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The quiet revolution: Decolonial struggles and intersectional futures

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, the concept of intersectionality arrived at the high point of the student movement against the escalation of university fees and demands for decolonising the curriculum. Queer, transgender and Black feminist students used the concept to ensure that these new decolonial agendas did not lose sight of urgent issues of gender-based violence on university campuses, as well as within the ranks of the student movement itself. In other words, these student activists used intersectionality not only to centre issues of gender and sexuality in struggles to decolonise the university and South African society at large, but also to name patriarchy, heteronormativity and rape culture in movement spaces, at the hands of their own male comrades. In reflecting on intersectionality's travel to South Africa, I am less interested in mapping these sites for the conceptual or activist inadequacies that they might reveal, but for what they might tell us about the locally charged milieus into which concepts enter. The different take up of intersectionality with distinct effects suggests something about the conditions under which specific intersections take hold of public or at least, of activist imaginations.

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In South Africa, 'intersectionality' arrived in the high tide of the student movements of 2015 to 2016. These students were some of the first to raise the demand for decolonisation in ways that shifted the culture and curriculum of higher education, globally. Alongside Black Consciousness (BC) and Pan-Africanism (PA), Black feminism and intersectionality comprised their ideological ground. Self-identified queer, trans and feminist students – encompassed in the category of 'womxn' or 'womyn' – used the concept to ensure that decolonial agendas did not focus on some injustices over their intersections with others, as had been the case in past liberation struggles. But their insistence on intersectionality also revealed frictions internal to the struggle and held the movement to account.

As I show in this essay, young Black feminist student activists in South African universities used intersectionality not only to centre issues of gender and sexuality in struggles to decolonise the university and South African society at large, but also to name patriarchy and rape culture in movement spaces, at the hands of their own male comrades. They used it to reveal how a radical movement could perpetuate

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oppression and abuse, even as it aimed to address them. These students, who were at the forefront of 'Fallist' movements, fought simultaneously on two fronts: as part of an intersectional, decolonial struggle *and* as what one activist called a 'quiet revolution', which tried to keep the movement accountable to its commitments to intersectionality.¹ And it was at their insistence that intersectionality, an otherwise academic concept confined to the feminist classroom, was included as the intellectual grounds of the movement and catapulted into mainstream visibility.

1. Intersectionality: From travel to arrival

Intersectionality has been marked by excessive travel, travel that has taken it beyond its intellectual, discursive and even spatial origins, stretching – but also diluting, many would argue – the analytical bite and political imperative of the concept. Intersectionality's travel and reach has incited a range of desires, affects and allegiances (or non-allegiances) among differently located feminists.

Sara Salem, for instance, worries that intersectionality has travelled so far from its radical origins that it has effectively mutated into something else, something fundamentally depoliticised and co-opted, especially by neoliberal capitalist circuits of power (as found in the neoliberal university, for instance).² In contrast, Nivedita Menon uses intersectionality's arrival at a specific Southern locale (India) to unpack the deficiencies in the concept itself, rooted in its imperial origins and travel, via transnational donors and Western knowledge-producers, including feminists, to the Global South.³ Notwithstanding its origin in Black feminism, Menon also cautions against the universal applicability of Western concepts.⁴ These feminist critiques speak to wider anxieties around intersectionality's origins, travel and co-option by Western imperialism and the related logics and practices of neoliberal governmentality. Implicit in them are presumptions and attachments to purity – of pure, radical origins – that can be recovered from decline, deficiency or loss, and of pure spaces that lie outside of or 'wholly detached from institutions'.⁵

In her response to Menon, Mary John poses critical questions that shift our gaze from predictable trajectories of origin and travel – from the Northern epicentre to the global periphery – to ones of arrival.⁶ In India, for instance, 'we have more complex instances of the arrival of Western concepts on our shores', John writes, with unanticipated and unpredictable effects.⁷ She reminds us of the sexual politics of globalised India where transnational biopolitical interventions around an AIDS crisis catalysed new forms of political organising by sexual subalterns, such as sex workers

¹Z White 'Musings on Black feminist resistance: The quiet revolution within a hetero-sexist patriarchal #FeesMust-Fall' in L-A Naidoo, A Gamedze & T Magano (eds) *Publica[c]tion* (2016) 28.

²S Salem 'Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory' (2018) 25 *European Journal of Women's Studies* 403. On problems with positing origins to intersectionality theory, and related tropes and desires around rescue, see JC Nash *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019).

³N Menon 'Is feminism about 'women'? A critical view on i from India' (2015) 50 *Economic and Political Weekly* 37.

⁴In contrast, Salem (note 2 above) locates intersectionality not only in Black feminisms in the United States but also in Third World liberation struggles.

⁵JC Nash 'The institutional lives of intersectionality' (2015) 50 *Economic and Political Weekly* 75.

⁶M John 'Intersectionality: Rejection or critical dialogue?' (2015) 50 *Economic and Political Weekly* 72.

⁷John (ibid) 74.

and queer and trans communities.⁸ This same example serves a different purpose; to show that even when it comes to ‘the world of governmentality’, as John puts it, concepts, ideas and identities do not land and live out their lives, ‘frozen into rigidity’.⁹

John’s claims help us think about the density of the local into which concepts arrive, or of their landing upon conjunctures that are thick with existing political literacies, conceptual imaginaries and horizons, and affective ties, on which newer conceptual maps might draw and that, in turn, they inevitably inflect, even shift. What exists is hardly erased, just as what arrives takes a specific shape, as it layers upon or even melds into specific conditions and cultural forms. Yet, anxieties around intersectionality’s origins and travel have produced limited and less nuanced accounts of where intersectionality lands. When it comes to the Global South, in particular, a lack of nuance can reproduce dominant perceptions of these locales as being typically empty or passive, as amenable only to epistemic imposition from outside. Put simply, travelling ignores the contexts into which concepts arrive, such that we flatten or even erase existing conceptual maps, that are themselves products of long, layered and multiple spatio-temporalities. Anxieties over origins, appropriation and loss restore a sense of boundness or fixity – an essence – as needing to be recovered from the journey and its end. Intersectionality’s travel and arrival might, in fact, be less an instance of the diminishing radical potential of concepts as they travel (or of the deficiencies inherent to the concept itself) but more of an opportunity to think about the impurity in which they always reside.

In reflecting on intersectionality’s travel to South Africa, where it has been enthusiastically taken up by academics and activists (especially student activists, both feminist and queer), I am less interested in mapping these sites for the conceptual or activist inadequacies that they might reveal. Rather, I am curious about what intersectionality’s travel to a particular place at a particular time might tell us about the locally charged milieus into which concepts enter. The different take-up of intersectionality with distinct effects suggests something about the conditions under which specific intersections take hold of public or at least, of activist imaginations, revealing the multiple temporalities contained within a specific conjuncture. The picture that emerges is one of the multiple, diverse and even competing conceptual maps, at the scale of the local, in ways that an easy postulation of ‘global unidirectionality’ is not able to capture.¹⁰

2. Fallism

The Fallist movements exploded on South African university campuses in 2015 and 2016, with the most well-known of these circulating, globally, as #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FeesMustFall (#FMF). Students demanded a decolonised curriculum, the removal of colonial iconography and symbols on campus, the better representation of

⁸See also N Menon ‘Sexuality, caste, governmentality: Contests over “gender” in India’ (2009) 91 *Feminist Review* 94.

⁹John (note 6 above) 75. On the travels of intersectionality that engages with this debate between Menon and John, see also M Sahay ‘The travel/trial of intersectionality’ (2019) *LSEngenderings* blog, 11 November.

¹⁰Fallism has, of course, emerged as a travelling concept in its own right. Fallism travelled from the South to the North, most prominently as #RMFOxford. But it also travelled within the Global South in ways that are less recognised. Indian students took up the hashtag to reveal the Indian state itself as a colonising power, and to materialise more intersectional protest cultures.

Black students and staff, and even an end to gender-based violence (GBV). Besides protesting the raising of university tuition fees (and eventually, demanding the removal of fees entirely), students also aligned with precarious service workers in the latter's longstanding demand to be insourced.

Student demands moved quickly beyond claims on the university alone. Activists sought to hold to account the failures of the African National Congress (ANC) government itself, rejecting what it had offered since the end of apartheid in 1994 – nationalism, transformation, nonracialism, embodied in the idea of the rainbow nation. As a first generation of born free Black South Africans, young workers and students 'ruptured the legitimacy of post-apartheid democracy and demanded a reopening of the history of South African politics and its associated visions of the future'.¹¹ These were the largest protest actions seen since the end of apartheid.

There were important wins at several places. The removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was an early and highly visible one of #RMF. At the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the subsequent #FMF movements were successful in scrapping fee increments, insourcing workers, and moving from loans to scholarships in higher education.¹² Both #RMF and #FMF shifted ways of knowing and knowledge-production, acting as epistemological ruptures.¹³ Or, as Achille Mbembe puts it:

It has forced upon us new questions about what counts as knowledge and why it has also obliged society at large to reflect on whether academic institutions can be turned into spaces of radical hospitality and if so, how, for whom and under what conditions; or whether they are simply sites that replay power relations already existing within society.¹⁴

As Fallism travelled from South Africa to the Global North, it enabled highly visible, even spectacular reckonings with colonial pasts. During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the statue of a slave owner in the Bristol harbour was torn down, in ways that echoed the removal of the Rhodes statue at UCT.

PA, BC and Black feminism/intersectionality provided the scaffolding for an emergent ideology called Fallism. Activist-scholars Gillian Godsell and Rekgotsofetse Chikane describe Fallism as engaging the 'colonial matrix of power' that encompasses 'the economy, gender and sexuality, knowledge and subjectivity, and authority'.¹⁵ The students thus brought back into the fray political traditions such as BC and PA, which had nurtured the liberation struggle.¹⁶ But they also drew centrally on a newer concept – intersectionality – in ways that catapulted an otherwise academic feminist term into public visibility. Through intersectionality, they attached an emergent public

¹¹K Gillespie & L-A Naidoo 'Between the Cold War and the fire: The student movements, anti-assimilation, and the question of the future in South Africa' (2019) 118 *South Atlantic Quarterly* 225.

¹²A Veriava 'On leaving Solomon House: A(n impressionistic) portrait of the FMF movement at Wits' (2019) 118 *South Atlantic Quarterly* 1.

¹³D Lewis & C Hendricks 'Epistemic ruptures in South African standpoint knowledge-making: Academic feminism and the #FeesMustFall movement' (2016) 4 *Gender Questions*.

¹⁴A Mbembe 'Future knowledges and their implications for the decolonisation project' in J Jansen (ed) *Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Knowledge* (2019) 239, 239.

¹⁵G Godsell & R Chikane 'The roots of the revolution' in S Booysen (ed) *Fees Must Fall: Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* (2016) 54, 59.

¹⁶Gillespie & Naidoo (note 11 above).

debate on decolonisation to a longer, more difficult one on GBV on and beyond South African university campuses.

This was not surprising. In the years leading up to these protests, GBV reached crisis levels. It shaped new protest landscapes in South Africa. The acquittal of (at the time) Vice President Jacob Zuma over rape charges brought forth by Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo ('Khwezi') in 2006 catalysed an entire generation of feminist activists. Not only was Zuma acquitted, but Kuzwayo faced such an intense backlash that she left the country and lived in exile until her untimely death.¹⁷ The Zuma rape trial was a powerful display of a deep consensus around the normalisation of sexual violence and the victimisation of those most socially vulnerable – women, Black and queer. It also showed what South Africa's foremost feminist scholar and expert on GBV, Pumla Dineo Gqola, has repeatedly stressed, that men 'rape women longest burdened with assumptions of unrapability'.¹⁸ The combined histories of slavery and colonialism created conditions in which Black women were most likely to be raped, and also least likely to be heard as credible complainants of rape and violence. Zuma was acquitted of rape charges not only because he was an exceptionally powerful political man – he went on to become South African president – but also because Kuzwayo was framed, in law and public opinion, as being impossible-to-rape. These enduring ideas around gender, sexuality and race meant that decolonisation in South Africa has had to contend with very specific structures of power and knowledge, which rendered rape as a way of life.

The fact that the ANC Women's League rallied around Zuma showed the lack of an autonomous women's political voice, and the easy co-option of feminist struggles by the masculinist state. The ANC's Women's League were the stormtroopers of patriarchy, writes Shireen Hassim.¹⁹ In the wake of the Zuma trial, a new and assertive feminist movement began, with the women's rights organisation One-in-Nine formed expressly to support Kuzwayo.²⁰ On the ten-year anniversary of his acquittal, in 2015, four young feminists hijacked a high-profile speech that Zuma was making in front of mainstream media. They held up banners calling on the South African public to 'Remember Khwezi'. They comprised 'a new moment that ma[de] possible a new conversation'.²¹

These young queer Black protestors were both feminists and Fallists, straddling new forms of student and feminist politics, both on and outside of university campuses. As many contributions to this special journal issue will attest, South African universities have consistently failed to recognise the enormity of GBV in higher education spaces. It has inevitably fallen upon students to take up the mantle as well as to ensure that the student protests of which they were part centred GBV, as issue and site of organisation.²² On the one hand, activists addressed the university as a site of gender-based and

¹⁷See P Gqola *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015); R Tlhabi *Khwezi: The Remarkable Story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo* (2017).

¹⁸Gqola (ibid) 53.

¹⁹S Hassim 'Why, a decade on, a new book on Zuma's rape trial has finally hit home' 2017 *The Conversation*, 5 October.

²⁰Hassim (ibid).

²¹Hassim (ibid).

²²See especially G Maluleke & E Moyer "'We have to ask for permission to become': Young women's voices, violence, and mediated space in South Africa' (2020) 45 *Signs* 871, 874, who stress the fact that it was the issue of GBV that made student politics also feminist politics (and vice versa: 'Gendered violence has been an area of concern within the movement, as has the fact that the movement's mostly male leaders have generally failed to include gender equality as a demand').

sexual violence, in continuum with and not as a departure from what happened outside of its walls. On the other hand, they placed GBV at the centre of a struggle to decolonise the university, tracing its stubborn endurance to entangled colonial and apartheid legacies. They wanted to ensure that the new spaces for political contestation created under Fallism were ones in which older struggles around GBV were visible and transformative. The inclusion of intersectionality emerged from the specificity of *this* experience, and it was at their insistence that the #RMF mission statement came to include the following:

An intersectional approach to our blackness 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, among other things. We all have certain oppressions and privileges and this must inform our organising so that we do not silence groups among us, and so that no one should have to choose between their struggles. Our movement endeavours to make this a reality in our struggle for decolonisation.²³

The insistence on intersectionality also rose to counter historic trends in BC movements. Apartheid's success in imposing and entrenching cultures of 'division and differences' had not only impeded the scope for Black solidarity – a central tenet of BC – but also for recognising multiple, overlapping and co-existent systems of power and oppression.²⁴ As an ideological response to racism and apartheid, BC saw racism as the primary social injustice, to be undone by the force of Black solidarity. Gender was not an arena of politicisation or mobilisation. 'BC ideology rests on the unsatisfactory premise that race is the primary oppressive force for all those racially subjugated in South Africa', Gqola argues.²⁵ She quotes Mamphela Ramphele who says of these male-dominated and masculinist movements: 'Gender as a political issue was not raised at all'.²⁶ The marginalisation of gender fuelled sexism and relegated women activists to second-class citizens. Women activists who challenged men silencing women or engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour were resisted from within the ranks, largely through dismissal and silencing.²⁷ Several Fallists believed that confronting GBV in the present was linked with 'confronting the silences of the past and the silences kept by older generations'.²⁸ In other words, the Fallists were 'not only speaking out about contemporary issues but revisiting debates about patriarchy that have long been silenced in the liberation movement'.²⁹

The turn to intersectionality was, in fact, a direct way to go beyond the limits of historic BC ideologies and movements. Artist-activist Thuli Gamedze makes this clear when they say: 'The intersectional agenda of Azania house is in direct response to the history of patriarchy in black consciousness movements [...] we need to be decolonised as completed units; we cannot separately decolonise each aspect of our

²³UCT Rhodes Must Fall Mission Statement.

²⁴P Gqola 'Contradictory locations: Black women and the discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa' (2001) 2 *Meridians* 132.

²⁵Gqola (ibid).

²⁶Gqola (ibid).

²⁷Meer, cited in Maluleke & Moyer (note 22 above) 885.

²⁸Maluleke & Moyer (ibid) 874.

²⁹Maluleke & Moyer (ibid) 884.

persons'.³⁰ Struggles against racism or white supremacy or patriarchy could not, then, take precedence over one another, or as scholar Kopano Ratele states simply, 'struggles against injustice therefore cannot but embrace intersectionality'.³¹ While feminist Fallists acknowledged proto-intersectional leanings in Black South African women's experiences and activism in the past, they also attempted to sculpt 'a distinctly South African intersectionality'.³² This was because of both the concept's African American roots but also the specificity of the conjuncture into which it had arrived. If BC developed in South Africa in a conjuncture where women – and gender – did not seem to matter,³³ then intersectionality arrived at a time when local feminists struggled to make GBV matter, greatly. They called sustained attention to a pandemic of femicide, corrective rape, and direct violence on women and queer people – to a South African nightmare, as Gqola named it.³⁴ Womxn students placed GBV at the centre of their intersectional decolonial struggle on university campuses, challenging not just the endurance of the coloniality of power but also the historic trend of male dominance, masculinist politics, patriarchy and sexism in liberatory ideologies and politics.

3. Contradictions, limits, futures

BC, PA and intersectionality created 'both epistemological and material possibilities for expanding liberation'.³⁵ As the student movement's three intellectual pillars, they were not, however, easily reconciled with one another. On the ground, activists experienced the fragility and, indeed, the backlash of trying to secure and sustain a genuinely intersectional struggle. Activist-scholar Leigh-Ann Naidoo provides a close mapping of the conflictual terrain in which intersectionality felt incommensurate with other ideological leanings of the movement:

The balancing act of BC, Pan-Africanism and intersectionality meant that there were more women and queer students voicing their concerns and participating more fully in the early stages of the movements. But as the student movements continued to struggle to decolonise their universities through an intersectional understanding of privilege and oppression, there was more and more resistance from a number of men in the movements who tried to argue that the issue of racism should trump all other issues. There was a shift from the October 2015 #FeesMustFall protests that placed class squarely on the struggle agenda, which resulted in movements centring race and class as the primary oppressive systems to fight against. Many students made the argument that the struggle needed to focus on one or two things and could not take on everything at once. Black queer feminists in the movement resisted this approach and continued to draw attention to the oppressive systems of patriarchy and homophobia, compelling their heterosexual

³⁰T Gamedze 'Azania House: Intersectionality as a catalyst for Black imagination' (2015) 9 *Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism* 122.

³¹K Ratele 'When the poor are Black, the Blacks are women, and the women are queer' in Naidoo et al (note 1 above) 55, 56.

³²K Khan 'Intersectionality in student movements: Black queer womxn and nonbinary activists in South Africa's 2015–2016 protests' (2017) 31 *Agenda* 117; see also M Matandela 'Redefining Black Consciousness and resistance: The intersection of Black Consciousness and Black feminist thought' (2017) 31 *Agenda* 10.

³³Gqola (note 24 above).

³⁴Gqola (note 17 above).

³⁵Khan (note 32 above) 110.

male comrades to recognise that while they are oppressed as black men in a university system and world that continues to privilege whiteness, they are simultaneously privileged as men by patriarchy and by heteronormativity as heterosexual. The key issue has proved to be a challenge internal to most student movements and highlights the continued ideological and power struggles taking place.³⁶

Intersectionality, at the hands of Black, queer and trans feminist students, had more labour to perform, though, than to simply remind male comrades of the intersecting logics and manifestations of patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, coloniality and racism. It served the urgent and difficult task of critiquing the movement, from within. Sharp cleavages emerged around experiences of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and hetero- and cis-normativity, especially among those most visible and vulnerable to such violence and those most protected from or even complicit in it. While trends of silencing and normalising sexism were familiar from historic BC movements, as already noted, what was unique to this moment was the emergence of an unapologetic feminist challenge to 'the oppression and discipline of patriarchy within the movement itself'.³⁷

It fell to those who comprised the 'margin within the margins', to wage an internal revolt – a quiet revolution – 'within a hetero-sexist patriarchal #FeesMustFall'.³⁸ During #FMF, 'intersectionality' became the site of actual conflicts among activists, with one set blaming the other of 'using the rhetoric [as] an ideological stance attempting to derail the broader movement'.³⁹ Male students claimed that the movement could not be everything at once. They blamed others of using the rhetoric to divide, even derail the movement. In fact, and across different university campuses, Fallist movement spaces were experienced as ones in which the promise of intersectionality had failed: 'Black cis and trans women and non-binary people worked hard to ensure that the decolonial agenda was truly intersectional. In theory it was a success, in practice patriarchy and cis-heteronormativity prevailed'.⁴⁰

The failures – even farce – of intersectionality were experienced in particularly intense ways when the movement emerged as a site of sexual violence, of the violation of comrade by comrade. A critical event occurred in the early life of #RMF, when an activist accused a fellow comrade of raping her at Azania Hall. Azania was the name used by nationalist formations, including BC and PA movements during the liberation struggle, to refer to South Africa. #RMF activists evoked this past as the site of a Black future. They occupied UCT's administration building, Bremner House, and renamed it Azania, a space 'that includes oppressed people as a collective, directly subverting the exclusionary tactics of institutions like UCT [...] it is a space that continues to be self-reflexive'.⁴¹

³⁶L Naidoo 'Contemporary student politics in South Africa: The rise of black-led student movements on #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall in 2015' in A Heffernan & N Nieftagodien (eds) *Students Must Rise: Youth Struggle in South Africa before and beyond Soweto '76* (2016) 180, 183.

³⁷N Mabaso 'Being Black inside #WFMF' in C Chinguno, M Kgoroba, S Mashibini, BN Masilela, B Maubane, N Moyo, A Mthombeni & H Ndlovu (eds) *Rioting and Writing: Diaries of the Wits Fallists* (2017) 99; see also N Sandy, S Dlakavu & B Boswell (2017) 'Womxn's and nonbinary activists' contribution to the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall student movements: 2015 and 2016' (2017) 31 *Agenda* 1–4.

³⁸White (note 1 above) 28.

³⁹CA Jacobs 'The outcasts: No retreat, no surrender!' in Chinguno et al (note 37 above) 120.

⁴⁰Kim, cited in Matandela (note 32 above) 27.

⁴¹Gamedze (note 30 above) 122.

But even such a self-reflexive space was not free of the power dynamics that it was created in opposition to; it was not even a straightforwardly safe space. The rape at Azania constituted a critical event in the movement's history, as the survivor brought it to public attention, through a Facebook post. The post catalysed a digital protest that coalesced around the hashtag, #RapeAtAzania. Besides the survivor who shared their story, others too used the hashtag to show that this rape was not exceptional, and that feelings of unsafety and vulnerability had been longstanding and everyday within Fallist spaces: 'The #RapeAtAzania is doubly tragic because women in the movement have BEEN saying they feel unsafe since the statue came down. Since forever'.⁴² Or, as Khadija Khan writes, also underscoring the violence women faced from other sources, like police and private security:

Rape was a tangible reality in the RMF/FMF space. Not only were prominent 'leaders' of the movement perpetrators of rape and physical violence against womxn, but there were instances of sexual assault within UCT occupations. During the FMF moment at UWC four womxn were raped on campus in three days, sparking the #UWC RapeAlert movement. Further, there were reports of private security forces sexually violating womxn protesters.⁴³

Azania embodied intersectionality's fragile, even incommensurate life. At the time of #RapeAtAzania, student activist Wandile Dlamini wrote:

A hashtag like #RapeAtAzania should be contradictory because Azania as a space is supposed to be a one of refuge [...] a space that we come to after experiencing teargas, rubber bullets and police brutality; a space that we go to in order to flee the institutional and social violence. We are not supposed to have violations of safety, psyche and bodies at Azania.⁴⁴

In their disappointment with what Azania had failed to be, Dlamini also imagined what it could be:

If Azania practiced intersectionality, there wouldn't be an extraordinary need for people to prove why someone's presence or actions is violent. It wouldn't be an uphill battle to get Azania to talk about patriarchy and hypermasculinity. It wouldn't be an uphill battle to get Azania to swiftly deal with violent people in the space. There wouldn't be a need for us to prove why dealing with patriarchy is of importance.⁴⁵

All of these things would happen naturally in an intersectional space. But Azania is not an intersectional space. At least, not yet.

4. A new Azania

Throughout the life of the student movements, Black feminist, queer and trans activists materialised a different Azania. They did so through cultivated forms of fighting back, combining older forms of resistance with new ones, which exploded ideas around victimhood, respectable politics, and who could claim power and public space and how. In response to the rape in Azania, cis and trans womxn stripped in protest.

⁴²Blacktwittertrends, cited in Maluleke & Moyer (note 22 above); see also Matandela (note 32 above).

⁴³Khan (note 32 above) 117.

⁴⁴W Dlamini 'RapeAtAzania: What our response is telling of us' (2015) 17 *Vanguard Magazine*.

⁴⁵Dlamini (ibid).

There were widespread acts of naked protest on campuses, in response to the violence of security forces and police, and to the violation experienced from within the ranks. Such forms of protest drew criticism, but womxn remained defiant:

The women who were told to dress appropriately chose to respond to patriarchal authority by doing the opposite. These young women are not only calling out specific men for their silence but also challenging societal beliefs and norms. Many of their tweets go beyond sharing stories of victimization by detailing how they fight back, illustrating that they do not necessarily see themselves as victims.⁴⁶

These authors go on to note how #RapeinAzania brought awareness to the endemic nature of GBV and the silencing of survivors within the student movement across universities in the country. Instances of rape and sexual assault that occurred within movement spaces – during occupations and protest actions on campuses – travelled to mainstream media and engaged multiple publics, especially through digital channels. The turn to the Internet marked an unprecedented moment of feminist activism around GBV in South Africa: ‘Through social media, young women today are engaging with various public audiences, drawing attention to patriarchy and its consequences within contemporary liberation movements.’⁴⁷ Hashtags like #UWCRapeAlert, #RapeatAzania, #PatriarchyMustFall #EndRapeCulture, #RUReferenceList, #IAmOneInThree were accompanied by direct action. Through their naked marches, brandishing of sjamboks, online naming and shaming, and careful consciousness-raising, womxn activists made clear that they would no longer tolerate societal tolerance of such injury and injustice. And they would not spare their comrades either.

At Wits, #MbokodoLead started trending three days after Fallist students occupied key parts of the university. Activist Simamkele Dlakavu recalls: ‘It began from a WhatsApp group, where the aim was to add as many Black women as possible to the group to brainstorm how to dismantle the tyranny of patriarchy in the movement while affirming each other.’⁴⁸

The hashtag went viral on Twitter, gathering critiques of patriarchal leadership styles from elsewhere. At Wits, it affirmed the agency and solidarity shared by Black women: ‘we sang, we made sure that the microphones were given to Black women to sing. Black women would claim the microphone also to provide political direction, and their ideas to advance the movement. That evening of these deliberations, I felt the unity among Black women,’ Dlakavu recalls.⁴⁹

From within #RMF came the call to dismantle patriarchy, in the widely circulating hashtag, #Patriarchymustfall. Not only did the hashtag act as a way of registering critique against the movement – and trying to hold it accountable – but also of referring to past patriarchies in past struggles: ‘The use of the #Patriarchymustfall hashtag directly and publicly challenged patriarchy within social justice movements, differentiating these young women from their forebears.’⁵⁰

⁴⁶Maluleke & Moyer (note 22 above) 883.

⁴⁷Maluleke & Moyer (ibid) 885.

⁴⁸S Dlakavu ‘#Feesmustfall: Black women, building a movement and the refusal to be erased’ in Chinguno et al (note 37 above) 110.

⁴⁹Dlakavu (ibid).

⁵⁰Maluleke & Moyer (note 22 above) 885.

Other prominent interventions included the #RURReferenceList at Rhodes University, which called out rape culture on South African University campuses, including accusations directed at male student leaders and at university management who failed to act.⁵¹ A list of perpetrators, released on social media, powerfully exposed the university's failure to tackle the persistent problem of GBV on campus, notwithstanding complaints and protest action. Amanda Gouws has extensively documented this campaign as well as the hashtag #EndRapeCulture that also arose at the time of #FMF at the same university. #EndRapeCulture combined direct action with digital protest and spread to most South African universities. It showed the exhaustion with formal channels of complaint and 'preceded #MeToo by nearly a year and forced universities to take note of rape cultures and failed policies and procedures dealing with sexual harassment and violence.'⁵²

At UCT, Black, queer and trans students staged disruptions against what they experienced as the simultaneous opening and closing of intersectional possibilities. A group of students called the Trans Collective – 'a decolonial movement centred on trans-feminism, which is allied to the Fallist movement, but also is deliberately separate from it' – formed at UCT, to challenge patriarchy, transphobia and cis gendered feminism within #RMF. The Trans Collective disrupted a photographic exhibition of #RMF by stripping and painting over images, to protest the erasure of the quiet revolution that they had led. In a statement explaining their intervention, the collective (formed in the early days of #RMF and responsible for an intersectionality audit committee)⁵³ wrote:

Our intervention is an act of black love. It is a commitment towards making RMF the fallist space of our dreams. It forms part of the journey towards the 'logical conclusion' of the decolonisation project. There will be no Azania if black men simply fall into the throne of the white man without any comprehensive reorganisation of power along all axis of the white supremacist, imperialist, ableist, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy.⁵⁴

It matters that these were Black, queer, non-binary and trans students who were exposing the limits to Black solidarity, both historic and contemporary. The term womxn or womyn signalled this expansion – from cis-gendered women to include trans and queer and non-binary people as well as to question binary gender.⁵⁵ Gavaza Maluleke and Eileen Moyer note how during #RepeatAzania, the rape survivor shifted the usual gendered understanding of rape from something men do to women to 'a

⁵¹Naming SRC leaders in the list led to ruptures in the student movement. O Meth '#FeesMustFall at Rhodes University: Exploring the dynamics of student protests and manifestations of violence' in M Langa (ed) *#Hashtag: An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities* (2017) 97, 106 argues that: 'Class, gender and racial issues were at the centre of the #FeesMustFall movement at Rhodes, and also led to the rupture of the movement'. There were other critiques around how gender and sexuality might have led to forms of identity politics, essentialism and ultimately, the fracturing of solidarity from within.

⁵²That these interventions had a significant digital dimension shows the limits of legal redressal and due process. A Gouws '#EndRapeCulture and #MeToo: Of intersectionality, rage and injury' in N Falkoff, S Phadke & S Roy (eds) *Intimacy and Injury: In the Wake of #MeToo in India and South Africa* (2022) 214 notes that communication technologies 'provide mechanisms to activists and some form of informal justice to victim/survivors of rape in the face of the failure of formal justice systems'.

⁵³See Sandy et al (note 37 above).

⁵⁴UCT Trans Collective 'Trans capture status' in Naidoo et al (note 1 above) 26, 27.

⁵⁵Student activist Mbali Matandela defines 'womxn' in alignment with 'decolonial theory, which is inclusive of the LGBTI community and challenges the dichotomy of "man" and "woman"', Matandela (note 32 above) 11.

more complex story of men violating the subordinate other [...] not only heterosexual female rape survivors but also trans, lesbian and gay people [...] she [the survivor] alludes to forms of violence in South Africa that are rarely configured as gendered violence.⁵⁶ GBV is a powerful technology of gender, of feminising its survivors and masculinising its (mainly male) perpetrators. The phenomenon of the corrective rape of lesbians in post-apartheid South Africa exemplifies this logic.⁵⁷

Debates on GBV, whether by governments or ordinary citizens, tend, however, to centre the cis-woman as the default object of violence. They erase the specificity of trans and non-binary experiences of violence but also their contributions to shifting public consciousness and conversation around GBV. And even in more celebratory accounts of the student movements, the category of woman erases how much Black students who are non-binary, queer and trans spearheaded a radical politics – not only around patriarchy and sexism but also for decolonisation. Khan, in fact, traces ‘intersectionality’ in the presence, even leadership of queer womxn and non-binary people in the student movements, who were actively taking on, ‘the country’s historically androcentric and heteronormative social activism environment. They demanded space and formed a narrative outside of the race-based, male and ANC-centric legacy of South African struggle.’⁵⁸

Khan reminds us that intersectionality arrived at a ‘moment [that] marks the convergence of both black and queer liberatory programmes, as black queer womxn and nonbinary people are creating both epistemological and material possibilities for expanding liberation.’⁵⁹ Even as there had been overlaps between struggles for Black liberation and for queer rights in the past, there was a far clearer articulation of how gender, sexuality, race and class constitute one another in the 2015 to 2016 struggles. The distinctly South African intersectionality that the students carved linked anti-capitalist fees protests to ‘anti-cisnormative patriarchy’.⁶⁰ From their rejection of respectability politics to male-dominated leadership to their embrace of all things non-normative, the discursive shift reflected a ‘lived intersectionality’ that this generation of gay, non-binary and trans activists, in particular, embodied.⁶¹

5. Back to the future?

The student movements of the 2015 to 2016 were making claims that both turned to the past – in rejecting colonial histories – and opened up the possibility of a new, different future – in demanding free decolonised education for all. These activists were alerting the nation to the unfinished businesses of the past. They alerted publics elsewhere, and enabled highly visible, even spectacular reckonings with the past. But

⁵⁶Maluleke & Moyer (note 22 above) 882.

⁵⁷Gqola is emphatic that what she terms the female fear factory is not just about women but all who have been constructed as such, P Gqola *Female Fear Factory* (2021). This includes gay men who are objects of the kind of violence reserved for women, because their homosexuality renders them woman-like. See also Rose on violence against women in South Africa and my commentary on the same. J Rose *On Violence and on Violence Against Women* (2021); S Roy ‘Violence against women and the future of the past’ (2022) *City Press*, 28 February.

⁵⁸Khan (note 32 above) 110.

⁵⁹Khan (ibid) 110.

⁶⁰Khan (ibid) 119.

⁶¹Khan (ibid) 113 stresses how the success of a movement’s intersectional commitments and capacity to ‘dismantl[e] the overarching structures that harm all’, can precisely be seen in its capacity to include and foreground ‘those who exist at the margins, even in social activism spaces’.

the South African Fallists turned to the past not simply to recover the pain and injustice that a previous generation had chosen to repress.

In their essay titled 'Cold Future', Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo draw out the specific temporal logics and claims towards futurity in the student movements.⁶² In their recovery of past political ideologies – BC, PA and in the evocation of Azania – the students reopened the past for a future that they felt they ought to have been delivered but were cheated out of. Instead, in the impasses of the present, the future had effectively gone cold and needed to be remembered and recast. Leigh-Ann Naidoo referred to her fellow student activists as time-travellers who were turning to the past to move beyond the impasses of the present, to go back to the future. The students were reopening the question of political time, asking anew: 'what time is it?'.⁶³

Womxn in Fallist movements were also 'time-travelers'.⁶⁴ Like their comrades, they challenged the victories of liberation struggle generation, but they also revealed a dark underside to struggle histories – of sexual violence and sexism. Their 'hallucinations' both converged with but also disrupted a wider Fallist claim to the future, through a demand for intersectionality.⁶⁵ And in spite their own feelings and declarations of intersectionality's failure, the concept was, in fact, critical to their investments in feminist futurity. After all, intersectionality functioned less as a coherent conceptual map in these movement spaces, than as 'sites of intensity that articulate a coming to political consciousness'.⁶⁶

Naidoo points to generational fault lines that emerged in the wake of these movements, with anti-apartheid activists declaring the Fallist call to revolution as being out of step with post-apartheid democratic time.⁶⁷ If older activists accused Fallists of being out of touch and time, then older feminists accused younger ones of forgetting past struggles and their continued relevance.⁶⁸ Darlene Miller refers to these generational tensions between 'leftist matriarchs' and 'radical young women and LGBTIAQ+' as 'generational blues'.⁶⁹ She observed them taking place along several fault lines, on issues of racism and nonracialism, violence, class and heteronormativity. Notably, she says, 'the emphasis on sexuality and identity has led to the criticism by earlier radicals [...] that the student activists do not focus on fundamental social transformation and social justice'.⁷⁰

Some of the disquiet of older radicals also centred around the deployment of intersectionality by a younger generation of Black women. Older activists claimed that the concept was used more as slogan than as concrete epistemic intervention, which easily devolved into single axis thinking – either privileging race or gender – and

⁶²Gillespie & Naidoo (note 11 above).

⁶³L-A Naidoo 'Hallucinations: Ruth First Memorial Lecture Keynote Address, 17 August 2016' in Naidoo et al (note 1 above) 49.

⁶⁴Naidoo (ibid).

⁶⁵Naidoo (ibid).

⁶⁶D Mupotsa 'Knowing from loss' (2020) 68 *Sociological Review* 524.

⁶⁷Naidoo (note 63 above).

⁶⁸D Miller (2015) 'Excavating the vernacular: "Ugly feminists," generational blues and matriarchal leadership' in S Booysen (note 15 above) 270–291.

⁶⁹Miller (ibid) 275.

⁷⁰Miller (ibid) 274.

essentialising identity. Desiree Lewis and Cheryl Hendricks, for instance, argue that in the Fallist movement:

‘intersectionality’ may have been oversimplified. There is limited attention to the challenging conceptual work that is needed to justify why or how certain locations are important in relation to particular political challenges and epistemic interventions. In fact, ‘intersectionality’ has frequently been seen as a kind of panacea of struggle; it is as though by simply stating that struggles are intersectional, commentators were dispensing with the more difficult task of articulating radical goals with reference to particular practices.⁷¹

They go on to say:

It may be the case that the enormous scope for sharing and accessing sound-bytes of information has weakened the epistemic possibilities within Fallist knowledge-making: instead of labouring over what liberatory knowledge-making means and can do, many Fallists might have unwittingly fallen prey to aspects of an uncritical neoliberal knowledge economy.⁷²

These kinds of generational readings produce a new radical African intersectional feminism as refusing to inherit the class and anti-capitalist analyses of the past, turning instead to transnational, especially American political vocabularies in ways that fall prey to neoliberal logics. Such linear, generational accounts – undergirded by attachments to loss and recovery – typically flatten the multiple times through which the present is seamed (as Sarah Nuttall observes of the immediate post-apartheid years in South Africa).⁷³ Fallist movements held the possibility of recovering *and* reinventing the past, but they also offered temporalities other than those that were normatively linear or progressive. Intersectionality enabled rather than foreclosed the possibilities for a future-oriented, even utopian politics. At the hands of feminist Fallists, it emerged a terrain for imagining and building worlds to come, for imagining what could be but did not yet exist.⁷⁴

This might sound surprising to some. Indeed, Jennifer Nash argues (after Jasbir Puar), that intersectionality is not amenable to futurity, being ‘present-oriented’.⁷⁵ Insofar as it seeks to make visible identities and injustices in the here and now, intersectionality disavows futurity. Nash contrasts this dominant strand in Black feminist theorising with an older political tradition, which she calls ‘black feminist love-politics’: one that eschews attachments to the present and to fixed selves to ‘dream of a yet unwritten future’. Black feminist love-politics is invested, unlike mainstream usages of intersectionality that can collapse into identity politics, not in what *is* but what *could be*, or the future as a locus of possibility.

For sure, the student movements lent to wider critiques of intersectionality as essentialising identities or as making visible what is there for the purposes of inclusion alone, at the cost of more radical, transformative and future-oriented agendas. That is, if we read Fallists as quite closely tied to intersectionality’s origins: to emphasise the

⁷¹Lewis & Hendricks (note 13 above).

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³S Nuttall *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (2009).

⁷⁴S Nuttall ‘Upsurge’ in C Boule & J Pather *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa* (2019) 41; see also Mupotsa (note 66 above).

⁷⁵JC Nash ‘Practicing love: Black feminism, love-politics, and post-intersectionality’ (2011) 11 *Meridians* 1.

intersectional nature of social identities and the interlocking dynamics of relations of power.⁷⁶ But if we treat intersectionality as a site of intensity, as a coming-to political consciousness, even of affective excess, then the conjuncture into which it landed offers scope for a different reading. Womxn Fallists harnessed the concept to do more than name identity – gender or race – as fixed essences, around which their claims for visibility and inclusion cohered. They used it as a tool to diagnose the limits and frictions in Black solidarity, especially (but not only) along the fault lines of gender and sexuality.

If the student movement was, as Gillespie and Naidoo claim,⁷⁷ an extended experimentation with a politics of Blackness – to affirm a new Black subjectivity and a future into which ‘black students felt willing to step’ – then intersectionality, in proving incommensurate with some historic articulations of political Blackness and BC, voiced ‘the difficulties of Black solidarity’.⁷⁸ These difficulties exceeded the kinds of gender-specific violence, injury and exclusion that this new political grammar made visible and nameable; they also came to contain womxn students’ sharp sense of disappointment and betrayal at violence and injury within the movement. When they recast the movement as a site of failed intersectional possibilities, they named the tensions, connections and contradictions – the frictions – intrinsic to projects and promises of Black solidarity, historic and ongoing. Failure and friction both presumed and prefigured ‘that which does not yet exist; that which only exists in an incipient state; or that which, it is hoped, is still to come’.⁷⁹

Azania was, then, not simply a locus of failed (intersectional) potentialities and scripts of disappointment, betrayal and loss. It was also about what could be possible, a claim towards not-as-yet scripted but possible alternative worlds. Intersectionality gave these students the political grammar to imagine and conjure these utopian desires, rooted not in the identitarian politics of gender or race (or past political struggles) but in the kind of Black feminist love-politics that Nash describes.⁸⁰ The UCT Trans Collective’s statement powerfully concludes with, ‘We are the trans people who have loved RMF even when it did not love us. Aluta Continua’.⁸¹

6. Conclusion

Intersectionality has been marked by excessive travel, travel that has taken it beyond its intellectual, discursive and spatial origins, stretching but also diluting, as some have claimed, the analytical bite and political imperative of the concept. But anxieties over travel – and origins – tend to ignore where concepts land, and how their arrival might be marked not so much by co-option by other forces but by a ‘foldedness’ into what exists.⁸² The language of travel also produces a forgetting of the fundamental amenability of concepts to change; ideas do different work in different contexts not because of loss

⁷⁶See, for instance, A Gouws ‘Feminist intersectionality and the matrix of domination in South Africa’ (2017) 31 *Agenda* 19.

⁷⁷Gillespie & Naidoo (note 11 above) 235.

⁷⁸Mupotsa (note 66 above) 4.

⁷⁹Nuttall (note 74 above) 41.

⁸⁰Nash (note 75 above).

⁸¹UCT Trans Collective (note 54 above) 27.

⁸²Nuttall (note 74 above).

or mutation through travel but because of their incomplete, impure, leaky and fungible nature. In tracking intersectionality's arrival in the high tide of the Fallist student movements in South Africa, I have been less interested in marking the concept's possibilities or limits, than in how it produced certain attachments and signalled new affective, epistemic and political aspirations. Intersectionality's arrival gives us important clues as to which intersections come to matter and why, and how these constitute the grounds for specific kinds of activist imaginations and interventions.

A small but substantial archive of activist voices makes clear that the #FMF and #RMF movements embodied a new kind of radical queer feminist energy. In particular, women, queer and trans students were able to give voice and meaning to deeply felt issues around GBV and toxic masculinity within the university and outside of it. Beyond that, these students took on the urgent and difficult task of critiquing the movement from within, directed at their own male comrades. While trends of silencing and normalising sexism were familiar in BC movements and ideologies, what was unique to this moment was the emergence of an unapologetic queer feminist challenge, which also made powerfully visible the limits, tensions and potentialities in projects – and promises – around Black solidarity. The conjuncture into which intersectionality arrived – marked by a new appetite for the decolonisation of higher education and hyper intolerance towards patriarchy and rape culture on university campuses – offered a way to reorient both historical movements and present(ist) identity politics towards future-oriented feminist world-making possibilities. Revisiting activist archives of that time offers not just forms of disruption and critique, but also future-oriented and even utopian queer feminist world-making possibilities.

In the aftermath of these movements – and partly in response to them – universities have hardened agendas of diversity – 'transformation' – in ways that feed into wider anti-foreign sentiments when it comes to scholarships and jobs. Xenophobic and, especially, Afrophobic rhetoric now informs the direction of mainstream political parties and politics in South Africa. It materialises in everyday attacks against fellow Africans, the bulk of whom are poor and precarious workers. The Fallist movements were not always hospitable to international students from other African countries. There were reports of Afrophobia and anti-foreign sentiments among student activists. In ways that echo activist frustrations around 'intersectionality', commitments to PA were also said to be superficial.⁸³ Issues of Black poverty and land redistribution were engaged with in terms already set by the nation-state, leaving little space to consider their transnational dimensions. A residual nationalism lent to a chauvinism that is now emergent. The lesson is clear from the writings of Achille Mbembe who has repeatedly stressed that decolonisation does not amount to Africanisation.⁸⁴ Instead, he argues that 'decolonising an African university requires a *geographical imagination that extends well beyond the confines of the nation-state*'.

Intersectionality is, then, more important than ever today. It remains a necessary and powerful framework to attend to shifts in relations of oppression, some of which were advanced in reaction to Fallism itself. Just as it exposed the limits of existing

⁸³ AK Ahmed 'The rise of fallism: #RhodesMustFall and the movement to decolonise the university' (2019) PhD diss., Columbia University.

⁸⁴ A Mbembe 'Decolonizing the university: New directions' (2016) 15 *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 36, emphasis added.

thinking on Black solidarity and made clear the challenges ahead, it might also offer tools to think creatively and inclusively beyond the limits of the nation state while challenging, at the same time, resurgent nationalisms.

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