

# Being a Feminist in the Fallist Movement in Contemporary South Africa

MBALI MAZIBUKO

**ABSTRACT** This short essay offers reflective feminist insight into the Fees Must Fall Movement of 2015–16 that was led by students and workers at universities in South Africa. It considers the ways in which Black feminist life is negotiated and embodied in a contemporary student-worker movement that remains oriented by and toward hegemonic hypermasculinities. This text further argues that Black feminist intervention and mobilization is distinct from women's movements as they happened under apartheid. Feminist organizing is principled in particular ways, and these ways are evidenced by Black feminist interventions within the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement. This essay demonstrates how intersectionality functions as more than a diagnostic tool. Intersectionality and how it is imagined and used in the contemporary South African feminist context does not only recognize multiple and interlocking oppressions. Intersectionality is also in itself a methodology. Intersectionality as demonstrated by feminists and the LGBTIQA community of the FMF movement is a methodological choice that requires that various forms of protest and intervention be used simultaneously to challenge systemic oppressions. Centering intersectionality as methodology works to disrupt archaic perspectives on what is and is not activism, thought, or feminist work. Relying on the intellectual work of student-activists in the movement, otherwise known as “fallists,” and memory and story-telling as methodological tools, this essay begins to imagine how we can think, research, and write in ways that memorialize and archive our lives, our histories, and our collective imaginaries.

**KEYWORDS** intersectionality, Fees Must Fall, feminist, university, South Africa

Contemporary concerns about South Africa's higher education landscape, as articulated by students, workers, and allies, remind us that the struggles we face in the present carry deep historical legacies in the violent apartheid regime. Thus, seemingly isolated political moments, rather than being marked as new or almost ahistorical, actually open up to deeply political struggles. I cannot engage in detail here with the history of education under colonial conditions and apartheid. However, let me note that the issues addressed by the Fees Must Fall movement (FMF) are

not at all new. In this short essay, I think through Black women's leadership and participation in contemporary protest action within the university. I also consider the Black feminist interventions that have emerged in the current student movement. In particular, I engage intersectionality and "fallism" in the context of feminist identity building. While we have a history of women's political organizing, most notable during the struggle for liberation from apartheid, the current student movement calls on us to think more seriously about the place of feminist identity in relation to other demands and struggles. I reflect on my own experiences of FMF and the ways that they have been influenced by my coming to the world as feminist or as what Sarah Ahmed terms a "feminist killjoy."<sup>1</sup> I have included my own reflections on FMF as well as the writings of some student activists who have claimed and embodied the fallist identity.<sup>2</sup> I write, perhaps, as one of the quieter voices in contemporary student activism in South Africa, and I show that decolonial work can happen in the street and on the web; that it can be explicit or implicit; that it can entail revolutionary violence, classroom politicking, or any combination of these and other protest repertoires. I argue that intersectionality and feminism within the student movement collapses, or at least forces a recognition of, the rigid binaries that dictate who and what is important, who and what comes first or last, what kind of work done in the name of the movement is more valuable than another.

Hlengiwe Ndlovu recalls her experiences as a student at Wits University during the FMF movement of 2015–16.<sup>3</sup> On Wednesday, October 14, 2015, students from Wits shut down the university by blocking off all of its entrances. The shutdown was a response to the 10.5 percent fee increase for the 2016 academic year. This day is often marked as iconic, historical even, because it seems to have presented itself as new in a post-apartheid context. Media coverage and public discourse often created the impression that FMF was new and legitimate because historically white universities like Wits had rallied around poor student-worker conditions. However, the South African student movement has a much longer genealogy, outside of its recent (re)emergence, marked by the FMF movement. Students in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and poorer institutions such as Tshwane University of Technology, Fort Hare University, and Cape Peninsula University of Technology have routinely protested against fee hikes since 1994.<sup>4</sup> The participation of historically advantaged institutions, like Wits and the University of Cape Town (UCT) in FMF was thus seen by observers to legitimize protest action against fee increases. As a result of the Wits campus shutdown in October 2015, at least seventeen other universities followed suit with shutdowns of their own.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, FMF emerged as iconic and also served as a repository for a number of other issues.

Whether a student movement is marked as legitimate or illegitimate depends on who sneezes and whose sneeze settles deep enough in our bones for all of us

to catch a cold. This is to say that because historically white and liberal institutions of higher learning like Wits and UCT were made ill and left untreated by the legacy of apartheid, the rest of the world was made to realize how deeply sickening a society as divided as South Africa is. The university simply operated as a microcosm of contemporary inequalities. Demands made by students include calls for universities to end the outsourcing of university workers, or ground staff as they are sometimes called, to decolonize the physical and intellectual architecture of the university, to take more seriously and address sexual violence perpetrated by private security and police officers deployed on campus and by fellow FMF comrades. FMF has also prompted us to question the image of the rainbow, a symbol that has become all too pervasive in South African politics. We are angry in spite—or perhaps I should say *because*—of the rainbow that was imagined in 1994 at the inception of the transition to democracy. In this context, South Africa became attached to the idea of a rainbow, signaling a transformed, inclusive, and all-embracing nation. While universities in democratic South Africa have been somewhat remodeled to bring together a broader range of demographics than they did under the apartheid regime, we remain steadfast in exposing how the university is not at all the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.<sup>6</sup> We recognize that the preferred student, the student who has ease of access to tertiary education and has no pedagogical or epistemological qualms with the academy, is often wealthy, white, and/or male. Students are also angry because even those Black middle- and upper-class students who have been able to self-fund remain ignorant and dismissive of the plight of the poor. We are angry because the rainbow does not accommodate Black life and Black radical politics, no matter how much you'd try to blend the other colors. Even when you think about the representation of the rainbow in many other discourses, in South African institutions of higher learning, particularly those that are historically white, the rainbow does not work in favor of gender non-conforming, non-binary, or poor students and thinkers. Or women. The women in the FMF movement have done so much to pull this rainbow apart, to expose its clandestine connections with silencing and interlocking forms of oppression. In the current student movement, which has become a national movement, Black women have introduced the kind of feminist practice that is unapologetic about its agenda. The feminism here, the feminism that has grown on me, is one that refuses our erasure.

We have always been here, as Zine Magubane and many other feminists, including Sheila Meintjies, Nomboniso Gasa, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Hannah Britton, and Jennifer Fish, have argued. However, the women's movement under apartheid, organized under political structures such as the African National Congress Women's League and the Federation of South African Women, often equated national liberation with women's liberation.<sup>7</sup> Magubane further argues that women in the liberation movement focused on sexism and misogyny as it appeared in private or

home life, thus maintaining the binary between private and public worlds. I share some of the same thoughts and experiences of Simamkele Dlakavu, an activist and now a PhD candidate at Stellenbosch University.<sup>8</sup> She writes about Black women's experiences in social movements in general, and in the FMF in particular, and highlights the centrality of Black feminism in these movements. In the FMF movement, as Black women, we started to critically and reflexively engage the narrative of collective liberation, which assumed that the students' struggle did not (re)produce gendered inequalities within itself. In our work with the FMF movement, many of us Black women began to feel that we did not belong in the space of leadership and visibility. Considering the hetero-patriarchal nature of resistance against apartheid, it is no wonder that men such as Mcebo Dlamini and Vuyani Pambo were often given presidential status in the movement.<sup>9</sup> Any other man was also given the time and attention to lead us in song, to address us, to provide direction. While women and some men were happy to serve by preparing food for students involved in protests, this soon felt like a required performance of our femininity. Dlakavu recalls a moment during FMF that I relate to deeply; I return to it often as a reminder of why feminism is important in any social movement, generally, but also for the project of decolonization in particular. Feminism has managed to extend itself in ways that move far beyond the here and now of protest action. Here, I tell my story in an autobiographical narrative, following Dlakavu, who also draws on autobiography to memorialize, as she says, (one of) the many ways Black women have attempted to disrupt and take up space. This particular moment happened a few days into FMF.

*It must have been the feminist gods that spoke to me that morning. I woke up, put on a black dress, a colorful head wrap and bold, dark purple lipstick. I wore white Converse sneakers because, somehow, I felt that a lot of my physical mobility would be at play. I arrived at the main campus of Wits University in the morning. I proceeded to go to our meeting place, Solomon Mahlangu House, a place that was once strange when it was still known as Senate House. Students renamed it after a political hero and soldier of the African National Congress's military wing, Umkhonto WeSizwe. I remember being called out by a student activist to join the other Black women on the other side of Solomon Mahlangu House. Although confused and not knowing why we were convening separately from the protesting masses, I made my way to the group of women.*

*The area in which we were standing was covered in beautiful colors displayed on our heads. Head wraps. More head wraps. More Black women. More melanin. More . . . butter. More Black women kept on coming into the space, with this aesthetic. I remember not caring about whether this was planned or orchestrated by any one political organization. All I could feel was visibility. Visibility, for Black women, or at least for me, is a feeling. A conversation started happening among us. It was consensus: we were going to march and occupy the center of the protesting student body and lead in song. You must understand*

*that struggle songs are a big part of South African protest culture. I cannot remember the exact song we started with, but I remember how we insisted on starting a new song over the one that was already being sung and led by a group of men. How we were received — it was as if we were waging war on our own. I remember men saying, so loudly: “This is not about women!” and “Stop dividing us” in the classic comrade accent many have perfected. “I am here, I am here,” I thought to myself with pride, because I was sharing a precious and important moment with other Black women. This pride was not an absence of doubt, however, since a feeling of demotivation suddenly came over me, and I began to ask myself: “What are we doing?” These contrasting feelings, as I have come to learn, are part of living a feminist life. That life is one that recognizes complexity and contradiction. Living a feminist life means I can be both proud of feminist intervention but also demotivated and in doubt as I navigate this world through a lens understood as sensational and irrelevant.*

Let’s now skip ahead a few moments and work from that place of doubt; that is, from the place of interplay between demotivation and the feminist I was still becoming. Former president Jacob Zuma announced a 0 percent fee increase for 2016 after days of campus shutdowns and protest actions by students across the country. Shortly after this announcement, students felt the pressure to turn their attention back to preparing for exams, since the 2015 academic year was coming to a close and qualifications were at stake. We returned in January 2016, hopeful that the 0 percent fee increase would be a stepping-stone to free education. But we also carried something else from the 2015 FMF movement: rage, our roots of bitterness and the deepened desire for decolonization, which is a much broader project. I have interpreted this project as one of risk-taking, of feminism, of inter-sectionality.

*It is 2016, and I return to Wits University as an honors student and a tutor for first-year sociology students. I am angry. I am enraged. The FMF movement left many scars but also encouraged me to find ways for this rage inside of me to be productive. Everything white and everything masculinized is a trigger. And so, I embarked on a teaching project that would place emphasis on Black life and the importance of creating a freethinking space. At the start of all of my tutorials, I had said to those that I tutored that I only had two rules in the tutorial: I am Black and I am a woman. I am a Black feminist, and whatever I say would obviously be read along those lines, so we should not be afraid to approach class content through various intersections. I was taking risks by presenting as Black and feminist and encouraging students to ask difficult questions and to engage in difficult topics. One day, the risks I had taken culminated in what felt like a disciplinary hearing of sorts after a white woman student had reported me for being aggressive, vulgar, and a bully in my tutorials. The day I was called in by the head of my department was the same day my tutorials were scheduled to take place. In that meeting, I was told that this white woman had requested to be moved from my tutorial and had asked for an apology. I left that meeting feeling completely shocked that white women would have that much influ-*

*ence over systems used to govern us, to remind us of our place. I was also shocked because of the way the department approached the situation, offering little to no support for me while protecting and acting on behalf of a student who happens to be a white woman and who felt I simply did not understand her and failed to recognize her life experiences. I could not teach that day. I sent out emails to my class and left a note on the door of our tutorial venue asking them to attend the tutorial led by someone I now consider a friend. I cried and cried and cried, and I thought to myself: This is the price you pay for being Black and feminist. This is the price you pay for challenging existing ways of knowing, of learning, and of teaching. This is what you get for thinking that intersectionality can challenge legacies of colonialism. This is what you get when you aren't . . . white.*

I realized then that part of the fallist movement also involves moving inward and clamping down on sites of learning and teaching. If Black feminist thought is invested in the free speaking, becoming, and being of Black women, then patriarchy is not in solidarity with Black feminist objectives because they threaten the sustainability of patriarchal domination. While I have always felt that I am a feminist, I think that it was only during my experience of FMF in 2015 that I truly began “living a feminist life.”<sup>10</sup> Through this experience, I realized that Black feminism challenges not only the sustainability of patriarchy, but also all other colonial conditions, including capitalism, systematic erasure, and epistemic violence. While I do have experience being on the ground and adding to the number of students in struggle, I have also been challenging the literary and academic status quo while being unapologetically feminist in my method.

Intersectionality refers to the recognition of multiple forms of oppression. It is a deliberate intrusion upon single-category analyses. It is not, or should not be, a matter of “oppression Olympics,” where specific struggles are pitted against each other. We should not have to sacrifice one struggle in favor of another. We are instead obliged to work for and stand in solidarity with struggles fought by disenfranchised groups other than our own. Fallism is developed from the urge not only to recognize multiple forms of oppression but also to work actively against these interlocking oppressions. Therefore, in a South African context, intersectionality would be more than the recognition of the ways in which systems allocate disadvantage, pain, and struggle. Fallism teaches us that these oppressive systems can operate as gifts that we can use to destroy the system that marginalizes us. The multiplicity of oppression requires us to use multiple tools in our strategies, as we seek to survive in the face of, and to contest, interlocking oppressions. I have learned, through the current student movement, which places such heavy emphasis on decolonization, to say, “I am also here,” together with other Black women. I am a feminist killjoy who is met with strong reactions and read as sensational when I speak.<sup>11</sup> I am a feminist killjoy inside and outside the classroom, one whose seat at the table has been revoked many times because of this. I am a feminist who has



taken risks and has also made feminist mistakes. I am a feminist who has realized that while I may face multiple oppressions, they never place me above or ahead of another Black woman. I am a feminist whose relationships with some of the men I love have taken a back seat; because I understand that these men benefit from the current system and reproduce it. I am a feminist whose heart heals a little bit more each time I hear that somewhere in the world, disenfranchised communities are fighting back and are winning some of their power back. I am a Black woman who is capable of singing struggle songs, being part of naked protests, participating in conferences, events, seminars, and writing workshops on the plight of Black women, gender non-confirming, non-binary, and disabled people. I am also a Black woman who has now learned that even going back to a place of rest contributes to dismantling the status quo, because we find strength, healing, and creativity in rest. Defined in this way, fallism, as it is developed with the benefit of having engaged intersectionality, makes room for us not only to recognize our complex positionalities but also to carve out various strategies that equip us to do the work of actively disabling normativities. Being feminist and fallist means knowing that we need to write, to cry, to fight, to mobilize, to teach, to encourage one another, to step back, to show up in numbers or alone, to crush the systems that both oppress and connect us. Being feminist and fallist means being productive in the simultaneous destruction of multiple forms of oppression in a number of varying ways.

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**MBALI MAZIBUKO** is a PhD candidate in women's and gender studies at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She completed an undergraduate degree with honors and a master's degree in sociology at Wits University in Johannesburg. Her academic personality is shaped by affect theories, rage, gender-based violence, feminist methodologies, and feminist pedagogical justice. Her current work raises questions about rebellious femininity, sensuality, and sexuality and is committed to contributing to the development of a feminist archive in South Africa. The Wits Centre for Diversity Studies, where she was a research intern, was one of the major influential contexts within which she wrote this article. She lives a deeply feminist life, which means she lives a dangerous yet rewarding life, as she comes to the realization that she belongs deeply to herself.

#### Notes

1. Ahmed, "Feminism Is Sensational."
2. Anzio Jacobs defines fallism as a commitment to the destruction of all forms of oppression, simultaneously. See Jacobs, "Outcasts." Similarly, Kimberlé Crenshaw offers a definition of intersectionality as the recognition of multiple forms of oppression. See Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins." There is something to be said about fallism having possibly developed from intersectionality but operating within a context of African activism and African feminism.
3. Ndlovu, "Journey through Wits."

4. Davids and Waghid, "#FeesMustFall."
5. Davids and Waghid, "#FeesMustFall."
6. Mazibuko, "Loss, Rage, and Laughter."
7. Magubane, "Attitudes towards Feminism."
8. Dlakavu, "Black Women, Building a Movement."
9. Dlakavu, "Black Women, Building a Movement." Dlamini and Pambo are student activists from Wits University. Both men were leaders of their student-based political parties at the time. Pambo was affiliated with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Dlamini with the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA), which is an extension of the national party, the African National Congress (ANC).
10. Ahmed, "Feminism Is Sensational."
11. Ahmed, "Feminism Is Sensational."

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