the movement.

The March 20th occupation of Bremner Building – renamed Azania House – was a radical and important point for the movement, and for us as Black feminists. Azania House was a rare moment; the three weeks of the occupation gave us a sense of what the decolonial project would be like. There were full days of rigorous learning and what felt like understanding. We opened a space for Black academics and intellectuals to come and share knowledge. We had different types of seminars, on subjects such as Black Consciousness, Femininities and Masculinities, Queerness, Black Feminism, and many other subjects. There were long nights of discussions and strategising. We were determined to understand this mighty project. Black feminists were not to be silenced, and we asserted our presence in the space. Black womxn and queer people led the space and the University of Azania became the place of refuge

for the knowledge and discussions rejected by a University that was centered on colonial knowledge and thinking.

One of the most important points in the movement was the formation of the Intersectionality Auditing Committee (IAC). The IAC was formed after a group of Black men left the #RMF space because many of them claimed that they joined the movement to organise against institutional racism, not to be distracted by “petty gender issues”. That moment was a cleansing of the movement and it was an important reality check for us. We needed to be honest about the work that still needed to be done but, more importantly, to recommit to educating ourselves about the depth of colonisation and its impact on our understandings of gender, culture, and socialisation. The formation of the IAC was a recommitment to the core values of the movement. As important as the IAC was, however, it unfortunately did not survive for the duration of the movement due to internal differences, including differences among committee members of the IAC. This was an indication of the hard work that lay ahead of us as Black feminists in the space.

The removal of the Rhodes statue was, of course, another critical point in the movement’s history. This moment was significant because of the work and effort it represented for many Black womxn and queer people who continuously gave to the movement, physically and intellectually. After many weeks of daily protest, occupations, performances and education, the University finally agreed to remove the statue. This day felt like it would never come and was very surreal. After a protest the night before at the University Council meeting, the institution’s highest decision-making body, and the very tense confrontation between students and Council, the announcement of the removal was almost surprising.

On the day the statue fell, 9 April 2015, more than 10,000 people showed up to watch this historic event. They comprised a mix of people who were happy to see the statue go and others who were there to mourn the “destruction of history”, as some called it. Many others were just spectators who were on neither side. A few minutes before the statue was lifted, a group of womxn and I stood in front of it, reflecting on the many weeks of organising, of occupation, teaching and learning about an intersectional space and supporting one another even when our ideas were being rejected. This day was a big victory for us all and also forced the world to remember the important work done by Black feminists at the University and in the country.

Apparently, the movement even received an email from Black Panther activist Assata Shakur, but we could never verify the message's authenticity.

The movement grew bigger and inspired the formation of #RhodesMustFall, Oxford, and many other movements like it. The Rhodes Must Fall movement was also very vocal and active in creating awareness around xenophobia, or what we refer to as "Afrophobia". In May 2015, South Africa experienced another wave of Afrophobic attacks. As a movement, we decided to embark on a protest outside the Home Affairs office in Cape Town, demanding a response and action from the Home Affairs minister against the Afrophobic attacks. We were met with hostility and got into a confrontation with the security guards. The Home Affairs officials refused to address us. We proceeded to march to parliament where we continued our day of action. The demonstration was successful in mobilising people and bringing attention to the seriousness of the Afrophobic attacks and the need for a solution. The protest was not easy and soon turned very volatile because of police harassment. The police used stun grenades and physically assaulted us. For many of us, it was the first of many days we would be contending with police brutality.

The many accomplishments of #RMF did not always translate into the movement space being inclusive. As the movement continued organising, the blind spots became more apparent. One of the biggest signs of the growing blind spots and contradictions in the movement was the setting up of the Trans Collective. This is a collective of transgender students who advocate for their safety and for space within the University and society. The Trans Collective's formation was an important point in our organising, because it forced us to reflect on the ways in which our work and organising was potentially excluding trans folks. As a movement that called itself intersectional and claimed to protect and represent all Black people, it was easy for us to claim particular bodies and to tokenise people unknowingly. To me, the formation of the Trans Collective was revolutionary because it challenged our laziness about educating ourselves on trans politics and what it meant to be allies to our comrades. The Collective's existence highlighted the limitations of our feminism and reminded us of the importance of intersectionality in the work we do.

#RMF was the first of what are now referred to as Fallist Movements. #RMF shaped the politics of Fallism and radicalised student politics at UCT. Throughout 2015, we organised around financial exclusions, the university

housing crisis and workers' demands. Two weeks before the start of Fees Must Fall, we organised a campaign called #October6 which was meant to be a day of action in a number of universities. The focus was on issues of outsourcing, worker benefits and the increasing inaccessibility of the University due to fee increases and exclusions. So when comrades at Wits University first organised around Fees Must Fall, it was only logical for us to adopt the programme as part of our organising at UCT.

As the #RMF movement transitioned into the Fees Must Fall (#FMF) movement – which called for free decolonised intersectional education in the country – the movement also transitioned into a more hostile space for Black feminists, Black womxn and queer people. Even with the endless attempts at educating and facilitating safer spaces, it became more and more violent to remain in the space. Black womxn and queer people had to deal with fighting police harassment and police brutality. They also had to contend with their fellow men comrades who refused to think beyond their patriarchy. Even worse, Black womxn and queer people were being sexually assaulted and threatened in the movement by other comrades. One morning at around 5:30 a.m., I received a call from a fellow womxn comrade asking for my help. Another womxn comrade of ours had been raped by a fellow man comrade. That moment was very difficult to deal with because it seemed that all the education and discussions on consent, rape culture and mutual respect meant nothing. By the end of 2015, we had five different womxn who shared their stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment by fellow comrades.

The movement was in crisis, and it became apparent that being part of it required a lot of physical, psychological and emotional labour. We had forgotten the principle of self-care as a vital pillar of our feminist work. This moment was also an indication to Black feminists to start organising and opening our own spaces. We had realised the power of our work and wanted to enact it in spaces that allowed for reflection and rectification.

#RMF was disbanded in mid-2016 after #Shackville, a campaign against the removal of students following the setting up of a shack on campus to symbolise the struggle for student housing and financial exclusions. Students were interdicted, suspended and expelled for actualising decolonisation. The impact that the Rhodes Must Fall movement had had in starting the conversation on decolonisation and symbolism was undeniable.

Even though the #RMF and #FMF movements claimed and still continue to claim intersectionality as a politics, the way the movement space translated into practice was in contradiction to feminist politics. The decay in the movement was often at the expense of Black womxn and queer people. The numerous challenges were valuable lessons to many of us and further asserted the importance of ensuring that the spaces we occupy are inclusive and attuned to the intersectional workings of power.

The revolutionary work of Black feminists who occupied and gave the Rhodes Must Fall movement life will remain in the hearts and minds of those of us whose lives have been changed by their neverending work. I have had the fortune of being a part of this movement; having learned from many feminist leaders, it would be a disservice to them not to honour their great work through writing and conversation. I commit myself to immortalising this revolutionary work and forcing it into the timelines of history through writing and sharing stories of the tremendous feminist activism embodied in the Rhodes Must Fall movement.

Endnotes

- 1 Womxn is a more inclusive term than “woman” or “women”. It is meant to shed light on the prejudices that womxn have to face on a daily basis, which include racism, sexism, transphobia and patriarchy, just to name a few.