

#RhodesMustFall: Decolonization, Praxis and Disruption

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Introduction

On March 9, 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, took a bucket of feces and threw it against a bronze statue of Cecil John Rhodes located on the university's campus (Nyamnjoh 2016). Rhodes, who was recognized as a British imperialist and racist, became a symbolic focal point for #RhodesMustFall (RMF) - a radical student movement centered on the decolonization of education by confronting questions of institutional racism, access to education, and reforming the university curriculum (Gibson 2016; Luescher 2016; Mbembe 2016). Maxwele's defacement of the Rhodes statue fueled an ongoing national debate on decolonization and the cost of higher education that had started in the early 2000s (Booyesen 2016). Protests at universities across South Africa erupted following the defacement of the Rhodes statue expanding RMF into the #FeesMustFall (FMF) movement which has demanded free, quality, decolonized education (Booyesen 2016; Hefferman and Nieftagodien 2016, Luescher, Klemenčič and Jowi; Motala, Vally, and Maharajh 2016).

The RMF movement seeks to decolonize education by employing tactics of disruption inspired by decolonial, black consciousness and intersectional theories (Booyesen 2016; Gibson 2016; Pithouse 2015). At the same time, the RMF paradoxically rejects human rights discourses in its Mission Statement (Kamanzi 2016, Maxwele 2016; RMF 2015) despite the well-established link between social movements and human rights (RMF 2015; Cohen and Rai 2004; Niezen 2003; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Instead, the RMF draws on Biko's (1978) ideas of black consciousness, Fanon's (1963) decolonization thesis, and Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory, framing their struggle as a resistance to the dehumanization of black people which they argue "is a violence exacted only against black people by a system that privileges whiteness" (RMF 2015). The RMF's adoption of decolonial theories and its explicit rejection of rights discourses, forms the first dimension of this paper located within scholarship centered on social movements and human rights (Allen and Jobson

2016; Urla and Helepololei 2014; Goodale 2006; Ballard, Habib and Valodia 2006; Ballard, Habib, Valodia, and Zuern 2005; Niezen 2003; Escobar and Alvarez 1992).

A few weeks after the RMF movement started at the University of Cape Town, students at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom also created a RMF movement using the Rhodes statue located at Oriel College as a symbolic reference point in their call for decolonizing education (Mpofu-Welsh 2016). Similarly, the RMF in Oxford invokes decolonial and intersectional approaches on its Facebook page (RMF Oxford 2015) and calls for the removal of the Rhodes statue in Oxford on change.org, drawing directly on the RMF Cape Town movement's success in eventually ensuring the removal of the Rhodes statue from the University of Cape Town (RMF Oxford 2015b). Consequently, it appears that student leaders at the University of Oxford were inspired by the RMF movement in Cape Town. This flow of knowledge and ideas from the global South to the North - from the colonized to the colonizer - constitutes the second dimension of this paper located primarily within postcolonial scholarship (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006, 2011, Mbembe 2001; Mamdani 1996; Chatterjee 1993; Abu-Lughod 1990).

Three related questions guide this inquiry: (i) how does the RMF movement draw on theory to inform its disruptive tactics? (ii) why does the RMF adopt specific theoretical frameworks, namely, decolonization, black consciousness and intersectionality, and expressly reject human rights discourses? (iii) to what extent has the RMF movement's adoption of particular theories and tactics in Cape Town, influenced the formation of the RMF movement in Oxford?

Methods

This paper analyzes the theories and tactics employed by the RMF movements in Cape Town and Oxford through interviews with three of the prominent members involved in both movements. Given the various factions within the RMF movement, the

limited number of interviews conducted with Chumani Maxwele (2016), Ntokozo Qwabe (2016) and Brian Kamanzi (2016) may skew the perspective offered in this study. Consequently, interviews are supplemented by references to public statements released by the RMF in Cape Town and Oxford, as well as scholarly analysis of the student movement.

From Theory to Practice

The RMF movement seeks to decolonize education by employing tactics of disruption inspired by postcolonial theory, black consciousness and intersectionality (RMF 2015). At the same time, the RMF paradoxically rejects human rights discourses despite the well-established link between social movements and human rights (Goodale 2009; Cohen and Rai 2004; Niezen 2003; Rajagopal 2003; Keck and Sikkink 1998). The student protestors I interviewed characterized their adoption of Steve Biko (1978) and Frantz Fanon's (1963) theories on the one hand, and their rejection of human rights discourses on the other, as a recognition of the continued existence of "black pain" and a deliberate rejection of whiteness (Maxwele 2016). The RMF movement defines "black pain" in their Mission Statement released on Facebook as "the dehumanisation of black people" (RMF 2015). This dehumanization lies at the heart of their struggle located at the University of Cape Town and is seen as "a violence exacted only against black people by a system that privileges whiteness" (RMF 2015). The RMF movement expressly defines black people as "all racially oppressed people of colour" and adopts this definition recognizing "the huge differences that exist between [these race groups]" (RMF 2015).

In his analysis of the RMF movement, Francis Nyamnjoh (2016) suggests that black pain and white privilege are two sides of the same coin and that consequently, these notions cannot be disentangled. This approach seems to be reflected in the RMF Mission Statement which finds that, "this movement flows from the black voices and black pain that have been continuously ignored and silenced" (RMF 2015). But Achille Mbembe (2015) has questioned the students' reliance on pain, suffering and whiteness to frame their demands suggesting instead that whiteness must be demythologized, failing which, whiteness may inadvertently be reinforced by black students. In addition, while Nigel Gibson (2016) recognizes that the RMF draws on Fanon (1963) to make sense of South Africa's socio-economic and political climate, he asserts that "South Africa is not the postcolony that Fanon is writing about" (p. 2).

Despite the apparent contradictions within the student movement of firstly, reinforcing black pain by mythologizing whiteness, and second, relying on Fanon's postcolony to make sense of post-apartheid South Africa, Mbembe (2015) and Gibson (2016) both characterize the student protests as South Africa's "Fanonian moment." They define this moment as a replacement of the "old politics of waiting" with "a new politics of impatience, and if necessary, of disruption" (Mbembe 2015 cited in Gibson 2016, 8). This new politics is reflected in the RMF movement's Mission Statement which includes extensive quotes from Biko (1978) to argue for a student movement that is deliberately black and that welcomes the participation of white students "so long as that participation takes place on our terms" (RMF 2015).

This strategy of creating a black centered movement that limits the participation of white students, flows directly from black consciousness theory and demonstrates how theoretical frameworks shape social movements, and more specifically, how the RMF enacts and embodies theory through praxis. In addition to drawing on black consciousness, the Mission Statement also refers to an "intersectional approach" (RMF 2015). The RMF movement defines this approach as one that "takes into account that we are not only defined by our blackness, but that some of us are also defined by our gender, our sexuality, our able-bodiedness, our mental health, and our class..." (RMF 2015). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality denotes the various ways social forces interact to shape the multiple dimensions of experience and reflects the notion of "interlocking oppressions" (Collins 1990) such as race, class and gender. Intersectionality implies that race cannot be separated from other inequality structures such as gender, ethnicity and class; instead, they intersect and shape each other. These theories appear to contribute to the formation of a collective identity among student activists who draw on black consciousness to develop the idea of black pain, while simultaneously extending this idea through intersectional theory.

At the same time, Richard Pithouse (2015) has warned that "Fanon's name is frequently mobilised as if it carried the kind of authority, sometimes theological or prophetic rather than philosophical or political, that can be deployed to end rather than to enrich a debate" (p. 9). In the context of the RMF movement, where factionalism and divisions emerged shortly after its inception (Nyamnjoh 2016), invoking Fanon or Biko is not only a way of determining strategy and tactics, but may also be used as a mechanism for privileging certain voices above others.

The Movement Away from Human Rights

The RMF movement's Mission Statement only makes one reference to human rights in its critique of the South African constitution's conception of racism. According to the RMF, the constitution "has systematically been used to deter irrepressible urges by black South Africans to challenge racism and violence" (RMF 2015). The Mission Statement goes on to offer a specific example of this constitutional deterrence by criticizing the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) decision to deem the racially exclusive membership policy of the Forum for Black Journalists unconstitutional.

The SAHRC is an independent constitutional body established to monitor, protect and promote human rights, whereas the Constitutional Court is the highest authority on the interpretation and implementation of human rights in South Africa (Constitution, 1996). In an analysis of the SAHRC decision, constitutional law expert Pierre de Vos (1998) found the Commission's treatment of the racially exclusive membership of the Forum for Black Journalists "slightly surprising" since the Constitutional Court adopts a more nuanced approach to racial discrimination. De Vos (1998) disagrees with the SAHRC decision arguing that the constitution's prohibition of unfair discrimination allows for differentiated treatment in certain instances.

Consequently, while the RMF's critique of the SAHRC decision is supported by scholars such as De Vos (1998), Brian Kamanzi, one of the leading figures in the RMF movement, offers a further explanation for the rejection of human rights. During an interview with Kamanzi (2016), he indicated that when the question of human rights was raised at an open dialogue hosted by the RMF movement, one of the participants suggested that because black people are not seen as human beings, human rights do not apply to black people. This argument appears to reflect Fanon's (2008) writing in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "...a Black is not a man" (p. xii). Since human rights are intrinsically connected to humanness, the arguments presented by student activists about the dehumanization of black people, offer an important critique of human rights.

Nyamnjoh (2016) also believes that abstract formulations of human rights cannot address South Africa's post-apartheid transition, and that the RMF movement's demands are a reflection of the limitations of rights discourses. Legal scholars such as Makau Mutua (2004), suggest that in the "Age of Rights" following the Second World War, South Africa "represents the first deliberate and calculated effort in history to craft a human rights state..." (p. 126). Mutua

(2004) however, finds that South Africa's incorporation of human rights discourses into its constitution was a "mistake" (p. 128). Citing Ibrahim Gassama, Mutua (2004) believes that South Africa's mistake was failing to recognize that human rights can be used by the privileged white minority to protect their economic status as the holder of significant private property rights. These arguments are echoed by student protestors in the RMF movement and may offer further explanations for their rejection of rights discourses.

Despite these critiques, the RMF movement's denunciation of human rights discourses seem counter-intuitive because of the link between social movements and human rights more generally. Employing human rights language could strengthen claims for access to education; a right that is explicitly contained in South Africa's constitution. This rejection of rights discourses in a country described as "a human rights state" (Mutua 2004), may symbolize a denunciation of South Africa's post-apartheid transition to democracy and the politically negotiated, human rights based constitution.

Theory from the South

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2012) pose the following paradox: while the North is often thought to determine social and historical trends, it is the global South that increasingly appears to prefigure these trends and export them to Euro-America. Furthermore, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) argue that the global South is the driving force of theoretical and social trends by reversing the flow of power/knowledge from local to global. The dominant belief that the South is a late arrival to modernity, is therefore not an adequate way of understanding the role played by the global South. Consequently, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) assert that it is the South that first feels the effects of global forces and the South that first decodes them theoretically and innovates political responses to them - all of which are then exported to the global North. This argument could potentially extend to the RMF movement's attempts to decolonize education at the University of Cape Town and its subsequent exportation of ideas and knowledge to the University of Oxford.

Based on my interview with one of the student leaders at the University of Oxford, students at Oxford were inspired by the RMF movement in Cape Town and constructed their call for the removal of the Rhodes statue at Oriel College on similar demands made by students in Cape Town (Qwabe 2016). The

RMF Oxford Facebook page describes itself as a “movement determined to decolonise the space, the curriculum, and the institutional memory at, and to fight intersectional oppression within, Oxford” (RMF Oxford 2015). Furthermore, the RMF Oxford movement’s petition published on change.org, makes specific reference to the removal of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, and expressly “supports and continues this vital work by looking to critically interrogate the colonial relations on which Oxford University is founded... We see no reason why here, at the heart of the High Street, at the heart of Oxford, Rhodes cannot also fall” (RMF Oxford 2015b).

At the same time, the strategies used by the Oxford students differ to some degree from the Cape Town students in that white students at the University of Oxford were not excluded by the RMF Oxford movement in the same way that white students’ participation was limited at the University of Cape Town. Furthermore, while tactics of disruption were used extensively by the RMF Cape Town activists, the tactics employed by the RMF Oxford students were primarily constructed around protest marches, debates and public gatherings. It is therefore interesting to note how shared theoretical approaches adopted by student movements can result in the employment of distinctive strategies depending on contextual differences. Furthermore, while the Rhodes statue was eventually removed from the University of Cape Town, it remains standing at Oxford. Student movements that adopt similar ideological approaches, may nevertheless employ varying strategies based on their local contexts, inevitably resulting in alternative outcomes.

Despite these differences between the RMF movements in Cape Town and Oxford, it could be argued that the Comaroffs’ (2012) theory from the South is reflected in the transfer of knowledge and ideas from the global South to Euro-America. It is evident that RMF Oxford was inspired by RMF Cape Town. Furthermore, both movements are centered around the removal of the Rhodes statue as a symbol for addressing institutional racism, curriculum reform and the under-representation of black students and faculty.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to provide an overview of the RMF movement by firstly, considering how the radical student movement converts theory into practice and second, how the movement at the University of Cape Town influenced the formation of, as well as strategies

employed by RMF Oxford. While some examples are offered demonstrating how the RMF movement interprets Biko (1978) and Fanon’s (1963, 2008) theories and converts them into practice, limited academic scholarship makes it difficult to properly interrogate this form of praxis. It is uncertain for instance how factionalism within the RMF movement has affected the interpretation and application of theories. In addition, there seems to be no scholarship on how the RMF movement incorporates an intersectional approach, making it particularly hard to analyze how the idea of praxis manifests beyond the application of theories articulated by Fanon and Biko.

Furthermore, while it is evident that the RMF Oxford movement drew inspiration from student activists at the University of Cape Town, it remains uncertain whether Fanon and Biko’s theories were interpreted in the same way by the two student movements. Based on the information currently available, it appears that the strategies employed by student activists in Oxford differs markedly from those employed in Cape Town in certain respects. However, many of the demands made by the students in Cape Town and Oxford share strong similarities. At the same time, this paper offers a compelling case for further research that takes into account the insights and opinions of the students who were actually involved in the RMF movement since these voices are often marginalized in academic scholarship. This future research could contribute to a deeper understanding of the RMF movement as well as to a more nuanced understanding of social movements concerned with decolonizing higher education.

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