# Fallism ten years on

Reflections on the impact of the Rhodes Must Fall movement

By Shose Kessi

Cape Town University students' 2015 call to remove Cecil John Rhodes' statue launched Fallist movements worldwide and unleashed a new wave of decolonial intellectual thinking. PROFESSOR SHOSE KESSI writes it placed questions of black identity, radical feminism, unity, and self-determination at the centre of contemporary social movements for social justice.
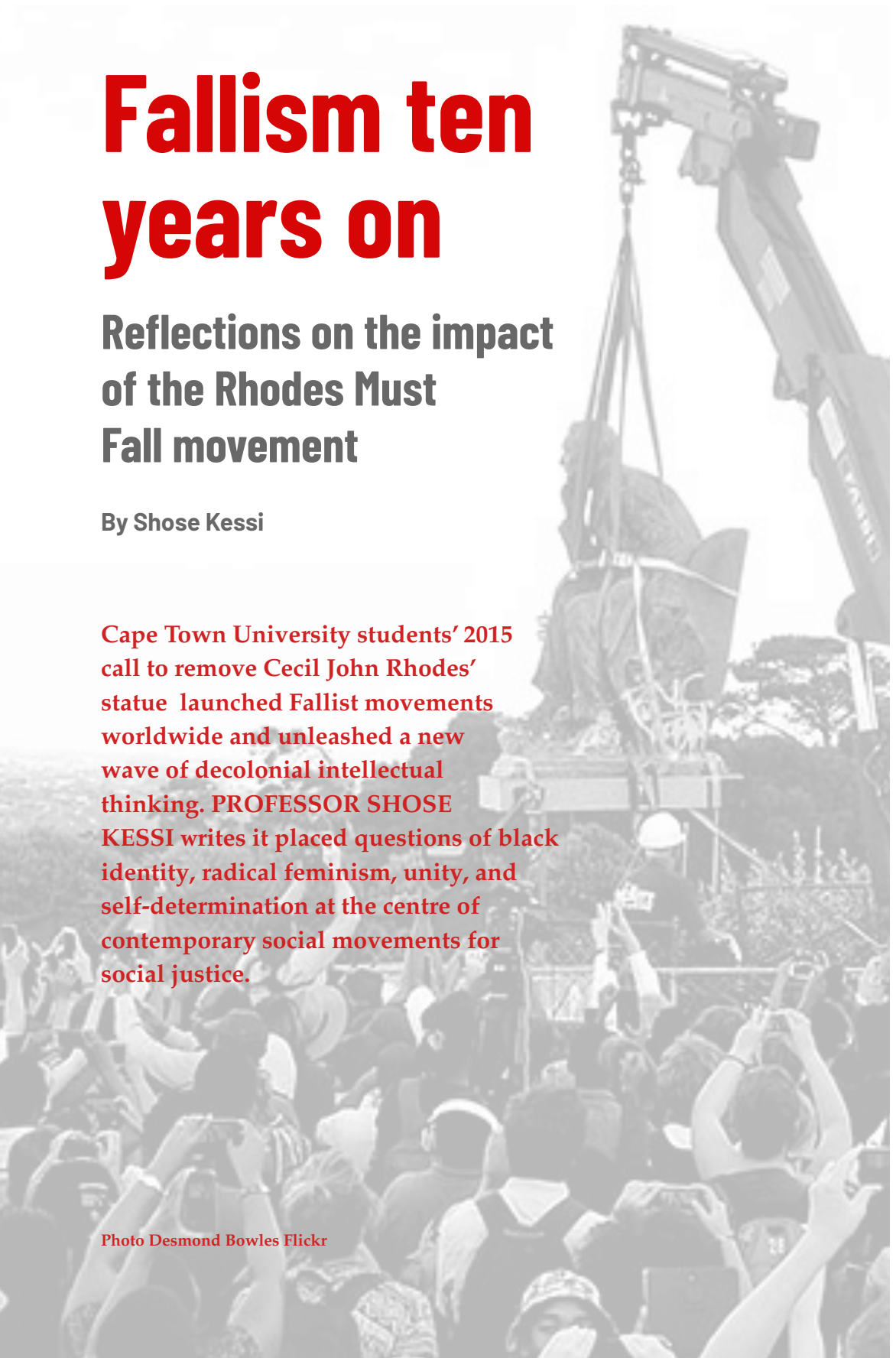
O n 9 April 2025, I had the privilege of delivering the keynote address at the University of Cape Town's (UCT) 10th year anniversary event commemorating Rhodes Must Fall (RMF), a landmark movement in the history of the university that had an impact on higher education in South Africa and in the rest of the world. The event was hosted at UCT's Centre for African Studies, which was a generative space for RMF students 10 years ago and one that continues to produce critical scholarship in the academy. This paper is an extended version of my keynote address enriched with added theoretical grounding as well as a commentary on some of the intellectual shifts that have emerged in higher education post RMF. The focus is on contextualising black students' affective and embodied experiences of racialisation at UCT and how these were expressed during RMF in ways that have contributed to the resurgence of a decolonial intellectual movement.

The 2015 fallist movements started at UCT with calls to remove the statue of Cecil John Rhodes (CJR). Occurring two decades after South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, this renewed energy towards the decolonisation of higher education was a contemporary expression of resistance to colonial legacies including the extant Eurocentric foundations of our institutions, which, as Ali Mazrui (2005) once described, were originally designed to expand cultural westernisation on the continent. Previous movements that emerged in African universities in the three decades following independence (1950s-1970s) had already challenged the misrepresentations of Africa as backward and uncivilised, highlighting the role of European colonialism and imperialism in the destruction of Africa's development, as well as the epistemic violence and complicity of Eurocentric knowledge in global politics (see Tella & Mosala, 2020).

Nearly three quarters of a century since the first decolonial movements in African universities, the fallist movements reminded us that many of these debates are not only still relevant today but also necessary. While some advances have been made, some of which the article will cover later, one could also argue that the slow pace of change in our institutions is indicative of the multi-layered and multi-dimensional legacies of colonialism and its pervasiveness in all aspects of our lives from the structural to the psychological and to the bodily resurfacing in our everyday behaviours and relationships.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) provides critical insights on why the legacies of colonialism are difficult to overcome. He reflects on the

magnitude of a colonial system designed to dominate not only materially but to subjugate people, their history and psyches, and denying them the status of being fully human. Frantz Fanon describes colonial imperialist conquest as the most violent encounter in modern history in large part because of the dehumanisation of the colonial subject (Fanon, 1967a). In a similar vein, Aimé Césaire states that "colonialism is thingification," a process which resulted in "(…) societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot" (Césaire, 2000, p.42–43), also captured in Maldonado-Torres' (2007) treatise on the coloniality of being. Given the deeply inner psychical and non-material character of such ontological questions, it is not surprising to see their contemporary resurgence in fallist rhetoric. The concept of 'epicoloniality' (Kessi et al., 2020) is useful in trying to grasp the magnitude of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni refers to. As societies evolve, systems of domination become more sophisticated and everyday forms of dehumanisation become less visible and more difficult to detect, yet these knowledges remain in our minds and bodies and are reenacted in everyday life.

Everyday manifestations of epicoloniality are occurrences that may not necessarily be directly related to colonialism but are nevertheless unmistakable traces of colonial relations of power. Such traces are evident in historically white universities in South Africa. When I joined UCT in 2011, the university was in the midst of a debate on affirmative action and whether to do away with 'race' as a proxy for disadvantage in our admissions policy given the growing numbers of black students having access to university since 1994. The popular discourses circulating in the media around this debate were highly stigmatising and described the increasing numbers of black students entering UCT as overcrowding the university and bringing down the standards of academic achievement (see Kessi, 2013; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). These racialising images were a reflection of the institutional culture of the university which, although it had opened its doors to black students, was still marked by deeply embedded patterns of institutional racism reflective of its historical whiteness. Even though black students had *access* to the institution, their presence within it was 'pathologised' presenting them as 'the problem'.

This situation led me to conduct an extensive participatory action research project using photovoice methods on the experiences of black students at UCT. Over a three-year period between 2013 and 2015, I collected written stories and photographs taken by students describing their affective experiences of the institution (see Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Cornell et al., 2016; Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Kessi, 2018). What I found was that the impact of institutional racism on black students was severe and

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

led to various forms of psychological challenges affecting students' sense of self, leading to severe forms of stress and depression that hindered their academic performance, findings that have been corroborated by international literature on prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination in higher education (Tileagă et al., 2022).

Some students in my study described these affective experiences as the first time they 'felt black'. 'Feeling black' was a metaphor for the ways in which affective and psychical manifestations of colonialism and apartheid surfaced, often in subtle ways, in their everyday lives on campus. Students described the segregation in classrooms with different sections being named after Cape Town locations: the *Camps Bay* area at the front of the class was where white students would sit, Coloured and Muslim students would sit in *Mitchells Plain* and black students at the back of the class in *Khayelitsha*. Such a construction of segregated spaces at the university indicated a deep entrenchment of race, space and subjectivity. Students also spoke of many forms of micro-aggressions, such as reluctance from other students to include them in group work, additional scrutiny in assessments, subtle expressions of surprise from others when they got good marks. Wealth differences were also apparent when one student recounted her experience of sitting in class next to a young man who would arrive at UCT every day in his Porsche Boxster that could pay for her entire fees from undergraduate to PhD and some... and that she was expected to sit there every day and pretend that everything was normal!

Students referred to the problematic monuments and artifacts displayed around campus and the names of buildings which reified a colonial aesthetic; the advantage of having English as a mother-tongue; the content of their textbooks and curricula that advantaged white experiences; and the over-representation of white scholars amongst academic staff, all of which contributed to the exclusion of their own knowledge and capabilities. Many stories reflected how experiences of 'feeling black' were also complicated by intersecting identities. Students of non-conforming gender and sexual identities felt isolated and invisible and described experiences of homophobia, having no adequate access to bathrooms, having student cards that didn't reflect their identities, and the daily discomfort of having to conform to the culture of single sex residences. 'Feeling black' at university was thus coloured by other factors, such as class, sexual and gender diversity.

These daily experiences left students feeling that they didn't belong and were a constant reminder of not being on a level playing field with their white counterparts. 'Feeling black' in this case should be understood as an affective experience of marginalisation, exclusion and alienation. During the RMF movement, black students referred to 'black pain' to describe this affective experience with many illustrations of the visceral responses and rage that it evoked. The throwing of human excrement by student activist Chumani Maxwele on the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on 9 March 2015, the incident that marked the beginning of RMF, was a poignant response to 'collective disgust' and collective 'black pain' (Nyamnjoh, 2015). The 'poo' was sourced from a portable toilet on the Cape Flats designed to juxtapose the white privileged establishment with the shame of township life on its doorstep expressed through "the material indignity of (easily available) shit" (Mpendukana, 2021, p.33). Sibonile Mpendukana explains this act as follows:

> "Above all (…), it is the origins of the human excrement – where it was sourced and the political and socioeconomic space of lost hope and encroaching disillusion within which portable toilets are framed that carries the force of the action. The material presence of the poo accentuated the vulnerability of Black subjects as people unable to remove their bodies and wastes from public scrutiny. Furthermore, to lay the excrement of the poor at the feet of opulence and dominant moral standards creates a mirror-image moment of the macro processes that otherwise define the country. It is a suggestive gesture that pokes the failings of democracy and brings the two worlds into contact – a literal moment of shit spilling into colonial heritage and white privilege". (Mpendukana, 2021, p. 34)

Human excrement has also been used historically as a form of violence towards enslaved people. A punishment, the "Derby's dose", invented by slave owner Thomas Thistlewood, was particularly brutal and sadistic involving defecation in the mouths of slaves (Burnard, 2004) and I cannot help to think of Maxwele's act as both a symbolic and literal regurgitative recovery from embodied trauma. In my inaugural lecture commemorating the 10-year anniversary of RMF entitled: *S#*t Happens: A Decolonial Feminist reflection on Institutional Racism in Higher Education,*[1] I employed similar imagery to foreground the centrality of the body, the brutality, pain, rage and disgust in explaining the resurfacing epicolonial manifestations of historical trauma.

Mpendukana draws on Fanonian notions of black re-subjectification as a way of reclaiming the identity of the black subject through such acts of resistance. Black re-subjectification speaks to how these deep-seated affective experiences erupt as forms of protest and recovery. It is important to note, however, that resistance strategies in contexts of whiteness are never straightforward. The UCT students who participated in my study employed multiple and complex strategies. For example, students often assimilated into the dominant culture by taking on certain cultural practices, such as modifying their language and changing their accents, befriending and engaging in the activities of white students. One student told me that when he started making friends with his rugby teammates his marks started to improve because he no longer felt like an outcast in the classroom amongst his white friends.

Such strategies hint at Fanon's treatise that blackness only exists in juxtaposition to whiteness and vice-versa (Fanon, 1967b), highlighting black re-subjectification as the simultaneous disruption of racial dichotomies. But these strategies led to difficult dynamics amongst black students, some of whom were accused of being 'coconuts' or other similar derogatory labels, which then created additional layers of marginalisation. In order to protect their self-worth, some students would understandably distance themselves from the transformation project and specifically the affirmative action debate as one that applied only to "other" black students. Others would claim their experiences of marginalisation in the institution as more legitimate, in other words, their blackness as more authentic (Nyamnjoh, 2017).

These complicated identity dynamics meant that black students, in addition to their academic requirements, had to find strategies for coping and relating to each other. They had to put in the extra effort to fit in, to prove themselves, to defend their right to be at UCT and to defend

their blackness. Any student studying under these circumstances was carrying significant additional labour just to get by. They carried the guilt of being made to feel that, as black students, they were taking the place of white students (through accusations of overcrowding and reverse racism emanating from the affirmative action debate). At the same time they shouldered the burden of transformation, knowing that their presence and contributions were fundamental to changing the institution and thus feeling the pressure to succeed academically. It is not surprising that under these circumstances, these racial dynamics coupled with the gender and class dynamics mentioned previously often culminated in internal conflicts and relational difficulties between black students themselves. Black re-subjectification, as an embodied and affective process, is only possible if it demystifies essentialising ideas of blackness with the potential to advance more nuanced subjectivities and inclusive knowledges.

A key critique of the racial dynamics of the RMF movement was the excessive focus on black suffering as a form of exclusionary politics (Mbembe, 2015). Be that as it may, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that black students' affective and embodied experiences were generative of critical intellectual transformations, calling for the decolonisation of the academy as a place of disruption and healing. In a panel debate on decolonisation organised by the former Dean of Humanities, Prof Sakhela Buhlungu, in 2015, one panellists, Ntebaleng Morake remarked:

> *"We are tired. We are angered and we cannot continue to live and learn in a space that denies us of our existence. We cannot continue to be treated as merely anonymous black faces without a history, because we have a history. And that history did not begin when white colonialist men robbed us of our dignity. It did not begin when they cornered us with their guns and stole our land. It did not begin with slavery and colonialism, nor did it begin with apartheid.*

> *"We are enraged because this single story of history that positions whiteness as triumph that UCT so chooses to articulate is gigantically undermining to black pain. It bluntly states that here, on this campus, built with the sweat of our people, our pain and lives do not matter; for UCT treats us and the pain carelessly printed on our folded black foreheads as a negation of whiteness.*

> *"We are enraged and we demand that our campus be decolonised, because this too is our space."* (UCT Newsroom, 2015)[2]

...academics across the institution have made many strides in transforming curricula and pedagogical practices that subvert Eurocentric archetypes.

I choose to emphasise the strength of RMF in bringing black students together in solidarity and mobilising a diverse campus community to advocate for the fall of the Rhodes statue. By drawing on their own experiences and relating these to theories of Pan-Africanism, black consciousness and radical black feminism, the movement tried its best to build a common agenda by navigating through these relational identity dynamics that ultimately inspired many other fallist campaigns.

At UCT, white students got involved through the *Disrupting Whiteness* collective. On one occasion, they formed a human shield between black students and the police during one of the more intense confrontations of the protests. Different groupings started sprouting, such as the black radical feminists and the Transcollective, calling for a more inclusive and intersectional consciousness of black identities. UCT's Black Academic Caucus also found expression as a result of the RMF movement with many of its members driving curriculum and aesthetic changes and ensuring that African-centred scholarship, which we had been long advocating for, was finally recognised as central to the academic project. During the student occupation of the main administrative building, which was renamed Azania House at the hight of the protests, we got a glimpse of the work of black academics from UCT and elsewhere who came to engage students through a ground-breaking conversation series. A critical achievement of the movement which is often overlooked was the insourcing of workers, enabling working class employees job security but also the promise of access to UCT for their family members that would further contribute to the changing demographics of our student body.

The national impact of RMF reverberated across the city and the country. At least 20 statues were defaced in 2015 including King George V at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Paul Kruger in Pretoria and the Gandhi statue in Johannesburg amongst many others.[3] Open Stellenbosch

produced the very moving *Luister* documentary, and protests at the university currently known as Rhodes broke out followed by significant work done to address gender-based violence in higher education. The University of Pretoria launched the Afrikaans Must Fall campaign and Steyn Must Fall was formed at the University of the Free State.

In their 2024 article, Daniel and Platzky Miller (2024) refer to Must Fall protests in Malawi, Senegal, Ghana, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States highlighting the global and transnational impact of the movement, specifically Gandhi Must Fall at the University of Ghana, Royall Must Fall at Harvard and Faidherbe Must Fall in Senegal. These examples demonstrate that what the RMF movement sparked was monumental – they set the scene for the Fees Must Fall protests and the national shutdown of universities in South Africa followed by global initiatives calling for change. This and future anniversaries should do justice to the gift that our students left us and the rest of the world through the enduring legacy of their critical intellectual insights and disruptions.

Fallism ten years on

At UCT, we have come a long way since the removal of the CJR statue on 9 April 2015 with considerable demographic change, curriculum change, insourced workers, renamed buildings, new artworks, gender neutral toilets, gender non-prescriptive student cards among some of the victories. Every year, UCT hosts a decolonial summer school that brings together students and local and international scholars to regularly ground ourselves in decolonial ideas and debates before the start of the academic year. These schools were inspired by the decolonial schools initiated by Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Ramón Grosfoguel and subsequently launched in South African institutions starting with Unisa in 2014.

Drawing on UCT's *Curriculum Change Framework*[4] that was published in June 2018, academics across the institution have made many strides in transforming curricula and pedagogical practices that subvert Eurocentric archetypes. Although we do not yet have a systematic way of assessing the impact of these initiatives in the university, internal university reports have noted significant changes in the demographic profiles of staff and students, the increase of black scholars in senior academic roles and leadership positions, as well as the reduction in the racial attainment gap of students. A concrete example of curriculum change was the launch of the *Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa* (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018) in the Department of Psychology as a student-centred teaching and research space dedicated to practices of

healing, restoration and finding joy in the academy. The Hub promotes theoretical and methodological advancements in the production of psychological knowledges and, equally importantly, provides a physical space for us to come together as a community of engaged scholars.

The critical voices of RMF students continue to find expression in current debates and contestations especially in university spaces. Building on the call for statues to fall, many institutions have reflected on the ways in which affective and embodied experiences are mediated through how they choose to memorialise symbols of the past. The display of colonial monuments and statues in public spaces are shaped by power relations and influence our collective consciousness. They provide a lens into the past and the present, they construct our beliefs, our sense of belonging and our relationships to others. Global decolonial conferences and seminars since 2015 have brought into question the related issue of the theft and display of art and human remains of enslaved and colonised people in museums and universities in the global north.

The Sarr and Savoy report[5] commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron and published in 2018 reported that 90 to 95% of African heritage remains outside of the continent. Even more distressing are the dismembered human remains of Africans that continue to be displayed in European and American museums including university collections, putting once again into question the legitimacy of museums and universities as educational spaces. Calls for the repatriation of the remains of African people from European museums has gained traction in the past ten years. Repatriation, more than signifying a mere transfer of looted objects from the West to former colonies, holds the potential for being a humanising act, a return of the bodies mutilated and lost in university cemeteries. It also holds the possibility for continued engagement about coloniality.

In the past 10 years, there has been a more concerted effort and more diligence in some academic spaces in South Africa to speak back to the epistemic violence of scientific research through the criticism (often public) of studies that reproduce colonial representations of black identities (see for example Boswell et al., 2019). As we move forward, we must keep engaging with the pitfalls of essentialist racial identity politics and how these are put into practice in institutional contexts. Despite the many gains in the changing demographics of academic staff through a more rigorous commitment to employment equity laws and practices, we must continue to interrogate the slippages in the use of apartheid racial categories and how these practices can inadvertently reproduce relational

violences between black staff. The reification of apartheid racial categories in hiring practices has, in some cases, privileged white appointments under the guise of favouring certain under-represented racial categories. The appointment of foreign nationals (read black foreigners) is often heralded as the problem whilst foreign white bodies are exonerated. Such practices are used as a gateway for the resurgence of narrow nationalist politics, motivating xenophobia and related violences, thus contradicting the premises of decolonial, pan-Africanist, black conscious, and radical feminist thought that underlined the fallist movements.

We should also draw on official findings of institutional racism in South African universities since 2015. The 2019 *Report of the Ministerial Task Team on the Recruitment, Retention and Progression of Black South African Academics* made findings of overt and covert racism, sexism and patriarchy in universities.[6] At UCT, we have learnt from the enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the late Professor Mayosi's tenure,[7] that the violences of institutional racism occur in the less visible spaces of corridor talk, informal coffee breaks and social networks. Ten years on, we must critically engage with the multifaceted manifestations of institutional violence in the process of transforming and decolonising our institutions. As Dr Motimele (2024, p.212) writes:

> "UCT management, some UCT staff, media, police, and members of the public considered RMF's disruptive and destructive actions and methods of protest as 'violence'. Further to this, these groups identified RMF student behaviour during the protests as rude, aggressive, disruptive, and at times illegal. In contrast, student activists recognized 'violence' as rooted within Colonial-Apartheid configurations of context."

Now that the dust has settled, we should be asking: What are the lingering violences that need to be addressed? When and in what form do they resurface? What are the policies, frameworks and spaces that acknowledge 'black pain' and its embodied manifestations and provocations? What tools are available for creating spaces for inclusive forms of dialogue and engagement? This is crucial in a context where the violence of colonialism is so easily denied and subverted. We are still confronted with claims that colonisation benefitted Africa, such as Oxford University Professor Biggar's defence of Rhodes[8] or current ludicrous accusations of genocide against white farmers in South Africa, one of the most privileged groups in one of the most unequal societies in the world. Our duty is to stand firm against coloniality, to reflect on our epicolonial existence and to keep listening to our students and staff so that we can better confront the institutional dynamics that keep reinventing themselves in ways that exclude and marginalise.

Conclusion

Fallism as a provocation was attractive in its simplicity and practicality; in the way in which it replicated itself across different spaces generating possibilities for solidarity, debate and social action. However, fallism as an ideology of disobedience, of disruption, of contestation, of ending racism, coloniality, heteronormativity, patriarchy and all forms of oppression is much more demanding and elusive, fraught with complexities and contradictions. It is important therefore to disavow the notion that RMF and the fallist movements in general did not ultimately achieve what they set out to do. Fallism is not an ideology that offers solutions but one that asks us to engage in a decolonial process and attend to the wounds however painful and uncomfortable that such a process can evoke.

There were many demands placed on fallists to address the broader problems of poverty and inequality in South African society, the plight of workers, rape culture, raising consciousness in schools and communities in addition to a decolonised higher education. This responsibility to address all remnants of coloniality in contemporary life is not only a heavy a burden to carry but perhaps also one of the most significant challenges for fallists who not only suffered from activism fatigue but who often failed to recognise and claim their achievements, including the institutionalising of their ideas in our university spaces.

The RMF movement must firmly take its place as one of the most influential global movements in the call to decolonise universities. Despite the contradictions, confrontations and complexity of its modalities and enactments, RMF successfully centred questions of black identity, radical feminism, unity and self-determination that remain at the centre of contemporary social movements for social justice. Its ability to mobilise communities within UCT and inspire others far and wide offers much food for thought and a rich tapestry of ideas and possibilities for the continued struggle against the legacies of coloniality in our institutions. The RMF movement gave meaning to Angela Davis' famous call that: 'You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world(...).' Our students showed us that such a path is possible.

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ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2025-03-25-the-candour-of-institutionalised-racism-in-higher-education

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[3] https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/thread/vandalisation-statues-south-africa

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[5] http://restitutionreport2018.com/ See page 3, Note 4.

[6] https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/institutionalplanning/documents/Report_MTT_RRP_of_Black_Academics_web_final1.pdf

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BIOGRAPHY

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