


#RhodesMustFall: How a Decolonial Student Movement in the Global South Inspired Epistemic Disobedience at the University of Oxford

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Abstract: When the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement erupted at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in March 2015, it not only sparked the proliferation of student movements across South Africa, but also led to the formation of #RMF at the University of Oxford and similar movements at universities in the United States. By drawing on ninety-eight interviews with various actors involved in both movements, Ahmed's empirical research contributes to the limited academic literature on the connections between the #RMF movements in Cape Town and in Oxford. The example of the #RMF movement in Cape Town inspired the #RMF Oxford movement to challenge the epistemic architecture of the University of Oxford.

Résumé: Lorsque le mouvement #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) a éclaté à l'Université du Cap (UCT) en mars 2015, il a non seulement déclenché la prolifération de mouvements étudiants à travers l'Afrique du Sud, mais également conduit à la formation du #RMF à l'Université d'Oxford, ainsi qu'à d'autres mouvements universitaires similaires aux États-Unis. En s'appuyant sur 98 entretiens avec divers acteurs engagés dans ces deux mouvements (UCT et Oxford), cette recherche empirique menée par Ahmed contribue à une littérature académique jusqu'à présent limitée sur les liens entre les mouvements #RMF au Cap et à Oxford. L'exemple du mouvement #RMF au Cap a inspiré le mouvement #RMF Oxford pour contester l'architecture épistémique de l'Université d'Oxford.

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Resumo: Quando eclodiu na Universidade da Cidade do Cabo, em março de 2015, o movimento #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) não apenas desencadeou a proliferação de movimentos de protesto por toda a África do Sul, como deu também origem à formação do #RMF na Universidade de Oxford e de movimentos semelhantes em universidades dos Estados Unidos da América. Partindo de 98 entrevistas a diversos atores envolvidos em ambos os movimentos, a investigação empírica de Ahmed vem enriquecer a reduzida literatura acadêmica sobre as ligações entre movimentos #RMF na Cidade do Cabo e em Oxford. O movimento #RMF na Cidade do Cabo deu o mote para que o movimento #RMF em Oxford desafiasse a arquitetura epistêmica na Universidade de Oxford.

Keywords: Rhodes Must Fall; Theory from the South; Oxford; Cape Town; decolonization; decoloniality

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Introduction

On March 9, 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a black student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, threw containers of human feces against a bronze statue of Cecil John Rhodes located on the university's campus. Maxwele's defilement of the Rhodes statue was an important catalyst in the formation of #RhodesMustFall (#RMF), a radical student movement centered on decolonizing UCT by confronting questions of institutional racism, increasing access to education, and reforming the Eurocentric university curriculum.¹

The #RMF movement resonated with students in the United States, particularly at Harvard Law School, where the Royall Must Fall movement was created in October 2015, calling for the removal of Massachusetts slave owner Isaac Royall Jr. from the crest of Harvard law school. At Princeton University, the Black Justice League occupied the university president's office in November 2015 to demand the removal of Woodrow Wilson's name from various buildings. Wilson supported racial segregation during his tenure as U.S. president from 1913 to 1921.

However, the echoes of the #RMF UCT movement were felt most profoundly at the University of Oxford, where the #RhodesMustFall Oxford movement was established two months after Maxwele's act of protest. The movement to decolonize UCT resonated strongly with students at the University of Oxford, who created the #RMF Oxford movement in May 2015.

While the Rhodes statue glorified the white British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes and was characterized in the UCT #RMF's mission statement (2015) as "an act of violence" as well as "the perfect embodiment of black alienation and disempowerment," it served primarily as a symbolic focal point for the movement's broader decolonial objectives. These objectives,

which included the removal of white supremacist iconography and “implementing a curriculum which critically centers Africa and the subaltern” (#RMF 2015), were derived from the #RMF’s adoption of a decolonial framework centered on Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, and Black radical feminism.

Following the removal of the Rhodes statue at UCT precisely one month after Maxwele’s protest, a group of Oxford students called for the removal of Rhodes’ statue at Oriel College on Oxford’s High Street based on demands similar to those made by students in Cape Town. The #RMF Oxford movement drew inspiration from students at UCT, stating, “We see no reason why here, at the heart of the High Street, at the heart of Oxford, Rhodes cannot also fall” (#RMF Oxford 2015). According to John Newsinger (2016:70), “The Rhodes Must Fall campaign has provoked more public discussion and debate on the rights and wrongs of the British Empire than any number of academic books and articles.” However, as Sizwe Mpofu-Walsh (2016:75) observed while reflecting on his involvement as one of the leading figures in the #RMF Oxford movement, “One of the most neglected aspects of the ‘Must Fall’ movement is its spread to Euro-America.”

This article attempts to contribute to debates about the connections between the #RMF movements in Cape Town and Oxford by advancing the argument that the #RMF movement in Cape Town inspired the formation of #RMF Oxford, which in turn sought to challenge the epistemic architecture of the University of Oxford. Drawing on ninety-eight interviews conducted with various actors involved in both movements, this analysis explores how student activists engaged in acts of “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2013) by delinking from Eurocentric theory and opting instead to frame their movement through a decolonial lens. Interview data are complemented by twelve months of intermittent fieldwork between 2016 and 2018 in Oxford and Cape Town, as well as an analysis of hundreds of documents, Tweets, and Facebook posts created by the respective movements between 2015 and 2016, collected and curated by the author.²

The Formation of #RMF Oxford

On March 19, 2015, a small group of Oxford students organized a protest outside Oriel College, standing below Rhodes’s statue located on the upper façade of the College (Facebook, March 19, 2015). The aim of the protest was to show solidarity with the #RMF movement at UCT. The eight protesters held up a banner that read, “decolonize education, Rhodes Must Fall.” The #RMF Oxford mission statement was, however, formally developed during May 2015, several weeks after the solidarity protest took place outside Oriel College. According to Mpofu-Walsh, it was only after the Rhodes statue was removed at UCT on April 9, 2015, that “about fifteen students decided to formally establish RhodesMustFall in Oxford (RMFO)” (2016:80).

During my conversation with Mpofu-Walsh (interview, July 31, 2017), the son of a prominent South African politician, Dali Mpofu, and author of *Democracy and Delusion: 10 Myths in South African Politics* (2017), he indicated that students “met in secret” for several months between March and May 2015 to discuss whether they should form their own movement at Oxford. But the movement only gained significant momentum following its protest at the Oxford Union on May 29, 2015. The Oxford Union is a debating society that invites world renowned leaders and media figures to share their opinions with Union members, following which, “Results are determined by how many students walk out the door marked ‘Ayes’, and the door marked ‘Noes’...” (Oxford Union webpage).

#RMF activists decided to protest by holding up various signs and placards just before a debate on the question of whether Britain should pay reparations to its former colonies. When I visited the Oxford Union, which is located down a narrow alleyway, a short six-minute walk from Oriel College off High Street, I noticed a homeless man lying on the ground close to the entrance. A strong urine odor filled the air (field notes, November 22, 2017). Since the Oxford Union only permits its members to attend, I obtained special permission from the President of the Union to listen to conservative English philosopher Sir Roger Scruton’s talk on November 22, 2017. To reach the debate, where Scruton characterized conservatism as “an act of love,” I had to pass through the Union Bar.

It was in this same Union Bar, where members gathered for drinks before and after Union events, that #RMF activists noticed a poster advertising “the colonial comeback” cocktail as they entered the Union on May 29, 2015. The poster advertising the drink was developed by the Union in anticipation of the debate on reparations and had a picture of black hands in shackles, reminiscent of images associated with slavery. The #RMF activists lodged an objection with the Union and shared photographs of the poster on Twitter using the hashtag “#RhodesMustFallOxford.” Ntokozo Qwabe, a South African Rhodes Scholar who was completing his law degree at Oxford, indicated that while their protest at the Oxford Union was focused on the reparations debate, “in a completely coincidental turn of events, which was totally unexpected, we then encounter what would be the first news breaking #RhodesMustFall event” (interview, August 1, 2017). The #RMF protest at the Oxford Union gained considerable national media coverage and led to the Union issuing a statement on June 1, 2015, acknowledging that it was “institutionally racist” (Waygood 2017).

Following the Oxford Union protest and the intervening summer vacation period, the next major action by #RMF was a protest outside Oriel College held on November 6, 2015, demanding the removal of Rhodes’ statue. The Oxford movement drafted a petition which stated:

At the University of Cape Town, the statue of Cecil Rhodes has fallen, and uncritical memory of his legacy has been discredited. It is at the University of Cape Town where the Rhodes Must Fall movement, a student-led

movement to decolonise education, challenges the active influence of colonial relations in Africa, and caused the removal of the statue of Rhodes that overlooked the campus. Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford supports and continues this vital work by looking to critically interrogate the colonial relations on which Oxford University is founded, not just in Africa, but worldwide. We see no reason why here, at the heart of the High Street, at the heart of Oxford, Rhodes cannot also fall.

Similarly, in a press release issued by #RMF two days earlier announcing the protest action, it provided that “[i]n calling for the Rhodes statue’s removal, we take inspiration from the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT), which led to the toppling of Rhodes’ statue in South Africa earlier this year” (#RMF Oxford November 4, 2015). There is consequently a clear link between the formation of the #RMF Oxford movement and the inspirational role played by the UCT movement.

During my interview with JanaLee Cherneski (interview, May 31, 2017) in New York City, she provided further insights into the #RMF’s formation and her involvement in the movement while she served as a lecturer in Oxford’s Department of Politics and International Relations. As a former Rhodes Scholar from Canada and an Oxford graduate, Cherneski indicated that in addition to the solidarity protest in March 2015, it was important to note that the question of Rhodes’ legacy was also raised by Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman during the Oxford Graduate Political Theory Conference on May 8, 2015, in which she participated.³

Cherneski recalled that Coleman arranged a lunch with various student activists on May 9, 2015. Annie Olaloku (interview, November 23, 2017), who worked on establishing a Black Students Union at Oxford in 2014, and Brian Kwoba (interview, September 21, 2017), who founded the Oxford Pan-African Forum in early 2014, were two of the key figures involved in #RMF Oxford who participated in the lunch meeting. In my discussion with Kwoba, he stated that Coleman “really pushed for us in a pretty decisive way to start our own version of #RhodesMustFall... which gave us a real boost and confidence... saying, ‘go for it!’” (interview, September 21, 2017).

Based on a timeline developed of #RMF Oxford’s formation, its staggered trajectory includes several weeks of inactivity at the start of the movement following the solidarity action outside Oriel on March 19 and the lunch meeting with Coleman on May 9, 2015. The three aims of the movement were only developed in anticipation of the protest outside Oriel College on November 6, 2015 (#RMF Oxford Change.org 2015), which focused on removing colonial iconography, replacing the Eurocentric curriculum, and addressing the lack of diversity at the university. The petition lists “tackling the plague of colonial iconography” as its first of three aims which include “statues, plaques and paintings that seeks to whitewash and distort history” (#RMF Oxford Change.org 2015: no page number). Renowned Oxford historian Richard Symonds (1986:161) notes that “no

one has more memorials in Oxford than Cecil Rhodes...” Prominent #RMF Oxford activist, Ntokozo Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017), who first arrived in Oxford in September 2014 as a Rhodes Scholar, was surprised by what he described as the “outward celebration of colonialism and colonial conquest.” For Qwabe, “it’s very hard to miss the links to empire because they are quite striking.”

The second aim of the #RMF Oxford movement was “[r]eform[ing] the Euro-centric curriculum,” which they argued “frames the West as sole producers of universal knowledge...” (no page number). In his explanation for the #RMF’s focus on curriculum reform, Qwabe indicated that several questions framed this aspect of the movement’s aims: “What is a university? But not just what is a university, but what is knowledge? How is knowledge produced and who produces it? For what purpose is it produced?” (interview, August 1, 2017). In its mission statement, #RMF Oxford sought to “remedy the highly selective narrative of traditional academia... by integrating subjugated and local epistemologies” in order to “create a more intellectually rigorous, complete academy” (#RMF Oxford 2015, no page number). For Dalia Gebrial from the U.K., who became a prominent organizer of #RMF, “Oxford is where the elite and the colonial elite get educated. If you can change the curriculum in Oxford, there’s every chance that you will then be able to change the curriculum in schools all over the country” (interview, November 23, 2017).

The third aim of the #RMF Oxford movement was to “address the underrepresentation and lack of welfare provision for black and minority ethnic (BME) amongst Oxford’s academic staff and students” (#RMF Oxford 2015). Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017) stated that at the time of his involvement with #RMF, “there [was] only one black professor at Oxford and only twenty-something undergraduate students in the entire university.” Race then became an important consideration in formulating the aims of the movement according to Qwabe, who found that “the everyday experiences of racism at Oxford have grave psychological and mental health implications for black students.”

While the three aims of the #RMF Oxford movement shared several similarities with the objectives of the #RMF UCT movement, there were important differences in the framing of their respective mission statements. For #RMF UCT, one of their goals was to implement an African-centered curriculum: “By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure—through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning—and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience” (JWTC 2015:8). The Oxford movement, on the other hand, sought to integrate “subjugated and local epistemologies” (2015) into the Eurocentric curriculum.

When I asked Ntokozo Qwabe about these differences and the extent to which #RMF Oxford engaged with these epistemic questions, he stated that, “I personally think #RhodesMustFall Oxford was not as great as #RhodesMustFall UCT in that particular aspect of conceptualizing, or

rather theorizing about the decolonial work that had to be done. Which again is very surprising because (laughs)... there is this thought that Oxford people are very theoretical” (interview, August 1, 2017).

What Qwabe was likely alluding to is the epistemic differentiation that is often drawn between Europe and the Global South, a problem identified by scholars such as Anibal Quijano (2000) in Latin America, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) in India, and Syed Hussein Alatas (2006) in the Arab world. Raewyn Connell (2014: 211), for instance, challenges the presumed role of the global South “to supply data, and later to apply knowledge in the form of technology and method,” and the role of Euro-America, “to collate and process data, producing theory (including methodology).”

Drawing on this scholarship, among others, Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (2012:2) develop a *Theory from the South* in order to “subvert the epistemic scaffolding” upon which assumptions about the superiority of Euro-American knowledge is based. This theory asserts that the global South is increasingly exporting ideas to Euro-America, thereby reversing the conjectural flow of knowledge production. The Comaroffs (2011) argue, furthermore, that this epistemic reversal suggests that the South is anticipating and perhaps influencing various political, economic, and cultural shifts across Euro-America.

James Ferguson (2012), however, critiques the Comaroffs’s (2011) theory that Euro-America is evolving toward the South. For Ferguson (2012), the “evolving toward” thesis tends to mask the deep inequalities prevalent between North and South. At the same time, Ferguson (2012) acknowledges that theory from the South is helpful because it encourages “the defamiliarization of habitual ways of thinking.”

This process of defamiliarization is also evident in Mignolo’s (2013) notion of “epistemic disobedience,” a term he coins to denote the process of delinking from dominant Western thought and ideology. Epistemic disobedience raises questions about who generates knowledge and where this knowledge is generated. At the same time, this type of disobedience is not just about changing the content, it is also about changing the “terms of the conversation” (Mignolo 2011:224).

For the Comaroffs, changing the terms of the conversation requires a reorienting of the North-South binary which they describe as a set of relationships rather than a fixed geographical location. They use this approach to argue that Euro-American knowledge dominates our understanding of the world and that knowledge from “the ancient world, the orient, the primitive world, the third world, the underdeveloped world, the developing world, and now the Global South” (2011:1) has largely been ignored, or at best exoticized. Definitions of the “Global South” are therefore intimately connected to epistemology, to questions of what constitutes knowledge and how and where knowledge is created.

If #RMF Oxford’s formation were to constitute a theory from the south, to what extent must the ideas that give effect to the movement’s formation be an exclusively southern construct? For instance, Annie Olaloku

(interview, November 23, 2017), a British national who was one of the organizers of the solidarity action on March 19, 2015, noted the important influence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the U.S. in raising the level of consciousness around race in the U.K. She stated that after the Ferguson protests in the U.S. in 2014, she worked on establishing a Black Students Union at Oxford prior to the formation of #RMF in Cape Town. Dalia Gebrial (interview, November 23, 2017) also noted that, “for me, it’s really different doing a movement like this in a country that is like, the empire...”

Consequently, it is important to acknowledge that while #RMF UCT inspired the formation of the #RMF movement at Oxford, there were other local and global developments that also played a critical role in shaping the Oxford movement. As a result of these developments, the movements evolved in parallel ways, with #RMF Oxford taking on some of the characteristics of the Cape Town movement, while simultaneously being propelled by local developments. These differences and similarities are discussed in more detail below.

Comparing the #RMF Oxford and Cape Town Movements

There are distinct differences between the tactics employed by students in the Oxford and UCT movements. While both movements used social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to organize meetings and share press statements, the actions taken by #RMF Oxford were less disruptive than those used by students at UCT. As part of this analysis, I considered 3,819 tweets and 541 Facebook posts from #RMF UCT, as well as 2,146 tweets and 274 Facebook posts from #RMF Oxford. Even though the Facebook pages of both movements include a range of information such as a list of demands, press statements, and event invitations, according to Julian Brave NoiseCat (interview, August 24, 2017), a Native American from the U.S. and a former master’s student in global and imperial history at Oxford, “compared to what was happening in South Africa, we were very, very tame.”

By comparison, the #RMF Cape Town movement employed more disruptive tactics, inspired in part by Chumani Maxwele’s performative protest that involved throwing feces against the Rhodes statue. During my second interview with Maxwele, he stated that “poo is a weapon of protest...” (interview, June 27, 2017). Maxwele informed me that he drew inspiration from earlier protests led by former African National Congress (ANC) councilor, Andile Lile, who in June 2013 dumped feces from portable toilets in Khayelitsha on the steps of the Western Cape provincial legislature in the center of Cape Town. More feces were dumped at Cape Town international airport that same month by Lile and fellow Khayelitsha residents to protest the City of Cape Town’s failure to provide decent sanitation to poor, black families living on the outskirts of the city (Davis 2013).

However, Ntokozo Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017) noted that from the perspective of the University of Oxford authorities, the #RMF protest

action “was seen as disruptive because it’s Oxford. But in South Africa, entering a room with placards—it’s not going to do the job, you know (laughs).”

The distinction between the South African and U.K. contexts became a serious point of contention within #RMF Oxford. During an interview with Dalia Gebrial in London (interview, November 23, 2017), she noted, “I think one of the biggest conflicts that happened is that like, we came from different contexts and we did not discuss what that meant for what we prioritized and what we wanted the movement to achieve... it did not have to be so either or... It’s easy when you’re facing Oxford to be united by how shit they are.”

During my conversation with Oxford professor Jonny Steinberg, he recognized the contextual differences between the two sites of protest and, more particularly, the way history is interpreted in both places: “I think that #RhodesMustFall here got off to a very good start at the beginning... this whole country’s national culture is very, very strange. I think there’s a deep, deep investment in this country in this idea of a long history of benign-ness. It doesn’t square with an imperial history at all... there’s this strange sort of cognitive dissonance deep in the heart of this country’s national culture” (interview, November 20, 2017). As a result of this cognitive dissonance that Steinberg referred to, Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017) argued that “although the strategies looked different” when comparing the actions taken in Oxford and Cape Town, “I think it was still quite disruptive because of the context, because it was Oxford” (interview, August 1, 2017).

When comparing #RMF Cape Town to #RMF Oxford, activists at UCT often characterized the tactics employed by #RMF Oxford as “#RMF lite,” a watered-down version of their more radical struggle. At the same time, Oxford activists recognized that their engagement with the university differed from that of their counterparts at UCT, but they argued that the context was profoundly different. Some of these differences with regard to race and organizing tactics, theoretical frameworks, and gender and intersectionality, will be considered below.

Race as an Organizing Tactic

One of the important contextual differences between the #RMF Oxford and UCT movements pertained to the way in which race was employed as a basis for organizing: “Those [racial] categories are just not the same in Britain” according to Dalia Gebrial (interview, November 23, 2017). For Annie Olaloku (interview, November 23, 2017) who self-identifies as black, “tensions were developing within the group around political questions but also around the question of ethnic blackness and who gets to speak in what spaces, which I got caught in the middle of (laughs).” Olaloku provided a comprehensive analysis of these tensions but chose to speak about these matters off the record.

Brian Kwoba (interview, September 21, 2017), who was appointed as an assistant professor of history at the University of Memphis after completing his Ph.D. at Oxford, also noted:

The demographic differences between, you know, Oxford and UCT... was a huge factor we had to deal with. In a majority white country, and in an extremely white and elite white institution, like Oxford, where black students are always the tiny, tiny minority, it was almost like climbing a much more... climbing an uphill battle that was much more uphill (laughs) in some ways than at UCT. We couldn't take for granted that people had the same sort of notions of race or blackness or even white supremacy that you might find to be more common currency in South Africa.

Because of these demographic differences between Cape Town and Oxford, white students formed an integral part of the #RMF Oxford movement. Ntokozo Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017) indicated that there were too few black students at Oxford to create an exclusively Black #RMF Oxford movement: "We simply didn't have the numbers or the labor to sustain... a totally Black space like UCT had." While white involvement was not controversial in the #RMF Oxford movement, Qwabe noted that "it was controversial in some of my interactions with certain UCT Fallists who were like, you know, 'comrades, you guys are #RhodesMustFall, you are a decolonial movement.' They saw it as us being shaky in our decolonial politics" (interview, August 1, 2017).

During my conversations with white students and faculty who were actively involved with #RMF Oxford, including JanaLee Cherneski from Canada (interview, May 31, 2017), Roné McFarlane from South Africa (interview, June 12, 2017), and Max Harris from New Zealand (November 21, 2017), they demonstrated an acute awareness of their positionality in the movement, preferring to play a background role.

Brian Kwoba (interview, September 21, 2017) also acknowledged the role of white student and faculty involvement in the #RMF movement indicating that

White allies on the whole, were very respectful and very humble and I think played a very important role in helping us get things done behind the scenes, you know, writing press releases for example, or helping us, you know, to set up different events. I think they did a really good job. And one of the things that was interesting about that, is that they weren't British. In fact, we had almost no British white allies.

The fundamental difference in demographics between Oxford and UCT necessitated a different approach to the question of race. Black and minority ethnic students at Oxford were a small, vulnerable group, primarily comprised of foreign nationals. Furthermore, the Oxford student activists lacked a common historical or geographical reference point because of their varied backgrounds. The #RMF Oxford movement occurred in a

fundamentally different geographical context when compared to #RMF UCT, since the U.K. represents the heart of empire and Oxford remains at the global center of knowledge production. By challenging the proud, imperial history of a nation and its highly-regarded institutions, the #RMF Oxford movement faced pressures different from those encountered by the movement at UCT.

Some of these pressures are examined in two books published by Oxford activists in 2018, which also discuss the connections between the #RMF Oxford and UCT movements. In *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, #RMF Oxford activists Brian Kwoba, Simukai Chigudu, Roné McFarlane, Ntokozo Qwabe, and Sizwe Mpofo-Walsh contribute individual chapters discussing their engagement with the Oxford movement. The book was credited as being “written by Rhodes Must Fall, Oxford,” and provides various statements, personal reflections, and interviews conducted with #RMF Oxford activists as well as with activists involved in “sister movements” such as #RMF UCT, and the movements at Harvard and Princeton in the U.S.

A chapter written by professor Patricia Daley, a former student at Oxford in the 1980s and a member of the academic staff since 1991, offers profound insights into her struggle as the “first Black academic to be appointed as a University Lecturer at Oxford University” and the “first Black woman to gain a full professorship at Oxford” (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018:74). Daley reflects on the “simultaneous feeling of being excluded and de-humanised, and the epistemic violence that objectification, silences, and eurocentricism perpetuates...” (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018:81).

Daley’s experiences at the university are shared by activists and academics in *Decolonising the University*, published in 2018. This book, which is co-edited by #RMF activist Dalia Gebrial, offers insights on decolonizing academia, curricula, science, education, philosophy, and higher education more generally. Gebrial’s opening chapter on the #RMF Oxford movement characterizes the decolonial imperative as a problem of how to simultaneously use the resources and position of the university, “while recognizing, accounting for and undoing its inherent exclusivity” (Bhambra et al. 2018:20).

The paradoxical position of the university as simultaneously empowering and dehumanizing for black people is a common theme reflected in the experiences of black students and faculty at UCT and Oxford. Both Gebrial (Bhambra et al. 2018) and Daley (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018) recognize the university as “a space where young people learn about the world, but more importantly, map out their futures and give meaning to their lives” (Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018:84). At the same time, universities can also be dehumanizing spaces for black bodies.

At UCT, this paradox was eloquently captured during an interview with Masixole Mlandu, a student representative from the Pan-Africanist Student Movement of Azania (PASMA) and a prominent member of #RMF.

He noted that the university “is the only space that we, as black people, have to think... they are spaces for organizing and mobilizing... so to me my brother, #RhodesMustFall can be seen as the awakening to a cry that has always been there... #RhodesMustFall was... at the heart of it was a critique of how the university is structured” (interview, June 30, 2017).

Mlandu’s assertion that #RMF UCT’s formation can be characterized as a critique of the university leads me to argue that the university occupies a paradoxical position for Black and other marginalized bodies. It is simultaneously empowering and dehumanizing; it offers the possibility of acquiring knowledge that could serve as a tool of liberation from the violence of socio-economic marginality, while at the same time, the physical and intellectual architecture of the university can also create an oppressive, alienating space for Black, queer, and disabled bodies, among others. The #RMF UCT’s mission statement characterizes this form of alienation as “black pain,” which the student activists define as “the dehumanization of black people” informed by the “violence exacted only against black people by a system that privileges whiteness” (#RMF 2015).

In his discussion of the #RMF movement, Francis Nyamnjoh (2016:83) argues that “Maxwela’s reference to collective black pain was intended as a strategic essentialism...” In his analysis, Nyamnjoh suggests that while this essentialism was necessary to build collective resistance in the #RMF movement, essentialisms were also deployed during colonialism and apartheid “as a technology of exploitation” (2016:83). Black pain therefore offers a vocabulary for naming what students are experiencing, while running the risk of essentializing the black student experience. At the same time, Nyamnjoh (2016) acknowledges that the recognition of black pain reflects a level of maturation for South Africans who, during apartheid, were forced to repress this pain for the sake of survival.

While this common experience of black pain at UCT and Oxford united the two movements, Dalia Gebrial noted, however, that there were different organizing tactics employed by the two movements. During a joint interview with #RMF activists Dalia Gebrial and Chi Chi Shi in London (interview, November 23, 2017), Gebrial stated that “there was a difference of strategic opinion. I think we had different ideas of what it means to organize. And that, I don’t think, was context...I don’t think that was like a geographical thing...”

Chi Chi Shi interjected: “I do think it’s kind of a geographical thing... it seemed that, we were staying here. This is our home. We live here. And we’re going to have to deal with this. Whereas like, a lot of people in #RMF Oxford were going somewhere else. So they had like these two years where they wanted to cause as much disruption. They didn’t seem to have... long-term vision, because their long-term vision was elsewhere. They wanted to make a name for themselves and get a job somewhere, in South Africa.”

Julian Brave NoiseCat acknowledged that there were differences between the approaches adopted by U.K. and foreign students during the

#RMF Oxford movement: “We didn’t really play by those rules because we weren’t British” (interview, August 24, 2017). At the same time, he recognized that “a lot of this is theatre,” which was critical to raising awareness about the aims of the movement. For instance, NoiseCat described Femi Nylander’s protest outside All Souls College, where he dressed up as a slave, as “performative” and suggested that because Oxford did not have a history of student protest, these tactics were viewed as disruptive.

The performative dimensions of the #RMF Oxford movement reflected the public pedagogical approach employed by the UCT movement to the extent that students “create[d] a social space within which they engage[d] the larger society in learning about equity, accountability, and democracy” (Sandlin et al. 2011:358). While the #RMF Oxford movement was not involved in occupying buildings or burning paintings, the level of attention garnered by the student protests was unprecedented (Newsinger 2016).

At the same time, not all foreign students involved with #RMF wanted to engage in this public form of pedagogy. Part of the reason stemmed from the vulnerability of international students who were in the U.K. on student visas and scholarships that could potentially be revoked if they participated in activities that were deemed “criminal” or that resulted in their arrest. Ndjodi Latenda Ndeunyema (interview, November 21, 2017) from Namibia, who was the President of the Africa Society at Oxford when I met him, stated that he was deeply concerned about the impact of his involvement in #RMF Oxford on his visa and scholarship status, “so I was reluctant to put myself out there fully.”

Consequently, while Ndeunyema was involved with #RMF Oxford, he focused his attention on a process called “Redress Rhodes” initiated by Rhodes scholars at Oxford. The Rhodes Trust website describes Redress Rhodes as “a group of Scholars dedicated to developing a more critical, honest, and inclusive reflection of the legacy of Cecil John Rhodes and a clearer understanding of how it relates to the image, mission, and purpose of the Scholarships” (Rhodes Trust website).

While to some observers the #RMF Oxford movement may come across as #RMF “lite” (Wanelisa Xaba, interview, July 13, 2017) when compared to the radicality of the UCT movement, the contexts that situated these movements were fundamentally different. The varying spaces within which these movements emerged are not only reflected in tactical differences or in how racial demographics shaped the movement, but also in the language used to frame their demands. Whereas the #RMF UCT movement wanted to *center* marginalized epistemologies, the Oxford movement sought to *integrate* these marginal ideas into the Eurocentric curriculum. These differences in approach suggest that there are degrees of epistemic disobedience that are informed by contextual factors. Despite these differences in approach, both the UCT and Oxford movements sought to challenge the epistemic architecture of the university.

Theoretical Frameworks

In addition to the differences in tactics used by #RMF UCT and Oxford, there were also significant variations in how the movements engaged with theoretical frameworks. While the #RMF Oxford movement discussed decolonial theory and adopted an intersectional approach, its consideration of these ideas did not appear as comprehensive as #RMF UCT's engagement with theoretical frameworks. #RMF activists at UCT, for instance, consistently referenced Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness and Black Radical feminism as the three ideological pillars of their movement, often citing decolonial scholars to frame and sometimes justify their tactics. #RMF Oxford activists, on the other hand, did not have an agreed upon ideological framework that deliberately shaped their tactical approach.

One of the reasons for this difference, according to Ntokozo Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017), was that at the start of the #RMF UCT movement, students were able to collectively develop and adopt a decolonial framework while occupying the Bremner administration building from March 20 to April 9, 2015. Shortly after entering the Bremner building, students changed the name of the building to "Azania House"; Azania is a name first used by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) to refer to South Africa, and it "was also adopted by the Black Consciousness movement as a protest name for South Africa" (Biko 2017:xxvii).

Qwabe noted that while the Oxford movement

had spaces where we met to unpack theory... it did not have the same permanency as Azania House... There's something else that happens in how you produce knowledge when you do it in a space that you identify with so much as a home, that is so familiar, where you sleep there, you wake up there, you go and shower there, you have your meals there. I think there is something different in pedagogy that is going on there that I don't think you can emulate by meeting every Thursday or every Friday to unpack decolonial theory, which is what we did.

Qwabe drew an important connection between space and knowledge production, suggesting that the development of #RMF UCT's decolonial framework in the occupied Azania House demonstrates that there is an intimate connection between knowledge production and the spaces within which it is produced.

In the case of #RMF Oxford, Qwabe found that there was no dedicated space to craft a similar framework. While I recognize the value of Qwabe's analysis, I also believe that the differences in the broader socio-political context between the U.K. and South Africa, as well as the differences related to the composition of both movements, played equally important roles in shaping the politics of the two movements. For instance, if #RMF Oxford had been an exclusively Black movement, this might have shaped their theoretical framework as much as the space within which their framework was developed.

Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017) also commented on a further dimension as he reflected on the distinctions between the UCT and Oxford movements:

The second challenge for us, was actually the selection of which ideologies would actually be pioneers of our decolonial thinking. I mean UCT had done this very well... those three pillars of #RhodesMustFall were identified very early and they were able to build a narrative around them. Whereas for us, it became slightly complicated because... we considered ourselves to be occupying a global location. So, the conversation about decolonization isn't necessarily a conversation about Africa. It's a conversation that includes a lot of geographies, 'cause the colonial moment, or the moment of empire, is not just a moment in relation to Africa, it is a global project.

It is therefore evident that Oxford's location in the heart of empire complicated #RMF Oxford's ability to agree on a shared decolonial framework in the same way that the #RMF movement in Cape Town was able to do. According to Qwabe, the central question was, "What does this decolonization mean for me as someone who is at Oxford?" Due to the range of ideologies and sources of decolonial theory, Qwabe recognized "that selection [of theory] becomes slightly more complex" when compared to the process embarked upon by #RMF at UCT. He therefore indicated that "we never actually got to a point where we thrashed out like, these are our ideas. Of course, we always spoke about intersectionality, we spoke about Fanon, we spoke about, you know, the same things, but we never had a document that said these are our three ideologies... simply because there were so many contesting narratives..." (interview, August 1, 2017).

Similar sentiments were expressed by other #RMF Oxford activists. Chi Chi Shi (interview, November 23, 2017) noted that "when we're having these conversations and everyone says Fanon, you assume that everyone means the same thing..." but often, geographical contexts affected how student activists interpreted these texts so that "the kinds of directions it went was so radically different." When I asked Brian Kwoba (interview, September 21, 2017) about #RMF Oxford's engagement with theoretical frameworks, he responded:

But one of the things that we really did wrong, or I think one of the big mistakes that we made in contrast to the way things emerged at UCT, is that we didn't actually ever clearly clarify or delineate the political boundaries of the movement with such ideological clarity, and explicitness as having those three pillars of Black Consciousness, Pan-Africanism, and Black feminism. And one of the things that that meant, unfortunately, that we never clarified ourselves, is that all kinds of people ended up coming into the space who had anti-black prepossessions and that ended up creating all kinds of rifts internally and a factionalism that undermined our movement in many ways. We hadn't clarified who this movement was for,

what it was about beyond just a kind of broad goal of decolonizing education in Oxford... I have to say from my perspective, I think that's one of the things we got wrong... We didn't frame what we were doing even internally for ourselves clearly enough.

During our interview in Johannesburg, Mpfu-Walsh (interview, July 31, 2017) agreed with the #RMF Oxford movement's failure to substantively engage with questions of theory: "I think in early meetings we spoke about that, but quite ironically, the Oxford movement was not based around theory particularly. It was based around practice and action rather than theoretical debates. The one thing we kept telling ourselves was that we really need to have sessions where we read and study, but that never quite crystallized... I think we committed ourselves to those principles in early meetings, but I think a lot of tensions and theoretical tensions began to develop as the movement progressed."

At the same time, Mpfu-Walsh noted, "I think the beauty of the #RhodesMustFall moment in both places is that the theory was built from practice. They developed a whole practice of how to have a complex debate around a single icon, which itself is a whole theory of how you go about activism. But they built it through activism" (interview, July 31, 2017). This analysis by Mpfu-Walsh reflects Catherine Walsh's assertion that decolonial theory should be built through practice. Walsh (2018) seeks to understand how those on the margins theorize their own practice.

For Mpfu-Walsh (interview, July 31, 2017), who was intimately involved in #RMF Oxford, the emergence of the movement could be explained through the Comaroffs's work:

The other thing we spoke about, not quite directly in terms of our ideology as #RhodesMustFall, we were very interested in this idea of theory from the South. And saying, if this thing started in the South, then we should intentionally bring it to the North as an antecedent of what started in the South. To show that the directionality can happen in the opposite direction which is another reason we decided to call it #RhodesMustFall. To break that linear directionality. So those were the theoretical discussions...

I interrupted Mpfu-Walsh, asking whether their engagement with theory from the South was deliberate. He responded, "Absolutely. Many of us were reading the Comaroffs's *Theory from the South*, and thinking, you know what, let's put this into practice and have something that starts in the global South and spreads to Euro-America" (interview, July 31, 2017).

At the time I spoke to Mpfu-Walsh, his ideas made sense. Upon further reflection, I wondered how, on the one hand, Mpfu-Walsh could assert that theory should be built from practice, while on the other, he was using the Comaroffs's theory to shape the #RMF Oxford movement. Using theory from the South to construct the Oxford movement, including its name, suggests a reliance on theory to shape decolonial practice.

This approach seems diametrically opposed to the idea of decoloniality, of building theory through practice (Walsh 2018). My assessment of Mpfu-Walsh's description of the #RMF movements in Cape Town and Oxford lead me to conclude that the interactions between theory and practice were iterative. Student activists were inspired by existing academic theories to shape the #RMF movements in Cape Town and Oxford, while simultaneously generating their own theory through the movement-building process.

Furthermore, the interactions between academic theory and movement-generated theory also had an important geographic component for Mpfu-Walsh; he was interested in importing movement-generated theory from Cape Town to Oxford using the Comaroffs's academic theory. This disruption in the flow of knowledge from South to North was a deliberate attempt to address the fact that "colonialism brought not only theory from the Western academy but also the assumption that theory is produced in the West..." (Mamdani 2016:81). This suggests that while places such as Oxford are often seen as producers of knowledge and theory, and the colonies as spaces where these theories are applied as "turnkey project[s]" (Mamdani 2016:81), Mpfu-Walsh was deliberately attempting to reverse the assumed geographical flow of knowledge through #RMF Oxford.

However, Dalia Gebrial offered a different take on Mpfu-Walsh's characterization of the #RMF Oxford movement as a manifestation of a theory from the South: "For me, I felt what it meant to express solidarity [with South Africa] is to attack, undermine, expose the system as it exists here at the heart of empire... rather than just imitate, transplant everything from South Africa, and like mimic... The British population did not know about empire. We're starting so much further behind. There's so many layers to get through. And like, we're not at that stage where we can skip all of those steps" (interview, November 23, 2017). Gebrial stated that she was not opposed to more radical action, but it "would have had a place after a program of escalation."

For #RMF activists such as Gebrial, the Oxford movement was not so much the result of a theory from the South, but rather an expression of solidarity with the South. This fundamental difference in perspective between Gebrial and Mpfu-Walsh makes it difficult to conceptualize the #RMF Oxford movement as a pure manifestation of the Comaroffs's theory. The formation of #RMF Oxford certainly reflects elements of a theory from the South, but its creation is not entirely explainable through one theoretical framework.

When I asked Steinberg (interview, November 20, 2017) whether he thought the transfer of ideas from the #RMF movement in Cape Town to Oxford constituted a theory from the South, he responded:

I don't think [theory from the South] is the sharpest analytical tool. I think it's a sharp polemical tool... The fact that #RMF did not resonate beyond the university raises questions about whether it is a theory from the south... I wouldn't say that #RMF comes from the depths of the South. I think it comes from particular places.

Steinberg offered two important critiques that warrant further consideration. The first pertains to what exactly constitutes a theory from the South? Must the theory emanate “from the depths of the South” as indicated by Steinberg, or does its emergence in “particular places” in the South form a sufficient basis for it to be categorized as a theory from the South? Consequently, how widespread or abstract must an idea be in the South for it to rise to the level of theory?

These questions highlight some of the difficulties inherent in applying a specific theory to understand the movement of ideas from Cape Town to Oxford, and more specifically, highlights some of the gaps inherent in the Comaroffs’s (2011) work. The disagreement among #RMF Oxford activists about the theoretical framing of their movement extended to questions of gender and intersectionality discussed in further detail below.

Gender and Intersectionality

In addition to the tensions around race, theory, and tactics within the #RMF movement, there were also frictions around gender and patriarchy among student activists, and more specifically, variations in understandings of intersectionality. Brian Kwoba (interview, September 21, 2017) noted that:

I found it was the non-black people of color that were the most problematic... There was this group of non-black women of color... the way they used intersectionality was, I think, almost as a way to put themselves at the head of the movement... as against the black students, both men and women, who had founded the movement and who had led the movement as in South Africa. That for me was a really good object lesson in what Patricia Hill Collins calls ‘the gentrification of intersectionality,’ you know, given that it’s a black feminist concept but can be co-opted and misused in even anti-black ways.

Many women activists such as Gebrial and Shi disputed Kwoba’s interpretation of events. According to Gebrial (interview, November 23, 2017):

For me there were two ways that patriarchy played out: first in terms of division of labor. That’s how our complaints and holding to account started. And I think the other one was, in terms of the political disputes... It just so happened that the young women of color in the organization were British. And I think that what we raised as “political differences,” was taken as naiveté. So if we had a political disagreement, men in the movement would say, like, “oh, let me take you for a coffee and chat to you about this disagreement.” That would end up essentially being patronizing berating. And when I argued that if we have political disagreements, like all other political disagreements, we should hash it out in a meeting, that was taken as belligerence, or being ungrateful, or like resistant...

Chi Chi Shi (interview, November 23, 2017) added that in certain cases, men in the movement would view women who had differences of political opinion with men as having a “personal vendetta.” Both Shi and Gebrial (interview, November 23, 2017) also indicated that they “pretty much single-handedly organized” the protest march to Oriel College on November 6, 2015, where Ntokozo Qwabe handed over a petition to the Vice-Provost. It took a significant amount of work to organize the event behind the scenes according to Gebrial, resulting in the women in the movement being so exhausted that it was the men who ended up speaking publicly at the protest march.

Other students such as Julian Brave NoiseCat, (interview, August 24, 2017) also found that “gender was a major division in the group even though it was not in the public eye.” For Ntokozo Qwabe (interview, August 1, 2017), “#RhodesMustFall Oxford did tend to centralize black men in ways that I think can be critiqued. I think the media was very obsessed with me because of my Rhodes association and because I was a Rhodes scholar and very obsessed with Sizwe because... he is from a family that was well known. So media narratives did have the same patterns of centralizing men in ways—and we must be honest—...that under-represented other voices.” In order to deal with these disputes, Qwabe mentioned that attempts were made at introducing “conflict resolution” processes among the core members of #RMF. However, he found that “it just became very messy” (interview, August 1, 2017).

Similar tensions arose in Cape Town, where #RMF activists established the *intersectionality audit committee*, which, according to Sandy Ndelu, a prominent #RMF activist and member of the Trans Collective, was “an attempt of mainstreaming intersectionality” (interview, July 17, 2017). Ndelu, however, informed me that while the intersectionality audit committee “was quite a novel idea” that attempted to filter the work of the movement through an intersectional lens, “it really doesn’t live long... it doesn’t really sustain itself” (interview, July 17, 2017) because of internal resistance within the movement. Once divisions started to emerge, Ndelu indicated that “it was the Black radical feminists as a caucus against everybody else” (interview, July 17, 2017).

The similarities in the types of conflict around gender and intersectionality that erupted in both the #RMF UCT and Oxford movements are fascinating to me. Women in both movements expressed a strong sense of being marginalized by black men and often took on a lot of the behind-the-scenes work. My sense is that both movements struggled to implement the intersectional component of their framework. In the case of #RMF UCT, an intersectional audit committee was established, whereas in the #RMF Oxford movement, dispute resolution mechanisms were established, but both approaches failed to satisfactorily resolve the conflicts.

Scholars with whom I spoke, such as Steinberg, argued that “using intersectionality as your guiding principle is naïve if you want to act”

(interview, November 20, 2017). Steinberg offered this perspective of #RMF Oxford during our interview in his office at the African Studies Centre in which he also revealed that some of the #RMF activists were his students. He indicated (interview, November 20, 2017) that he was initially “quite excited” by what #RMF was attempting to do, particularly around the curriculum. However, he found that:

I think they went astray in exactly the same way the South African movement did. They started fighting very bitterly among each other and on grounds that were almost a caricature of identity politics. About who had the authority to speak and who didn't... If you take that to its logical conclusion, no one has the authority to speak. And that's what happened. Nobody was allowed to speak inside that movement and it tore itself to pieces... and the divisions were, men and women, Africans and African Americans, black people and Indian people; it was absolutely riven by, you know, one division crossing another, crossing another, crossing another to the extent that they wrapped a rope around themselves and all fell over.

While Steinberg's assessment of the collapse of the #RMF movements both in Cape Town and in Oxford resonated with me, it was the incorporation of an intersectional approach that allowed members of the #RMF movement to recognize the intersections between race and patriarchy as manifestations of coloniality.

In the Cape Town movement, the incorporation of intersectionality also created the space for queer and trans activists to engage in the movement, despite the challenges that were subsequently highlighted by the Trans Collective. I am therefore not as quick as Steinberg to dismiss the incorporation of intersectionality as “naïve,” but I must acknowledge that its role in the fracturing of both #RMF movements raises important questions about how activists interpret intersectionality as a framework for challenging racism as well as patriarchy.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the #RMF UCT movement not only named the Oxford movement but also inspired #RMF Oxford's decolonial aims, which were centered on iconography, curriculum change, and racial inequalities. Even the frictions that emerged in #RMF Oxford around race, patriarchy, and intersectionality were similar to the contestations dealt with by students at UCT. At the same time, the #RMF Oxford movement occurred in a fundamentally different geographical context when compared to #RMF UCT. The U.K. represents the heart of empire, and the University of Oxford remains at the global center of knowledge production. By challenging the proud, imperial history of a nation and its highly regarded institutions, the #RMF Oxford movement faced pressures that may not necessarily have been encountered by the movement at UCT.

But the Oxford movement was not able to formulate a comprehensive ideology or conceptual framework to guide its activities. Decolonial and intersectional approaches were adopted by the movement, but a common understanding of these constructs was never agreed upon. Despite these differences, it is argued that both movements were actively engaged in epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011). For activists involved with #RMF Oxford, this disobedience played out most prominently in relation to challenging the Eurocentric curriculum.

While the exportation of #RMF from Cape Town to Oxford suggests that it is an idea that emanated from the global South and traveled to Euro-America, questions remain about whether #RMF comes from “the depths of the South” (Steinberg interview, November 20, 2017). For the moment, it seems sufficient to conclude that #RMF is an idea that emerged in the global South, and that it inspired the formation of #RMF Oxford, which incorporated many of #RMF UCT’s characteristics into its epistemic foundations.

In my engagement with UCT activists, I found that they were generally dismissive of the #RMF Oxford movement, and they questioned the extent to which #RMF Oxford embraced the ideas developed in Cape Town. During my conversation with Dr. Zethu Matebeni, a faculty member at UCT who was intimately involved with the #RMF UCT movement (interview, July 21, 2017), I relayed this skepticism that I encountered among #RMF UCT activists to her. She indicated that students involved in #RMF UCT failed to fully appreciate the international dimensions of their movement: “I was teaching a course now at Yale on ‘Gender and Sexuality and Decolonizing South African Universities’... What was interesting for me, was that [the students at Yale] were looking for leadership from South Africa. And I don’t think South African students realized that.”

After arranging a Skype conversation with activists from #RMF UCT during her class, Matebeni found that the students at Yale “got energy and power from what was happening here... so they used #RhodesMustFall as a thing for them to mobilize and to say the things that they needed to say... all they wanted to hear about was #RhodesMustFall.” According to Matebeni (interview, July 21, 2017), while her Yale students were also critical of certain elements of the #RMF movement, she recognized that #RMF activists at UCT “gave people a language.” Reflecting on the global impact of the #RMF UCT movement, she concluded, “Maybe one day they will realize that they really did change the world. And it was a powerful thing to be part of and to experience.”

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Notes

1. The hashtag (#) that precedes the name 'RhodesMustFall' is used on social media networks such as Twitter to identify and search for messages on a particular issue.
2. Ethical approval for this study was granted by three separate ethics committees or institutional review boards at Teachers College (Columbia University), the University of Cape Town, and the University of Oxford. In all three cases, the committees granting ethical approval required a formal application, a copy of the dissertation outline, a copy of the semi-structured interview questions, and an informed consent form, as well as specific documents unique to each institution. Specific approval was requested to audio record the interviews and to give interviewees the option of having their name included in the study.
3. Coleman spells his last name with a line through it as a way of signaling its connection to his slave ancestry.