

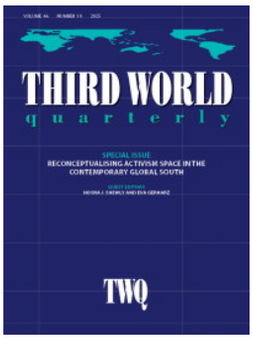
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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Third World Quarterly

ISSN: 0143-6597 (Print) 1360-2241 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ctwq20

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To cite this article: Antje Daniel & Josh Platzky Miller (2025) ‘Must Fall’ movements globally: transnational flows of South African student activism, Third World Quarterly, 46:10, 1210-1228, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2024.2419011

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2419011

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Published online: 15 Nov 2024.

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THIRD WORLD QUARTERLY
2025, VOL. 46, NO. 10, 1210–1228
https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2419011

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'Must Fall' movements globally: transnational flows of South African student activism

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates an important case of transnational activist influence from the Global South to both Global North and other Global South contexts. While protests, slogans, strategies and demands are expressions of a specific context-bound protest culture, they have the potential to resonate globally. In this way, specific protests become a model for other social movements, although not without tension or reconfigurations of activism. In this article, we explore the transnational flow of the ideas around 'Must Fall', developed initially by the South African student movement. From 2015, several university-based protests in South Africa coalesced under the slogan 'Must Fall', most prominently #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. This 'Must Fall' idea resonated transnationally in multiple contexts. However, protests using 'Must Fall' also drew from other resources and held different meanings across the different contexts, creating a complex transnational flow of partially connected protests across Africa, Europe, and the US. Nevertheless, the 'Must Fall' protests were similar in expressing a need for a radical change to rupture and overcome structures of oppression, especially those shaped by colonialism. This article analyses the Global South genesis and meaning of the 'Must Fall' protests and how they travelled, resonating differently in both Southern and Northern contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 October 2023
Accepted 16 October 2024

KEYWORDS
Social movements
global justice
globalisation
Rhodes Must Fall
student movements
decolonisation
travelling models

Introduction

Significant protests have proliferated worldwide, more than doubling from 2006 to 2020 (Ortiz et al. 2022, 14). These protests take place in the context of overlapping crises around the world that simultaneously are global and have a deep bearing on local conditions, from climate change to authoritarianism, to the fragility exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to these conditions, protesters have sought to reshape societies and steer social change. In recent years, many protests working towards justice have focused increasingly on overcoming the legacies of historical exploitation and oppression, especially of colonialism.

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.
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Social movements are essential in reshaping societies and addressing global challenges. Moreover, transnationally connected or global movements are particularly important, as they are responses to, and reveal, the constitution of and conflicts embedded in the global system (Daniel 2022; Platzky Miller 2021). Social movements thus articulate (global) problems, offer communities an orientation and pathway through such conflicts, challenge existing political institutions and instantiate new ones. Over the last several decades, social movements have increasingly been recognised as 'global' and 'transnational' (Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018). In this paper, we consider these to be related but distinct: transnational social movements may cross borders, but global movements address fundamentally global (and not just transnational) issues. This was the case for the Global Justice Movement, the anti-globalisation movement and to some extent the Occupy movement over the 1990s–2010s. Since 2018, the Fridays for Future movement has further emphasised climate justice as a global phenomenon. Theorists have highlighted that these forms of globalisation have created not only a fundamental interconnectedness between societies but also a need to overcome a national 'container theory of society' (Beck 2000), with more recent debates further challenging such methodological nationalism. However, much of the existing literature looks at connections between regions of the Global North, or focuses on cases of diffusion from the Global North to the South.

While global protest dynamics have predominantly been analysed regarding structures and opportunities of global activism (Smith and Fetner 2007) or how Euro-American protest slogans, strategies or demands have been adopted in the Global South, the 'Must Fall' protests show the opposite. In this paper, drawing on travelling model theory, we explore the flow of ideas and activism *originating* in the Global South, especially flowing from South to North and from South to South, and how this shapes a transnational protest dynamic. While there is a long history of such activism, including the significant impact that anti-colonial struggles have had in the colonial metropole,[1] this is often understated in contemporary theorising. We thus take the 'Must Fall' protests as a case study. These began in South Africa at the University of Cape Town (UCT) with #RhodesMustFall (RMF) in early 2015, a protest that focused on the legacies of colonialism, apartheid and racism at the university and in society broadly (Daniel and Platzky Miller 2024). Similar movements quickly emerged at other universities in the country, coalescing in the #FeesMustFall (FMF) protests against public university tuition fees in October 2015. Continuing over the following years, the 'Must Fall' protests were one of the largest and most radical sustained challenges to authority in post-apartheid South Africa – and, indeed, were surprisingly successful in at least some of their aims.

From South Africa, the 'Must Fall' slogans, analysis, demands and political practices spread to contexts across the world. This was most visible in elite universities in the Global North, such as Rhodes Must Fall–Oxford (RMFO) in the UK or Royall Must Fall at Harvard in the US. Still, as Mpofu-Walsh (2016, 75) argued, 'one of the most neglected aspects of the "Must Fall" movement is its spread to Euro-America', although some scholars, notably Ahmed (2019, 2020), have contributed to rectifying this lacuna since. However, little has been developed about the broader global spread of 'Must Fall' protests, especially across Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. Moreover, there continues to be little discussion about which aspects of these mobilisations are carried to which places (and not others).

We argue that the transnational flow of 'Must Fall' shows how a Global South protest can become an impetus for others in both the Global South and the North. This flow shows that

the focus on the legacies of colonialism – central to the decolonial 'Must Fall' protests and other Global South social movements – offers a distinctive contribution to activism, in both South *and* North. We build this argument by combining independent empirical research conducted primarily over 2015–2018, focusing on RMF and FMF. In so doing, we synthesise differing but complementary methodological and theoretical approaches.[2] We examined the other 'Must Fall' protests through reviews of news media, social media, and extant literature, and, to a lesser extent, interviews and participant observation (for the UK and the Netherlands). There are limitations to this approach, most significantly that there has been relatively less empirical and theoretical material developed from the African cases compared to the Euro-American cases. We have nevertheless attempted to balance the coverage of each context.

In the first section, we show how social movement theory can productively engage with debates about globalisation in ways that can illuminate the 'Must Fall' cases. Second, we introduce the context, genesis and significance of the 'Must Fall' protests in South Africa. In the third section, we explore the transnational circulation of 'Must Fall' politics, analysing how the ideas, practices and symbolism of 'Must Fall' moved and were developed elsewhere, focusing on cases in Africa and Euro-America. The final section concludes in connection to this Special Issue theme on reconceptualising activist spaces.

Social movements and their global interrelatedness: a theoretical lens

Globalisation and transnationalisation have been central to social science research since the 1990s, including in social movement theory. Some scholars distinguish between *globalisation*, as processes encompassing major parts of the world, and *transnationalisation*, as processes crossing nation-states' borders but with limited scope. However, many scholars use them interchangeably. Analytical perspectives on global protest deal with a fundamental tension in globalisation, namely between the thesis of increasing convergence, through the possibilities of global interrelationship, and the heterogenisation of protest as well as the role of the situatedness in relation to global flows (Schiller and Çağlar 2009). In general, this literature aspires to overcome methodological nationalism by highlighting global entanglements.

First, convergence theories suggest globalisation involves processes of *homogenisation*, and thus (amongst social movements) a growing perception of the world as a unity or even the emergence of a global protest culture. Convergence theorists argue that globalisation has its own level of action on global spaces, independent of national territory, with relatively universally available norms and institutions that substantially influence domestic policy decisions. For example, Colas (2013) has emphasised the emergence of a global civil society, materialising mainly amidst United Nations or World Trade Organization conferences. Much of this literature on transnational social movements emphasised international non-governmental organisations (eg Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997) but also their potential to unpack contradictions of globalisation and regarding their norm-setting potential by shaping global governance (Andretta et al. 2003). Despite initial optimism regarding global spaces for social movement impact, criticism emerged, for instance emphasising the perpetuation of power relations in these global spaces.

A second perspective analyses the *contradictions* between global processes and their situatedness. This means that globalisation does not lead to homogenisation, but creates

contradictions between adaptation and deviation. For instance, Robertson (1992) uses the concept of 'glocalisation' to show how the globally available ideas, goods or institutions merge with the local, creating different local appropriations. Similarly, Levitt and Merry (2009) discuss how global flows are appropriated and adapted as 'vernacularisation'. Vernacularisation highlights that globalisation creates not only flows but also frictions. In relation to this, the notion of 'scales' highlights the situatedness and trajectories of power in processes of globalisation (Schiller and Çağlar 2009). Global–local entanglements are also considered in social movement studies, for example by analysing how global problems are locally appropriated, reinterpreted or rejected, or how different degrees of engagement between these levels (local, national, global) have a bearing on movements' activism (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). Other scholars have explored how scales of global power dynamics and international imaginaries help or hinder movements' context-specific struggles (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink 2002).

A third analytical perspective explores globalisation as multiple forms of global *relationalities*. These approaches do not reject the idea that all processes of globalisation are spatially anchored, but they focus their analysis on the global flows and their complexity. An example of such a concept is that of 'travelling models' (eg Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014), focusing on how ideas, imaginaries, practices and symbols flow around the world, while transforming and changing as they are brought into new contexts, without a specific origin, destination or endpoint. This can occur through direct contact among people or, more recently, through social media. The aim of the theory is to unpack multiple relationalities of global flows. While all global flows are spatially shaped, travelling model approaches argue that globalisation is complex, not just as an interplay of global flows and local conditions, but a process in which the sender(s) and receiver(s) can no longer be precisely identified, or are indivisibly multiple. From this perspective, the world is multipolar and multicentric. While most 'travelling model' analysis studies everyday practice (Neubert and Daniel 2012), it can also be fruitfully applied to social movements, particularly the global flow of protest symbols, practices, or ideas. Scholars have for instance examined the global flow of demands and protest slogans as in the case of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, which inspired the US Occupy movement, as well as the globally connected square occupation protests (Della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Glasius and Ishkanian 2018).

Finally, from a post-colonial and decolonial perspective, scholars examine how globalisation emerges from, perpetuates, and accentuates power structures entrenched by colonialism (Bhambra 2007). Globalisation theory has been specifically criticised for overlooking international hierarchies and treating different regions as being on equal footing. This extends to critiques of (globally interconnected) social movements, where scholars highlighted that movements from the Global South must be examined by considering power structures and epistemic cleavages between the Global South and North (Daniel and Neubert 2019).

From these debates, we draw a perspective that, firstly, recognises that the kinds of global flows that exist will be shaped by historically uneven patterns of conquest and empire-building, while acknowledging that for numerous reasons there have been some shifts in global linkages. Secondly, we remain attentive to both local and transnational influence. Social movement scholars and activists understand that what might appear 'spontaneous' often has a deep context underlying it. So, too, in each of the cases we look at, 'the protests did not emerge from a void' (Glasius and Ishkanian 2018, 32). Many activists who are central to

these protests, whether in South Africa or elsewhere, would have had pre-existing experiences of activism through existing student formations, feminist collectives, previous campaigns or community work. Many more who joined the protests later, however, may have experienced this as their first protest. The protests discussed below therefore cannot be reduced to mere 'copycat' protests, devoid of local context, even as they are influenced by protests elsewhere.

Using the notion of travelling models, we explore the multi-relationality of the 'Must Fall' idea as it developed in South Africa, Senegal and France, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Ghana and Malawi. In doing so, we show that South African students drew on and developed existing anti-racist paradigms, imaginaries of decolonisation, and contestations of memorialisation. Each of these was, in turn, reconfigured in the contexts into which the 'Must Fall' protests spread, merging with, adapting to, and contesting existing political cultures. In the following section, we give an overview of the genesis and formation of the South African 'Must Fall' protests, before discussing their transnational travelling.

From #RhodesMustFall to #FeesMustFall in South Africa

The student-led movement which would become known as #RhodesMustFall (RMF) started on 12 March 2015 with a mass meeting of students at UCT. It was catalysed by a symbolic protest a few days earlier in which a student had thrown shit on a statue of British racist and colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, which had held a prominent place at the centre of UCT's main campus (Price 2023). Rhodes became infamous for his support of racial segregation and disenfranchisement from the late nineteenth century, his violent dispossession of African peoples' lands, assets and labour, his self-enrichment through ruthless exploitation of African labour in mines he owned, and his self-aggrandisement and empire-building project through philanthropy to educational institutions in South Africa and the UK (primarily UCT and Oxford University) (Beinart 2022). Contesting the celebratory heritage embodied by the statue, RMF students took aim at the continuities of past injustices in the present, arguing particularly that the 1994 'post-apartheid' election of the African National Congress (ANC) to government did not herald a fundamental break with the past. Students argued that structural and institutional racism continued, and the university especially remained shaped by its colonial roots and apartheid-era roles. The Black majority continued to be marginalised and exploited.[3] They thus challenged the ruling ANC and its promises of transformation, as well as the idea of a 'multi-racial Rainbow Nation' with formal democracy and legal equality of rights for all, embodied in the persona of Nelson Mandela (Chikane 2018). As one student argued,

> Post-1994, we have been brainwashed with the idea of the 'Rainbow Nation'. What is clear is that we live in a post-apartheid South Africa where inequality, racism, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy continues to oppress black people in the country. The movement comes out of the feeling of being desperate, angry and frustrated by the state of things in the country. (Ndelu 2017, 62–63)

While students primarily challenged racism, their concerns were broader. They critiqued the 'Eurocentrism' and 'Whiteness' of the curriculum, and a hostile institutional culture that students felt was an 'unhomely, unwelcoming and exclusionary space' (interview, student, 28 February 2017). Feminists ensured that questions of patriarchy and sexism remained

central to the movement's early politics. Labour activists highlighted the role of outsourcing of campus operations workers, alongside the legacy of Rhodes' nineteenth-century labour policies to the post-apartheid state's murder of striking mineworkers in the 2012 Marikana massacre. Some students thus argued the South African political economy was path-dependent in the world-system: that capitalism and colonialism entwined to exploit local resources and labour for export, and Africa continued 'feeding the Global North and remaining poor' (interview, student, 6 June 2018).

Throughout early 2015, similar protests emerged at other universities across South Africa, which have come to be grouped as the Black Student Movements or 'Must Fall' protests, often using social media hashtags to coordinate (Daniels 2016). These include #AfrikaansMustFall (University of Pretoria), 'Open Stellenbosch' (University of Stellenbosch), the #RUReferenceList (University currently known as Rhodes), and #SteynMustFall (University of Free State). Social media communication was thus an important tool that connected the protests across different contexts and shaped their discursive practices (Bosch and Mutsvairo 2017; Bosch and Mutsvairo 2017). In each, a similar cluster of challenges came to the fore: the historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid, institutionalised racism and sexism, and the relationship between education institutions and broader societal dynamics (Langa et al. 2017).

In late 2015, these movements converged with a recurring issue in South African higher education: student tuition fees. After students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) protested an announced 10.5% fee increase in October 2015, a new wave of protests quickly took place on campuses nationally under the banner of #FeesMustFall (FMF). This wave demanded the abolition of fees and an end to exploitative employment practices of outsourcing workers, and continued the earlier critique of racism and discrimination in universities. FMF became one of the most significant political events of the year, including on social media as one of the top trending hashtags for 2015 (Daniels 2016, 179). However, it was also heavily critiqued in the media and civil society (Daniel 2022).

Remarkably, these protests were surprisingly successful at shifting institutions and the state, at least relative to previous movements (Roy 2023, 16). In 2017, the government introduced 'Fee-Free' tertiary education for socio-economically disadvantaged students (albeit primarily by expanding student debt through a neoliberal 'user-pays' loan model). Student activism in South Africa has since slowed down, although with sporadic and endemic protests on some campuses due to localised issues, as well as issues with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme that disburses funding to poor students (Luescher et al. 2023). The protests also changed several university cultures, bringing critical reflections about decolonisation to the fore and initiating several curriculum review processes.

What 'Fallism' is, or was supposed to be, has been contested since 2015. Nevertheless, several prominent themes emerged, particularly the centrality of *decolonisation*, as well as the importance of *intersectionality* (Daniel and Platzky Miller 2024). As students in RhodesMustFall (2015) themselves put it, the three pillars of decolonisation were Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, and Black Radical Feminism. Students drew inspiration from diverse sources: anti-colonial movements in Africa, the 1976 Soweto Uprising and broader anti-apartheid student movement, the Black Radical tradition in the US and the contemporary Black Lives Matter protests.[4] They also drew from activist-intellectuals, such as Frantz Fanon's work in Algeria, the Latin American decolonial school, and local figures like Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe and Pumla Gqola (Chikane 2018; Booysen 2016). The different

imaginaries of decolonisation that emerged encompassed different facets of social relations, but one aspect emerged clearly: an 'imaginary of negation' in which students 'envisioned an end to an existing white-supremacist, patriarchal, colonial world, and all its alienation and dehumanisation' (Daniel and Platzky Miller 2024, 506). The slogan 'Must Fall' thus expresses a desire to see the abolition of domination.

Moreover, this desire to abolish forms of domination was not simply limited to one facet. Feminist and queer student activists used the concept of intersectionality not only to challenge the patriarchal social relations that shaped their institutions, but also to critique hierarchies in the movement itself (RhodesMustFall 2015, 6). Over time, male leaders became dominant in the 'Must Fall' protest, and began pushing the earlier feminist and queer politics of intersectionality to the margins, although they were challenged from within by Patriarchy Must Fall counter-protests (Ramaru 2017; Daniel 2021).

Accordingly, 'Fallism' can be understood as an emergent ideology of *rupture*, in which the primary task is to disrupt what exists, such that something else can emerge (Platzky Miller 2021). As one student at Wits put it, 'you're disrupting the status quo with an analysis of what that status quo looks like. You are insisting that this has to stop' (interview, student, 22 March 2017). This is reflected in students' primary tactical interventions, especially barricading campuses and occupying key administrative and management buildings, attempting to paralyse the ordinary functioning of authority. 'Must Fall' thus entails the necessity of a radical break with the present to envision and shape a different future (Naidoo 2016).

Transnational flows of 'Must Fall' politics

From South Africa, 'Must Fall' slogans flowed transnationally, with protests in Africa, Europe and the US. For some of these protests, RMF was the main source of inspiration; for others, it was one influence amongst others. In the multiple global relationalities of 'Must Fall' protests, it is not always clear where the slogan, and thus the protest demands, originated and how exactly they inspired each other. It is also not possible here to fully explicate how the 'Must Fall' slogan is locally situated or its contextual specificities. Rather, our aim is to show the transnational flow of the 'Must Fall' idea, arguing that protests are integrated into global, multi-causal relationalities which develop their own dynamic and in which 'Must Fall' takes on diverse variations. This provides a new perspective on the global interconnectedness of protest in general and 'Must Fall' specifically.

As a slogan, 'Must Fall' has found wide appeal, including in South Africa where it has been used by multiple groups. In 2015, the hashtag #ZumaMustFall was used to protest the politics of the then South African president Jacob Zuma, with citizens expressing a sense of anger and frustration with the status quo (Daniels 2016). It also took the form of a political-economic critique against high telecommunication costs, with consumers campaigning for fee reductions from cellphone companies under the slogan #DataMustFall from 2016 (Moyo and Munoriyarwa 2021). Elsewhere in Africa, the slogan appeared during the 2019 Sudanese revolution conveying a clear critique of existing political authority, saying 'the Bashir government "must fall"' (Bishai and Elshami 2019). Elsewhere, protests picked up the 'Must Fall' practice of initially targeting statues to contest historical legacies and memory cultures, especially around racism, slavery and colonialism (Rose-Redwood et al. 2022), including in the US and UK (Price 2023, 57, 68). Several social movements advanced similar critiques of education, including calls for decolonisation. Unlike the South

Table 1. Typology of 'Must Fall' movements globally.

Point of reference	Example context
Heritage: Historical legacy in memory culture	Senegal, France, US
Geopolitics: Rejection of neo-colonial intervention	Malawi, Ghana
Education: Colonial legacy and racism shaping education	UK, Netherlands

African 'Must Fall' protests, but nevertheless resonant with some aspects, there were also several protests that focused on contemporary geopolitical contestation, especially rejecting neo-colonial intervention.

Although we cannot examine the full diversity of references to 'Must Fall' here,[5] in what follows we discuss seven cases that each reference the 'Must Fall' protests. These cases span Africa (Malawi, Senegal and Ghana), Europe (France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) and North America (the US). What they have in common is that 'Must Fall' stands for *rupture:* a break with the past and its persistence in the present, whether in structural violence, racism, or the culture of memory (Platzky Miller 2021). In these struggles, breaking with the present becomes a condition to be able to shape the future. While these protests often had multiple points of overlap with the South African 'Must Fall' protests, we have clustered them into three core thematic groups, summarised in Table 1.

Heritage and historical legacy in memory culture

RMF's success in removing the statue of Rhodes from UCT in 2015 influenced protests about how history is commemorated elsewhere. One such link was the Faidherbe Must Fall protests in Senegal's former capital, Saint-Louis. Faidherbe was a major French colonial figure, the governor of West Africa between 1854 and 1861 and between 1863 and 1865 (de Jong 2022, 4). Much like Rhodes, Faidherbe was long celebrated by colonial administrators and propagandists for his contributions to imparting 'civilisation' in Africa, such as roads, ports and schools. He was honoured with a statue erected in Saint-Louis in 1886 (in 'Faidherbe Square'), and following his death in 1889, a 'Faidherbe myth' was cultivated, reinforced in concrete by streets, schools and hospitals named after him (L'Association Survie Nord 2018, 23). Overlooked in this glorification is that Faidherbe was responsible for the killing of more than 28,000 Senegalese (de Jong 2022, 5), learning from a genocidal scorched earth campaign that France waged in Algeria and applied in Senegal to subjugate local populations and entrench colonial rule (Bobin, Khadim, and Sylla 2020).

Explicitly inspired by RMF, as well as Black Lives Matter in the US, Senegalese activists in 2018 began the 'Faidherbe Doit Tomber' (Faidherbe Must Fall) protests (Bobin, Khadim, and Sylla 2020).[6] They created the Senegalese Collective Against the Celebration of Faidherbe (*Collectif Sénégalais Contre la Célébration de Faidherbe*), composed in part of academic historians and student activists (de Jong 2022, 5; Diop 2020). Like RMF and Black Lives Matter, the protest in Saint-Louis claimed a radical break with the legacy of colonialism and its memorialisation in the present, as materialised in the statue (de Jong 2022, 7). Indeed, activists argued that the statue 'means, for all of Senegal's students, the torturer honoured and glorified' (Bobin, Khadim, and Sylla 2020), and that this glorification 'celebrates the colonial project to which he devoted his life' (L'Association Survie Nord 2018, 29). Activists thus organised and debated on social media, eventually making demands that reached the Saint-Louis mayor (de Jong 2022, 9). However, the call for the removal of the statue was controversial.

The mayor, for instance, opposed the removal by highlighting that the colonial heritage is part of Senegalese history, and indicated appreciation for cooperation with France (de Jong 2022, 8). Nevertheless, the protest succeeded: in 2020, the statue was removed, and the city council renamed Faidherbe Square *Baya Ndar*, a Wolof expression roughly meaning 'crossroads of the city' (de Jong 2022, 9). The protests in Saint-Louis in turn inspired protests in Lille, Faidherbe's birthplace in France that also has a statue of him. Coordinated by the Faidherbe Must Fall collective, these protests in Lille aimed to critically reflect on the colonial past and overcome its glorification in the present and in the metropole (Bobin, Khadim, and Sylla 2020). This project remains unresolved.

Across the Atlantic, the 'Must Fall' protests were not the *origin* point of much US activism: Harvard and Brown universities, for instance, had already begun research into the histories of slavery at their institutions from the 2000s (Walters 2017). 'Must Fall' nevertheless became one important strand in a broader activist milieu. It intertwined with Black Lives Matter, and foregrounded universities' colonial-slavery era links in several important student mobilisations (Price 2023, 83). In the US, the 'Must Fall' protests resonated most at Harvard University, where from October 2015 students demanded the Harvard Law School remove the seal of the brutal slave-owning Royall family from its crest under the banner of 'Royall Must Fall' (Ahmed 2019, 282). As Purnell (2021) points out, the 'initial group of students were from South Africa or had also just returned from studying abroad there'. Royall Must Fall intentionally drew on South African 'Must Fall' imagery and modes of engagement, expressing that: 'We recognize, endorse, and adopt [South African students'] resolute struggle against social injustice, inequity in access to education, and the vestiges of a discredited racial project' (Harvard: Royall Must Fall 2015). In a similar critique of memorialisation, one member of Royall Must Fall (cited in Walters 2017, 727) argued that,

> The problem is the names on these buildings serve to honor these people; they serve to hold them up as someone to be imitated. The fact of the matter is that these people engaged in morally reprehensible behavior and that shouldn't be honored.

By March 2016, the Harvard Law School had conceded and removed references to Royall, although broader struggles around the legacy of colonialism and slavery continued (Mpofu-Walsh 2016, 81). Indeed, these struggles radicalised in part due to the influence of the South African social movements. Purnell, for instance, an activist-scholar and lawyer from the United States, was a student at Harvard at the time of Royall Must Fall. In her partially autobiographical *Becoming Abolitionists* (2021), she recounts how she was at a conference in the Netherlands on Decolonising the University, where she learned about RMF. After visiting the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and the University of Cape Town, Purnell returned to Harvard radicalised, with a new understanding of the issues at stake.

Similar dynamics found their way to other US campuses and beyond: Princeton students occupied the university president's office and demanded the removal of former president Woodrow Wilson's name from various campus buildings over his support for racial segregation (Ahmed 2019, 282). Yale students forced the university to remove slavery advocate John Calhoun from memorialisation on buildings, referencing RMF and 'looking for leadership from South Africa' (Ahmed 2020, 301). Across the Atlantic, RMF thus inspired and radicalised protests against the continued commemoration of colonial heritage.

Rejection of neo-colonial intervention

The 'Must Fall' protests also provided an impetus for protests against neo-colonial interventions and African subordination. This took place in both Ghana and Malawi, each drawing on RMF. Both protests relate to the Indian government's efforts under Narendra Modi (since 2014) to gain global power through cooperation. This 'heritage diplomacy' (von Zydowitz and Cermeño 2024), sometimes called 'Modiplomacy' or 'Gandhiplomacy', attempts to build soft power by celebrating Indian heroes in Africa, specifically Mahatma Gandhi (Mantey 2018, chapter 3). Gandhi is deployed to demonstrate Indian culture as intellectually inspiring, powerful, and relevant. Behind the symbolism, India is an important economic partner for many African countries. India is Ghana's second largest foreign investor and was Ghana's largest export market in 2015 (Mantey 2018). Similarly, in 2015, India was Malawi's fifth largest export market and fourth largest import market, accounting for roughly 10% of Malawi's trade.[7] However, the supposedly mutually beneficial economic relations hide familiar structures of inequality and dependency from which India benefits, but which do little for most Malawians and Ghanaians.

Against this backdrop, India planned to erect statues of Gandhi in both Ghana and Malawi. Activists protested these interventions, perceived as neo-colonial in the context of the broader political economy. In June 2016, the University of Ghana erected a statue of Gandhi on its Accra campus, coinciding with a visit by the former Indian president (von Zydowitz and Cermeño 2024). Students and academics formed a 'Gandhi Must Fall' protest against this decision, with a petition against the statue gaining over 1500 signatories and support from people nationwide, arguing that 'African heroes and heroines' ought to be celebrated, rather than 'other people's'.[8] The petitioners explicitly drew attention to 'Must Fall' protests, including against Gandhi, in South Africa. The Ghanaian protests also attracted international media attention, which further bolstered support – although politicians feared that the protest would undermine diplomatic relations between Ghana and India (Menz 2016). Nevertheless, the University Council, in discussion with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, agreed in October 2016 to remove the statue from the campus (Mantey 2018, 3).

Activists in Malawi became inspired by Rhodes Must Fall and the Ghanaian protests when a separate attempt was made to erect a statue of Gandhi in central Blantyre in 2018. Here too, local activists created a petition with the slogan 'Gandhi Must Fall', gaining over 4000 signatories,[9] aiming to pressure the Malawian government to revoke the decision to erect the statue, and raised a court case against the state (Lipenga 2019, 109). As Ken Junior Lipenga (University of Malawi) noted, RMF activists in South Africa and Gandhi Must Fall activists in Malawi had argued that 'the statue and the values held by the person it celebrated were not representative of their nation at that point in time' (Lipenga 2019, 117). Malawian protesters predominantly used social media to organise and air their critiques, drawing directly on the Ghanaian experience. This pressured the Malawian government, which also had to tread carefully to maintain good relations with the Indian government. Because of these protests, the statue was never erected, and the High Court of Malawi ruled in 2021 that the statue 'violates the right to dignity of the claimants' (von Zydowitz and Cermeño 2024, 303).

These protests against the Gandhi statues suggest at least three major themes. One is indirect resistance to contemporary export-oriented and -dependent development models that India and others are advancing in Africa. The second is a critique of Gandhi himself,

usually upheld as a saintly figure, trying to demystify and expose him as a false role model. Central to this critique, raised by protesters in both Ghana and Malawi, are arguments that Gandhi expressed racist views while living in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, for instance claiming that Indians were superior to Blacks, and supported British colonialism and its claims of a 'civilising mission'. The third is an attempt to develop a transnational model of global Black dignity, against racism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Critiquing Gandhi's legacy, Ọbádélé Kambon (University of Ghana) argued that 'we would like to show the connectedness of various related movements throughout the world for African/Black dignity' (Menz 2016). Kambon references RMF, Black Lives Matter and similar protests, arguing that their struggles were 'interconnected through time and space'. The Malawian and Ghanaian Gandhi Must Fall struggles were thus both influenced by movements in South Africa, and addressed similar concerns, albeit in strikingly different contexts and with only superficially similar catalysts of contesting statues.

Colonial legacy shaping of education

Across the Global North, the 'Must Fall' protests resonated with student activists attempting to challenge the continued colonial legacy in their educational institutions. Crucially, they demonstrate the importance of decolonisation as a framework in both the former colonies of the Global South and the former colonisers of the Global North.

This was especially striking in the UK, a coloniser of Southern Africa. The most prominent of these resonances is #RhodesMustFall-Oxford (RMFO). Taking inspiration from RMF in South Africa, Oxford students first targeted the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford.[10] Several of the prominent activists involved in setting up RMFO were themselves South African, such as Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh and Ntokozo Qwabe, and had extensive interaction with comrades involved in the 'Must Fall' protests in South Africa (Mpofu-Walsh 2016, 75). By May 2015, RMFO began to challenge the epistemic architecture of the university (Ahmed 2019). The statue was an entry point to contest 'iconography, curriculum change, and racial inequalities' (Ahmed 2020, 300), as well as calling for reparations for colonialism (Mpofu-Walsh 2016, 79–81). As one RMFO (2015) statement read,

> Rhodes Must Fall Oxford started in solidarity with the Rhodes Must Fall movement [at UCT], which has encouraged students across the world to fight institutional racism and call for the decolonisation of education. We believe that despite his statue being pulled down at UCT, Rhodes – and more importantly the culture that inculcated his imperialism in the first place – remains unscathed. Indeed, this culture is alive and well in Oxford.[11]

The deeper educational issues of institutional racism and Eurocentric curricula that RMFO challenged garnered relatively less attention than the statue, but engaged with similar critical epistemological debates – although, Ahmed (2020, 296) suggests, to a lesser extent than in Cape Town. For Gebrial (2018, 20), a core activist in RMFO, the protests highlighted the importance of 'a reorientation in the anti-racist framework from diversity to decolonisation'. In this sense, the protest was 'about critically examining the power struggle that underpins hegemonic knowledge production, and the material structures that make this possible' (Gebrial 2018, 23).

Oxford was by no means the only UK university to be influenced by 'Must Fall'. In October 2015, South African students in Cambridge drafted an international Letter of Solidarity with



Figure 1. *Critical 'Dear World – Yours Cambridge' Campaign*, linked to Decolonise Cambridge, outside Queen's College (L) and Christ's College (R), November 2018.
Source: Photos by the authors.

FMF/RMF, which gained over 1200 signatories from over 300 institutions around the world (UCT 2015). From November 2015, students organised a loosely affiliated network under the banner of 'Decolonise Cambridge', which continues to date. Decolonise Cambridge was formed by student activists from not only from South Africa and the UK, but also elsewhere in the Global South and North. It drew inspiration from debates around 'Must Fall', as well as other critiques of empire and Eurocentrism from around the world. The network prioritised intervening in five areas: knowledge production, accessibility, symbolism, material links, and autonomous organisation. As exemplified in Figure 1, it worked with other activist organisations towards decolonising knowledge and curriculum reform (Schwoerer 2018), challenging racism at the institution and bringing to light its radical and colonial histories (such as documenting the history of Black students in the institution, spearheaded by the 'Black Cantabs' group, hosting a debate on *Must Smuts Fall? Apartheid Legacies and Eurocentric Heroification*,[12] or pushing for an institutional inquiry into the Legacies of Enslavement).[13]

Elsewhere in the UK, the 'Must Fall' connections resonated with existing campaigns, such as the *Why Is My Curriculum White?* network based primarily in the University of London (Peters 2015). Because these elite universities are and have been central nodes in imperial networks of knowledge and power, such decolonial and anti-racist critiques face paranoid reactionary defensiveness, including vitriolic racist and sexist attacks against student activists (Mitchell 2021, 98). They have also spawned a sizable secondary literature, as scholars grapple with the demands students raise and engage with what decolonisation means in their own fields (see e.g. Cupples and Grosfoguel 2018; Bhambra, Nişancıoğlu, and Gebrial 2018).

In the Netherlands, students also challenged colonial legacies in education. For example, a pre-existing student activist cohort occupied several University of Amsterdam buildings in late 2014 and early 2015, prior to RMF. The key 'Maagdenhuis occupation' was a critique of the Dutch university's budget cuts, neoliberalisation and managerialism, calling in part for the democratisation and proper funding of education. As a critical current within the democratisation movement, students of colour self-organised as the University of Colour to critique the 'white, patriarchal institution deeply embedded in colonial power structures', arguing that there was 'No Democratisation without Decolonisation' (de Ploeg and de Ploeg 2017, 321).

Students involved in the University of Colour thus developed an independent Decolonial School and secured an institutional 'Diversity Commission' for the University of Amsterdam, mostly comprising researchers proposed by the University of Colour, although only after the university rejected proposals for a 'Diversity and Decolonisation Commission' (de Ploeg and de Ploeg 2017, 329). Crucially, students were familiar with 'Must Fall' in both Cape Town and Oxford, as well as student movements in Harvard, Princeton, and Missouri in the United States, as the Diversity Commission's report demonstrates (Diversity Commission at the University of Amsterdam 2016, 15–16).

This awareness was not limited to the University of Amsterdam: at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the University of Leiden, for instance, scholars and students were engaged with the debates and practices of RMF (Omarjee 2018). While all these movements emerged independently, the fact of historical-colonial connections[14] meant that there are regular exchanges between South Africa and the Netherlands. As a result, activist contributions from South Africa informed and influenced activists linked to the University of Colour (Suransky, Pitstra, and Toyana 2017; de Ploeg and de Ploeg 2017, 323–324). However, South Africa's 'Must Fall' protests were by no means at the centre of the Dutch debates: for instance, Afro-Caribbean and Iraqi activists heavily shaped the University of Colour (de Ploeg and de Ploeg 2017, 324). As University of Colour activists and commentators highlighted, while the movements challenged similar issues, the contexts were different and hence the focus, debates and strategies differed in turn.

These challenges in the 'heart of empire' (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018) swiftly provoked fierce public debate (and hysterical reactionary apologia) about the legacy of British colonialism (Gebrial 2018). And yet, it is hardly surprising that these movements emerged: as the Caribbean-inspired slogan from the 1970s in the UK goes, 'we are here because you were there'. The emergence of movements in Europe can be seen as a part of the imperial boomerang: what happens 'in the colonies' inevitably shapes the colonial metropole, including through anti-colonial (and now decolonial) struggles. Trying to understand each region in isolation is to misunderstand the profound co-implication between contexts due to colonialism (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021).

Conclusion

Our analysis shows how 'Must Fall' emerged in the Global South before becoming a 'travelling model' that circulated in both the Global South and Global North. In the process, the global flow of imaginaries, ideas and practices developed a life of its own, creating new contextualised meanings. The politics of 'Must Fall' thus resonated with and inspired multiple protests across the world, creating a loose network of different but overlapping struggles, largely grappling with the question of colonial legacies today.

Looking at the various 'Must Fall' protests in Africa (Malawi, Senegal and Ghana), Europe (the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and France) and North America (the US), the emerging protests tended to contest three clusters of issues: colonial heritage and memory culture (Senegal, France), post-colonial geopolitical interventions (Ghana and Malawi), or colonial legacies and racism in education (the UK, US and Netherlands). All these protests referred to different aspects of the South African 'Must Fall' protests, appropriating and combining them with context-specific demands. Across all these protests, however, 'Must Fall' stands for a rupture: a break with the past and its persistence in the present. As such, they represent the latest iteration of a long history of activism linking one part of the Global South to another, as well as affecting and reshaping the Global North. Like past anti-colonial movements, the travelling model of 'Must Fall' expresses a need for radical and structural change, coupled with the urgency of action to replace structures of oppression that were developed during colonialism. In erupting across contexts around the world, they represent a global challenge that is mutually legitimised by its multi-relationality.

The multi-relationality of the 'Must Fall' protests mean that a direct link to South Africa is not always visible or present. For example, while in Senegal and Ghana the protests were more directly influenced by those in South Africa, in France and Malawi, by contrast, the primary point of reference was to Senegal or Ghana, and just partly to South African 'Must Fall' protests. In some cases, the origin of the globally circulating idea is thus not obvious; rather, it is multiply interrelated. In some cases, however, we can directly observe how the globally circulating idea of 'Must Fall' has travelled. Personal connections played a vital role: In the UK and the Netherlands, as well as the US, either activists from South Africa were essential initiators for the protests, or there were transnational exchanges between the activists. More broadly, social media played an important role in sharing information, providing inspiration, building solidarity, and connecting and mobilising participants across contexts, especially where activists did not already know one another. Finally, there are structural linkages, especially the shared historical experiences of colonisation between the UK, the Netherlands and South Africa that connect several protests, initiating some in the UK and entwining with those in the Netherlands. These different modes of connection between 'Must Fall' protests demonstrate the importance of both 'old' transnational spaces (especially those shaped by colonisation and migration) and 'new' transnational activist spaces, such as social media and other digital platforms.

Existing transnational social movement research is dominated by Euro-American perspectives in which 'global' ideas still largely originate in the Global North and diffuse to the Global South. Analytical perspectives on the circulation of ideas from the Global South to the Global North remain under-investigated. This paper therefore contributes to the Special Issue by challenging these existing discourses and frameworks for understanding social movements as a phenomenon emanating from the Global North. The 'Must Fall' model, first developed by RMF in South Africa, has been a source of inspiration for other decolonial protests in Africa and Euro-America.

However, there are limits to its global circulation. 'Must Fall' predominates in Anglophone contexts, and only crossed linguistic borders into French in one case, between Senegal and France. However, we find no further 'Must Fall' protests in other Francophone contexts, nor for instance in Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking countries with colonial histories in Latin America. There are, nevertheless, links between the 'Must Fall' protests and other contemporary protests, such as Black Lives Matter in the US or protests against colonial and racist

street names in Germany. While they do not necessarily refer to South Africa or 'Must Fall', they often adopt similar critiques, challenging the colonial past and its persistence in the present – in both former colonies and colonial metropoles.

As a result, we can read a new approach to social movements working towards global justice in how the 'Must Fall' protests overlap with one another, and with other movements demanding decolonisation, whether in Latin America or Africa, the United States, Europe, or elsewhere. Understood as part of a broader global justice movement, the wave of protests over the last decade increasingly challenges colonisation, racism and structural violence. Overcoming the exploitation and oppression of the past is therefore a starting point for shaping a just future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics

JPM: Ethical approval granted by the University of Cambridge POLIS Research Committee, 7 December 2016. AD: Participants gave verbal and written informed consent to take part in the studies. All named sources are from materials in the public domain.

Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so, due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

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Notes

1. For just one example: anti-colonial Algerians in metropolitan France influenced the May 1968 student uprisings (Bracke 2009).
2. Antje Daniel analysed RMF as part of her research project (habilitation thesis) titled 'Towards a sociology of lived utopias. How the future becomes present in lived utopias in South Africa' (Daniel 2022). As part of this research, she also investigated activism of the housing movement Reclaim the City and environmental activism of the Green Camp Gallery Project and Oude Molen Eco Village. She conducted more than 80 biographical and semi-structured interviews

and used ethnographic methods such as participant observation. Josh Platzky Miller researched the 'Must Fall' movements as part of a doctoral dissertation (see Platzky Miller 2019, 26 – 34). This involved conducting 30 semi-structured interviews and group discussions with roughly 50 participants while drawing on student-produced texts and videos, attending reflective events with participants, and engaging in informal peer conversations.

3. Although we adopt the term 'Black' in this paper, we use it as a socio-politically constructed and contested category, rather than to reify race-thinking (Vally and Motala 2018).
4. To date, there has been no extensive study of the links between Black Lives Matter and the 'Must Fall' protests, but numerous Fallists were aware of (and sometimes engaged with) Black activists in the US, and to some extent vice versa.
5. There have, for instance, also been many student protests worldwide that refer to 'Fees Must Fall' alongside critiques of neoliberalisation and commodification of education, including in the UK, India and Uganda, as well as influence between South African movements and those elsewhere that did not use the 'Must Fall' framing (Platzky Miller 2024). We do not consider these here.
6. Protests against the colonial legacy are not new. There had already been protests against the statue of Faidherbe in the 1970s and later in 2014 (L'Association Survie Nord 2018, 24).
7. See the Observatory of Economic Complexity: https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mwi?yearSelector1=2015.
8. See petition: https://www.change.org/p/the-members-of-the-university-of-ghana-council-gandhi-s-statue-at-the-university-of-ghana-must-come-down.
9. See petition: https://www.change.org/p/the-mayor-of-blantyre-stop-erecting-mahatma-gandhi-s-statue-at-ginnery-corner-blantyre.
10. By 2021, Oriel's Commission of Inquiry into Rhodes' legacy found that the college should move the statue, before the college's governing body claimed it was 'too costly' to move (Beinart 2022, 582).
11. See RMF Oxford Press Release (4 November 2015): https://rmfoxford.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/041115rmfpressrelease1.pdf.
12. Students reflected on the ambiguous legacy and memorialisation of Jan Smuts, a South African official educated in Cambridge at Christ's College and (a generation after Rhodes) a consistent supporter of racist segregation that formed a foundation for the apartheid system (Dubow 2008, 47).
13. See https://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/history/legacies-of-enslavement.
14. The Netherlands was a former colonial power in South Africa, largely through the Dutch East India Company and colonial settlers who became the Afrikaners.

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