

# **New Student Activism after Apartheid: the case of Open Stellenbosch**

BY

Vanessa Lebohang Mpatlanyane

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Supervisor: Dr. Bernard M. Dubbeld

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## **DECLARATION**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers recent student activism in post-apartheid South Africa by paying attention to Open Stellenbosch, a black-led student movement at Stellenbosch University. By using data collected from the beginning of 2015 to mid-2016 from Facebook and Twitter feeds, interviews, and participant observation in protest action, I show how such movements articulate feelings of alienation and concerns around fees, thereby drawing attention to the contradictions and unfulfilled promises of both South Africa's higher education and of the new democratic dispensation. Furthermore, I argue that although Open Stellenbosch can be located within a broader history of student activism, such activism can be thought of in new ways because of the way in which student experiences and grievances are represented. Through this work I draw attention to the student activist as an intellectual, investigating the use of social media by such movements. I finally engage the decline of Open Stellenbosch, arguing that multiple factors such as institutional repression have been key in the demise of the movement. Looking beyond 2015-6, I conclude that the use of social media, unresolved student grievances, pockets of conscientised students on campus, as well as a growing black women leadership in the student body suggests the possibility of student activism re-emerging in the future.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis oorweeg die onlangse aktivisme in post-apartheid- Suid-Afrika deur aandag te skenk aan Open Stellenbosch, 'n swart-begeleide studentebeweging by Universiteit Stellenbosch. Ek gebruik data wat versamel was aan die begin van 2015 tot middel 2016 vanaf die sosiale netwerke Facebook en Twitter, onderhoude en deelnemende observasie tydens protesaksie. Deur dié versamelde data te gebruik, wys ek hoe sulke bewegings die gevoelens rondom vervreemding en bekommernisse rondom fooie artikuleer en sodoende aandag trek na die teenstellings en leë beloftes van beide die Suid-Afrikaanse hoërsonderwys en die nuwe demokratiese orde. Verder argumenteer ek dat alhoewel Open Stellenbosch binne die breër geskiedenis van studente-aktivisme gevind kan word, kan daar van sulke aktivisme op nuwe maniere gedink word as gevolg van die maniere waarop studente-ervaringe en ergernisse verteenwoordig word. Deur hierdie werk, trek ek aandag na die studente-aktiwis as intellektueel en ondersoek die gebruik van sosiale media deur sulke bewegings. Ek spreek uiteindelik die afname van Open Stellenbosch aan, en argumenteer dat veelvoudige faktore soos institusionele onderdrukking die sleutel is tot die ondergang van die beweging. Deur tekyk na verder as 2015-6, kom ek tot die gevolgtrekking dat die gebruik van sosiale media, onopgeloste ergernisse, sakke van sosiaal en politieke bewuste studente op kampus, sowel as groeiende leierskap van swart vroue in die studenteliggaam stel die moontlikheid voor dat studente-aktiviste weer in die toekoms te voorskyn sal kom.

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## List of Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
AZASO	Azanian Students Organizations
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
EFFSC_SU	Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command of Stellenbosch University
FMF	Fees Must Fall
FMF 2.0	Fees Must Fall Stellenbosch 2.0
IFOS	Intersectional Feminist of Open Stellenbosch
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual
LLL	Listening, Living and Learning
MIB	Men In Black
NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
NUSAS	National Union of South African Students
OS	Open Stellenbosch movement
RMF	Rhodes Must Fall movement
RMT	Rector's Management Team
SAFLII	Southern African Legal Information Institute
SAHO	South African History Online

SASCO Maties	South African Students Congress at Stellenbosch University
SASM	South African Student Movement
SASO	South African Student Organization
SRC	Student Representative Council
SU	Stellenbosch University
UC Davis	University of California Davis
UCT	University of Cape Town
UFS	University of the Free State
USAF	Universities South Africa
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WITS	University of the Witwatersrand

## Introduction

This thesis foregrounds recent student struggles in South Africa generally, and in Stellenbosch in particular, focusing on black students' experiences. Examining such experiences, I show how black students through movements articulate feelings of alienation and concerns around fees, thus drawing attention to the contradictions, unmet expectations and unfulfilled promises of both South Africa's higher education and of the new democratic dispensation. Drawing from the Open Stellenbosch movement, both online and offline, I collected data from the beginning of 2015 to mid-2016 from Facebook and Twitter feeds, interviews, and participant observation in protest action. My aim is to contribute to ongoing conversations about student movements in the country and the post-apartheid University. Moreover, I offer a mode of analysis that takes into consideration the composition, longevity, survival strategies, and purpose of such movements.

Although students' role in the anti-apartheid struggle is evoked and remembered in contemporary student politics, I argue that present activism is organizationally and politically distinct from anti-apartheid student movements and from current national African National Congress (ANC) politics. In my analysis of the movements' strategies, I show that this difference from past movements is apparent in the ways in which Open Stellenbosch draws on new media forms as a channel of expressing student dissent. This provides new avenues and a new vocabulary with which to think about knowledge production and the representation of marginalized students in our contemporary moment.

Through analysis of collected data, I show how student activists in democratic South Africa feel and express the desire for forms of struggle that capture their realities. Indeed, I suggest, these struggles claim that the conditions at institutions of higher education are the most adequate foil for tackling larger social and political issues. I argue that the institutional containment and rejection of student demonstrations – arguably in defense of the status quo and of whiteness – has hindered the capacity of student-led movements to sustain organizations for the future. I conclude by suggesting that this violent suppression of contemporary movements, focusing on the case of Open Stellenbosch at Stellenbosch University, has nonetheless failed to contain the wide publication of the events and fulfill all the demands made by students, thus failing to suppress the conditions for the re-emergence of student activism in times to come.

### **The Post-Apartheid University**

In 2008, then Minister of Education (now called the Department of Basic education) Naledi Pandor, established a Ministerial Committee to “investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism, and to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and promote social cohesion” (Soudien, Michaels, Mthembu-Mahanyele, Nkomo, Nyanda, Nyoka, Seepe, Shisana & Villa-Vicencio, 2008:9).

The committee was established in response to a video showing

“four young white Afrikaner male students of the Reitz Residence at the University of the Free State (UFS) [...] forcing a group of elderly black (cleaning) workers, four women and one man, to eat food into which one of the students had apparently urinated” (ibid.:23).

The video caused national and international outrage as it made vividly apparent that South African higher education was a site for the manifestation of social injustice and racism. It became clear that higher education “inherited the full complexity of the country’s apartheid and colonial legacy” (Soudien et.al., 2008:6).<sup>1</sup> Although South Africa had legally and legislatively moved into a post-Apartheid era, campuses of higher learning failed to reflect a materialization of promises embedded in democracy. The committee noted that “[racism], sexism and class discrimination continue to manifest themselves in the core activities of teaching, learning and research”, setting the tone for a hostile environment for many staff and students at institutions across the country (ibid.:23). Although the events at the University of Free State powerfully showed how racism persists in post-apartheid institutions, the committee’s report also drew attention to more subtle and everyday forms of racism and discrimination.

The report outlined that socio-economic factors, manifested in the inability to afford tuition, accommodation, living expenses, and study material, were a major factor in not only the ability to access higher education, but also to flourish in its institutional space. Such factors were common amongst students in historically black institutions.<sup>2</sup> Although the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) had contributed greatly to financing, and thus granting

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<sup>1</sup> *Apartheid*, the Afrikaans word for apartness, refers to an ideology and system of separate development through racial segregation instituted formally in South Africa in 1948 under the National Party government (SAHO,2017b). The system had a white minority rule, formally ending with the first democratic elections in April 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *Historically black institutions* refers to all institutions that were designated for black students under Apartheid. These institutions were typically far from urban areas and resource deprived. These are contrasted with institutions designated for white students, also known as *historically white institutions*, which were in urban areas and highly resourced (Reddy,2004).

access to, black<sup>3</sup> students in higher learning, NSFAS assistance alone was simply not enough to “facilitate access to, and the success of, financially disadvantaged students at higher education” (Soudien et.al., 2008:16).

Cooper (2015) argues that following the establishment of democracy, efforts to change structural inequalities determined by the previous dispensation were put in motion. In higher education, several mergers between historically white and advantaged institutions, and historically black and disadvantaged institutions took place.<sup>4</sup> The intention was to spread resources more evenly, simultaneously facilitating the demographic transformation necessary to reflect the new democratic ideals. However, four of the large historically white and advantaged institutions, namely Stellenbosch University, University of Pretoria, University of Witwatersrand and University of Cape Town (UCT), were excluded for the mergers<sup>5</sup>. As such,

“some of the structures of inequality across the 23 institutions were already built into the architectural framework of this new system itself via what was, and was not, merged” (Cooper, 2015:248).

The exception granted to these institutions, coupled with their staggered ‘Africanization’ after 2000, had implications on institutional change, both demographically and culturally.<sup>6</sup> At historically white institutions, many students, particularly first generation black students,

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3 The term *Black* is used to refer collectively to all historically oppressed peoples consisting of persons classified under apartheid as african, indian, or coloured (Cooper, 2015). This term is used in this manner throughout the thesis.

4 The mergers primarily involved historically black institutions and smaller, yet advantaged, historically white institutions. Not only did this skew the spread of black students in higher education, it replicated some of the structural and systemic issues it intended to address. (Cooper, 2015).

5 In addition to Stellenbosch, Pretoria, Wits and UCT, “two smaller white universities (Free State and Rhodes) and one historically coloured university (UWC)) were excluded from the mergers, while most of the (‘lower status’) 15 technikons along with many of the african historically black universities underwent mergers” (Cooper, 2015:248).

6 *Africanisation* is the term Cooper (2015) uses to refer to the process of increasing black African South African students at an institution.

found the linguistic demands of the space difficult to overcome.<sup>7</sup> Students not only had to refine their English language skills and adapt to the academic language encountered in their course material, they also struggled to relate and feel like they belonged at these institutions. Goga (2010) notes that black students at Rhodes University experienced the institutional culture of drinking as particularly alienating and marginalizing as it did not reflect their own cultural norms or experiences.<sup>8</sup> Institutions, therefore, were experienced as foreign spaces both linguistically and culturally. Durrheim and Dixon's (2001) argue that such behaviors racialize a space, thus marking who belongs and who does not.

Aligned with the cultural and linguist challenges of the post-Apartheid University, is the challenge of curricula.<sup>9</sup> Soudien et. al. (2008:21) found that much of what was taught and was on offer to students was "decontextualized" and did not adequately "sensitise students to the place of, and the issues surrounding South Africa on the African continent and in the world at large". Kargbo (2002) notes that education in Africa plays a pivotal role in the struggle for national development. Therefore, the African university bares the task of educating and training students for national service and development.<sup>10</sup> This assertion suggests that students who graduate from African universities need to be well aware of the complexities of the African space in which they exist. Gillespie and Dubbeld (2007) argue that although the university does well to produce students that are social interventionist, or students for

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<sup>7</sup> *First generation students*, refers to students that are the first members of their families to attend a tertiary institution.

<sup>8</sup> Rhodes University is also referred to as *The University Currently Known as Rhodes*. The term is recognized formally, and is used as a political statement to illustrate the rejection of a colonial university, as well as to demonstrate a call for decolonization. Cooper (2015) also notes that the university was amongst those that did not undergo a merger in the early 2000s.

<sup>9</sup> I use *post-Apartheid University* to refer to tertiary education as well as tertiary institutions post-1994

<sup>10</sup> This *African University* is used as a collective term for tertiary education institutions on the African continent



national service in Kargbo's terms, such efforts should not be divorced from critical thought.<sup>11</sup> They argue that critical thought is as much political action as interventional social action in that "[radical] change work, [...] necessarily involves the diagnostic capabilities of serious critical theory [...]" (ibid.:132). This perspective thus suggests that critical theoretical work falls within the interests of national service and development because it is through this work that social interventionists can adequately understand, and thus find solutions for, problems and complexities in a context. Gillespie and Dubbeld's assertion is central to the demands for a transformed curricula as it draws attention to the important role of conceptual frames and framings in the decolonial project. Following this, Nyamnjoh (2012) argues that education in the 21st century, both in teaching techniques and epistemology, discourages critical thought and oppositional thought, while mimicry is emphasized. The student's capacity to critically apply herself is undermined, denying her the opportunity to contextualize, identify, and challenge hegemonic epistemologies that fail to acknowledge African knowledges and African people as dignified.

Although the committee was established in response to a single incident at the University of the Free State, the findings outlined in the Soudien Report highlight the multiplicity of issues plaguing higher education more broadly. The extent, and character, of the colonial and Apartheid legacy on the education sector is apparent. What emerges, consequently, is deep

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<sup>11</sup> Gillespie and Dubbeld's assertion is a direct response to views of the University, and the discipline of Anthropology, as needing to be "more 'relevant', more 'practical'", thereby creating a false dichotomy between critical theoretical work, which is "[understood] as belonging to a 'comfortable' ivory [tower]" and what is regarded as "social action (intervention)" (2007:129-131).

dissatisfaction on the part of students and staff members who daily encounter, and fear, exclusion on racial, financial, gender and linguistic grounds.

### **The Stellenbosch context**

Stellenbosch University (SU) has been central in debates around transformation and institutional reform. Its roots as an institution through which young men strived to form an Afrikaner identity of their own under both British rule and Apartheid, has demanded an institutional effort to re-imagine itself in democratic South Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Gordon (1988) notes that during the conceptualization and implementation of Apartheid regulations, Stellenbosch University made its political mark on contemporary South African history-- a mark that would further taint the image of the university well into the 21st century. In the twentieth century, SU offered courses, such as Eugenics, that emphasized inherent differences between people and races, thereby providing the foundation upon which to root Apartheid (Hammond-Tooke, 1997).<sup>13</sup> The institution emphasized 'racial hygiene' in the syllabus, explaining heightening levels of white poverty, misery and indolence in terms of a so-called "natural selection" – a Darwinian concept that arguably suggested that only the fittest and best-suited creatures could survive in a particular environment (ibid.:63).<sup>14</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> I use the word *Afrikaner* to refer specifically to white European descendants that are first language Afrikaans speakers and conform to particular cultural norms associated with this group (SAHO, 2017a; van der Waal, 2012). I do recognize that other people outside of this group speak Afrikaans as a first language. For the purpose of this paper, the term is used specifically to the group described.

<sup>13</sup> I refer to *races* to be consistent with the views of the context I am describing. This in no way is a reflection of an essentialist understanding of differences between people based on skin color.

<sup>14</sup> *White* refers to those who under Apartheid were classified as being of European descent (Posel, 2001)

idea of competing races, which proposed that different races were different species doomed for inevitable conflict and lack of co-existence, seemed to align with suggested explanations for the poverty of white people to such an extent that fears of the thriving natives swamping the minority whites, dominated academic and political circles.

Sympathetic with these concerns, academics at SU as well as the University of Pretoria (UP), along with politicians from the National Party worked towards salvaging Afrikaner pride and fortune (Hammond-Tooke, 1997). Amidst the discussed solutions was the idea of removing the competition altogether. Although racial segregation was not a new practice in South Africa, for indeed over centuries South African life had been segregated, the need to prevent whites from further 'degeneration' called for immediate attention and drastic measures – measures that academics at SU were able to provide. Bank (2015) argues that the separate development policies implemented under Apartheid were not detached from earlier ideas of separate races, but rather reflected the influence of decades of thought in the discipline of *volkekunde* at Afrikaans universities. Under the scholarly leadership of Dr. W.W.M. Eiselen, some of the most influential figures of Apartheid trained in the ethnological discipline that propagated "biological ideas of racial difference and their application to different racial groups in South Africa" (ibid.:164). Eiselen, "trained a new generation of young Afrikaner ethnologists" who had the responsibility of preserving and enhancing the 'superior race', sentiments that were foundational to the National Party's rhetoric and reasoning for the so-called "separate development" (ibid.:163).

In the post-Apartheid period, Stellenbosch University has struggled to shake this image, a matter compounded by ongoing contestations over belonging at the institution. The (in)visibility of particular people that constitute the student and staff population, suggests

who belongs in the space and who does not. In 2000, Stellenbosch University had a student body that was 81% white and 15% black (Cooper, 2015:253).<sup>15</sup> In 2016, undergraduate students, who make up majority of the student body and the group that is most immersed in institutional culture and activities, had a profile of 65.18% white students and 34.82% black students (SU, 2016f). Additionally, the racial profile of teaching and research staff has also reflected SU as an overwhelmingly white space. According to university statistics, black teaching and research staff composed a mere 22.3% of the academic staff total (SU, 2016f). Pattman and Harris (2012) argue that the lack of black people has led to a common view of the institution as a white space in which black students have no place.

The infrastructural features of the university, in addition to the institutions demographic profile, suggest a sense of nostalgia that negates the diversity in experiences, livelihoods and histories of the people that constitute the space. Durrheim and Dixon (2001) argue that race prejudices and perceptions through the manifestation of behavior – in this instance the presence of building names, statues, and structural design – racialize a space. Harrison & Tatar (2008) emphasize that the mental model of a space is fashioned according to the bodily experience that one has in that space. In other words, statues, plaques, names of buildings, the racial and gender profile of people in the space, as well as the language of communication, all fashion how the mental image of the space is constructed. Or, differently put, it determines how *place* is created. Spaces therefore, cannot be thought of as neutral but as canvasses upon which identities are expressed. Durrheim, Mtose & Brown (2011) suggest that certain spaces have been allocated and associated with certain groups of people not because the space

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<sup>15</sup> In 2000, the remaining 4% of the fully-time equivalent students were classified as “foreign and unknown” (Cooper, 2015:253)

naturally bid it so, but because spaces have acquired meaning and that meaning has formed the basis for exclusion and inclusion.

Furthermore, the ongoing language debate at SU continues to be a site for contesting belonging and ownership. The 2014 language policy outlined that for the next five years the university would continue to commit to “the use, safeguarding and sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic language in a multilingual context [...]” (SU, 2014). English and IsiXhosa would also be developed, with an increased use of the former in teaching and learning, and an increase in overall use of the latter where feasible (ibid.). Although official university statistics state that 46.1% of enrolled students consider English as their first language, with Afrikaans being at 40.7%, the university has been unable to shake its image as an Afrikaans university (SU, 2016f). In part, this image is sustained by the use of Afrikaans as the primary language in many residences, formal and informal meetings, as well as in the classroom setting and social settings. Van der Waal suggests that the persistent use of Afrikaans in significant settings, irrespective of the language profile of students, is indicative of a push back from “language activists” working to defend Afrikaans against English, the ““killer language”” (van der Waal, 2012:447).

Increases in English-speaking students and staff, white or black, challenge efforts to maintain Afrikaans as the primary language of engagement at SU, albeit contested. Stellenbosch University has in the past, as in the present, illustrated division over the language issue: English has been considered the “lion” awaiting the “lamb”, a metaphor used to personify the Afrikaans language (van der Waal, 2012:452). Notions of a language, people and culture under threat, not only create hotbeds for contestation and division, but also illustrates a disregard of the changing student body and linguistic community. In effect, such push back delays and

undermines transformation efforts, mainly at the expense of already marginalized students at the institution.

### **Student activism in 2015 and 2016**

In March 2015, news broke about a student, Chumani Maxwele, at the University of Cape Town throwing excrement at a Cecil John Rhodes<sup>16</sup> statue. The incident marked the beginning of the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement. RMF, defined as “a collective movement of students and staff members mobilizing for direct action against the reality of institutional racism at the University of Cape Town”, argued that UCT was still rife with exclusionary institutional practices that reflected in the present moment consequences of colonization and Apartheid (RMF, 2015). The presence of statues such as that of Rhodes symbolized, in their view, the remnants of colonialism at the institution. Formed as a direct result of an Open-Air dialogue, the movement articulated its main priority as being to “create avenues for REAL transformation that students and staff alike have been calling for.” (ibid.).

Shortly after the founding of RhodesMustFall, student movements on campuses around the country emerged with similar assertions (Booyesen, 2016). At the University Currently Known as Rhodes, the Black Students’ Movement called for transformation through the #RhodesSoWhite campaign, while students at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) campaigned through #TransformWits. The North-West University Potchefstroom campus called for change through the #TransformPukke movement. Although each university

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<sup>16</sup> *C.J. Rhodes* (5 July 1853-26 March 1902) was a British businessman, mining giant, politician and believer in British imperialism who donated the land upon which UCT is built. He served as Prime Minister of South Africa under British rule (SAHO,2015).

articulated their struggle within the specific context of their respective institution, the broader issue of the remnants of Apartheid and colonization finding place in higher education in the present moment was a common theme.

Stellenbosch University was not exempted from the surge of student activist movements in 2015. A few months before the formation of RMF, an incident at a McDonald's eatery in Stellenbosch raised issues around racism in the student town. According to the Cape Times, three black students were attacked at the eatery on Saturday 21 February by a group of white men as a result of trying to intervene when the black students perceived the white group as being disrespectful towards black McDonald's staff members (Dirk, 2015). The white group told the black students that they did not belong in Stellenbosch because they do not speak Afrikaans and are not white. The incident, although reported to campus security and senior university management for further investigation, yielded no immediate disciplinary consequences. Subsequently, the incident agitated discussions about race, belonging and the university's commitment to transformation and non-racism. Students and staff, in an effort to raise awareness and demand answers for this occurrence formed "a collective of students and staff working to purge the oppressive remnants of apartheid in pursuit of a truly African university", later known as the Open Stellenbosch movement (OS, 2015a).

Like RhodesMustFall and the other movements, Open Stellenbosch (OS) drew attention to the issues of systemic alienation and marginalization in higher education. These concerns were articulated more sharply by pointing at the issues of overt racism, as well as cultural and linguistic exclusion. The movement lobbied for the recognition of black students, suggesting that there was a need to do away with the exclusionary nature of the Afrikaans language and Afrikaner culture at the institution. What seemed to emerge from OS was a discourse around

specific and practical issues of learning and belonging. The movement pointed to the 2014 language policy as the most prominent instrument used by the institution to suffocate black students in the space. Or, rather, to suffocate them out of the space.

The language policy, OS argued, not only favored Afrikaans as the primary language of instruction, but also functioned as a proxy for a specific and exclusive campus culture that alienated anybody that fell outside of a rigid set of markers, of which race and language were the more prominent (OS, 2015i). Moreover, they argued that the institution's efforts towards safeguarding the Afrikaans language, and consequently a specific culture, by evoking constitutional rights and privileges, only illustrated the Apartheid nostalgia that seemed to permeate various practices and levels of the institution. In effect, the use of Afrikaans and the perpetual preference given to Afrikaner culture at Stellenbosch University was experienced by black students as an undeniable marker of who belonged in the space and who did not.

In response to these perceived issues, the movement initiated several protests. Posters and stickers were placed all over main campus. One such sticker read, "Racists don't belong here", which was a response to the claim from the McDonalds' incident (Field notes, 2015). Protest demonstrations and marches on the rooiplein, a central gathering place for students on campus, were also used to draw attention to concerns students and OS had. The use of visual art such as sculptures, wall painting, the hanging paper with students' opinions on washing lines inside academic buildings, as well as the screening of protest-related documentaries, all formed part of the movement's protests tactics as well. These tactics were supplemented by interactions on Twitter, Facebook and other media interviews. Not only did these protests strategies grant the movement a presence on campus, thereby educating students and staff



about OS, they also served as information outlets to draw attention to numerous issues that students may have otherwise neglected.

Open Stellenbosch soon became part of a growing network of student movements around the country. By October 2015, the discourse in these movements started to shift towards a focus on free education. The issue of fees had been central to student protests since the early 2000s, however at historically black institutions mainly. However, following a vote rejecting fee increment suggested by Wits council a few days earlier, Wits students started systematically shutting down the institution, marking the formal start of the #WitsFeesMustFall campaign on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October (Naidoo,2016; Booysen,2016). The struggle for free education and affordability of tertiary education had become a general concern for students at both historically black and white institutions. Within a week, movements at other institutions across the country initiated their own protests both in solidarity with Wits, as well as in response to the annual fee increments at their respective institutions under the #FeesMustFall (FMF) banner. By mid-October, student movements on campuses were working towards an official country-wide protest, following Rhodes University's call for a #NationalShutDown. The #NationalShutDown resulted in a no-fee increase for 2016, which students rejected as insufficient in meeting their demands for free education in their generation. As such, the campaign for free education continued well into 2016, with fees-related protests emerging at some institutions in 2017 as well.<sup>17</sup>

Various scholars have proposed interpretative lenses through which these events may be understood. In an editorial by Booysen (2016), multiple accounts and interpretations of the

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<sup>17</sup> See Booysen (2016) for a detailed account of FeesMustFall protests 2015-6

FeesMustFall are offered. What is central in many of these accounts is the assertion that the recent protests contribute to conceptualizations of governance, both in higher education and in national government. The flat leadership structure and non-partisan action evident in these movements, allowed decision making that relied on consultation and engagement on a mass scale, which often took place in mass plenaries and mass meetings. This illustrated students' dissatisfaction with a top-down governing approach that has disregarded the interests of the masses. Booysen further suggests that the movements have demonstrated the power of solidarity and concerted effort in achieving desired goals, therefore altering conceptualizations of governance as the rule of the ruler, favoring a view of the citizen as a powerful decision-making force.

In Heffernan and Nieftagodien (2016) it is suggested that locating the recent protests within a history of students' protests in South Africa – notably by drawing parallels between the 1976 protests and the 2015-6 uprisings – provides us with an enriched understanding of the trajectory of student activism in the country. The centrality of quality education and language politics in both the 1976 and 2015-6 protests suggests that the struggles of the 'born frees'<sup>18</sup> are resonant with those of the past, an observation that echoes students' concerns about the remnants of apartheid in education.

Furthermore, Nyamnjoh suggests that the movements illustrate a black student body that is fed up with the "violation and victimization by outsiders [...] claiming the status of superior beings and bearers of superior values" (Nyamnjoh, 2015:48). Nyamnjoh's analysis situates the

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<sup>18</sup> *Born frees* refers to the "generation(s) of South Africans born after 1994, the legal end of apartheid" (Heffernan and Nieftagodien, 2016:x). This is also the generation of students in higher education in 2015 onwards.

uprisings as an antagonistic relationship between Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism. This interpretation renders the attack on the Rhodes' statue as an attack on "[eurocentric], narrow- minded racism" that still plagues higher education at the expense of black working-class students (ibid.:54).

Badat (2015) argues that in higher education the global North is considered supreme, as evident in the curricula and campus culture, both of which work to produce and reproduce Eurocentric perspectives as universal and absolute wisdom, as opposed to historical social constructs. In effect, such wisdoms embed and normalize Eurocentric thought, practices and conventions at the expense of context-centered alternatives, an undertaking that illustrates a failure to yield "substantive respect for and affirmation of difference and the creation of inclusive cultures" (ibid.:81). The effect of marginalization and lack of inclusivity and transformation – or what Nyamnjoh refers to as the unwillingness of whites to make "space at the table" – has created a hostile environment in which black students feel suffocated in historically white institutions and find no point of self-reflection nor equal ownership and belonging (Nyamnjoh,2017). Badat's interpretation suggests that higher education in its current state is hostile towards the black student, and any other body that is misrecognized by Western knowledge and standards.

Badat (2015:74-76) further argues that although more students are being accepted into universities, higher education remains insufficiently funded by the state, pressuring institutions to make up the shortfall

"through significantly increasing tuition fees, seeking third-stream income (alumni and donor contributions, and income from consultancies, research contracts, short courses and hiring out of facilities) and reducing costs through mechanisms such as outsourcing."

As a sector within a complex web of political, ideological and economic pressures, higher education is not left unaffected by the state of the rest of the country and the rest of the world. The African National Congress (ANC) government's "economic policies, powerfully shaped by neoliberal prescripts, have not generated the kind or level of economic growth and development that is required" to invest in higher education in significant and sustainable ways (Badat, 2015:77). Therefore, student dissent can be regarded as a response to the effects of neoliberalism<sup>19</sup> on higher education. The rise in tuition fees and lack of a free education reflects a government that has failed to remedy past socio-economic injustices and challenge current socio-economic injustices in ways that would make free education a reality, much to the benefit of students denied tertiary education because of financial exclusion.

The remnants of Apartheid and colonization, compounded with the pressures of neoliberalism, have rendered higher education a space that is hostile towards black working-class students. The identification of the incongruence and contradictions plaguing higher education has nurtured a black-centered black-led activism that is "no longer accepting the things [it] cannot change, [and] changing the things [it] cannot accept" (BBC News Africa, 2016).

This thesis aims to contribute to these interpretations of student activism by drawing attention to student activists as innovative intellectuals. I argue that the representation of the

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<sup>19</sup> Badat (2015:79) defines *neo-liberalism* as "a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade".

marginalized has been a central theme in student activism under Apartheid and that the recent student protests suggest it remains a challenge in the democratic period. The 2015 and ongoing uprisings, therefore, are approached as a response to the failure of current student representative structures and channels to adequately represent the interests of marginalized and alienated students. The multiple issues raised by black students further suggest that access to higher education is still designated along gender, linguistic, economic and racial lines, leaving certain people inadequately represented. The use of social media, I argue, is an avenue through which these voices may be heard. Social media, as a space relying on user-generated content, has enabled students to represent themselves on their own terms, in their own ways. As a many-to-many communication tool, a rapid disseminator of content, and an easy-to-access platform, social media presents a way to contribute to public opinion and political concern, as demonstrated in the use and usefulness of social media in the recent uprisings.

## Method

Everatt (2016:127) argues that the “youth provide a lens that magnifies many challenges in society”. Apple (2013:19) argues that education in all its facets, provides insight into a society, thus institutions of education ought not to be viewed as “other than society”. In this section, I will reflect on how I approached students as a youth, on how I collected data about students, and on how I position myself in relation to a struggle which with identify. Rather than claim an ‘objective’ position in relation to these struggles, I suggest that a) the politics of these struggles are such that nobody involved at the institution is able to take a fully outsider position and, b) that being sympathetic to the struggle, and close to it, lends certain insight into the nature of those struggles that would be impossible to obtain at a distance.

In taking students to be emblematic of broader South African society, I do not imply that they simply reproduce broader structural tensions in South African society. Indeed it is their agency that I hold as indicative of new tensions and strategies for confronting these. Throughout this thesis, I labor to demonstrate and detail the different strategies used by students in response to their circumstance, precisely illustrating that students are neither passive nor without any power. It is in recognizing the agency of young people that Apple concludes that institutions of learning can be powerful spaces in which class, gender, race, and ‘ability’ hierarchies are challenged.

Collective protest action, as illustrated in the recent student activism in higher education, has been one of the ways in which young people have identified certain hierarchies as problematic and challenged them. What then is to be said of these protests? What are

students protesting about? How are they protesting? Why are certain strategies used and not others? Which students are participating in protests and which students are not? What does this tell us about the nature and character of student activism in post-apartheid South Africa? What comparisons can be made with student activism elsewhere? Are there any overlaps with student activism in times past? These are all questions of inquiry that require empirical investigation. Although student movements may be placed within a web of broader societal issues, a consideration of the student movements and student activists in their specific contexts, meanings and intersections necessitates critical investigation.

In an attempt to respond to this need for empirical investigation, throughout the span of Open Stellenbosch protest on campus from 2015 to 2016, including the FeesMustFall campaign, I participated in mass meetings, as well as OS meetings and events such as the June 16 symposium. At protest demonstrations, I took photos, hand-written notes, voice recordings and video recordings of the events. Moreover, I collected posters, stickers and pamphlet hand-outs from these gatherings. I analyzed themes evident in these posts and materials, from March 2015 to mid-2016. I follow Bryman's (2012) insight that this kind of ethnographic work enables the researcher to develop an understanding of the subject's patterned behavior and meaning-making processes. Observations were supplemented by informal interviews conducted in 2016 with some of the movement's prominent activists. I began each interview by asking the participant how they became involved in the movement. Follow up questions would build on what the participant's response, focusing on understanding the participant's experience in the movement. Three interviews were done in person.

The first interview was conducted with a participant I call Uhuru. *Uhuru* is a black man from a rural area. He was significantly involved in the movement, serving on numerous discussion

panels and strategic forums. He was a third-year student at the time of the interview. The second interview was with Azania. *Azania* is a black woman who was a vocal member in the movement. Azania was a second-year student at the time of the interview, but a first-year student when OS was formed. The third face-to-face interview was with King. *King* is a black male student. He was very vocal in the movement, especially endorsing the leadership and voices of women in the movement. He also had been at Stellenbosch for more than three years when OS started. King served on numerous leadership positions at the institution.

All the participant's names are pseudonyms as a measure of protecting their identity. The main informant in the study, Uhuru, referred me to both Azania and King amongst other prominent members of the movement upon hearing what my study was on and the areas I wished to focus on. However, when these interviews were conducted, many of the movement's prominent activists had either left the institution or were simply unavailable to speak. In addition to these interviews, two email questionnaires were sent out to two black female activists who agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaire had the following questions:

Would you define yourself as an activist? Why/why not?

What was (is) it like being part of a movement such as OS?

What made you get involved in the movement?

From experience, would you say sex/gender has an impact on how one is treated in activist spaces? How so?

Would you say that being a female in the movement had an effect on you in any way?

What role do you think females have in society holistically?

How would you describe being a female in RSA in 2017?

How would you describe being a female on a university campus currently?

Anything else that you may want to let me know?



Of the two questionnaires sent, only one was filled in and returned. The returned questionnaire was from a heterosexual black woman I refer to as Ruth. *Ruth* is a final year student who has been a member of both Open Stellenbosch and the FeesMustFall campaign among other leadership structures on campus. Both students had initially agreed to a face-to-face interview, however, changes in personal circumstances made this impossible.

Bryman (2012) notes that informal face-to-face interviews enable in-depth follow up questions and interactions, a process that is difficult to replicate via email questionnaires. In an attempt to address this shortcoming, I drafted questions to be filled in, with the understanding that I would send more questions if need arose. In both the face-to-face interviews and the email questionnaire, I analysed the content thematically, identifying recurring themes and patterns in the data. Furthermore, a major segment of the data came from the social media posts, particularly Facebook posts, of the movement. Postill and Pink (2012:145-146) argue that social media can be intertwined with work done in relevant and related localities. As they put it, studying social media and the “locality-based realities” means that the researcher is “[able] to follow ethnographically the (dis)continuities between the experienced realities of face-to-face and social media movement and socialities”. Considering the tremendous use of social media in the 2015-6 protests, studying social media content was essential for a fuller understanding of activism in this period.

### ***Commitment, conflict and contradictions: notes from the field***

While the content herein is presented in a systemic, logical manner, it is necessary to reflect on the messiness of the research process. One way of doing this is working through some of

the pressing questions, and experiences, of doing this research. I do this not as a way of gushing about my personal experiences in the field, but rather as a way of engaging the very questions and arguments I raise in this thesis, albeit using my own experience as data.

Throughout the thesis I make a case for the student-activist as an intellectual. I argue that the student-activist is a powerful agent pushing the boundaries of what is known and accepted as knowledge, knowledge production processes, as well as how the ‘intellectual’ is characterized. In other words, I am implicitly probing into grander questions around knowledge(s) and the production of knowledge. Thinking about the student-activist in this way, I am drawing attention to problematics of conceptualized boundaries that suggest that the student is only defined by their position as a registered student. In this thesis I acknowledge that students take on multiple complex positions and roles. Might this be applicable to me as a researcher in this field as well? Here I argue that indeed researchers take on multiple complex roles as well. In this instance, I engage the scholar-activist role in particular.

### ***Commitment***

In her 1995 article, *The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions of a Militant Anthropology*, Nancy Scheper-Hughes makes a case for an anthropology that is “personally engaged and politically committed” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:419). According to Scheper-Hughes, ethical<sup>20</sup> anthropology necessitates that the researcher acknowledge that they are a human being first-

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<sup>20</sup> In this context Scheper-Hughes (1995) argues that the ‘ethical’ exists prior to, and outside of, culture. As such, it is based on the understanding that human suffering, in its varied forms, ought not to be dismissed or go without intervention under the guise of cultural practice. The ‘ethical’ understands the researcher as an agent capable of alleviating suffering and injustice thus prone to intervene in cases of violation of human dignity or inflicted suffering, irrespective of the context in which they occur.

a condition they take with to the field. Being a human being, she argues, necessarily means that there has to be an investment in fighting “evil” and “inhuman” practices, regardless of their origin or expression. (ibid.,1995:416). It is the researcher’s responsibility to fight against dehumanization. Scheper-Hughes’ anthropology therefore, is one that does not position the researcher as an outside looking in, but rather as one who is an insider with as much commitment and investment as any of the participants<sup>21</sup>.

During the 2015/6 student protests around the country, students were confronting institutional authority by asking difficult questions about identity, place, belonging and what it means to know. Students asked about the value of their education, flagging the difficulties of being a student while facing what seems to be inescapable socio-economic challenges. As a black woman, some of these questions more readily resonated with me. I too was a student at a predominately-white Afrikaner institution with a horrific history of exclusion and violence against black people. I formed part of the minority black collective on campus. I too had experienced the marginalizing practices at first-years orientation. I knew what it was like to be one of only five black women in a residence of over 100 women. I knew what it felt like to feel suffocated by the inescapable feeling that you cannot flourish in a space because you spoke the ‘wrong’ language or were the ‘wrong’ colour.

In contrast, as light-skinned woman, I could less readily comprehend the anger and anguish of being called a ‘kaffir’ or ‘monkey’ because of the tone of my skin. Nor could I, as a consequence of English-Afrikaans schooling, easily grasp the difficulties of accepting that

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<sup>21</sup> I draw on scholars that make similar assertions throughout the thesis, for example Said (1994) and Apple (2013). Other scholars such as Freire, pointy make similar assertions in various pieces of work.

personal hard work is not sufficient to pass a module when you cannot understand the language in which it is being taught.<sup>22</sup> My position as a heterosexual middle-class woman also seemed to be a point of divergence, not to be mistaken with apathy, when put alongside some of the concerns regarding homophobia, sexuality and the cost of education.

Indeed, in some ways I was unlike the students I write about. Yet, their concerns and experiences are legitimate, even though I cannot always claim them as my own. Their experiences, even though not my own, matter. It is precisely this recognition from whence a political commitment and personal engagement stems. A question is asked “[what] is this anthropology to us, anyway?” (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:411)<sup>23</sup>. Put differently, to what end does a researcher do the work they do? For what purpose? The work of the anthropology, as many have argued, is to liberate<sup>24</sup>. Liberation is by definition a political act. One that requires immense commitment. Said (1994) notes that the intellectual speaks truth to power. The process of liberation is such that it rubs against the grain in an effort to break down walls, both imagined and literal.

An anthropology that is ethical and committed to human liberation inevitably requires anthropologists that are committed political actors, just as an army inevitably requires soldiers. Such a commitment therefore converts the scholar into a scholar-activist.

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<sup>22</sup> Smith’s observation regarding the difference between the philosopher and the street porter is useful in this regard. Smith argues that it is more socialization and social statuses that separate the two than it is natural talent or mental ability (Smith, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Scheper-Hughes (1995:411) writes that in the poor Brazilian community where she was conducting fieldwork, she was asked this question in response to her reluctance to do more than idly take field notes without getting involved in the community politics like her participants had expected of her.

<sup>24</sup> I recognize that the anthropologist forms part of a great number of people that work for the advancement and good of humanity. In this instance, I use Scheper-Hughes’ definition of ‘ethical’ anthropology as a way of defining the work of liberation.

**Conflict**

Apple (2013) argues that it is easy for academics to claim to be a scholar-activist by merely appropriating the language of scholar-activists without any commitments. Scholars write eloquent pieces that appear “political” and “critical” yet lack any substance from the realities they profess to reflect (ibid.:2013:26). Such works only create an illusion of political commitment through literary performance and “academicization of the political” without any “sacrifice in one’s goal of individual advancement”.

Apple’s criticism, or accusation, suggests that some scholars claim activism but fail to live up to the commitments and sacrifices required to fulfil this role. Under the guise of political activism, such scholars write for personal advancement, and not as an extension of political commitment. If some scholars can theorize about pressing issues without an intimate involvement or commitment to such issues, could it be said that theory work is apolitical and uninvolved?

Here I suggest that theory is political. Gillespie and Dubbeld (2007) argue that critical thought is as much political action as activist work on the ground because all interventionalist work needs to be accounted for, documented and made sense of critically. What marks the difference between the scholar parading as an activist and the scholar-activist is that the former lacks the empirical insight that the latter has, thus produces work that is out of sync with the realities it professes to engage. More importantly, the scholar-activist understands theory to be an extension of interventionist activism. For the scholar-activist, theory and activism are not mutually exclusive<sup>25</sup>. As an intellectual, the ethnographer is represented by

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<sup>25</sup> In later parts of the thesis I demonstrate how this dual positionality manifests in the student-activist resulting in the ‘student-intellectual’.

their ability to think through, write and account for the condition of society. For the scholar-activist, or ethical scholar in Scheper-Hughes' terms, descriptions and mean-making account for the world as we know it, but more so contribute to the formation of the world the author desires. That is to say, theorization is both for understanding and desired change. Said (1994) proposes that it is the intellectual's responsibility to expose the invisible workings of power and account for the conditions of the subaltern. In other words, to show the unseen and amplify the unheard.

Furthermore, the scholar-activist understandings that research and writing are selective processes that inescapably reflect some things and not all things, even though the author may account for this (Rose, 1997).<sup>26</sup> There is a recognition that theoretical work is a political act because it is not neutral nor without contestation. As such, theory becomes a powerful tool for mobilizing support for the subaltern. In this thesis, for example, I have made specific arguments that showcase the legitimacy of students' concerns. Here I make a case for the student-activist as an intellectual by placing emphasis on certain themes from my research. In this way, theory is not separate nor conflicting with activist work, but a necessary part of it.

### ***Contradictions***

Thus far I have argued that an ethical anthropology is one in which the researcher is a scholar-activist. For such a researcher, political commitment and personal engagement are what constitute ethical practice because they are centered on scholarship that seeks human

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<sup>26</sup> Reflexivity for example, is one way of accounting for biases in research however, this does not do away with them.

liberation, justice and dignity. Although the position of scholar-activist is necessary, it is not one without contradictions or challenges.

As I have already argued, conceptualization and theorization of the world cannot occur without empirical involvement in it. Intimate knowledge of the student activists and the issues they raised provided rich data, amongst which is a particular activist vocabulary. This is reflected in my use of concepts such as 'woke', 'intersectionality' and 'Becky' in this thesis. I have kept these concepts intact as part of an intentional effort to tell the story of Open Stellenbosch as "truthfully, and as sensitively" as possible (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:410). Apple (2013:7) compellingly states that "language makes a difference. How someone or a situation is described, especially by powerful forces who wish to remain in power, is crucial". Throughout the thesis the issue of representation is a central theme. Therefore, how students represent themselves, and how others represent them, is crucial. By maintaining the language of activists, I demonstrate their position as intellectuals with agency.

Furthermore, the inclusion of this lexicon not only serves to recognize and acknowledge activists, but also provides an opportunity to interrogate the language. Admittedly, the difficulty in interrogating presents one of the challenges of the scholar-activist. The intense involvement with the project often means an entanglement that is difficult to break away from in ways that would enhance the analysis. Perhaps this illustrates one of the key criticisms of a personally engaged anthropology. England (1994) notes that such an anthropology, as suggested by Scheper-Hughes, directly antagonizes the neo-positivist model of research. According to the neo-positivist model, a clear separation of the researcher from the researched demarcates roles, and with that particular expectations and responsibilities, both negotiated and imposed. From this perspective, an anthropology that deviates from this rigid

dichotomy transgresses the lines that delineate the researcher from the researched. In other words, research processes that are personally invested and politically committed intentionally perforate the demarcations that separate the researcher from the researched, compromising the integrity of the scientific inquiry.

The neo-positivist model presents a sanitized version of the research process that overlooks the complexity of human relations and the research process. Ethnographic work often requires the researcher to respond to the demands of the situation. For example, there were instances where the detached taking of notes was not a primary concern because students' were in need of food and medical assistance. In other instances, raising funds for arrested students or students in need of money for tuition fees required action on the part of the researcher.

The neo-positivist model would suggest that the response to such circumstances would have been to remain on the margins, looking in. Such an approach is problematic precisely because it assumes that the researcher is a blank canvas with no biography or emotional attachments. It dictates that the researcher leave their humanity at. In my experience with activists, this has been impossible. The conditions of the field demanded emotional and political involvement. Without such investments, there is limited grasp of the extent and severity of the circumstances faced by students. More so, this would be in direct contrast with an anthropology that is "really, real"; anthropology that is ethical (Scheper-Hughes, 1995:417). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the neo-positivity model places the researcher as "an omnipotent expert in control of both passive research subjects and the research process" (England, 1994:80). In my own work with student activists, I have found this perspective to



be counter-productive. Such a perspective undermines the extent to which biography and social status mediate experience. As I have highlighted, my status as a light-skinned, black, heterosexual, middle-class, woman has an impact on my worldview and life experience. Therefore, I recognize that I do not, and cannot, claim the experiences of others as my own. It is true that my social statuses, as dictated by class, gender, race or habits, permits access to certain conditions and not others. Perhaps it is in this very instance that Apple's assertion resonates sharply. That is, it is in the unshared experiences, the narratives in which you do not immediately see yourself, that an appreciation of a personally engaged anthropology blooms. For example, my grasp of the extent of financial need at the institution would not have been as intense had I not participated in the Fees activism. Similarly, had it not been for on-the-ground involvement in activist work, I would not have understood the extent at which the use of Afrikaans academically disadvantages black students, as this fell outside of my own experience. Rose (1997:308) reminds us that knowledge is a mediated process. My position enables certain types of knowledge because it permits certain experiences and limits others. Therefore, this challenges the view that the researcher knows everything and participants know nothing. In fact, to demonstrate this point is central to this thesis.

Lastly, the perspective of the researcher as 'expert' assumes that it is the researcher that has more power in the research process. This sentiment is also illustrated by lengthy check-lists necessary for ethical clearance that use language that suggests that the researcher is always studying 'down' and therefore, ought to not take advantage of the research participants. However, there are limitations to such a perspective. Take for instance my own position as a student, as opposed to a senior lecturer. In this regard, one may argue that I am studying 'across' as opposed to studying 'down', which shifts the understanding of power distribution.

Another example is that of me being an individual going into a collective space. When I began my research project, I was intimidated by the thought of going into an already established and politically charged space. Access to this space had to be negotiated, a process that grants the participants more power than the researcher does. I have above highlighted some of the biographical and social traits of difference from the students I worked with. Although the assumption is that I was working with students, coded as 'vulnerable', I did not always feel powerful or empowered.

In addition, one of the most striking examples of powerlessness is in the realization that I cannot speak for, or about, the concerns of students because it was not my story. Here again, the issue of representation is central. Who was I to tell their narrative? What if I misrepresented them? I recognized fairly earlier on in the project that the work I have undertaken speaks of a terrain not yet fully grasped. More pressing however, was the realization of the importance of such work. The emergence of Open Stellenbosch, alongside other student movements, marked an incredible turn in the way in the ways in which we think and speak about Stellenbosch University. The movements across the country, and more importantly the issues raised by these movements, may well have altered how we think about the student situation in the present moment. Students were flipping, the narrative of a passive, uninterested, unintelligent youth upside down. At SU, the black student was moving from the margins to the centre. Such a moment could not be misrepresented because of who and what it implicated.

It is in attempting to adequately and truthfully document these moments that I felt overwhelmed and disempowered. I understood that in such moments, power lies with the students themselves. It is their story to tell. Their time to represent themselves on their terms.

The conflict and contradiction of the scholar-activist is this precisely. In the realization that you are both on the inside and the outside. Scheper-Hughes and Apple's resolve this conflict by arguing that the scholar-activist be completely on the inside. However, as I indicated, this is not without its drawbacks. Perhaps it is productive to acknowledge that the scholar-activist, as an insider, certainly has more insight than the scholar-parading-as activist does. With that said, the limitations imposed by their own positionality, which demonstrates the heterogeneity of any collective, alongside the inescapable selective nature of theorization, renders any research but one interpretive scheme through which the subaltern may be represented.

In this section, I have labored to engage the role of the scholar-activist.. Although I recognize the importance of such a position, I recount some of the challenges I encountered while conducting this research. I have argued that this is a position of commitment, conflict and contradiction. I have further argued that although the role of the scholar-activist is not without its challenges, a neo-positivist position is problematic. One of the major problems with this position, I argue, is that of representation. In keeping with the central argument of this thesis, I argue that a neo-positivist position silences voices that are not 'expert' or supposedly, not 'powerful', thereby reinforcing problematic research practices. A scholar-activist position however, intentionally labors to break down the rigid separation of researcher and participant because it recognizes that participants are knowledge producers and intellectuals in their own right. Therefore, such a position considered the research process as a political act in itself.

## **Chapter outline**

This thesis is divided into three parts. In the first chapter, I discuss student activism and student movements. Using Open Stellenbosch as a case, I engage broader discourses of student activism by paying attention to definitions, history, and the global and local contexts. I engage these as a foundation to engage the issue of representation and participation, both within and without formal institutional channels.

The second chapter continues to engage student activism on issues of representation by drawing attention to the student activist as an intellectual. Here I characterize the student activist as political actor as well as producer and disseminator of knowledge, by paying attention to Open Stellenbosch's use of social media. I use the third chapter of the thesis to briefly describe the state of OS in 2017, two years after its founding. Here I articulate the factors that have contributed to the decline of the once vibrant movement, as well as engage thought around the possibility of re-emergence. In the final chapter of the thesis, I engage the legacy of Open Stellenbosch at the institution.

# I

## Situating Open Stellenbosch within Student Activism

This chapter locates Open Stellenbosch within accounts of student movements more broadly, including those of the anti-apartheid struggle, to consider the ways in which this movement intersects with, and diverges from, other student movements in South Africa.

In order to do this, I begin by defining student activist movements and identifying their key features. Secondly, I briefly discuss significant student movements globally. Thirdly, I consider the student activist in the anti-apartheid struggle drawing attention to representation as a contested issue. Finally, I argue that a major result of this struggle was that, after apartheid, students gained a voice in university processes, having representation on committees and participating in some institutional decision-making. Student Representative Councils (SRCs), I suggest, are the outcome of student struggles in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. These analyses allow me to consider *how* and *why* the student activists of 2015-6 broke with SRCs, particularly, how such a break—as important as it was politically— might obscure other similarities that movements like Open Stellenbosch have with those of the past. At the same time, I suggest that the movement’s privileging of the experiences of black students, although echoing aspects of the black consciousness movement, was quite distinct from the latter.

## Defining Student Activism

Badat (1999) defines student activism as action undertaken by students, often at universities and in vocational colleges, in response to a political, social or economic cause. Such activism, often in the form of violent or peaceful public protest demonstration, may manifest through student organizations – typically spaces in which a collective of students, through affiliation or membership, organize in a society/union or club on a common “political, cultural, religious, academic and/or social” basis (Badat, 1999:33; Rosas, 2010). Student organizations often resemble fixed organizational structures, as they are present for a significant period in different institutional spaces and sometimes across institutions. Collective student activism also takes form in student movements, as

“the sum total of action and intentions of students individually, collectively and organizationally that are directed for change in students’ own circumstances and for educational and wider social change” (Badat, 1999:33).

Movements cannot typically be traced back, or reduced to, a single organization. That is to say, student movements are independent entities that are neither under an organization nor an extension of an organization. It is important to note that student organizations and student movements may intersect at certain points in their existence. Aside from sharing a common space – as both can co-exist at the same institution of learning, for example – it is not unusual for student organizations to participate in, and support, initiatives by movements.

Moreover, both student political organizations and student movements can be oppositional in nature, that is, challenge and resist the status quo (ibid.). Melucci (1985) asserts that movements are a form of collective action that is built on solidarity around a specific issue

with the purpose of pushing and breaking the limits of the system in which they exist. Activism that works to preserve the status quo is not unheard of, however. Although both forms of student activism may be composed of a collective of students seeking to achieve particular political, social or economic goals, student activist movements tend to have a far less permanence than student organizations.

Altbach (1989:99) argues that student movements are sporadic and occur at irregular intervals, so that “[just] as it is difficult to predict the rise of activist movements, it is as great a challenge to predict their demise”. Sporadic and irregular, student activist movements tend to be short-lived collective structures that usually cease before the two-year mark is reached. Nkomo (1984) suggests various circumstances may contribute to student activism, among which are the state of the university environment, personal and familial composites of students, socio-economic issues as well as structural issues in society.

Badat (1999) further argues that student activist movements are fragile social constructs created by social actors through purposive mobilization and collective action. The heterogeneous nature of students, as well as the inevitable variation in their interests and concerns at any given time, may propel a state of continuous adaptation and evolving of a movement. In instances where these variations are aggressive and prominent, rifts and fractions may occur rendering the movement unstable. For this reason, activist movements tend to be fragile formations that are sensitive to a multitude of factors, one of which is internal organizational cohesion. It is productive therefore to think about student activist movements as being in a constant state of change and becoming.

The fragility of a movement is amplified by the fact that participation and membership often fluctuate depending on the time of the academic year. Exam pressure as well as academic breaks not only threaten high member involvement, but also further disrupt continuity and structural unity. Altbach (1989) notes that student turnover disrupts continuity and structural unity. With students typically leaving the campus and campus activism within a short period of time, continuation is compromised. As such, the recognition of the disruptions brought by graduations, school breaks and examinations on unity and momentum of collective effort, may affect the choice of protest strategy and the latter's intensity.

It is worth noting that student activism is often a minority phenomenon, a factor that has implications for a movement's longevity and appeal.<sup>27</sup> That is, activist efforts on campus are often the results of a small segment of the student body population, irrespective of the cause. Altbach (1989) states that a large majority of the student body is vague about the goals and specificities of the movement. Within the small activist movement itself there are core members that are highly active, as well as a sympathetic following in the periphery with a sense of the goals and issues of the movement and are thus willing to add to the head count at demonstrations. Moreover, a movement's longevity is also influenced by the context in which it occurs – the most beneficial of which is an environment that legitimizes student resistance and acknowledges protest action as an integral part of political expression. In such circumstances, it is likely that the small number of activists is able to generate enough attention to gain support and solidarity from other pockets in society.

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<sup>27</sup> I elaborate on this observation in Chapter III



Furthermore, Badat (1999) notes that student movements tend to locate issues in their immediate space within those in broader society. Although movements seldom last long, or amount to a political organization, it is not unusual for student activists to link the challenges experienced in the university space with broader issues in society. The university is perceived as a space linked to the rest of society, most evidently through the socio-economic realities of the people that constitute the staff and student body. Although the student experience and greater societal issues are intertwined, the student situation becomes the most immediate and significant. Therefore, a movement's energy will be focused more intensely on solving the issues faced by students first and foremost.

Finally, the location and infrastructure of the space in which a movement emerges has implications on the ways in which it develops (Altbach, 1989). In its political expression, a movement not only demonstrates its cause, it also characterizes and defines itself to the rest of the public. Geographical location and infrastructure play a role in determining what kind of action is possible for a movement. It is worth noting that the availability of advanced technological infrastructure, especially in the form of communication technologies, impacts protest strategies and the functioning of a movement significantly. This is clearly demonstrated when considering the role of the newspaper, television and most recently, social media, on student activism, which I consider in-depth in chapter two of this thesis.

Multifaceted and complex, student movements emerge within specific social relations, the origins of which activists often attribute to particular historical events, periods and decisions. Under these circumstances, students' concerns and desires are fashioned. Activists see the possibility of change in the current social conditions and the socio-economic circumstances as the direct outcome of their struggle. Considering the fragile aspects of their movement,

activists strategically plan, negotiate, and create meaning as they encounter each other, as well as other social actors and forces. Therefore, constant negotiations within the movement, continuous meaning making, and constant decision making, all filter various interactions within the movement in an attempt to establish and maintain internal cohesion and achieve the goals of the movement.

### **Student activism outside of South Africa**

Student resistance in South Africa is perhaps famously symbolized by images of the June 16 1976 protests in which students marched the streets of Soweto against the implementation of Afrikaans as a main medium of instruction in black schools (SAHO, 2017d; Hirson, 1979). This event has been immortalized by the iconic photograph of a bleeding 13 year old student, Hector Pieterse, the first of many students shot on the day. The image portraying a slain young man has become a reminder that youth struggles can do more than improve conditions of education for students, as they can also be socially transformative. In some ways the wide circulation of this image, and other South African-only struggle images, may create the impression that student activism is a uniquely South African phenomenon evident only under the apartheid regime. Bakke (1966:163) challenges this perception in stating that

“[activism] by students in the affairs of their universities and of their community and nation beyond the universities is no new phenomenon. It is as old as the universities *[sic]*”.

Altbach (1989) similarly notes that throughout the nineteenth century, students were involved in activist efforts aimed at achieving nationalist goals. Student movements and organizations, alongside other intellectuals and academic staff, played a central role in

revolutionary movements in Germany in 1848. In China, students were at the forefront of activism aimed at modernizing the country in the early 1900s. Meanwhile, students in South America concerned themselves with academic issues that resulted in several university reforms on the continent. In the 1960s, students in Western Europe and North America became a strong force amid national turmoil, in relation to which the university was neither exempted nor isolated (SAHO, 2017c; Altbach and Cohen, 1990). The concerns of Western students in the early 1960s drew much attention to the Civil Rights and demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, placing student activism on the national political stage (Altbach, 1989:100).

In the African continent, students at Makerere University in Uganda protested against the poor quality of food served at the institution in the 1950s. Soon thereafter, as a consequence and influence of other “anti-colonial and pan-African” efforts on the continent, issues beyond their immediate conditions on campus became a concern for student activists (Cele, 2006:126). National political issues, such as the repressive regime of Idi Amin, formed part of the student activist agenda. In Senegal, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia to name a few, students and other young people formed part of the forces determined to achieve social, political and economic change. With the repercussions of colonialism still lurking in the structural and functional order of society, and indeed the consequences of recent independence, living conditions had become difficult to withstand. As Nkinyangi (1991:157-160) notes, “Africa [had] progressively deteriorated since the early 1970s because of several internal and external shocks” which made it difficult to survive “increases in the price of oil; recurrent droughts; rising debt burdens; decline in official development assistance; widespread government corruption; questionable national policies”. Students perceived

themselves as having to bare the weight of prevailing socio-economic and political ills prevalent at a national level, while dealing with the reality of declining educational standards. In response to these challenges, violent demonstrations, vandalism and the boycotting of classes characterized student dissent.

A glance at global history shows that South Africa is not unique in having a politically vibrant student body. It is evident that student activists globally have been participating in efforts to effect change, both in their immediate campus context as well as beyond it. Participating in the public political arena, at some moments more aggressively than at others, student activists have a long history of active participation in social, economic and political issues that do not necessarily, or directly, relate to academic concerns.

### **South African Universities and early activism**

Nearly a century after the founding of the first tertiary institution for white students, Fort Hare University in the Eastern Cape was established in 1916 to cater to black South Africans (Nkomo,1984). The classification and separation of universities according to race continued in the education sector well into the twentieth century. Reddy (2004:10) states that

“[the] racial differentiation of universities comfortably replicated the racial organization prevailing in society. Society resembled an inflexible hierarchical structure, modelled like a pyramid with a minority classified as whites at the top and a large majority of blacks categorized by state policy into Africans, Coloured and Indian “groups” at the bottom”.

Ironically, or expectedly, universities were considered spaces of intellectual refuge and freedom (Nkomo, 1984). In other words, spaces in which the intellect is sharpened, and

curiosity is coupled with systemization, awareness and exposure. However, universities were also spaces in which existing social configurations were emphasized and reproduced as a consequence of the relationship between universities and the broader society. Nkomo suggests that an ever-growing awakening to alternative possibilities to this contributed to student activism in South Africa, particularly amongst black students.

The shared frustration among students created a sense of urgency and necessity to deal with the issues they faced in their everyday life as black men and women in segregated South Africa.

Badat (1999:87), notes that

“[most] students had common experiences in White South Africa, and there were few who had not encountered directly the humiliation of White superiority attitudes, while all suffered in some degree the effects of legal discrimination. The very fact of their common positions of inferiority in South African society, unameliorated by contact with white students, created a bond which formed a basis for their political mobilization”.

Higher education did not exist in a political vacuum. In the fifties, the national government had initiated and implemented Bantu Education with the intention of controlling “native education” thereby placing education completely under state control (Hirson, 1979:45). Education was an instrument of indoctrination through which, in the words of Verwoerd, the “[natives would] be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them [...]” (ibid.). Centers for education, therefore, were an environment that maintained and reproduce racial segregation. Moreover, it is through education, according to Verwoerd, that the social hierarchy was to be conflated with natural laws, thus impressing in the mind of the black student an innate intellectual inferiority. Following the implementation of Bantu

Education, the African National Congress initiated a campaign against the Act, as well as against numerous issues that plagued black lives at the time, such as the pass laws and the Group Areas Acts (Hirson, 1979).<sup>28</sup> At Fort Hare, student activists opposed issues that resembled those of the rest of the country, echoing calls to address and reform South African society.

### **Black Consciousness, anti-apartheid activism, and the issue of representation**

Student activism as it emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was intensified by decades of oppression and injustice in South Africa. Over the next two decades, the poor conditions of black institutions as well as the continued oppression and disregard for black people under the Apartheid system would continue to fuel student activism (Hirson, 1979). Resistance to white supremacy and paternalism as displayed by the Apartheid government, continued to be the concern of student activists amidst concerns about unequal opportunities at all levels (Badat, 1999). The dissemination of anti-colonial ideas on the continent, as well as ideas of Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness, changed the vocabulary of students and of members of their communities. The ideas of black liberation through self-emancipation and black empowerment revived student activism in higher education and in black communities (Mkhabela, 2001).

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<sup>28</sup> The Group Areas Act, 1950, 1957, 1966 refers to “Acts of Parliament that assigned various racial groups to different residential and business sections in urban areas under apartheid [...]” (Heffernan and Nieftagodien, 2016:xi). The nature of the Act was such that movement was highly regulated and policed, especially for black people. This also meant that blacks could only live in under-resourced, poor living conditions of areas on the outskirts of urban areas.

Following the 1970s, the 1980s saw some of the greatest resistant efforts under the Apartheid regime. Bundy (1987) notes that thousands of young people were detained, whipped and harassed in 1985. He further notes that throughout this period, schools continued to be places of political education and awakening. Political repression and oppression precipitated acts of resistance from victims -- sit-ins, demonstration marches and protests erupted both on campuses and society at large. Badat (1999:249) highlights that while student organizations such as South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO) were struggling to establish themselves on campuses in the early eighties, this period was saturated with widespread "mass student, worker and civic struggles and political campaigns". Students had become militant in their approach, intimidating any form or symbol of authority, including parents. The country had become ungovernable, leaving President Botha with little choice but to declare a partial State of Emergency on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1985 (SAHO, 2016b)<sup>29</sup>.

Furthermore, the limited and policed role of black students continued to be a point of contestation in higher education. The inability to significantly participate in decision making on issues that impacted them directly and indirectly, remained an issue on black campuses. Biko (1978:5) notes that what was deeply desired beyond "black visibility" and tokenism on campuses was "real black participation". Under Apartheid, the lack of representation and participation was exacerbated by the fact that within multiracial student formations, black issues and concerns as articulated by black students themselves, were not granted attention. Within the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) formation, this sentiment was most vividly illustrated. NUSAS, a non-racial national student organization that opposed

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<sup>29</sup> SAHO is the official abbreviation of South African History Online.

apartheid policy, was perceived as a platform in which black students could gain support around pressing issues at the time, as it offered high numbers and resources (Hirson, 1979). However, on black campuses debates and contention arose as some students, most probably because of the influence of black consciousness thinking, argued that affiliation to NUSAS would hinder the black struggle.

Hirson (1979) notes that it was the perception of some students that NUSAS, as a predominantly white English organization, was just as invested in protecting white domination, albeit in a less obvious way. On numerous occasions, the organization had arguably displayed an inability to move decidedly, and radically, in favor of black interests by maintaining passive ways of opposition even when situations required aggressive moves. In 1967 at a national NUSAS conference, black students were accommodated in a black township outside of the white town in which their white colleagues were accommodated (Nkomo, 1984). Although NUSAS opposed this segregation, tensions and suspicions that had been brewing within the organization found outlet in this event, with black students interpreting it as an illustration of the organizations' hypocrisy. As a result of this, South African Student Organization (SASO) was established.

It was also the perception of many black students that their concerns differed from those of white students that made up the bulk of NUSAS. Hirson (1979:69) writes,

“[the] white students were preoccupied with the whittling away of democratic rights: the Blacks' concern was to secure the most elementary of such rights. The white students did not feel the need to take their political demands outside of campus: the Blacks were always conscious of the fact that they came from an oppressed majority, and they could not divorce the demand from national liberation from their own student demands.”



Endorsing Hirson's argument, Reddy (2004:21) argues that black student leaders believed that NUSAS was more concerned about "narrow academic matters" than pressing issues faced by black students and their communities. The disjuncture between students' concerns did not only reflect the immense differences between the lived realities and experiences of black and white students respectively, but vividly demonstrated the lack of significant black representation and power within the organization. As one student stated,

"[it] does not help us to see several quiet black faces in a multi-racial gathering which ultimately concentrates on what the white students believe are the needs of black students." (Nkomo, 1984:94).

As NUSAS developed a strained and uncertain relationship with black students, the latter increasingly attended to issues of police brutality, poor infrastructure, and systemic oppression on black campuses across the country – issues that white students could arguably not relate to, or attend to, regardless of the extent of their sympathies (Reddy, 2004).

Throughout the struggle against Apartheid, student activism found expression through numerous pockets of collective action. Student movements, such as the South African Student Movement (SASM), as well as organizations such as SASO, the Azanian Students Organizations (AZASO) and the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and many others, played a key role in the political education and mobilizing of students (Nkomo, 1984; Hirson, 1979). In addition to these, Student Representative Councils (SRC), local youth clubs and church youth formations also formed part of a student activist's life (Mkhabela, 2001). Student activism in South Africa under the Apartheid regime concerned itself with achieving freedoms that would span beyond the institutions of higher learning. Participation in decision-making was a central issue for student activists, particularly at black campuses,

especially since participation in political life at a societal level was virtually nonexistent (Nkomo, 1984). Indeed, tertiary education reflected the structure of power in the broader society in that at black institutions students could not fully participate and represent themselves in legitimate ways. Denied the freedom to be self-determining and effectively involved in decision making formed part of the student grievances that underpinned their revolts.

### **Post-Apartheid activism, the issue of representation and representation at Stellenbosch University**

In the early period of the new democratic period, higher education found itself under restructuring with the intention of reflecting more closely the newly obtained democratic rights while working towards developmental goals and intentions (Reddy, 2004). In 1997, the government initiated the legitimization of student participation in higher education thereby making formal “student involvement in institutional governance” to redress decades of exclusion, specifically that of black students, from institutional decision making and participation (Koen, Cele and Libhaber, 2006:406). The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 stipulated that all tertiary institutions should have and recognize Student Representative Councils (SRCs) as legitimate student representative bodies (Cele, 2009). Institutions were mandated to make provision for SRC student leaders in

“the highest decision-making body on strategic issues (Council), the highest academic body (Senate) and the highest advisory body (Institutional Forums)” (ibid.).

The Act intended to grant more power to the student body through representation in managerial bodies. Student leaders were placed in numerous committees responsible for student wellbeing and concerns, such as committees of academic development and of student fees. The result of this placement was meant to be the beginning of a shift from “tried and tested means of dissent and mass protest” to formal channels of decision making in terms of representing students’ interests (Koen et.al., 2006:406).

The presence of SRCs in decision-making bodies, however, did not eliminate students’ concerns. Jansen (2004) notes that at historically black institutions, the concern of students shifted from issues about wider societal freedom and equality to demands for debt relief, greater access to institutions, financial assistance and access to institutional resources. At historically white institutions, students battled with issues of institutional culture, language of instruction and racial integration, particularly at historically Afrikaans institutions (Soudien et.al., 2008; Koen et. al, 2006; Jansen, 2004). SRCs were presented as the only channel through which to negotiate and air student grievances. As a result, protest action and public demonstrations were perceived as acts of rebellion, while round table discussions were regarded as legitimate. Student grievances expressed outside of formalized channels such as the SRC, were strongly condemned by fellow students and management, with unrest receiving a stringent response from government-backed institutional management.

Student activism through movements and organizations became highly policed, both by institutional policies and other students. Protest action and demonstration were delegitimized as modes of political expression and replaced by boardroom negotiations through the SRC. In effect, the SRC had become the only legitimate representative and voice of the student body that institutions, and indeed the state, recognized.

As part of the Higher Education Act, Stellenbosch University was also required to have an SRC structure, keeping with the formalization of student representation. According to the Stellenbosch University website, the institution has multiple structures aimed at giving students a voice (SU, 2017d). These structures consist of three main statutory bodies, namely the Academic Affairs Council, the Societies Council, as well as the Prim Committee (ibid.). The aforementioned representative bodies represent students in their respective faculties, social spaces and in the residences. These three bodies each have representatives that form part of the highest representative structure for students at the institution, the SRC.

According to the Stellenbosch University Statute (SU, 2010:36):

- “(1) The SRC exercises its functions and powers subject to the authority of Council.
- (2) The SRC represents the interests of the student community at -
- (a) Council;
  - (b) other institutional structures of the University; and
  - (c) national and international student bodies.
- (3) The SRC is a representative body that takes decisions regarding
- (a) the interests of the student community; and
  - (b) the administrative activities required to serve these interests.”

The interests of the student body therefore ought to be identified and protected by the SRC both within the institution itself, as well as outside of the institution by representation in “national and international student bodies” (SU, 2010:36). The primary purpose of the SRC, therefore, is to serve the interests of students and to safeguard these interests.

## **The challenge of black-led representative movements at SU**

Student activism in South Africa has been characterized by the struggle for representation. With the purpose of the SRC in post-apartheid geared towards the interests of the student body, as well as its representation, the emergence of Open Stellenbosch and other movements separate from the SRC is intriguing and concerning.

Accounting for its emergence separate from the formally recognized student voice, Open Stellenbosch stated that it arose due to the “lack of action on the part of management, the SRC and the broader university community in relation to incidents of racist violence on the campus and town” (OS, 2015i). According to Open Stellenbosch, the SRC is not an adequate representative structure as it failed to adequately address issues of racism and exclusion experienced by black students. Throughout the year, the rift between the SRC and the movement was exacerbated by multiple incidents during student protests, among which was an incident involving the SRC chairperson and student activists during the FeesMustFall (FMF) campaign.

During one of the Stellenbosch sit-ins, student activists demanded that the SRC chairperson retract his comment that the chosen mode of protest was unnecessary and the “wrong way to go about things” (Field notes, 2015).<sup>30</sup> Hours prior to the chairperson’s address, students had tactfully made their way into the main administrative building, initiating a sit-in. Singing and vibrant discussions became the strategy of students as they showed their solidarity with other movements around the country protesting for free education as part of the FMF campaign. As the day ended, questions around the presence of the SRC circulated amongst

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<sup>30</sup> The predecessor SRC chairperson also once stated that he does not believe in protests, thus dismissing protest action as a legitimate political act (Field Notes, 2015).

students in the building. Looking at some of the SRC members present at the occupation, students asked “where is the rest of the SRC? I want to know when are the others getting here? We keep seeing the same faces. Why isn’t the SRC mandated to be here?” (ibid.). The question not only overtly marked the absence of the SRC at the occupation, but further raised questions about the commitment of the SRC in the issues of financial exclusion. In response to the question about the SRC’s presence, the SRC chairperson finally made his way to the building. A round of applause engulfed the building. Students subsequently asked the chairperson to address them. Songs of praise and encouragement directed at the chairperson preceded the address. The chairperson began by assuring students of his commitment and solidarity with them.

However, he stated that the illegal occupation of an administrative building was not the way to fix the problem. In absolute disapproval, students broke out into an uproar over the comment. As one student shouted

“I think the chair has misunderstood the mandate. The mandate is for him to bring management to us. They must come here to us. We are sending him to bring them here” (Field notes, 2015).

Students claimed that the chairperson had misunderstood why he was summoned to the occupation and thus needed to be reminded. Amidst the uproar, a message claiming that the SRC chairperson had writing a letter to the Rector’s Management Team, further strained an already tense situation.<sup>31</sup> It was announced to activists and students present at the sit-in that

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31 The Rector's Management Team (RMT) consists of “[the] Rector, the chief executive officer of the University, [who] is also the Vice-Chancellor [...] the RMT consists principally of the Rector and vice-rectors responsible for the functions of the institution, as well as the Chief Operating Officer. The vice-rectors are respectively responsible for Learning and Teaching; Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies; Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel; as well as Strategy and Internationalisation.” (SU, 2017b).

the chairperson's letter, found by some students at the occupation, stated that students should be removed from the building. According to activists, the chairperson had committed the ultimate betrayal against the students and thus rendered an unfit representative student body.

The chairperson, however, argued that the letter was an appeal to management to remove students in a dignified and non-violent manner (Field notes, 2015). He asserted that the institution had already called for interdicts and removal of students from the building. This response did not convince student activists, who continued to assert that the chairperson no longer demonstrated a commitment to protecting their interests. Consequently, students called for the chairperson to be removed from office, which resulted in an emergency student parliament session.

It is worth bringing to attention that a few days prior to the occupation, the SRC announced intentions for an organized student march against a proposed 11.5% fee increment at the institution (Field notes, 2015). The question directed at the SRC's presence at the occupation was therefore a question about the extent of the SRC's commitment to the fees issue and not whether they recognized the problem with an increase in fees. In other words, students wanted to know whether the SRC was willing to support marginalized students at great lengths. Even though the SRC was considered a useful channel through which the whole student body could be reached, tensions escalated throughout the year creating a conducive environment for distrust and disregard of the SRC as an ally in the struggle against institutional and interpersonal exclusion at the university. Conflicting ideas about protest strategies and ideology destabilized the relationship between these groups.

Naidoo (2016:184) suggests that this rift may be accounted for by considering the political affiliations of students that form the SRC. At Stellenbosch, students campaign for SRC in their personal capacity and not as a member of a particular political party or political society. However, it is not uncommon for students that are active members in youth organizations, political or otherwise, to run for SRC office. In fact, multiple students have campaigned under a political or organizational banner, even if this warranted disqualification (van Zyl, 2017). It would be naïve to neglect the impact that student leaders' personal values, political affiliations and social commitments have on their decisions and priorities while in office. Noting this, student activists at SU have drawn attention to the lack of black working-class students on the SRC and were more likely distrustful of the SRC because they felt under-represented within the structure. Students perceived that the SRC neglected their interests because they could not identify and relate to them. Many activists saw the chairperson, one of the few black men in the SRC, as reinforcing the patriarchal tendencies of that organization. His perceived middle-class status arguably further distanced him from the struggles of working-class black students. As one student said to the chairperson during the sit-in, "you don't understand" (Field notes, 2015). Although the chairperson responded by stating that "I do. I too am on a bursary", his perceived middle-class position, and indeed the fact that a significant number of SRC members were white and absent from student activist efforts, was perceived as insincere. His position as the SRC chairperson further marked out his privilege in that space.

Cele, on the other hand, proposes that SRC themselves are not as powerful as it may seem. He argues that the formalization of SRCs, although aimed at creating a space for democratic participation in higher learning, has in fact gained more success in silencing unrests and less



so in solving student grievances and adequate representation (Cele, 2009). The inclusion of student representatives on decision-making bodies did not necessarily result in equal and significant participation of student leaders in these bodies (Koen et.al, 2002). That is, the mere presence of students in meetings does not result in an equal distribution of power amongst stakeholders. As the SU Statute outlines, the SRC represents students subject to the authority of Council. As the highest strategic body at an institution, Council has a lot more power than the SRC. Having SRC seats on Council is important for representation of students. However, if Council itself is characterized by conservative members with arguably little to no regard for black students, the power of the SRC is significantly diminished. That is, SRC members on Council become representatives with diminished participatory power necessary to advance the interest of black students at a historically white institution.

Cele's analysis prompts a consideration of the conditions in which SRCs exist. Now more than ever, higher education is flooded with students from a wide range of backgrounds (Badat, 2015; Jansen, 2004). At historically white institutions such as SU, the student body is no longer white Afrikaner only. As such, to speak or think of a student body in the singular is not only unproductive, but also potentially harmful to transformation and reform. Students in their thousands are similar in that they are all registered students at the institution, yet this group is neither homogenous nor equal in their experience of the tertiary space. As stated in the SU Statute, the SRC is the recognized guardian of the interests of the student body. However, the document fails to clearly articulate the complexity of this role. The document imposes homogeneity on the student body, as if the latter was a unitary collective. The variety in students' experiences on campus, and consequently in their interests and needs, is inevitably neglected. With this consideration, it can be understood that it was not the general interests

of the student body that the SRC failed to protect but rather, the specific interests of black minority students in the space.

In a discussion around the relationship between the FeesMustFall protests and the ongoing efforts by Open Stellenbosch regarding the language policy at SU, a student argued that black the tuition fee increment would surely result in a “double exclusion because the culture is already excluding us; now they want to exclude us on top of that with the fees issue” (Field notes, 2015). The consequences of a “double exclusion” would consequently exclude them out of the space thus emphasizing claims of not belonging. The fees issue, like the language and culture issues raised by Open Stellenbosch, is crucial because it threatens the presence and security of black students at the institution. It is no wonder then that the SRC chairperson’s failure to demonstrate his investment, and of course that of his team, in the plight of black students is read as highly problematic. If the SRC is fulfilling its responsibilities as guardian and protector of the interests of the student body, of which black students are a part, then its failure to seriously take on the interests of black students may arguably highlight an investment in protecting the very interests that activists and other marginalized groups in the space have opposed.

Furthermore, the response of the SRC chairperson to students occupying the administrative building also signals a weak comprehension of the intention of the movement to question and highlight that the institution was neither adequately acknowledging, representing nor protecting the interests of the black students. Student activists perceived that the institution could not be trusted as solely responsible for resolving any issues pertaining to their wellbeing. The emergence and existence of a student movement on the periphery was due precisely to diminished trust in the system. Occupying the main administration building, as

well as requesting management to come address students at the building, was one way of asserting the presence of an otherwise overlooked black students in the space. The backlash to the proposed round-table discussions with management was asserting alternative narratives, histories and experiences in space. One of the foundational claims of black student activists around the country, particularly Open Stellenbosch and RhodesMustFall, has been that they lack ownership and full participation within the spaces in which they exist. In spaces in which black narratives are overlooked, and black cultural expression shunned, expression through protest marches and sit-ins are experienced as empowering. In other words, in a space in which black students cannot breathe, protest may become an oxygen mask.

The relationship between the SRC and Open Stellenbosch raises questions about representation. Both claiming to safeguard the interests of the student body, these organizations do so in different and often conflicting ways. While the SRC and OS have not always been oppositional, conflicting ideas with regards to political expression and the experience of the university as a space resulted in multiple clashes between the two. More importantly, the conceptualization of the student body along with the student's interests, seem to be different for both representative bodies. With a diverse student body at hand, the SRC as a representative body has not adequately figured out how to manage and act in ways that protect and cater to various interests and concerns as present amongst students. Perhaps this is a reflection of SRCs not being granted sufficient participatory power within the institution, which is highly problematic in a space in which the dominant voice is that of the white male student, yet the student body is composed of a far more diverse demographic profile.

## **Alternative Student Representation After 2015**

It is worth noting that Stellenbosch University is not exceptional in having an alternative student representative structure emerging outside of the SRC. Student activist movements elsewhere existed and functioned almost completely outside of the formalized SRC structures. Naidoo suggests that this has been the case because at most institutions, the SRC is composed of and indeed dominated by, political party aligned students, specifically ANC aligned students. As a result, it cannot be expected that SRCs would be at the forefront of the movements that so vividly and unapologetically spoke up against the “insufficient and superficial” transformation agenda currently in place (Naidoo, 2016:184). Koen et.al (2006) make a similar observation by stating that at ten out of twelve historically black institutions surveyed, dissatisfaction with student leaders was a point of serious concern for students. At these institutions, students perceived inactivity, as well as lack of representation and accountability on the part of SRC. Students therefore, perceived the SRC as an ineffective representative body.

At historically white institutions, perceptions of a failing SRC created an environment in which black students formed collectives to represent themselves, on their own terms. Naidoo (2016:182) notes that “[these] institutionally-based black-led student movements were all organized around, and were thinking through, the decolonization of their universities [...]”. Although in some instances there were points of overlap and collaboration between SRCs and movements, institutional management had to accommodate and make provision for parallel representative structures, which at times had opposing interests.

It is important to note Naidoo's observation that the movements were all institutionally based and black-led. They all had their origins at the institutions they were based in, although inspired by similar movements elsewhere. In effect, this meant that these student movements could not be attributed to other organization off campus, such as political parties, even though such organizations found ways to show solidarity and in some instances, participate in demonstrations on other campuses. By emerging outside of the SRC, the new student activism marks a point of divergence and a shift from with 1960s, 1970s and 1980s movements.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have located Open Stellenbosch within the broader contexts of South African student activism during and after apartheid. I began by defining student activism and student activist movements, and noted that student activism is directed towards achieving political, economic or social goals occurring at the scale of the university but relating to national and even international struggles. I emphasized that student activism may not always be oppositional in nature, however it is almost always an endeavor of the minority student population. I pointed to how student movements are particularly fragile in that they are sensitive to fluctuations and changes within and without the movements themselves. Therefore, I suggested that it is productive to think of student movements as being in a constant state of change and becoming.

I then demonstrated that recent student activism emerges out of a long history of global and local student activism. I discussed how student activism under Apartheid focused on systemic

reform on a national scale and located its own issues within the country's socio-political context. Students concerned themselves with issues that spanned beyond the immediate student situation, as the issue of representation and participation in decision-making structures, both nationally and in higher education. Representation also formed a central part of student activism in the post-apartheid period with SRCs, now formalized and absorbed into institutional bureaucracy, becoming the legitimate channel for expressing student grievances and concerns. As a result, the government, institutional management and other students negatively viewed protests and demonstrations that occurred outside the SRC.

The protests in 2015 and 2016 however, saw the emergence of student activist movements outside of the SRC, which raises question about the effectiveness of SRCs twenty-three years into democracy. At Stellenbosch University, I argued, the SRC's failure to adequately address the grievances of black students' concerns indicates that student representative structures at the institution have yet to align with the diverse student body and interests. Black students claimed that a failure to do so showed how the university had not yet transformed from a mono-cultural and mono-linguistic space. Therefore, the emergence of an alternative representative body was necessary.

## II

### Intellectuals, Ideas and the Internet

One of the most distinct features of the recent student protests has been the immense use of the Internet, specifically social media. Facebook and Twitter have become synonymous with the 2015-6 movements. Movements used their social media accounts as both a space to organize online communities and for information sharing, discussions and ideological representations. Unlike the tools of previous and more traditional political movements, social media allows political ideas to be authored, circulated and debated, becoming the basis of political action in real time without relying on the authority of established intellectuals or popular charismatic figures. This raises questions about whether student activists, using the Internet to author political ideas, become intellectuals. Related to this, the digital age raises questions about the role of intellectual authority in political leadership and its position in the knowledge economy. I turn to these questions in this chapter.

In the first section of the chapter, I focus on the student activist as a political actor. I use the first section to outline a definition of the intellectual, and characterize the student activist in an effort to illustrate that political participation is both defining and exemplary of an intellectual. In the second section, I draw attention to the student activist as a knowledge producer illustrating this by showing Open Stellenbosch's use of social media. I argue that social media has not only facilitated showcasing the intellectual prowess of student activists, but also altered the conversation around knowledge production and revived a discussion about the role of intellectuals today.

## Defining the Intellectual

The question of who is an intellectual and what being an intellectual entails has been prevalent amongst scholars in the twentieth century. Feuer (1976), as well Huszar (1976), trace the origins of the debate and the changes in the definition and priorities of the intellectual in contemporary society. Although there are numerous and contested definitions, Gramsci's (1971:51) concept provides a useful starting point for characterizing the intellectual as for him "[all] men are intellectuals" by way of being able to think and reason. That is, all mankind regardless of profession is intellectual, thus negating the view that intellect is solely about thinking or reasoning. Gramsci proposes that although all human beings are intellectuals, it is "not all men [that] have in society the function of intellectuals" (ibid.). He proposes that 'intellectual' denotes a particular social function as opposed to an assessment of cognitive ability-- a point he emphasizes by noting that "non-intellectuals" do not exist (ibid.).

Furthermore, Gramsci argues that there are two types of intellectuals in this sense, namely traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Traditional intellectuals are distinguished by their engagement in paid labor to produce and distribute knowledge in society, and typically have monopoly in the knowledge economy (Gramsci, 1971; Said, 1994; Burawoy and Von Holdt, 2012). They are further characterized as engaging in repetitive work from generation to generation, preserving the status quo through ties with the dominant class, yet thinking themselves "autonomous and independent" (Gramsci, 1971:51). Said (1994:68) proposes that traditional intellectuals today would be "managers, professors, journalists, computer or government experts, lobbyists, pundits, syndicated, columnists, consultants", all of whom



society grants legitimacy as authoritative voices in the production and dissemination of knowledge in its various forms.

Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, are organizers of the masses. The organic intellectual is a “constructor, organizer, and permanent persuader” of the working class, himself having his origins in it (Bundy, 1987:307). Although they are thinkers, they differ from the traditional intellectuals most strikingly in that they are typically not paid to perform this function. Instead, their efforts align with the interests of the dominated class through active political participation, an endeavor that not only places them outside of the institutions of traditional intellectuals but also renders them unpopular with the dominant class and its agents (Said, 1994). Burawoy and Von Holdt (2012) argue that organic intellectuals, as a collective that generates a form of collective consciousness through dialogue, become the figures that the masses rely on in times of national crisis. This is further illustrated by Said in stating that the intellectual becomes a beacon of light and an oracle of answers in times of national crisis.

Gramsci’s distinction between the traditional intellectual and organic intellectual is useful in defining the intellectual beyond the constraints of paid intellectual labor. By presenting the intellectual in terms of their social function and in relative terms, it becomes possible to imagine intellectuals outside of, and in contrast with, the academy. That is, the notion that all people are intellectuals and that this status is a matter of social function, allows for an engagement with the idea of student activists as intellectuals standing in different relation to the academy than do ‘traditional intellectuals’.

## **Students as Intellectuals: then and now**

In his 1993 Reith lectures on “Representations of the Intellectual”, Edward Said highlights key features that are markers, and responsibilities, of the modern day intellectual. Amongst these he notes that an intellectual is someone who ensures that equality and justice, as material goals and not only as political rhetoric, continue to be fought for (Said, 1994). Not only does Said’s assertion illustrate incongruence, political and reality, it also suggests that the intellectual may bring a richer and more considered perspective on reality. It is necessary therefore, for the intellectual to have an understanding of, and be actively engaging in, the world that he describes and desires to change. Said’s assertion echoes the sentiments of both Mills and Bourdieu who are not only critical of the intellectual that is abstracted from the empirical realities he attempts to understand, but further critical of the intellectual that does not translate his sociological understanding into political participation (Burawoy and Van Holdt, 2012:151-174).

The intellectual is also “of [his] time” (Said, 1994:21). He is in tune with the mass politics and realities of his time. During apartheid, a period notable for a highly politicized student body, higher education was not exempted from experiencing the ills that plagued society and the communities in which it existed. Cele (2009:45) claims that it was in this context that students were perceived as agents of change with the capacity to use their “knowledge to articulate views about a more just society”. The conditions founded on structural injustice created a pocket of militant youths seeking solace and a common purpose in politics and political activism (Glaser, 1998). Higher education provided a space in which to learn and mobilize around issues that students valued. Concerned with the conditions of their own class, these young men and women, specifically at black universities, “read widely and were searching for

ideas” which consequently exposed them to Black Consciousness ideology (Glaser, 1998:303). Meetings and reading groups engaging Black Consciousness were well attended. The students also had the responsibility of educating and enlightening their community members and fellow comrades. Glaser (1998:304) states, “[there was] a need to reach beyond the isolated campuses, to forge links with a wider black community”.

Consistent with Gramsci’s characterization of organic intellectuals, student activists in pre-democratic South Africa were involved in the fight against social injustice, many of them currently considered international heroes for their social contribution towards liberation. Gramsci’s conceptualization, therefore, considers figures such as Steve Biko not only organic intellectuals but also figures of thought outside of the confines of the academy and established political formations.

In the post-apartheid South Africa, many black students in higher education find themselves suspended between two contradictory worlds. As bodies thrust into the realm of prestigious higher education institutions such as Stellenbosch University and University of Cape Town, black working-class students find themselves alienated, marginalized and out of sync on campus. Their immediate student situation is strikingly different and contrary to their lives and experiences outside of the university. Academic institutions such as these express a form of intellectual elitism that relies on a technical mastery of English, or Afrikaans in some spaces at SU, which creates a hostile environment towards newcomers, especially black workers and students. Students experience universities as whiter than many other spaces of contemporary South Africa.<sup>32</sup> As a result, many students feel displaced by what they perceive as the extent

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<sup>32</sup> At a silent march to inaugurate the new Vice-Chancellor and Rector, Prof. Wim de Villiers, students held posters that read “Wim, I feel like I am in Europe” (Field notes, 2015). The poster

of white culture in the institution. That is, the student fails to find herself reflected in the material composition of the space in any form. Nyamnjoh (2017:1) argues that this leaves the student “frustrated over not having room at the table”. That is to say, the black student although having attained ‘whiteness’ as it is embedded in “opportunities, set of competencies [...]”, still finds herself reminded that she is not in fact white thus has no room at the *table* (ibid.). This frustration not only illustrates her ability to comprehend reality, but also promotes a shift from academic sociological understanding to political participation as activist.

Nyamnjoh’s analysis of Chumani Maxwele’s act of throwing excrement at the Rhodes statue in 2015 at UCT suggests that the ‘poop throwing’ was in fact an example of sociological understanding becoming political action (Nyamnjoh,2015). As an act committed in a public space against a statue considered a symbol of white domination, Maxwele placed the frustrations of many students like himself within a greater and broader debate about inequality in South Africa. Moreover, he signaled that the challenges faced by black students in higher education were not to be regarded in a vacuum. That is, Maxwele’s actions juxtapose the realities and living conditions of black students against those of white students, drawing attention to the striking difference between the two. Said’s assertion that the intellectual is of his time illustrates a concern with rectifying the injustices evident in the present empirical world, thus positioning the student activist as a political figure.

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was a commentary on the pre-dominantly white student body and staff at the university. During my research, it was also common for black students from Gauteng as well as other parts of South Africa to remark that Stellenbosch is so different from ‘home’ because its saturated in white people (Field notes,2015).

Indeed, throughout the 2015-6 student protests, student activists continually addressed social injustice and inequality in higher education in numerous ways, showing traits of Gramsci's organic intellectual. Unlike their predecessors under Apartheid, however, they did not intend to overthrow the government or revolutionize the social system holistically. Even so, it would be misleading to suggest that there was a failure on the part of students to locate the issues on their campuses within a broader spectrum of issues in society. The language used by students to articulate their grievances suggests the recognition of the intimate link between the issues on campus and issues in society. Maxwele's 'poop throwing' is a case in point, supplemented by the call for Africanization of education more broadly beyond the fall of Rhodes' statue, the call for the end of outsourcing workers as a mechanism to keep the poor in poverty, as well as the call to create access to higher education and employment after graduation.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Gramsci's organic intellectual not only has a political presence, but also has his origins in the working class – a clear class position. The class status of the black student at a prestigious institution of higher education such as Stellenbosch University or University of Cape Town is, however, less certain. The prospect of upward social mobility, coupled with the exposure and adoption of certain hegemonic practices and mentality, both as a result of voluntary and involuntary assimilation into a space of social privilege, provides the prospective graduate with privileges that render his class status somewhat ambivalent. It is undeniable that gaining access to higher education in South Africa is an incredible privilege and is recognized as the most feasible route to a more favorable social and economic position.

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<sup>33</sup> Student movements around the country, especially Wits, ran End Outsourcing campaigns along side workers such as residence catering staff, cleaners and grounds staff in an effort to get these works permanently employed by the universities directly (OS,2015h;Booyesen,2016).

As Badat (2015:82) notes, “[higher] education holds the promise of contributing to social justice, economic and social development, and democratic citizenship [...]”. He further suggests that although the university student may have his class origins in the working-class,

“training of higher education students as mental labor, means that the class trajectory of their education is one that leads them to largely a new petit bourgeois class location” (ibid.:51-52).

The new petit bourgeois class however, “has no long-run autonomous class political position”, a factor that leaves the class position of the student “open-ended” (ibid.). The student’s ambivalent class status does not necessarily imply that the student cannot, or will not, align his political position with his class of origin. The recent student protests, particularly the #FeesMustFall campaign and the #EndOutsourcing campaign, show that although their class position may be ambivalent, student activists do not have an ambivalent perception on issues of social justice. Instead, what the student activists showed was an outright investment in rectifying issues of the dominated, unheard and sidelined. By so doing, the post-Apartheid student activist positions himself as a political actor.

### **Intellectuals in the Internet age**

The student activist is arguably more easily recognized as a political figure. Less evident is the role of knowledge producer and disseminator. The twenty-first century has introduced a new terrain for articulating and representing protest. With the advent of the web in the 1990s, society could be viewed through different lenses as mechanisms for the communication of knowledge became less constrained by time and geography and less controlled by centralized authorities. Although the introduction of print media in the sixteenth century contributed to

breaking down these barriers, the arrival of the internet in the mid-1990s took communication to new heights (Dahlberg, 2015; Anderson, 2006). Most impressive was the development and introduction of the Web 2.0 in the early 2000's which allowed for the subsequent introduction of social media.

In the early days of Web 2.0, scholars praised the internet for its many-to-many communication potential that made available access to information about issues that concerned citizens both locally and globally. The interactive internet was understood as the long-awaited solution to the problematic top-down structure of traditional media (Lovink, 2011). Participatory platforms such as blogs, social media applications and discussion forums emerged, allowing users with an internet connection a space in which their freedom of speech and freedom of participation could be exercised. Seemingly, communication could now transcend the constraints of time, geography and social position.

Lovink (2011) argues that the combination of the three distinguishing features of the Web 2.0 – easy usage, sociality facilitation, and allowing users freedom to actively produce and consume information in a variety of forms – have made the web an important part of activism and protest. South African students at Rhodes University in the early 2000s, for example, had already started demonstrating the usefulness of social media platforms as a protest space against dominant cultural practices. Goga (2010) argues that the Rhodes University Student Discussion Forums, a social networking platform for students at the institution, became a space through which black students reflected on their alienation from the drinking culture at the institution, a prevalent practice that marked those who did not belong at the institution and those who did. The discussion forum became a space in which many black students could contest and problematize the drinking practices that left them feeling “out of place”, an

experience that was strikingly different from white students' feelings of "[belonging] to something unique and untouchable" (ibid.:47).

Furthermore, new media technology, through the integration of content production and consumption of information, has expanded the communication opportunities of the wider public (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2012). Driven by a user-generated content model, social media allows users to partake in content production and reach beyond their immediate and internal networks. In other words, not only does this provide a platform for movements to produce content, but also provides them with a platform to rapidly "[mobilize] and [accelerate] awareness of issues", beyond their physical reach (Lovink, 2011:158). Illustrative of this is the incredible speed and far reach of news about RhodesMustFall and the call for removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue.<sup>34</sup>

News of protests for the 'falling' of the statue circulated quickly and across a much greater terrain because of social media. The result was a wave of support, laying the foundation for decolonization movements and related conversation at various institutions around the globe (Magubane, 2016). Similarly, in 2014 news of the shooting of, Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, spread all over the world within hours of his shooting as a result of Twitter (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). In 2011, social media was also central in mobilizing support for the anti-government protests in the Middle East, commonly known as the Arab Spring. Not only did it serve as a communication tool between protestors on the ground and supports around the world, but further became a space in which narratives of protestors and citizens

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<sup>34</sup> The RhodesMustFall campaign captured national and international attention, inspiring a similar movement at Oxford university. In 2017 the movement had 17883 followers on Facebook alone(RMF,2015).



could be told in “ways that inspired dissidents to organize protests, criticize their governments, and spread ideas about democracy” (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, Hussain, Mari and Maziad, 2011:2).

Evidently, social media platforms are considerably the most self-reflective expression of the Web 2.0. As Dahlberg (2015:1) puts it, the Web 2.0’s most distinguished feature is its support for “user creativity and collaboration” through its participatory social media applications. Described as any online tool or utility that allows the communication of information, participation, as well as collaboration to its users, social media presents a peculiar platform for politics and the political (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2012). The production of public opinion<sup>35</sup>, therefore, can no longer be thought of as limited to journalists and academics. In the age of social media, what is considered worthy to be on the public agenda is no longer limited to the imaginings of a Member of Parliament, political party representative or any traditional intellectual in Said’s sense. New media technologies have become a channel for the production and transmission of ideas, opinions and ideologies by people outside of these traditional formations. Consequently, social media platforms are a stage upon which members of the broader public can represent themselves.

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<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu’s ‘Public opinion does not exist’ (1979) piece suggests that what is concealed as public opinion is in fact an expression of particular political interests, making such polls a form political action. He argues that opinion polls, used as a basis for claiming public opinion, are on the contrary bias formulations that represent the work conditions of those that formulate and produce such questionnaires, as well as those that can pay for such polls to be conducted.

## Open Stellenbosch and the use of social media

In each generation students add new strategies of protest to the existing arsenal of strategies. In this generation, interactive media appears to offer be such a strategy as evidenced by the use of social media by Open Stellenbosch. In this movement, the Media & Communication working group ran the online space on a voluntary basis and managed all internal and external communication (Field notes, 2015).

Although the working group had this responsibility, all decisions regarding any external communication to the press or directly to the public via social media had to be voted on by the collective before being operationalized by the working group.<sup>36</sup> Open Stellenbosch notably used social media for two related functions: firstly, to provide frequent updates to members and supporters and secondly, to articulate the movement's views and stance to the supporters.

### ***Frequent updates***

Open Stellenbosch used Facebook as the main channel through which people who are supporters of the movement were kept up to date. One of the most appealing features of social media platforms for activism is that information can be produced and disseminated for consumption frequently and rapidly, withstanding the restrictions in availability of content.

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<sup>36</sup> OS members could sign up for a working group of their choice on Facebook and Twitter. There were mainly six working groups, 1) arts & culture which focused on organizing events that showcased Afrocentric art and cultures, 2) media and communication which handled press statements and all forms of communication with the external world, 3) intersectional feminist of OS (IFOS) which aimed to create a safe space for women and non-binary people, 4) patriarchal remediation which aimed to educate men about patriarchy, 5) research group which compiled the documentation and facts for the movement, and 6) wellness which set up to deal with the physiological and psychological well-being of activists (Field notes, 2015).

This is a contrast with traditional print media which is often staggered by the lengthy process of having to pass through several editors before the actual printing process, thus limiting its usefulness to activist groups. In a bid to rapidly gather support for both the cause and the movement itself, the ability to maintain frequent contact with supporters is crucial. Velenzuela (2013) argues that repeated exposure to content through frequent updates plays an important role in fostering a collective group identity, which sets the foundation for support. Insight into the circumstances of others – in this instance the narratives of students and staff members experiencing the remnants of apartheid at Stellenbosch University in its varied forms – are part of a collective identity formation process that can yield support for the movement. Velenzuela's assertion also suggests that the online space is in itself a platform for community building. That is, online communities may appear forming a virtual social movement. This therefore renders the online space as both a space for the dissemination of knowledge, as well as a collective space in itself.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, content generated without an audience is ineffective, and content that is outdated is limited in its effectiveness. Content that is already known and published online by traditional media is less effective, and for social media to be effective it has to circulate fresh information, as well as to be linked to online sources that will disseminate it rapidly to multiple audiences. It is for this reason that traditional media forums such as print newspapers act as a secondary rather than primary channel of communication for movements. Although Andrews and Biggs (2006) make a strong argument for the effectiveness of newspapers in propagating protests through information spreading and

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<sup>37</sup> I elaborate on this point in Chapter III, noting that collective identity both online and offline presents a bonding space crucial for the longevity of a movement.

exposure, as illustrated by the role of the newspaper circulation network in the facilitation of the sit ins of the 1960s in the major cities of the United States, the hierarchal and time elements of print media act as barriers and limitations. With the rapid growth of mobile phones in areas where television, newspapers and radio may not reach, interactive media applications on these devices become useful for efficient communication, allowing rapid response to shared information (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2012).<sup>38</sup> Rapid movement on the ground along with ever changing circumstances forces social movements like OS to employ methods of communication that enable them to reach supporters directly and coordinate action immediately.

Mobilize resources, both material and human, as well as the need for collective consent on every decision, deems modes of rapid communication crucial for movements. Asked about the usefulness of social media for rallying up resources and support, one activist responds,

“I think it’s useful to a certain audience, in talking to a certain audience that [is] elite. That’s the audience that we mean we are talking to when we organizing things, we need when organizing sponsors...[those] people have used that platform, so much so that they trust the online space” (Uhuru,2016).

Without the instant many-to-many information distribution of social media, the call sent out by Open Stellenbosch for the “collection of groceries for people affected by the fire in Khayamandi” a few hours after the actual fire, would not have made any sense let alone been

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<sup>38</sup> Wasserman (2011) argues that new media technologies such as cell phones, have provided alternative avenues to engage the state and politics. These technologies penetrated barriers of traditional media forms, and transgressed normative narratives of politics and democracy through the circulation of satiric jokes, political gossip, rumours, and the submission of political opinion on satiric television and radio shows through the Short Message Service (SMS).

able to draw any support (OS,2016b). It is against the many-to-many communication backdrop that content production becomes news making.

Lovink argues that social media, having infiltrated every aspect of the urban human life, is playing an increasingly central role in the organization of information. The effect is that we “transform news items into issues that we act upon” (Lovink, 2011:160). Although one may argue that online newspapers and the televisual platform are able to disseminate information just as fast as social media, the difference lies in the nature of the information itself. Both Facebook and Twitter permit users to post content instantly, which in turn can be received just as fast. As Lovink (2011:11) puts it

“[nowadays] live television is too slow...the televisual apparatus itself may be fast enough [...] but these days we need multiple and omnipresent viewpoints”.

As highlighted above, interactive media is a space in which users can generate original content. Response driven platforms such as Facebook and Twitter function primarily on the assumption that users want to share their views, opinions and thoughts. On Facebook, the question ‘what’s on your mind?’ alongside Twitter’s ‘What’s happening?’ prompt users to express themselves in ways that may indicate “[an] increased willingness to publicly articulate ‘resentment’” (Lovink, 2011:53). That is, to express prolonged dissatisfaction with current conditions. Resentment, if well-articulated – as demonstrated by Uhuru’s golden rule: “put out a simple message stating What, How, Why & So What” – together with mass exposure, has the potential to elicit solidarity for a cause and the movement driving it. Consequently, a network is formed and there is a shift from private problem to a public issue.

It is worth noting that statements and posts are not generated and published without thoughtful consideration. There is planning and calculation that takes place prior to publication. There is recognition that views aired by Open Stellenbosch do not go unnoticed, especially since Facebook updates and Twitter posts are increasingly considered important news sources (Small, 2011). Interestingly, print media and television are gradually relying on social media for minute-by-minute updates on current affairs (Bosch, 2017). It is not uncommon for social media to act as a feeder for mainstream media houses. In the activist realm, this advantage does not go unused. As an activist remarked

“[when] we write a statement, we have four or five points that we want to communicate. So, we say, we want to tell people, one: [this] is happening because of this, the problem with this is this, this is what we proposed, and this is what the response has been [...] those five points we weave into a statement that flows well. And then the reason we make sure partly that the message arrives as clean as it was, is because we use social media as a way of getting airtime from media houses. If we set an agenda about language, all of a sudden Power FM realizes black twitter is heating up, they have to get the story out. Jacaranda realizes that we are actually talking about Afrikaans, they have to get the story out.” (Uhuru, 2016).

Clearly there is not only recognition of the potential power of statements posted on social media, but also a deliberate effort to gain the attention of mainstream media houses. In so doing the movement draws public attention to what may have otherwise be considered private matters.

The usefulness of social media in activist work was also illustrated by the #FeesMustFall campaign in 2015. Through the use of social media, student activists across South Africa organized marches - often at synchronized times across all campuses. The students mobilized supporters in an effort to convince university management and the Minister for Higher Education and Training to ensure that fees would not increase in the next academic year

(Nicolson, 2016). The scale of the collective action, not overlooking the volatility of the situation, forced major news outlets to rely on social media for frequent updates and responses from either camp. Therefore, it is fitting that OS uses its social media platforms to articulate issues that will earn them “airtime from media houses” (Uhuru, 2016). Recognizing the weight of the task, the movement employs techniques such as “[weaving] a particular issue that needs attention with [the] issue that everyone likes” in an effort to draw attention to the problem at hand (ibid.). Reaching over 7000 people, Facebook serves as a beneficial tool for efficient communication in contemporary social movements.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Taking a stance and providing direction for supporters***

In addition to providing rapid information to many users, Facebook and Twitter are a space to make known and clarify the movement’s political standpoint on issues, alongside protest action and demonstrations on campus. These platforms are used in three ways. Firstly, to publicise event notice, secondly, to pin allegiance posts and thirdly, to articulate overt statements of policy, views and stance.

The event notice posts typically alert users of an event that the movement is hosting. Events may be hosted by the movement itself or by a party that the movement considers noteworthy, in that it aligns with OS values. Able to be viewed by anyone who visits the Open

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<sup>39</sup> This figure is based on the number of people receiving Open Stellenbosch posts as regular feeds on Facebook. The current figure on the official Facebook page is 7986 for people receiving notifications from OS. 8061 people have ‘liked’ the page via Facebook’s thumb-rating system (OS, 2017). I recognize that the number in no way indicates the number of people that know about Open Stellenbosch, nor does it indicate the number of people that follow the movement via other media and news forms such as Twitter, newspapers, televised news and radio. Perhaps it is worth noting that a member of the Media and Communications team mentioned that the statistics generated by Facebook for the page indicated that the movement’s Facebook posts had reached over 15000 people in 2015 alone. This figure, I was told, was calculated based on the number of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ of all the posts the movement has published (Field notes, 2016).

Stellenbosch page on Facebook, these posts generally provide information on the time, date and venue for the concerned event - a function that traditional media shares with social media (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2012). Furthermore, there is often an option to indicate whether one will be attending the event or has interest in joining the event. At its most basic, the ability to indicate attendance on the forum itself, in real time, highlights the interactive potential that distinguishes social media from tradition media forms such as newspapers and television (Lovink, 2011). Event posts typically look like this:



Figure 1: End Rape Culture event post (OS,2016a).



Figure 2: Ipotsoyi Party event post (OS,2016d).



The nature and content of the events posted, such as the ‘End Rape Culture’ and ‘Ipotsoyi’, alert users about the interests of the movement, giving insight into its stance and ideological position. In *figure 1*, the movement notifies supporters of the prevalence of rape culture at the institution, and that the movement does not support rape culture. The event title “[but] one rape isn’t rape culture” acts as a provocation against hegemonic beliefs about what rape culture is. The title therefore calls for debate and discussion if one rape is not to be considered rape culture (OS, 2016a).

Moreover, the event post on Ipotsoyi, *figure 2*, is consistent with Open Stellenbosch’s efforts to represent the interests of black students on campus. The use of the vernacular is particularly telling in that the intended audience is scripted in the lack of an English and/or Afrikaans translation for the title, as well as the explicit absence of white bodies in the picture itself. Ipotsoyi, a social event organized with the intention of challenging the social norms of the annual institutional orientation week, is in line with OS’s mandate to create spaces on campus in which black people can breathe.

The second type of post is that of allegiance with other movements and parties. It is not uncommon to see on the Open Stellenbosch Facebook page a post inviting members and supporters of the movement to events hosted by or in favor of allies of OS. Likewise, it is not uncommon to see messages of solidarity with other movements at different institutions of higher learning around country. Often these messages are accompanied by the hash (#) prefix-- a punctuation mark associated with another social media forum, Twitter. These statements of solidarity often outline the particular issue with which the movement is in solidarity, the reasons behind the stance, and finally a sign off signaled by the hash symbol

summarising the concern or naming the organization being supported. An example of solidarity posts would be the messages below:

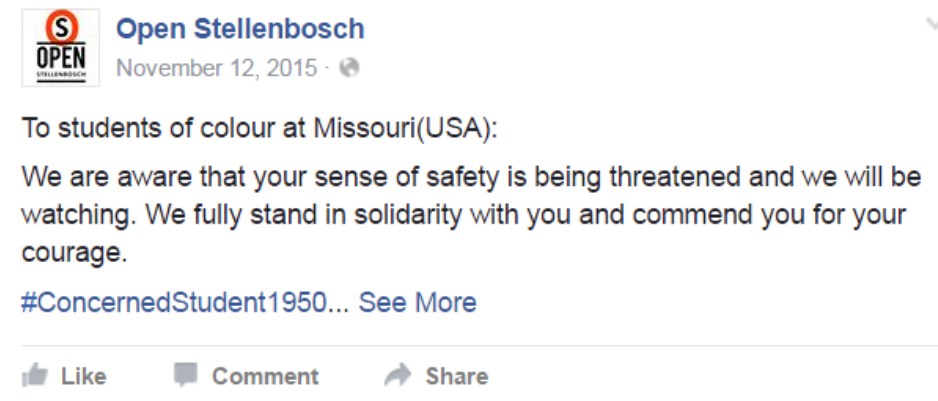


Figure 3: Solidarity post to students in Missouri, USA (OS,2015j).

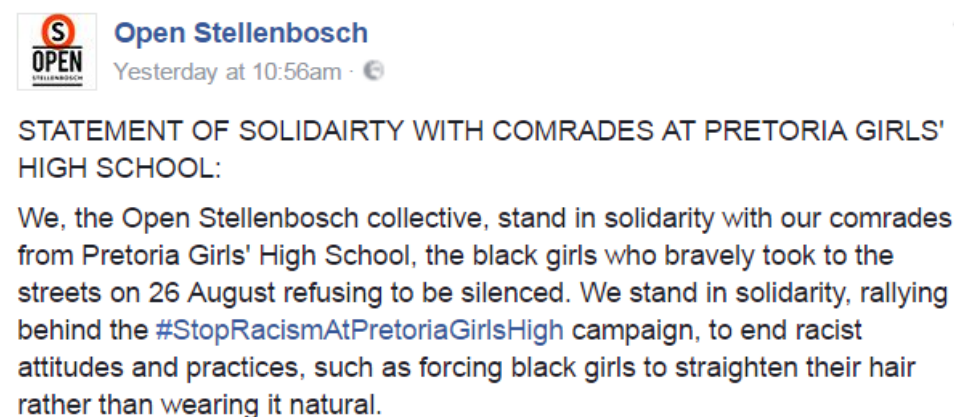


Figure 4: Solidarity post to students at Pretoria Girls' High School, RSA (OS, 2016g).<sup>40</sup>

The public declaration of solidarity, both explicitly and implicitly, through advertising of events and cause express the concerns of the movement in the same way that event posts do. Solidarity messages can also be read as Open Stellenbosch's comments on a particular social issue, effectively amplifying particular issues. Lovink (2011:51) notes that "[not]

<sup>40</sup> In August 2016, it was reported that a learner had been threatened with suspension from the school for wearing her natural afro and delivering an assignment on inequality in South Africa (Makhetha,2016). It was reported that the school did not allow black students to wear their natural hair or speak in their vernacular language, with some students claiming that teachers had harassed them and uttered racial slurs at them.

everyone can participate in every conversation. Not everyone gets to be heard. Some core group seems more connected than the rest of us". Recognising its ability to draw public attention to particular issues, through the posting of events by associates of the movement, Open Stellenbosch helps to draw attention to issues that may fall outside of their immediate university space but within what they stand for as a collective.

Lastly, official statements are another way through which OS makes explicit the movement's standpoint on issues. These may be in the form of attachment content as well as typed posts.<sup>41</sup> Clearly outlined in these posts are the ideological and political stand points of the movement. In some instances, these posts are presented as press statements, while in other instances they are presented as responses to issues or events arising elsewhere. An example of this is the statement in solidarity with Pretoria Girls' High in which the movement not only responded to the incident, but further engaged issues of race and beauty beyond the single incident.

In addition to being a forum for the collective to literally write what they like, social media is also used by individuals for information sharing and opinion exchanging. In the case of OS, discussions in response to posts are not uncommon although the movement itself is hesitant to engage comments. As Uhuru (2016) puts it,

"we used to [read and respond to comments] in the early stages, and then realized discussions [...] at the beginning are very fruitful then they get to the stage where they need somebody to anchor them to a certain place. And [we] don't have time to do that [...] it's a strategy to keep clean. Putting one message".

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<sup>41</sup> *Attachment content* is a term I use to refer to any additional content attached to a post that is not the general message typed into the text-box provided by the Facebook platform. Such content can be digital posters, digital photographs, digital graphics, short video clips, as well as embedded hyperlinks.

While responses to posts and comments are seldom entertained by the activist movement itself, Facebook still has the capacity to facilitate lively discussions amongst users themselves thus putting the interactive feature in motion. Aside from the request to write one's opinion in the status prompt, participation in a discussion is made possible by the comment function that allows users to respond to a post by someone else. On Twitter, users can contribute to a discussion by posting their view in the prompt box followed by a hashtag of the topic one wishes to contribute to. The hashtag as in #StopRacismAtPretoriaGirlsHigh – is a convention used to add context to published tweets by categorizing messages and highlighting topics that are referring to the same issue or topic (Yang, Sun, Zhang and Mei, 2012). This function allows the categorical archiving of data on the forum, thereby allowing users to retrieve stored data about any topic by merely typing it in. The automatic archiving of tweets also means that one can read and respond to messages about an issue or subject long after it has made its rounds on social media. Additionally, users can utilize the '@' symbol that enables one to send messages to a person, often in response to a discussion that they started or contributed to (Small, 2011). These interactive functions allow users to exchange views and deliberate on issues- a feature that can be regarded as a sign of political participation (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2012).

#### ***#Luister: a dynamic mode of activism***

Beyond the posting of statuses and tweets, there is potential to appeal to supporters through visual aid such as videos. Much like the status updates and images posted on the Facebook page of student movements, visual material, in particular videos, have become a powerful

protest strategy. Take for instance the publication of the online Open Stellenbosch documentary titled #Luister.

The video, published on YouTube, shows 32 students and a lecturer articulating the experiences of black students at the institution. In the video, students relay their experiences of being excluded from bars, clubs and other social settings on the basis of being black, with one student stating that he was once called “kaffir” at a bar (Contraband Cape Town, 2015).<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the video articulates the debates around ‘belonging’ as articulated through language use in the classroom setting. Students claimed that many black students were forced to leave the university because they could not take the “courses they need, because they cannot understand a word of what they are being taught” (ibid.). Nationally the video received over 200 000 views on YouTube, another interactive platform for sharing videos, and was the most popular topic on social media for over two weeks after its release in August 2015 (Nicolson, 2015). The publication of a video narrating the experiences of black students at the institution was a proved to be a powerful protest strategy.

It would be naïve to suggest that documentaries and biographical motion pictures have not, in the past and present, been used to communicate and mobilize for social injustice causes. It would be equally naïve to suggest that protest action has never been captured in motion pictures. However, here I am suggesting that the power of this narrative lies not only in its immortalization through the capturing thereof on camera, but also by the fact that it was a project authored by the protagonists themselves. In other words, unlike picture and videos of protest action captured by mainstream journalists as is common practice, #Luister is about

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<sup>42</sup> *Kaffir* is a racial slur used to refer to a black African popularly used in South Africa although having Arabic origins (Merriam-Webster, 2017)

black students, as they see and articulate themselves in the space.<sup>43</sup> There is here an element of ownership and active participation in production. The activists were able to tell their own stories, on their own terms and through their medium of choice. Like the status updates stating the stance and ideology of the movement, the OS #Luister video served to raise awareness around the issues facing black students on campus. Moreover, through the use of social media, the movement was able to direct attention towards the viewing of the video.

The use of videos as a strategy of protest goes beyond formalized videos like #Luister. The intentional capturing and publishing of confrontations between activists and law enforcement by students themselves via video recording is rampant. More so is the rate at which the videos circulate on social media. In 2016, a video of private security officers forcefully handling activists during the FeesMustFall protests was widely circulated on social media (ENCA News, 2016). The incident, like many similar occurrences around the country, showcased the violent conflict and altercations between student activists and private security personnel on campus. Supporters and activists demonized security officers, effectively portraying the student activists as heroes suffering at the hands of agents of an unjust system (Field notes, 2016; FMF2.0:2016). Vividly and visually, student activists were able to demonstrate the failures of the institution and university management to protect and prioritize the student body. Like #Luister, videos of this nature captured the attention of media houses, politicians and celebrities, as well as members of the general public. The responses on social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, were overwhelmingly

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<sup>43</sup> Although I recognize that the technical production team, Contraband Cape Town, is predominantly white, what I am laboring to illustrate here is that *Luister* was a collective of narratives told by and authored by black students themselves. They told their stories as themselves, they produced the content and they published it on their own terms.

unforgiving towards the private security officers, sparking a wave of discussions around the necessity and role of private security on campuses across the country. Evidently, the videos were effective in mobilizing support and resources in favor of the movement and the FeesMustFall campaign. As a protest strategy, video capturing and sharing in the age of social media presents an opportunity to communicate experiences as they happen to a larger group of people, therefore, drawing attention to issues at hand as illustrated by OS's #Luister.

A second related point is the discussions in response to such content. These publications elicit various views and responses from social media users. Some comments are sympathetic to the cause, congratulating the movement on bringing to light the mishaps and injustices that linger in Stellenbosch. As one comment said

“The SAD reality AND IRONY of Stellenbosch University is that me as a person of colour with Afrikaans as MY FIRST LANGUAGE felt so ALIENATED AND IGNORANT, that it felt like I was being taught in A EUROPEAN LANGUAGE. I ended up doing most of my course work in English which is sad cause you think the university is in your alleged 'home language' until you realise that the Afrikaans they speak WAS NEVER YOUR AFRIKAANS. and that AFRIKANER CULTURE CAN NEVER BE YOU. i CAN ONLY imagine how it is for those who dont have Afrikaans as home language *[sic]*” (OS, 2015c).

Other comments, however, are less sympathetic stating that the claims made by black students are misguided and that

“institutional (insert problem) does not exist. It is a fabrication people use to advance their interests when they are stricken by the shock that other people don't care for them in the big real world.” (OS, 2015b).

A 32-comment thread on the Luister video indicated a variety and polarity in opinions and views. Users replied to each other's claims and cross-examined the claims presented as facts. Lovink (2011) accounts for this phenomenon by stating that debates cluster around a few

issues and on longer-running threads, therefore generating interest and faster turnover of posts, which in turn inclines others to leave comments as well. Social media forums such as Facebook allow for the representations and exchanges of opinions not only from commenter to the initial person who submitted the post, but also allows deliberations between commenters themselves. Such exchanges between users may be indicative of new forms of political participation and democratic practices that are emerging-- a sign of political sympathy and not empathy as suggested by some scholars (Bosch, 2017; Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2012; Mbenga, 2012).

Open Stellenbosch's use of social media throughout the 2015-6 student protest demonstrates that social media was an integral part of the functioning of the movement. The platform provided the movement with a space to publicly articulate themselves with ease and rapidly. Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke's assertion that the nature of social media as a platform that depends on the content generated by its users, has added a new dimension to the conversation around knowledge production and authority. The use of video material as a protest strategy presents an interesting use of social media's capacity to facilitate many-to-many communication at a rapid speed. Furthermore, it is a commentary on the platform's capacity to allow activists themselves to claim ownership over their own narratives and its articulation.

### **New media, new activists, and the question of the Intellectual**

Being able to articulate themselves on their own terms, Open Stellenbosch activists have ownership over their material. Noting that a movement is a collective of individuals,



sometimes with opposing views, ownership within the collective itself may present a point of conflict. Lovink (2011) argues that the ideology of participatory culture often claiming an all-inclusive stance simply blurs the editorial and selective mechanisms that go into online content production. Within Open Stellenbosch, Lovink's concern is illustrated by having a communication working-group to monitor and formulate statements to the public. By so doing, the movement may give preference to certain issues, and inevitably voices, over others. Although the movement requires that all content formulated by the Media and Communications committee needs to get majority vote before it is made publicly available, this mechanism also presents certain challenges. A majority vote itself is problematic in that it inevitably means that select voices shape the agenda and suppress disagreeing voices. Therefore, authorship is a realm of contestation in the offline space preceding the online publication. While social media promises to go beyond traditional media's reliance on established authorities and forms of producing public opinion, it relies on its own techniques of selecting what the relevant public issues are.

Furthermore, content, as it appears on the online space regardless of the contentions in the offline space, challenges the monopolization of knowledge by traditional intellectuals. This observation ought to be considered carefully as one may fall into the trap that Bourdieu cautions against-- that of making scientific what is common science and opinion (Burawoy and Von Holdt, 2012:161). With this caution in mind, Open Stellenbosch's systemic manner of articulating and deciding what goes online suggests an endeavor that is beyond common sense and mere opinion. The fact that the movement has both a research team as well as a media team responsible for the production of the movement's content, suggests a seriousness that is attributed to scientific work.

Related to the issue of knowledge as a scientific product, is that of audience. Every intellectual, as a political figure and philosopher, requires an audience to which she will present her ideas and views. Gramsci's organic intellectual persuades her audience in her favor. In the case of Open Stellenbosch, two audiences require persuasion. The first is institutional management as a representative of the institution's decision-making bodies. The second audience is the body of students and staff at the university whose support is necessary to make strong and broad demands on the first audience. In some instances, members of the broader public such as potential financial sponsors, legal advisors and parents supplement the latter. Each of these audiences need to be addressed in particular ways. Institutional management, as traditional intellectuals, are the group that most probably requires systemic representations of student grievances and assertions. In effect this means that the movement's research, as well as its communications team, were required to align their articulations in ways that resemble the scientific endeavor suggested by Bourdieu. The facts and figures, research informed, and logical arguments evident in the movement's documents, such as the revised language policy and formal press releases, illustrate this (OS, 2015f). Additionally, this audience requires Open Stellenbosch members to attend lengthy strategy meetings and discussions, as well as present well-articulated and comprehensive lists of demands. As such, this audience may have forced a more overt shift from opinion and common science, into a more scientific, logical representation of the movement and its cause. Fellow students and members of staff required a different approach. One of the ways in which this audience could be reached and persuaded was through discussions and posts on social

media, in addition to public protest demonstrations.<sup>44</sup> Social media enabled the movement to represent itself in creative, relatable and accessible ways as demonstrated by the #Luister video and creative hashtags. As such, the use of social media became a political act. That is, it illustrated the movement's understanding of its audience, what needed to be said, how it would be best said, and how this content would be best circulated. In effect, the use of social media by Open Stellenbosch illustrates that knowledge does not stand on its own but is used, and has to be used, in a manner that is consistent with the audience it is intended for. In the case of an activist movement such as OS, succinct rapid messages are a necessity. The representations of the intellectual therefore, are distinguished by speed, succinctness, sharpness and multidimensionality.

Social media may have created a space in which political debate and discussions take place, however, it does not inevitably become a space in which all voices are heard, responded to and attended to. OS ceased responding to comments on social media, leaving commenters to debate amongst themselves. By so doing, Open Stellenbosch illustrated the limitations of social media as a new avenue for political participation. This illustrated that the intellectual's audience is created and shaped; it is not an inevitable consequence of a many-to-many function of the Web 2.0. With that said, it cannot be neglected that social media has increasingly become a force that sways political agenda and mainstream media, as observed by Bosch (2017). Open Stellenbosch recognizes the amount of power it has to draw mainstream media attention to the issues it needs publicized. In this way, social media became an avenue to legitimized activists as authoritative figures and knowledge producers.

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<sup>44</sup> I recognize that the content and form of the information required to persuade either one of the audience groups is neither fixed, static nor invariably confirmative to the distinctions I have made.

However, this is not without contestation. Although social media has reasonably weakened the traditional intellectual's monopoly over the knowledge economy, it is not uncommon for 'experts' and 'professors' to be interviewed or requested to verify what students have articulated. Television news shows, and newspapers still require 'expert' opinion on issues raised by students. On social media, this behavior is replicated by the 'share' or 'RT' functions. In order for a story to get maximum exposure, and legitimacy, certain figures of authority, many traditional intellectuals themselves, ought to 'share' or re-tweet a statement.

The power dynamics at play illustrate that social media does not exist in a vacuum. The platform exists within a complex system of existing social relations. That is, it functions within a space of biases and contradiction, dominators and dominated-- a space in which some have more voice than others, and more authority than others. In the offline space, one may argue that the fact that it took movements at historically white and financially well-off institutions to speak about fees, even though the issue had been raised as a serious concern for years at historically black universities, for example, is already telling of these contradictions. In the online space, to assume that the Web 2.0 was rolled out in a vacuum would be misguided. Instead, both the web and internet culture need to be understood within the context in which they exist, that being, "caught between self-referentiality and [existing] institutional arrangements" (Lovink, 2011:3).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I considered the student activist as an intellectual at a moment in which social media has changed how knowledge is shared in society, and democratized authority by

allowing many more people to participate in its authorship. Using Gramsci's definition of the organic intellectual, as well as Said's characterization of the intellectual in contemporary society, the student activist is approached as an intellectual on the basis of being both a political actor and a knowledge producer and disseminator.

I illustrated this by firstly, defining the Intellectual and positioning him within a web of social relations, highlighting the history of student activists as intellectuals from Apartheid to democratic South Africa. In both instances, I noted the student as more aligned with Gramsci's organic intellectual. That is, as both a thinker, persuader, and political actor immersed in the world and interests of the subaltern. Secondly, I built on this point by outlining Said's elaboration of the intellectual, illustrating that the student activist, as a body suspended between two contradictory worlds, not only articulated the issues in higher education in terms of broader societal issues, but further labored to ensure equality and justice, thus demonstrating political prowess and sync with the mass politics of the present moment.

Thirdly, I engaged the intellectual in the internet age to argue that social media has significantly enhanced the operations and status of student activists as authoritative knowledge producers. Social media has expanded the communication opportunities of movements such that they can partake in content production and reach beyond their immediate and internal networks at a rapid pace. The notion that production and dissemination of knowledge can only be attributed to the traditional intellectual is therefore contested. Open Stellenbosch and its use of social media is a case in point. Not neglecting that social media emerges in a context in which authority and power are contested, it cannot be neglected that the movement's content reach thousands of people and, informed political agendas and mainstream news. In effect, this suggests a weakening of the monopoly

traditional intellectuals have on knowledge production and dissemination. The movement used its social media platforms as an avenue to inform and articulate their views and ideas. Differently put, social media became a powerful medium of representation.

### III

#### **The decline of Open Stellenbosch**

During the writing of this thesis, Open Stellenbosch had not been active on social media for over a year and, less than a quarter of the key role players in the movement are still students at the institution. What remains of the movement is their followers, the conversations it started on campus, the changes to the language policy it proposed and achieved, and mixed responses to its cause, protest methods and racial composition. This chapter aims to describe and explain the decline of Open Stellenbosch, a movement that barely survived 2016. In the first section of the chapter, I briefly describe Open Stellenbosch in relation to the 2015 FeesMustFall movement, and the impact of the latter on the former. In the second section, I outline factors that have contributed to the decline of the once vibrant movement.

##### **Open Stellenbosch and the 2015 FeesMustFall: a brief narration**

In South African higher education, the latter part of 2015 was characterized by a surge of ongoing protest demonstrations, violent encounters between armed forces and students, as well as a series of academic disruptions. The FeesMustFall campaign became the main focus of student activists across the country. The StelliesFeesMustFall movement resonated with Open Stellenbosch members, which resulted in the campaign being a major priority for

activists, particularly at the end of 2015 and the latter part of 2016.<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that although many of the Open Stellenbosch activists were involved in the *StelliesFeesMustFall* movement, the two movements were regarded as separate entities. As Open Stellenbosch explained in a statement on their Facebook page,

“There has been some confusion regarding the relationship between Open Stellenbosch and *#StelliesFeesMustFall*. We state for the purpose of clarity that Open Stellenbosch did not create *#StelliesFeesMustFall* nor does it run *#StelliesFeesMustFall*. Open Stellenbosch and *#StelliesFeesMustFall* are altogether separate entities, although some students at Stellenbosch University are members of both. *#StelliesFeesMustFall* was formed after the creation of *#WitsFeesMustFall* and during the development of the national *#FeesMustFall* movement. Open Stellenbosch was formed in April of this year and remains fiercely non-partisan. We are committed to the Decolonisation Project, the dismantling of institutional racism and patriarchy, and the Opening of Stellenbosch University as an authentically public institution that is accessible to all, regardless of class status, race, gender or sexual orientation. In the spirit of this commitment, Open Stellenbosch supports credible action that seeks to End Outsourcing and realise Free Education.” (OS, 2015g).

Although it distinguished itself from *StelliesFeesMustFall*, OS contributed to the fees campaign immensely. In the formative stages of the fees campaign, there was great reliance on the assistance of Open Stellenbosch. Many of the Open Stellenbosch members and allies were typically the ones planning and coordinating activities such as food rationing, strategies and meetings, *#StelliesFeesMustFall* capitalized on the support network that OS already had (Field notes, 2015). This is further illustrated in an OS member’s recollection of the *FeesMustFall* period,

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<sup>45</sup> *StelliesFeesMustFall* or *#StelliesFeesMustFall* refers to the student movement protesting tuition fee increments in favour of free education at Stellenbosch University. This title is used to refer to the 2015 movement, which formed part of the national *FeesMustFall* movement. In 2016, a follow-up movement called *StelliesFeesMustFall2.0* was formed (Field notes, 2016; FMF2.0, 2016).



“[...] during FeesMustFall, one of the nights we were bringing comrades from UWC here. I never want to repeat a night like that. I was sitting on Twitter, on Facebook, on my phone and someone else’s phone; calling and communicating with people at UWC telling them this is the spot, this is the car, the license plate. Calling people who were driving, saying look out for this person, this is what they are wearing etc. Alongside trying to organize food and medical supplies [...]” (Azania, 2016).

In addition to providing human resources, the Open Stellenbosch social media platforms were used to draw attention to the fees campaign at the institution. People in support of OS also provided legal and monetary resources to aid FeesMustFall. The close relation between StelliesFeesMustFall and Open Stellenbosch therefore suggests that practically these two resembled a single movement rather than two separate entities. With the support of Open Stellenbosch members, StelliesFeesMustFall proactively protested for free education in harmony with other students around the country. On October 19<sup>th</sup>, following the announcement and rejection of the 11.5% fee increment for 2016, students initiated a sit-in at the institutions main administrative building, *Admin B*, which was subsequently, renamed Winnie Mandela House (Field notes, 2015).<sup>46</sup>

Students occupied the building overnight, calling on university management to reconsider the fee increment. Similar to other institutions around the country, protesting students were met with violent police and private security forces. On the morning of October 20<sup>th</sup>, students were ambushed and locked in the building by the police, riot police and, later on, a private security company referred to as the *Men In*

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46 Occupied buildings were renamed after black women as a political statement about the significance and leadership of black women in the Fees protest and other protests in higher education at the time (Boniifire, 2015). This was also an effort by women in both OS and FMF intended to assert the voices of black women within these collectives in response their experiences of silencing. I elaborate on this observation later in the chapter, under the ‘internal conflict’ heading.

*Black* or MIB (Bonfiire ZA, 2015; Field notes, 2015). It was not until mid-day that students were finally released. The occupation marked the beginning of a week of protest marches, road blockades, and a second occupation at the Wilcocks building, which was renamed Lillian Ngoyi House. Lillian Ngoyi House became the hub of mass meetings, sit-ins and strategic planning. This also became the place where those in solidarity with the movement could drop off supplies such as food and water (Field notes, 2015).

Three days into the #StelliesFeesMustFall protest week, students had developed ways of navigating activist and academic demands. With the start of examinations scheduled a few days from when the occupation began, in addition to the fact that Stellenbosch University had not completely halted academic lectures and tutorials, students took turns occupying the building.<sup>47</sup> Typically, late evenings were dedicated to sleep-ins and studying well into the night. Late afternoons and evenings were set for strategizing and reporting back, while afternoons were typically characterized by some socializing and protest demonstrations. Many students took the mornings to return to their residence to get more supplies and take a shower (Field notes, 2015).

StelliesFeesMustFall culminated on Friday 23 October following the President Zuma's announcement of a no-fee increase for 2016. The night before the announcement, students gathered on the rooiplein to talk about a FeesMustFall mass march (Bonfiire ZA, 2015). Consequently, an ocean of students, most of whom had not been a part of OS or the fees protests until that point, marched through campus finally gathering at the corner of Merriman

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<sup>47</sup> The Faculty of Arts and Social Science was the only faculty that halted 'business as usual' in solidarity with protesting students (Field notes, 2015).

and Ryneveld Street where the Vice-Chancellor Prof. Wim de Villiers, who had been out of the country throughout the week, announced the institution's support for the President's announcement. This was followed by the announcement that management had postponed examinations for a week, granting students time to study post-protest (Field notes, 2015). Stellenbosch University concluded the 2015 academic year with examinations written albeit under immense security. At Wits and the University of Johannesburg, protests continued and lead to the arrest of students and workers. Multiple institutions had examinations "disrupted, rescheduled or postponed" which led to students having the option of deferring exams to the beginning of 2016 (Booyesen, 2016: 323). The FeesMustFall movement achieved much during 2015. With the assistance of existing movements and activists, the movement achieved a no-fee increase for 2016.

The significant involvement of Open Stellenbosch in the StelliesFeesMustFall however, had an effect on the movement. OS found itself working alongside other organizations, which had a disruptive effect on Open Stellenbosch going forward. As Azania (2016) put it,

"[...] things might have changed during FeesMustFall but [now *in 2016*<sup>48</sup>] they must go back to the way they were, because that's when we worked best, pre FeesMustFall. And I think FeesMustFall threw out every student movement throughout South Africa. If you look at Reform Pukke, RMF, Uprising and at the University Currently Known as Rhodes, all stopped functioning. No student movement started in 2015 is currently functioning properly in the way that it was in 2015. There are fractions which all started at FMF, because FMF is now this bigger group and you don't come there as your own non-partisan person but as SASCO and OS and you're wearing all different t-shirts and bandages and they can be very conflicting".

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<sup>48</sup> Author's own words inserted for clarity.

StelliesFeesMustFall saw involvement of students from the Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command of Stellenbosch University (EFFSC\_SU), as well as the ANC-affiliated South African Students Congress at Stellenbosch University (SASCO Maties). These students joined the fees movement in their organizational capacity, marking a visible difference with the original non-partisan stance of Open Stellenbosch. Booysen (2016) argues that this was a trend at other campuses across the country, providing a channel through which national party politics, and the conflict they ensue, infiltrated the fees conversation and collective organizing. This was further illustrated by a fistfight that broke out during a mass meeting on fees at the rooiplein. During a speech by an ANC ward leader, a student from the EFFSC\_SU confronted the speaker, leading to a fight that was eventually stopped by an Open Stellenbosch member. In response to the incident the chairperson of the meeting, a prominent Open Stellenbosch member, explained that the fees movement was for everyone who had concerns about access to education and was not a space for addressing party politics (Field notes, 2015). The incident illustrated that national party politics could no longer be considered separate from student activism. Unlike Open Stellenbosch, FeesMustFall did not warrant non-partisan sentiments. In effect, the intricate involvement of OS in FeesMustFall, the two practically one, resulted in Open Stellenbosch being affected by these contentions. By way of being a collective open for all types of activists and interests on campus, even those contradictory and conflicting with the rest of the movement, FeesMustFall disrupted the organizational synergy of the existing OS movement in ways that made it difficult to precede seamlessly in the following year.

## Fatigue

Throughout 2015, activists organized, facilitated and participated in protest demonstrations (Field notes, 2015). When students were not participating in demonstrations, academic responsibilities and other personal responsibilities required attention. The movement had set up working groups in an effort to spread the workload amongst members, however, various tasks still required an incredible amount of time and effort to complete. The pressure was exacerbated by the fact that OS was a small movement with an even smaller group of fully committed members. As one activists noted,

“people always think it was such a big group, but it wasn’t. At most like, we had like 50 people. And that’s even pushing it. Like people who were constantly working, constantly there, we were like 50 people, pushing it. OS was really small” (Azania, 2016).

Arguably, the working groups that endured the most pressure and highest workload were also composed of the most consistent and committed members. Working groups such as the Research Team, which handled the research on particular issues of institutional policy and language, as well as the Media and Communications team, which worked on media correspondence, public information and managing the movement’s social media platforms, seemed to be the same people that constantly worked and participated in the movement (Field notes, 2015). Inevitably, this meant that the fatigue experienced by these activists had an immense impact on the movement’s general planning and morale. Although OS encouraged full participation and high member involvement, which was illustrated through practices like requiring collective input and agreement before any major decisions were made, there was still crisis management and background work that needed attention. These students kept the movement going, often sacrificing their own personal lives and wellbeing

which one activist captured in stating that the year was characterized by “[sleepless] nights” (Uhuru, 2016).

In addition to physical fatigue experienced by student activists, psychological fatigue presented a great challenge for activist wellness. Smith, Yosso and Solórzano (2006) note that in predominantly white institutions, racial minority students tend to suffer from an incredible amount of psychological and physiological illnesses due to ‘race battle fatigue’. The race battle, a concept developed by critical race theory, suggests that the experiences of black students are constantly plagued by racism and racial micro-aggressions that result in fatigue and psychophysiological symptoms. That is,

“the stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces leads to people of color feeling mentally, emotionally, and physically drained” (ibid.:301).

Race battle fatigue is thus the consequence of constant and cumulative encounters with racial micro-aggression. Noting that overt racism is illegal and considered undesirable in most societies, critical race theory argues that racism has not diminished nor disappeared in contemporary liberal societies, but is rather evident in subtle assaults that are

“1) subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously; 2) layered insults, based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and 3) cumulative insults, which cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging whites” (Smith, Yosso, Solórzano, 2006:300).

These subtle intentional and non-intentional insults have the ability to negatively impact black students. At Stellenbosch University, black student activists have repeatedly referred to the space as suffocating and violent. OS as a collective of black people in a white space became

the subject of much verbal and nonverbal insult, much of which hid under the guise of free speech. Many of the insults directed at Open Stellenbosch were posted on Facebook and Twitter. On Facebook, the page *StelliesRage* became particularly active with insults and ‘rage’ directed at the movement for one reason or another. These comments often took a more blatant racist form, as opposed to the subtler nuances suggested by critical race theory. One such a post read “we are black, give us special treatment. Grow the f\*\*\* up you spoilt little shits” (OS, 2016f). In some instances, insults were directed at specific members of the movement, as was the case when a lecturer at the university sent a text message to a prominent Open Stellenbosch member. The message read “Jou swart moer van die wit Boer” which loosely translated as “You black bastard from the white farmer” (Raborife, 2015).<sup>49</sup>

The emergence of the movement seemed to act as an opportunity to transform subtle insults into more overt forms of racism. Indeed, the collective had raised issues that questioned and challenged dominant notions of race, culture and identity. These provocations not only encouraged students to consider the meanings of social configurations and norms that they took for granted, but seemed to also push white students to take on a defensive position in an effort to counter what they perceived as a personal attack on their identity and culture. It is within this context that statements such as ‘they are isolating the people they should be drawing in’ and ‘this is reverse racism’ as uttered by white students occurred (Field notes,

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49 In a statement by the Vice-Chancellor Prof. Win de Villiers, the university stated that “the violation of human rights, victimisation in any sense, racism, classism, sexism and all other forms of discrimination, will not be tolerated – regardless of who is involved” (SU,2015b). The statement was issued following the termination of the service contract of the lecturer who sent the text message. While the university has illustrated no hesitation in dealing with blatant acts of racism, it is apparent that there is considerable hesitation in dealing with less blatant act. A consideration of the students’ requests to remove the JH Marais statue, alter the language policy and, respond decidedly on issues of discrimination in residences, is illustrative (OS,2016e).

2015). For black activists, however, the conversion of subtle micro-aggression into blatant racism only escalated what was already experienced within that space. The only difference was that the experience could now be shared with others in the movement without being deemed imagined or exaggerated.

McCabe (2009) notes that perhaps what is most frustrating about racial micro-aggression is that it is everywhere in everything but at the same time, nowhere. The frustrations of black women in the movement illustrated this. Activist meetings and social encounters became a place for activists to exhale, not only as an expression of discontentment with being in a toxic space, but more so to vent the fatigue experienced as a result of disguised daily racial insults. The women often expressed just how tired they were of having to constantly explain themselves to other students regarding Open Stellenbosch, feminism and the struggle of the black student at SU (Field notes, 2015). *Becky*<sup>50</sup> became a word used by students to concisely describe both the suffocating presence and ignorance of whiteness in the space, while simultaneously capturing the frustration of black people in response to whiteness.<sup>51</sup>

The inevitable stressors brought on by the demands of activist life require much from the activists, often at the sacrifice of health and wellness. With that said, psychological fatigue weighs heavier on the student activists. Race battle fatigue presents a serious concern

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<sup>50</sup> *Becky* is the name used by pop star Beyoncé in her visual album, *Lemonade*. The name has been used in popular culture, and appropriated by student activists, to refer to a white woman that one may dislike. In the album, Beyoncé contrasts her black hair with Becky's white hair as a symbolic contrast for their experiences which incidentally are intertwined by the fact that Becky is the mistress to Beyoncé's husband. Readings of the song, and use of the term, suggest that *Becky* is used to denote white people, and whiteness, in an antagonism with black people, and blackness (Knowles-Carter, 2016; Perrott, Rogers, Vernallis, 2016; Kelly, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Here I use the term *whiteness* as indicated by activists in an effort to capture the sentiment of student activists. Student protester Busisiwe Nxumalo, who compiled a student protest glossary list, defines *whiteness* as "a system that privileges white people at the expense of black people. It is in all institutions in South African society and it is assumed to be the standard of how things should be, but it is inherently racist." (Booyesen, 2016:329).



amongst black students in predominantly white institutions that remain exclusive, marginalizing and alienating. The daily battles of activists include constantly fighting to remain intact and sane in a space that is experienced as hostile and suffocating. Ironically, the frustration of daily encounters with racial micro-aggression may very well have been the reasons for joining a collective that promises a different environment. Nevertheless, for most student activists, the combination of physical and psychological fatigue, both as remembered and presently experienced, prevent their full participation as highly active members of the movement.

### **Academic responsibilities**

Students in an academic institution have the primary responsibility of achieving academic success. As committed activists, students often find themselves splitting their time between academic and activist responsibilities, particularly during periods of high protest activity. Although it has been noted already that within a movement lies a variation of student activists, distinguished by the level of their commitment and roles in the collective, student activists generally tend to take a lot of strain and stress, often at the cost of their own education.<sup>52</sup> Students that sympathized with the cause, although perhaps not as deeply committed as some Open Stellenbosch members, aided in protests and demonstration, which in most instances meant missing lectures and sacrificing study time (Field notes, 2015). As most protest demonstrations took place during the day, with most of the planning and

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<sup>52</sup> Many students sacrificed their academic careers because of their involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle. Some suffered suspension, others expulsion, and some even exile (see Mkhabela, 2001; Badat, 1999)

strategizing taking place in the evenings, students often found themselves alternating between protests and lectures.

The emergence of the Steve Biko Study Centre, located in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, can be understood in light of this tension between political activity and formal education.<sup>53</sup> The centre emerged out of the need for a space in which activists could discuss and engage in debates about pressing issues, while having access to academic study groups. The centre hosted a variety of students in different fields, although the majority were in the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, it was not coincidental that the center emerged around the time of the mid-year examinations. By May, Open Stellenbosch had already had its feet firm on the ground as an active student force on campus. Mass meetings were held almost weekly, alongside frequent meetings for members, the public media, other interest groups, as well as with the institution's management. Time had lapsed quickly from the time of its founding. Consequently, many students fell behind on their studies and were under pressure to submit assignments and prepare for exams. The Steve Biko Study Centre provided a space where this could take place in the comfort of peers who understood the situation and shared similar concerns.

It is worth noting that the emergence of the study centre illustrated students' commitment to their academic responsibilities, which for some critics was questionable considering the amount of protests-related media coverage. Some critics suggested that students latched on to activism because they did not want to attend to their academic responsibilities. These

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<sup>53</sup> The centre was located in the Department of English studies, in the Molteno room. It operated between the hours of 17h00 and 06h00, and was open to all students (Field notes, 2015).

sentiments were often echoed by messages that urged students to focus on their studies and stop protesting. As one comment on Facebook read,

“I hope this meeting is to disband your organisation. Apart from being destructive you haven't achieved much. Your exam starts soon. Go to class and study. You will achieve much more” (OS, 2016c).

It may be argued that some students took advantage of periods of high protest activity. However, it cannot be neglected that for most students, particularly those that formed the core of the movement, time spent on activism was lamented due to the recognition that it was time that could have been spent on academic work (Field notes, 2015; Bonfiire ZA, 2015). Sentiments that echo notions of laziness and carelessness therefore, fundamentally fail to recognize the strategies employed by student activists in an effort to fulfill both activist and academic demands. More than this, such statements fail to acknowledge that exclusion from the institution, as a consequence of academic failure, would in fact work against the goals and aims of student activism.

As was the case with other movements such as RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall, Open Stellenbosch showed the lengths to which black students went to gain access to, and remain in higher education. This was precisely what the protests had been about. Therefore, it would have been counter-intuitive, and perhaps counter-revolutionary, to be academically excluded. The Steve Biko Study Centre emerged as a response to this pressing need. That is, a need to encourage, assist and strengthen fellow activists in their academic careers. The understanding was that the university space could not be changed if the minds required to change it were absent. This echoed the sentiment of students in the 1960s and 1970s who, although conflicted about remaining in school and effectively under state indoctrination and

control, viewed education as crucial in their own freedom and the liberation of the black community (Mkhabela,2001).

To remain in good standing academically while attending to activism demanded a high level of commitment from students. It is no wonder then that by year-end, student activists were burnt out and less likely and willing to commit to the high demands of activism that they had previously been able to fulfill. Academic pressure, as well as the fatigue and trauma experienced during high levels of protest action added to student activists' reluctance to continue their confrontational activism on campus.

### **Peer response**

A movement's continuity is significantly dependent on its members and on the ability to recruit and retain students. As mentioned earlier, the fatigue and fees disruptions of 2015 had implications for the Open Stellenbosch movement. Additionally, the inability of the movement to continue seamlessly in 2016 was due in part to the fact that its program of providing an alternative orientation for black people failed to materialize<sup>54</sup>. The lack of interest in the OS planned program was not an isolated incident however, but rather an extension of an already fragile movement. Throughout 2015, Open Stellenbosch failed to attract and retain committed members. As noted above, at its peak, OS had approximately fifty committed members. This reality was often distorted by the magnitude of people at single protest marches and demonstrations, of which the FeesMustFall march in late October

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<sup>54</sup> The alternative orientation program was intended to be an alternative to the institution's orientation week which the movement has identified as problematic in that it is often experienced by black students as alienating and marginalizing as it includes practices such as *skakling* or 'mixing' that often leave black students out (OS,2016d; Robertson,2015)

following the announcement of the zero percent increase is a case in point. Nevertheless, Open Stellenbosch as a movement had continually struggled to recruit and retain a mass following. Of the few that the movement had recruited and retained, the majority were black students. Asked about this observation, a student activist said,

“[...] we are in Stellenbosch; no white person would want to join. A lot of people were like ‘*ah but we will be a black only space*’, you are in Stellenbosch of course you’ll be a black only space! And then those who are like ‘*ah but I feel excluded*’... they didn’t want come! They just saying so because they are white kids who just want to be a better white. Like we are refusing them an opportunity to be a better white...” (Uhuru, 2016).

The quote draws attention to Open Stellenbosch as a predominantly black movement. Carefully considered, it is dismissive of commentary that suggests that the movement is inherently black and intentionally hostile towards white people. Uhuru’s response suggests that the movement *became* black because of the nature of the space in which it emerged. That is, the *blackness* of the movement is the consequence of the student demographic profile, the resilience of the hegemonic culture, and a reflection of the lack of shared experiences necessary for resonance with a group’s collective identity.<sup>55</sup> Simply put, the movement lacked resonance with the student body it was seeking to attract.<sup>56</sup>

Jasper (1998) notes that emotions and common experiences play an important role in social movements. Hirsch (1990:245) also notes that convincing potential recruits that the cause of

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<sup>55</sup> As in, that of being mainly constituted of black students

<sup>56</sup> The night before the mass *StelliesFeesMustFall* on Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 2015, a FMF leader appealed to “our dear white friends to please come out in the day time and not wait for evening to show support”. She further argued that the scarcity of white students in the protests added to ill notions of a movement for black students that are “lazy” and do not care about their education (Field notes, 2015; Bonfiire ZA, 2015). This appeal highlights the general hesitation of white students to join protests and the perception that the movement and demonstrations are a black student only endeavor. Perhaps this is also a reflection of a problematic national narrative that equates protest, strikes, and ‘toy-toy’ as not only disruptive and violent, but also inherently a ‘black people thing’.

the movement is “justified” and “just” is important, but difficult for minorities in a space to achieve. A collective identity has to be fashioned around commonalities, most crucial of which is a shared understanding of the ‘enemy’, the problem, and each other’s experiences. Black students claim that they do not experience the university in the same way that white students do. While white students’ belonging in the space is affirmed by a series of visible and invisible symbols, black students are disaffirmed and made to feel foreign and marginalized by the same symbols. The conflict in perception and incoherence in experiences was clearly illustrated in the emergence of the *#whereisthelove* event following the release of the *Luister* video, when two white students at the institution initiated a campaign to “spread the love” on campus (Swart and Swart, 2015).<sup>57</sup> Although the campaign founders argued that the event took a stand against discrimination and racism, many students interpreted the event as dismissing the claims of racism and marginalization made by students in the *Luister* documentary.

The event was experienced as a challenge to Open Stellenbosch and condescending to the experience of black pain at the institution.<sup>58</sup> It was also no coincidence that the event, planned to take place on the rooiplein on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, would take place a day after

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<sup>57</sup> The event was advertised on Facebook and Twitter but received mixed responses from students and the public. Initially the event was contextualized as responding to recent protests, which was characterized as divisive and falling short of the ‘rainbow nation’ ideal where all South African’s love each other. However, upon receiving immense backlash, the event description was changed to simply standing against discrimination and aimed at achieving a united campus (Swart and Swart, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Biko’s conceptualization of the white liberal “do-gooders” is useful here. He states that they “argue that they are not responsible for white racism and the country’s ‘inhumanity to the black’, and “that they too feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks”. ‘Do gooders’ not only benefit from their whiteness, but propose a non-racialism through co-operation between blacks and whites, which Biko argues means “the whites doing all the talking and the blacks the listening” (Biko, 1987:21-22). Such acts by white ‘sympathizers’ effectively silences black people and undermines their ability and need to represent themselves and articulate their own experiences, in their own way, on their own terms.

the *Luister* march also on the rooiplein.<sup>59</sup> In a space that is predominantly white, the justification of black pain, alienation and marginalization, is difficult to articulate in ways that will not be considered a stretch of the imagination (McCabe, 2009). In effect, what emerges is a predominantly black movement with little appeal to the majority of the predominantly white student body. In a cyclic manner, the black movement is perceived as a black-only movement, further repelling white students. It is worth noting that there were sympathetic white students and staff members that played crucial supporting roles in the movement. The *Luister* video, filmed and directed by white men, showcased a white lecturer, and white student articulating the problem of racism and exclusion of black students. However, these were few exceptions. For a majority of the white student body, although perhaps sympathetic, full commitment and participation in the movement was rare.

Although Open Stellenbosch could not gain majority support, or commitment, from white students, it did not gain a following from all black students on campus that constitute the racial minority either. At Stellenbosch University specifically, the issues raised by OS regarding language and fees seem to have appealed to a particular black student. The language issue, for example, may have had little resonance with some coloured students who not only speak Afrikaans, but prefer to have lectures in the language.<sup>60</sup> In fact, critics of the proposition to have English instead of Afrikaans as the main medium of business and of instruction at the university often argue precisely this point (van der Waal, 2012). Van der Waal (2012) notes

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<sup>59</sup> The march was planned in relation to the release of the *Luister* documentary on Youtube on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2015. Open Stellenbosch intended to bring the issues raised in the video to management's attention at the march (OS, 2015d)

<sup>60</sup> This was evident in remarks made by students in tutorials, as well as observations as a tutor in the Sociology and Social Anthropology department. Although the number of students opting for the Afrikaans-only tutorials has diminished over the years, there is still a demand albeit it less than before. In most modules, it is still necessary to have at least one tutor that can read, write and speak Afrikaans.

that the increasing pressure on historically Afrikaans universities, as a consequence of the push for a more inclusive higher education, has resulted in the strategic inclusion of the Afrikaans-speaking coloured community, in an effort to retain the dominance of Afrikaans at institutions. The recruitment of coloured Afrikaans-speakers boosts the numbers of Afrikaans speakers, thus strengthening the case of Afrikaans language activists. Although such efforts “[retain] elements of ethno-nationalism, expressed in essentialist notions of language and identity”, it remains true that there are black students at the institution that prefer to use Afrikaans as a language of teaching and learning (van der Waal, 2012:451).<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, the fees issue also resonated with predominantly working-class black students. During the FeesMustFall campaign especially, class identity became central to the conversation, aggravating existing contentions.<sup>62</sup> Many students during FeesMustFall stated that the “middle-class and upper class” students, many of whom were in Open Stellenbosch, were making all the decisions and articulating the fees struggle on their terms (Azania, 2016). This left the working-class students marginalized. The visibility of SASCO and EFFSC\_SU students provided a strong voice for working-class students who were not just black, but also financially weak. Having presented the black student as a single-identity entity, a political

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<sup>61</sup> In her speech at the SU convocation, Nwadeyi echoe’s Van der Waal’s critic of an exploited coloured community. Nwadedi argues that although Afrikaans is spoken at the university, it is not reflective of the many “Afrikaans(es)” spoken (SU, 2016d). Therefore, the language is taken captive by white Afrikaners through their imposition of what constitutes ‘proper Afrikaans’. In effect, this suggests that the language, contrary to claims by language activists, is not equally owned. Instead, coloured Afrikaans speakers are expected to conform and assimilate to white standards of Afrikaans (van der Waal, 2012).

<sup>62</sup> Although class was not brought on the table as a point of discussion as blatantly during FeesMustFall, within OS there were observable class differences between members. These were most obvious in language use and accents, friendship circles, personal good, and social media posts. I observed that up until FeesMustFall, students that spoke on behalf of OS or raised points during meetings were students with a middle class or affluent background, typically students that had a good command of the English language (Field notes, 2015).



tactic in the fight against institutional racism and exclusion, Open Stellenbosch struggled to approach the black student in more elaborate terms. The movement, therefore, seems to have relied heavily on race as a factor, neglecting the complexities of identity and variation in personal circumstance. Race and language were conflated, as well as race and class.

Lastly, Stellenbosch is a student town that reproduces political and social conservatism, including adherence to traditional white hierarchies, through the use of 'respectable language' and a clear gender division. The organizational structures and culture of the institution illustrate this. Consider the fact that many male residences still have a tradition of referring to senior students and authority figures as 'meneer' or 'sir' (Field notes, 2015). Student accommodation is still predominantly single sex residences, with the exception of a few residences on campus. Single sex residences, incidentally, prove conducive for practices such as male residences serenading and courting female residence, which produce and reproduce particular gender norms (Robertson, 2015). These norms can be understood as a remnant of the institutions conservative religious roots, further illustrated in the present through practices such as prayer in resident meetings and church recruitment initiatives during first-year orientation. Van Dyke (1998) notes that religious affiliation decreases the likelihood of participation in protests. Religious convictions may be the basis of respect for authority, particularly older male figures, as re-enacted and legitimized in classroom and residence settings. The implications of such institutional norms and culture result in a reluctance to challenge white male figures of authority.

Hirsch (1990) argues that recruits are reluctant to commit to movements until they are convinced that the group's cause cannot be achieved through institutional means, and that the only way to achieve collective goals is through efforts outside of formalized structures.

That is to say, in order for Open Stellenbosch to successfully recruit students, it would have had to convince them that structures such as the SRC and engagement with management were insufficient and inadequate to deal with their grievances. However, this becomes a difficult task when students not only believe that these structures are adequate, as illustrated by the SRC president's speech to activists and management's constant appeal to 'talk', but more so when there is a high regard and respect for those that manage these structures. In light of this, the backlash towards Open Stellenbosch for referring to the Rector and Vice-Chancellor, and other figures of authority, without the 'professor' or 'mnr.' prefix can be understood.<sup>63</sup> That is to say, Open Stellenbosch's reputation for going against the grain by rebelling against courtesies that endorse a hierarchal authoritative structure, stigmatized the movement. This negative stigma discredited and impaired perceptions of the collective to the extent that it was not considered favorably by peers (Ferree, 2005).

Open Stellenbosch provided a space in which black students could connect around their shared experiences of marginalization in a predominantly white institution. Demographically, black students are in the minority. Linguistic and cultural nuances also contribute to the marginal status of black students at Stellenbosch University. The consequence of this has been an inability to recruit and retain members. Hirsch (1990) argues that this is typical in that minority groups fail to communicate and relate to the masses as their experience of the space is different. That is, the struggles of black students at the institution are significantly different from those of white students. Therefore, it can be expected that the common

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<sup>63</sup> *Mnr.* is the acronym for *meneer*, which is *mister* in Afrikaans

experiences necessary for collective identity and movement participation would be lacking in this instance.

### Internal conflict

By arguing that class, race and language were not the only issues that required attention and reform at the institution, the black women and LGBTQIA+<sup>64</sup> students of Open Stellenbosch advocated for a university in which all identities found belonging. Naidoo (2016) notes that Open Stellenbosch was not unique in this instance as women in other movements across the country also called for an intersectional approach to transformation.<sup>65</sup> Black women, as well as LGBTQIA+ people, argued that the violence experienced in the university space was such that LGBTQIA+ students and black women experienced greater hostility than cisgender students, particularly men.<sup>66</sup>

The women argued that the nature of the hegemonic culture at Stellenbosch University, as expressed in the identity and mentality of an Afrikaner cisgender male, ranked men above women, and heterosexuality over queerness and other non-binary identities.<sup>67</sup> Cornell, Ratele

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<sup>64</sup> *LGBTIAQ+* is the abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other non-binary identities (UC Davis, 2017)

<sup>65</sup> *Intersectionality* refers to the “interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and Subordination” (Davis, 2008:67). The term, although contested, has been used in feminist theory predominantly as a way of articulating the multi-layered struggles of black women, and black queer woman.

<sup>66</sup> *Cisgender* is the term used to describe a gender identity or performance that society considers matches a person’s assigned sex at birth. As a political term, cisgender is a term used to call attention to the perceived privilege of people who are not transgender (UC Davis, 2017)

<sup>67</sup> *Non-binary* refers to “a gender identity and experience that embraces a full universe of expressions and ways of being that resonate for an individual. It may be an active resistance to binary gender expectations and/or an intentional creation of new unbounded ideas of self within the world. For some people who identify as non-binary there may be overlap with other concepts and identities like gender expansive and gender non-conforming” (UC Davis, 2017)

and Kessi (2016) note that the concerns about gender and sexuality as raised by movements can be understood as a reflection of the general stubbornness of higher education to transform and become more inclusive. That is to say, although higher education has become more accessible to the masses, issues of inclusivity, particularity of students that fall outside of normative gender and sexuality identities, is still lacking. The space is still hostile towards non-binary people as illustrated in instances of rape, lack of restroom facilities for transgender people and single sex residences, for example.

Although OS acknowledged these challenges at the institution, there was reluctance to acknowledge the presence, and indeed strong manifestation, of these nuances within the movement itself. This is illustrated in a statement by a woman activist, who suggested that

“[the] way that cis-het men act and become in movements can be violent when they believe that they must become the ones who protect those they view as being ‘weak’ and it is [the] womxn<sup>68</sup> and LGBTIA+ bodies [that] are forced to suffer the consequences [...]” (Ruth, 2017).

As with racial micro-aggressions experienced in the broader university space, the discomfort and even violence experienced by women and LGBTIA+ bodies within the movement was largely neglected.<sup>69</sup> With the development of the movement over time, the negligence developed into frustration and anger. In one instance, an altercation erupted between a man and a woman at a sit-in. The woman was fervently expressing her frustration about the

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<sup>68</sup> *Womxn or womyn* is a political term used to mark a shift away from the traditional spelling of woman/women, thus illustrating empowerment of the user (UC Davis, 2017).

<sup>69</sup> I use *bodies* as a recognition of the intersectional identities that people have, singularly or collectively. I also use the term to reflect the way(s) the subject defines self.

situation at the university when a man requested that she kept her voice down. In response to the comment, a group of women reprimanded him stating that they were tired of “black men policing black women [...] if a black woman is angry, let her be angry” (Field notes, 2015). The silencing of black women may be read as a form of soft repression, which can be experienced as non-physical violence. Ferree (2005:141-144) defines soft repression “as involving the mobilization of nonviolent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas”. This is contrasted with hard repression which is understood as “[involving] the mobilization of force to control or crush oppositional action through the use or threat of violence” (*ibid.*). In response to such soft repression tactics, women and non-binary bodies developed comradery and solidarity around their shared experiences of being silenced, undermined and censored within and without the movement. The outcome of such solidarity was the formation of the Intersectional Feminist of Open Stellenbosch (IFOS), a group that met weekly to reflect on the experiences of being feminist activists (Field notes, 2015). The group also included non-binary members, thus becoming a “space for people who identified as a women or non-binary” (Azania, 2016).

Furthermore, soft repression was also visible through the evoking of culture as a curtain behind which misogynic and homophobic insults could hide. Women expressed deep frustration at the fact that many of the men in the movement could not see similarities in their oppression as black people and the oppression of women (Field notes, 2015). This illustrated a failure to note the similarities between racism and sexism. That is, a failure to recognize that “[both] are justificatory ideologies, serving to legitimize a system of domination [...]” (Lorenz, 2002:64). By failing to recognize and acknowledge the parallels between racism and sexism, the men in Open Stellenbosch consequently perpetuated the

inequalities they were professing to stand against. The neglect of women's issues and issues of patriarchal violence is indicative of a long tradition within black liberation movements, which places the 'race' identity above and beyond all other identities.

Lorenz (2002) notes that Mamphela Ramphele's autobiography account of the Black Consciousness movement highlights that within the movement, a woman's *blackness* became her primary identity and access to membership, neglecting the intersection of this identity with other identity forms. In instances where her gender identity was recognized, gender normative roles and expectations were imposed, which meant that women often found themselves in the kitchen and on social welfare errands (ibid.). Likewise, Barnett (1993) proposes that the role of women in the Civil Rights movement has been poorly documented, reflecting the attitudes within the movement towards women. Irrespective of their immense contribution in the movement, women have not received widespread recognition as men like Martin Luther King Jr., because of their gender identity (ibid.). Noting the long-standing tradition within such movements, it is of little wonder why IFOS often found itself having to reprimand men by stating that

“[...] if equality is your belief then equality should be your belief [...] the 'it's my culture excuse' doesn't fly. If someone says it's my culture to be racist, [you as a man] aren't [going to] give them a pat on the head and say 'shame it's your culture' ” (Azania, 2016).

IFOS advocated for the formation of a men's group that would be a teaching and learning space in an effort to deal with the complexity of ideas and identities within the movement. The Patriarchy Remediation group was formed as a result of this plea. It was reported that the group circulated some feminist readings and had a few sessions, however not much came from it (Azania, 2016). As a consequence, the gender battle fatigue continued to be a point of

conflict and divide within the movement. It is worth noting that not all men within the movement exhibited blatant misogynists or homophobic tendencies. In fact, some cisgender male activists expressed that it was indeed the black queer women who could most likely articulate a way forward in terms of liberating black people in the university space (King, 2016). Even so, gender and sexuality were the most contentious points within the movement, particularly in the latter part of its development.

In earlier periods of the movement, contention had been brewing around issues of age, often entangled with gender. In the earlier moments of the movement, post-graduate students, as well as men, carried majority of the work. As one activist put it,

“[...] in the early stages most people who were undergrad and doing real work were men [...] people who really worked were men or post grad [...]” (Uhuru, 2016).

The fact that the majority of the planning and strategizing was done by men, and older men, was a cause for concern among women. Younger undergraduate women expressed concern that the division of labor within the movement was seemingly perpetuating gender stereotypes and norms. The younger women expressed frustration at the hierarchy of power that was evident in the treatment of older activists in relation to younger activists. As one activist noted

“[...] for me as a woman I had to constantly prove that I can be there, I am smart, and I can be [intellectual]... because I was a lot [younger] than a lot of the people. I was in first year and quite a lot were in third year, post-grad and some second year [...]” (Azania, 2016).

Age and gender presented challenges to organizational cohesion. Although the working groups were supposed to remedy the age issue, by providing a space for more contributions

from the wider membership, the issue of gender remained pressing and inadequately addressed. The movement struggled to deal with the position and attitudes of some of the black heterosexual men and the privileges of that status, and could not always effectively remedy the micro-aggressions against women and queer bodies. The movement seemed to mirror the broader institutional space. Contrary to the promise of a safe space for all people, the movement became a hostile space in which some people belonged and others did not.

Intersectionality was advocated for as a useful way of navigating the issues within the collective. That is, having a sensitivity to the ways in which different identities interact with each other and result in different experiences for different people based on their identities, was put forth by black women as useful in attending to the experiences of people that are not cisgender white middle-class men. However, this was not without its challenges. At a member's meeting during the FeesMustFall campaign, the movement decided that black women would chair the evening gatherings, which focused primarily on debriefing comrades on the day's happenings as well as planning for the upcoming day. It was also decided that the women would alternate, with a new chairwoman taking the position every night as a symbolic gesture towards the liberation of women in the movement. On one occasion, the selection of the new chairwoman was contested by a "gay black man" (Field notes, 2015). The man stated that as a self-identified "gay black man", he felt excluded and marginalized by that decision because recognition of LGBTIA+ students remained neglected (ibid.). Displeased with the comment, a group of black women stormed out of the meeting displaying their frustration at the site of "another black man trying to silence black women" (ibid.). The contention illustrates the varied interests within the movement. More than this, it illustrates the practical difficulties of trying to create a space in which all people feel a sense of belonging and equal



power. Open Stellenbosch had attempted to create a safe space for all students, but in practice, this proved difficult to achieve.

Open Stellenbosch succeeded in demanding that the university be self-reflexive and sensitive to the needs of black students and other minority groups within the student body. What arguably remained neglected was the recognition that the movement itself was a heterogeneous entity. There was a misrecognition and neglect of the significantly different experiences of black women and non-binary people in comparison to cis-het heterosexual black men. These men failed to recognize the amount of power and privilege this status awarded them. Black women and LGBTQIA+ students found themselves demanding rigorous reflexivity, critic and sensitivity within the movement.

As the movement developed, it became strikingly clear that this demand was gaining momentum. By 2016, Open Stellenbosch had shifted its attention to supporting and working on issues that affected women on campus. The #EndRapeCulture campaign alongside other campaigns opposing violence against women were highly endorsed by members of Open Stellenbosch, particularly black women. Women such as Lovelyn Nwadeyi<sup>70</sup> and Farai Mubaiwa<sup>71</sup> became icons on campus, and regarded exemplary figures in the fight for

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<sup>70</sup> Lovelyn Nwadeyi, a Political Science Master's graduate and Stellenbosch University alumni, became the first black, the first female, and the youngest person to give a speech at the SU convocation in January 2016. Her speech titled *Courage, Compassion and Complexity: Reflections on the new Matieland and South Africa*, articulated the struggles of black students at the institution (SU,2016d). She was also one of the leaders in the 2015 StelliesFeesMustFall. Lovelyn stood for convocation executive office in 2016 but was not elected. In many ways this illustrates the ongoing resistance of the alumni for change, an observation Van der Waal (2012) further asserts.

<sup>71</sup> Farai Mubaiwa, Accounting graduate and founder of Africa Matters, served as a Women Empowerment portfolio manager on the SRC in 2016/2017. She initiated several campaigns on campus in this regard, amongst which was the #EndRapeCulture campaign, as well as a sanitary wear drive to provide free sanitary pads to students. She was also named a recipient of the Queen's Young Leader Award (QYL) in 2017 for her work on Africa Matters (SU,2016b).

women's voices in a predominantly male space. These campaigns were nurtured by black women activists' sense of oppression and by a sense of neglect of issues facing women in higher education. The silencing of these issues prior this point however, and indeed of black women, within Open Stellenbosch and FeesMustFall created a space that was conducive for distrust and frustration, both of which contributed to the corrosion of the movements' fabric. Identity politics, therefore, contributed to the fragility of the movement albeit in different ways and different intensities in different moments.

### **Institutional repression**

South Africa has a well-documented history of state repression through the use of physical violence against student activists (see Badat, 1999; Nkomo, 1979). In 2015 and 2016 student protests, police brutality and private security on campuses around South Africa called attention to the issue of universities using armed forces to respond to student opposition. Some students argued that the deployment of armed police and private security was a replica of the tactics used by the Apartheid police to silence black resistance (Field notes, 2016; SAHO, 2017d). McPhail and McCarthy (2005:4) argue that physical violence is a common repressive strategy when dealing with movements and that repression, defined as "obstacles by the state (or its agents) to individual and collective actions by challengers", is intended to be a hindrance to a challenger's actions.<sup>72</sup> The antithesis of repression therefore, would be to provide a space and opportunity for a challenger's ideas and action (ibid.).

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<sup>72</sup> McPhail and McCarthy's definition frames repression within the context of encounters between governments and social movements. This conceptualization is not limited to such

In the 2015/2016 student protests, university management and other bodies of authority such as university council, although not the state as such, intentionally enforced measures that impeded student activist efforts. Through the use of rubber bullets, teargas, pepper spray, beating of protestors and verbal assaults, encounters between police, private security, and protesting students resembled a scene from Apartheid South Africa. McPhail and McCarthy (2005:4) note that although repression may take the form of physical violence, it should be considered within a spectrum, with the use of “deadly direct force” being at the end of it. At Stellenbosch University, physical violence and its place in student activism became especially visible at the end of 2015. Throughout the earlier parts of the year leading up to the FeesMustFall campaign, legal action as well as institutional disciplinary measures featured more strongly in the repressive strategies used by the university to halt the efforts of Open Stellenbosch.

Repressive measures can take effect in response to direct activist action, as illustrated in encounters between students and police during protests. In other instances, it is not unusual for measures to be taken against challengers prior to any actual demonstrations. Surveillance, arrest of organisers and, invasion of organisations are measures used to prevent any actual fruition of intended protest (McPhail and McCarthy, 2005). In the case of student activism, the threat of institutional discipline and possible criminal charges, serves a similar function. A number of Open Stellenbosch members for example, were summoned to the institution’s

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encounters however in that the definition provided has a materialization in other spaces such as universities, and more specifically in observing encounters between university management and student movements. Furthermore, in some instances university’s may act as agents of the government, as was the case in the 1990s when governments backed managements in using stringent measures to silence student protests, as indicated in Chapter I under *Post-Apartheid activism and the issue of representation*.

disciplinary committee and charged with counts of misconduct, disrupting academic lectures, and misuse of institutional resources (Field notes, 2015). Disciplinary notices are part of a specific set of constraints and prohibitions that significantly limit the actions and commitments of the subject, in alignment with their violation. In instances where there is misconduct on the part of a student, the institution may limit access to particular places at the institution, as well as the campus activities that a student may engage in. As such, charges of misconduct as a consequence of activist activities necessarily involves stipulating criteria that limit participation in protest action and activist efforts.

The consequence of such measures is two-fold. Firstly, this arouses fear and anxiety in the activist such that he or she most likely withdraws from protest action and activist efforts. During an Open Stellenbosch meeting, members were divided over an incident that had occurred on social media that required an immediate response from the movement (Field notes, 2016). One of the pressing issues that would determine the nature of the response was the fact that a few months earlier many of the student activists were given disciplinary notices determining, among other things, that they had to restrain from any participation in conduct that may be deemed as further violations of the university's code of conduct. A failure to adhere to these conditions would result in suspension, arrest and possible incarceration. One student raised this issue in the meeting, convincingly relaying his fears of arrest and incarceration. The threat of legal action therefore has real consequences on the psyche and lived reality of student activists, thus influencing the extent of their commitment to the movement and cause.

Secondly, and related to the first point, the threat of legal measures, particularly applied to key members, can have serious effects on a movement's continuation and effectiveness. As

already noted, student movements often have a core circle that takes on the bulk of the work. When these few members face legal action and internal disciplinary measures, the structural integrity of the movement as a whole is under threat. The use of institutional disciplinary measures, therefore, not only limits ongoing activist action, but also decreases the likelihood of activists participating in oppositional action later on in the movement. It is worth noting here that perhaps much of the hesitation to be at odds with the institution may be that the university's bursaries and loans fund a number of black students. In that vein, the concerns around academic and financial exclusion weighed heavily on students, particularly black working-class students. Although activists recognized their need to sacrifice for the sake of the movement and the cause, they raised concerns around the possibility of the university revoking their bursaries. Koen et.al (2006) note that student activism in higher education in post-Apartheid South Africa is in part restrained by the fact that students' affairs have been institutionalized. Much of the financial provision for students comes from institutional coffers and private sponsors through the specific institution (Badat, 2015). This in effect has left students heavily reliant on institutional benefits and provisions, leaving them vulnerable and at the mercy of administrators and management. Legal threat and internal disciplinary measures therefore may be useful as a pre-emptive measure in halting protests.

Furthermore, during the FeesMustFall sit-ins, the institution filed an interdict against students occupying an administrative building, prohibiting the illegal occupation and summoning students to evacuate the building otherwise risk facing arrest and incarceration (Field notes, 2015).<sup>73</sup> In response to the court order, students contacted legal alliances in an effort to

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<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting that it was later revealed at a student and supportive staff meeting that the interdict the institution had obtained against students was questionable on the basis that it had been acquired after hours, which meant that courts and judges under whom interdicts

revoke it and eliminate the risk of incarceration. Students that had already been identified as repeat offenders by the institution were advised by law students in the movement to be cautious and avoid any behavior that may aggravate the situation in any way. It became very clear during the sit-ins that the role of the research team, law students present at the protest, and other law practitioners via social media became key players in dealing with the legal implications of the occupation. McPhail and McCarthy (2005) note that although repression may create hesitation on the part of activists to further engage in activist action, some activists are not deterred by previous experiences of repression as they implement adaptive strategies. In this instance, legal contacts and law students in and outside the movement became crucial in dealing with the university's legal actions.

Finally, on numerous occasions there were reports of physical violence committed against students by private security guards known as the *Men In Black*. The Men In Black, a group of unknown and unnamed men in black clothing, were deployed on campus during the student protests (Field notes, 2015). The university stated that these men, with no nametags or any form of identification other than their black uniform, were hired to protect students from any potential harm that may arise from protest action (SU, 2016e). In addition to this, the university stated that the presence of these men at every examination venue on campus was a necessary measure to ensure that exams continued with minimal interruptions. Contrary to the university's statements, students argued that the use of private security illustrated the university's paranoia around black gatherings and the intention to protect the institution's interests at all cost (Field notes, 2016). Some students reported that the presence of the MIB

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are issued were closed, as well as that the document included names of students that had once been part of Open Stellenbosch, but had either left the university or had not in fact been at the occupation at all (Field notes, 2015).

in examination halls elicited feelings of intimidation and anxiety. Female students expressed a distrust in the security men, referencing moments of harassment like cat calling and prolonged staring (Field notes, 2016). Although the sentiments around the Men In Black were mixed on campus, as some students stated that their presence gave them a sense of security and protection, their presence had changed the space of the university by symbolizing the violence on campus and replicating the repressive tactics used by the Apartheid government to silence black pain and grievances. For many student activists of Open Stellenbosch, the MIB evoked anxiety, trauma and anger.

During the FeesMustFall protests, what had begun as an occupation of an administration building on Monday October 19, had in less than a day turned into an intense encounter between student activists and the Men In Black. The night before the evacuation of students, which took place on Tuesday the 20th, sit-in coordinators announced that the university had interdicted students for the illegal occupation and therefore would send in troops to remove students from the building. Students were then advised to stay down, remain calm and refrain from violence should evictors arrive. However, on Tuesday morning, after hours of occupation, students were ambushed by a group of Men In Black and other armed forces. Students that were at the occupation at the time, state that activists remained calm as planned and did not refuse arrest, although they did refuse to leave the building (Field notes, 2015; Bonfire ZA, 2015). A few altercations occurred in which some students were physically harassed.

By mid-afternoon, occupiers were held inside the building, while a group of students and staff members gathered outside. Students were released at some point, some wounded but all tired and anxious. Details of the period inside the building vary, however, what has been

consistently reported is that students were mistreated and man handled. Some narratives claim that at students were refused water and access to restrooms (Field notes,2015). Upon leaving the building after the occupation, students walked out of the door in tears and raised fists, symbolizing the struggle and anguish they had endured. Many of the students had repeatedly argued that the university was a violent space for black people but the FeesMustFall occupation vividly illustrated this assertion. A student who had formed part of the occupation tearfully stated that as an employee and student of the university, she was ashamed and absolutely distraught at the fact that the university she loved so much could treat its students in such a brutal and criminalizing manner (ibid.).

The response of the university to the student sit-in illustrated the extent to which management was willing to go to deal with student activists.<sup>74</sup> McPhail and McCarthy (2005) note that physical violence is rarely the first repressive strategy used against opposition, hence it is far down the repression continuum. They suggest that contrary to mass media reports and depictions, in democratic countries agents of the state such as police are often reluctant to use force against protestors. However, the type of agency employed and experience with similar situations contributes to the nature and intensity of the response to protestors (ibid.). Perhaps it is this consideration that marks the difference between an intervention by the public police and that of private security such as the Men In Black. Public police are accountable to the nation more broadly regarding their conduct. The call for an

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<sup>74</sup> Following the violence and trauma reported by students, the university sent out a correspondence apologizing for the harm caused to students (SU,2015c). Even so, the MIB still had a presence on campus in 2016, and implicated in violent encounters with protesting students in 2016.



explanation from numerous public stakeholders following the mass murder of miners at Lonmin mines in Marikana, North West province is one example of this (SAHO, 2016a).

McPhail and McCarthy (2005) further argue that the transparency, avoidance of bad media coverage and accountability required of public police deters police violence. Such accountability measures may not necessarily be attained from private security, as they have no mandatory obligation to the general public nor to protestors. Moreover, student's frustrations with the Men In Black were aggravated by the fact that the men had no nametags or company name on their clothing. As a result, harassment and violence committed by the MIB member could not be reported with any significant detail. In addition, because the MIB were neither campus security nor public police, there was no clear directive as to where or to whom complaints could be lodged. In effect, the use of private security to deal with student protestors may very well have been one of the most effective repressive strategies deployed by the university.

Repressive measures by the university materialized in various forms throughout the protests of Open Stellenbosch and the FeesMustFall movement. The use of disciplinary measures and the threat of legal action, although a less physically involved strategy, limited the participation of some students in activist endeavors. For other students, these legal threats added to their frustration and anger towards the institution, pushing them even further into activism. By the end of 2015, the university's strategies culminated in the use of physical force to deal with protesters. This was not limited to student dissent in 2015, but was also part of the institution's measures against activists in 2016. The #StelliesFeesMustFall2.0, which also involved student protests, saw violent encounters between private security and students, as

well as the arrest of some students.<sup>75</sup> Although the institution justified these actions as the need to protect students and the infrastructure, activists saw violence as suppressing the expression of black pain. That is, through physical violence the symbolic violence endured by black students in the space had materialized. This had the effect of exposing the extent of repression at the university and further fragmenting the movement in significant ways.

## Conclusion

In 2017 Open Stellenbosch has lost its original form. Multiple factors have contributed to the movement's decline, among which, I argued, was the FeesMustFall movement of 2015. I have also argued that a year of sleep deprivation, continuous protest, organizing and facilitation of activities, led many student activists to experience fatigue and burn out and to feel unable and reluctant to devote the energy and time required to sustain a movement.

Furthermore, activism involved serious commitment, which threatened members' academic success. Many activists noted that their academic progress was suffering as a result of activism. Although spaces like the Steve Biko Study Centre were created to combine formal academics and activism, they did not fully remedy this conflict. In an already precarious position as a black person in higher education, students were forced to consider the consequences of activism on their academic future. The reality for most committed activists was that a compromise had to be made. As a perfect balance between academic work and

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<sup>75</sup> To date, some of the 2016 interdicted and arrested students still have court appearances as interdicts and suspensions are yet to be lifted (Personal email, 2017; FMF2.0, 2017). The ongoing legal and institutional action taken against students illustrates vividly the extent of institutional repression and the persistence thereof.

activists work proved exceptionally difficult to achieve, academic work became a priority in detriment of the movement's continuity.

Internal conflict within the movement also contributed to the corrosion of the movements' fabric. Central to this conflict was a call for a more intersectional approach to racial identity, in ways that recognised gender, class and sexual orientation. This call became more pressing when the movement itself was seen as oppressive to women and LGBTIA+ people. That is, the group was considered biased towards black cisgender bodies, particularly men. There was a perceived failure to equate racism with sexism as a pressing issue and to turn gender issues into a central part of the transformation demands until much later. The silencing of these issues reflected the movement's porosity to issues that plague the broader society.

Whereas issues of fatigue, academic responsibility and internal conflicts continued to challenge activists, Open Stellenbosch's recruitment and retainment of new members presented an external challenge. The growth of the movement once showed that its concerns resonated with that of many other students, thus granting it the leverage needed to persuade institutional management. However, at Stellenbosch, the lack of a collective identity amongst students across the racial, linguistic and cultural lines undermined the recruitment process. The predominantly white, Afrikaner, and Christian composition of the student body proved to be a challenge in fostering resonance with a movement that challenged authority, and confronted issues of race and culture in ways that questioned students' personal and institutional identity. Students lacked shared experiences and a shared concept of the 'enemy', both of which are arguably crucial for collective mobilisation and identity.

Persistent institutional repression significantly threatened the continued existence of the movement. The issuing of court orders to the movement and its members, as well as notices of disciplinary action, resulted in activists' withdrawal from protest activity. This also signaled to others that activism on campus could have unfavorable results. The direct violent force used by private security Men In Black further repressed student dissent. Although the university claimed private security was brought in to protect students, the latter experienced fear, anxiety and trauma. Altbach (1989:100) notes that movements are more likely to succeed if they emerge in a context that perceives them as a legitimate "element of the political system". Criminalisation, instead suggests that the university does not consider student political activism as legitimate. Consequently, movements such as Open Stellenbosch, StelliesFeesMustFall, and StelliesFeesMustFall 2.0 continue to suffer institutional repression.

## Conclusion

### The legacy of Open Stellenbosch

On May 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, the Open Stellenbosch collective handed the Rector's Management Team a memorandum of demands. The document outlined three key areas that needed consideration. First on the list was the language policy. OS demanded that the

“VC and Stellenbosch University face up to [...] structural racism, by firstly addressing the very foundations of the Language Policy, and not merely the procedural modifications about teaching and translating [...]” (OS, 2015f:2).

The university was asked to make all classes available in English, have every official and unofficial communication from any area of the university available in English, and cease to have Afrikaans as a requirement for appointment to leadership positions at the institution. The movement also demanded that the Afrikaans-to-English translation devices be discontinued as their use “[presumed] Afrikaans as the normative code to which every other non-speaker, generally non-white, is expected to adhere” (ibid.:2).

The second demand was that of re-establishing the Centre for Diversity and Inclusivity by the end of September 2015. Students argued that the centre, under black leadership, would reflect the institution's commitment to transformation. Their final demand outlined in the document was that of developing a new curriculum, considering that

“Apartheid-era ideologies continue to affect what [students] are taught in the present and how such forms of knowledge and ways of being affect the work and thought of those who teach students in a Post-Apartheid context” (ibid.:5).

At subsequent moments of the movement's development, these primary demands were supplemented by the call for free education through the FeesMustFall campaign, demands for the recognition and voice of women and LGBTQIA+ people, and the call to absorb outsourced workers through the EndOutsourcing campaign.

Continually, the issues raised by Open Stellenbosch required robust debate, immense consideration and feasible implementation strategies. Some success has been achieved with some of these demands, although challenges remain. The language policy for example, has been changed and the new language policy, implemented at the beginning of 2017, places English and Afrikaans on equal footing as the primary languages of instruction and communication at the institution<sup>76</sup>. Gelyke Kanse, a group composed of numerous parties including Stellenbosch University's prominent alumni, has taken legal action against this decision, accusing the university of undermining the place of Afrikaans at the institution.<sup>77</sup> The backlash to the new language policy echoes van der Waal's assertion that language continues to be at the heart of identity politics at historically Afrikaans universities, with language activists neglecting the change in the student demographic profile. Therefore,

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<sup>76</sup> The language of the 2016 policy places emphasis on the university as a multilingual space. The policy "aims to increase equitable access to SU for all students and staff and to facilitate pedagogically sound teaching and learning" (SU,2016c). The essence of the new policy thus gives English and Afrikaans equal status, distinctly shifting away from the purpose of the 2014 policy which outlined that "The University is committed to the university was to "the use, safeguarding and sustained development of Afrikaans as an academic language [...]" (SU,2014).

<sup>77</sup> *Gelyke Kanse*, which translates as *equal chances*, is "a new initiative to ensure that Afrikaans will remain a full and equal language of instruction at Stellenbosch University" (Gelyke Kanse,2016). They accuse the university of acting in an effort to appease the masses, an endeavor the respondents state infringes on Afrikaans' overall use at the institution (Nienaber,2017;SAFLII,2017;Gelyke Kanse,2016).

although Open Stellenbosch brought the language discussion back on the table, and perhaps in new terms, *die taaldebat* remains a site of contestation.<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, the statues and symbols that arguably represent a single history and narrative undermine Open Stellenbosch's efforts to recognize the multiple histories and experiences that compose the university space. The mobilization around the history of *Die Vlakte*, for example, convinced the university to publicly acknowledge past injustices, as well as to start a fund for the descendants of *Die Vlakte*.<sup>79</sup> However, it cannot be ignored that the J.H. Marais' statue remains majestic and firmly grounded on the main campus' central point, the rooiplein<sup>80</sup>. Anthems, furnishing and traditions of various residences continue to privilege Afrikaner pride and heritage, contributing to the alienation and trauma of the growing number of black students in university accommodation. At the beginning of 2017 Nazi-style posters, claimed by a group called the New Right, appeared on campus appealing to white students to 'fight for Stellenbosch' thereby showing how the space remains highly contested and deeply divided (SU,2017c).

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<sup>78</sup> *Die taaldebat* is a phrase commonly used at Stellenbosch University to refer to the debate around language use at the institution. The translation of the phrase is *the language debate* (van der Waal,2012).

<sup>79</sup> There is a display set up in the Arts and Social Science building showcasing the history of *Die Vlakte* people that occupied the land upon which the faculty building is built. The display tells the story of how inhabitants of *Die Vlakte*, which translates as the flats, were forcibly removed from the land under the Group Areas Act,1950,1957,1966 (Field notes,2015).

<sup>80</sup> *J.H. Marais* is considered a notable figure at Stellenbosch University. The wealthy farmer contributed £ 100 000 in 1918 which saw the subsequent establishment of the university, which was formerly Victoria College (SU,2015a). Students have called for the statue, which is placed at the institution's central point called the rooiplein or red square, to be removed arguing that it glorifies imperialists and neglects the oppression and enslavement of black people. The statue, and others elsewhere on campus, have not been removed to date.

The growing number of reported incidents of rape and violence against women on campus leaves much to be desired regarding safety and security. The #EndRapeCulture campaign on campus drew attention to violence against women at the institution. This discussion also formed part of an already existing discussion about crime on campus, which the university has worked to remedy through various measures such as cancelling evening tests, increasing campus security personnel, as well as having clearly designated emergency points on campus. The gendered aspect of crime however, signals a need for further interrogation into students' perceptions, understanding and experiences of a broader range of issues around gender, sexuality and violence. Moreover, the call for recognition of gender as a central part of the conversation about institutional change alongside race and class remains relevant. As it currently stands, the university has only a few women, and even less black women in management, council and the convocation, a sentiment that OS captured in an article titled "there are more Professors named Johans than black professors" (OS,2015e). Faculty websites also strikingly indicate that black women senior academics are few. As such, much is still to be achieved in this area.

Similarly, the issue of curriculum reform remains a challenge despite the demands of Open Stellenbosch and other movements elsewhere. What constitutes knowledge, how such knowledge is taught and assessed, as well as who is worthy to teach it, remain points of serious discussion because the pressures of neoliberalism and globalisation have entangled institutions (Badat,2015; Nyamnjoh, 2015). The university remains located within a web of complex social and economic configurations that impact its form and function in significant ways. The pressure on institutions to cater to the global market by producing global citizens, which is often code for students that have a western and neoliberal orientation, is but one



way in which this is expressed. Budget cuts on courses that do not present immediately obvious market returns, such as courses in Education, the Arts and Social Sciences, is another.

I noted earlier in the thesis that there is a constant call for a ‘practical’ education that trains students for national service and development (Kargbo,2002). It cannot be ignored that at the heart of such calls are ideas about the university as a factory producing workers that will advance the conditions of a country. The problem with this view however, is that it models its ideas on western conceptions of advancement and civilization<sup>81</sup>. As such, if the university is indeed a mere factory producing such students, as a consequence of mounting financial and political pressures, it necessarily needs to retain a colonial education that considers the western world as the ideal to which Africa ought to aspire. Discussions about decolonization and curriculum reform therefore not only raise questions about the state and function of South African universities, but the University in modern times.

Furthermore, the demand for free education continues to be at the centre of student protests. At the end of 2017, several institutions had interruptions due to fees related protests<sup>82</sup>. At Stellenbosch University, the academic year continued uninterrupted well into the examination period. However, this is not to say that fees have ceased to be a concern for

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<sup>81</sup> I am reminded of Adam Smith’s distinction between so-called ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ societies. Smith (2000) distinguishes the two by the way in which they organize labour, which he argues impacts productivity and ultimately the wealth of a nation. What is worth noting in Smith’s analysis is that ‘savage’ societies can become civilized if certain labour reforms are introduced. Perhaps it is this very distinction, more so the idea of Africa being ‘savage’ or backwards, that gives rise to the notion of the African university as a means towards civilization or ‘development’. Arguably, civilization in this way constitutes a free +market-driven economy, again, illustrated somewhat by observing the academic courses that get massive funding as compared to those undergoing major budget cuts.

<sup>82</sup> In October 2017, the University of Cape Town, Free State University and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology all experienced academic disruptions due to student protests. The University of the Witwatersrand’s SRC chairperson also warned that protests would erupt at the institution if students’ demands to suspend the fee increment were not met (de Villiers,2017).

students. In October 2017, the SRC and Student Parliament rejected the announced annual fee increment of 8%, demanding a zero percent increase. This sentiment was shared by students at institutions countrywide in a continuous call for free education. In December 2017, former state President Zuma announced ‘free education’ for first years in 2018 that came from households with a combined annual income of up to R350 000. Universities South Africa (USAF) CEO Ahmed Bawa explained that the ‘free education’, which would not apply to post-graduate students, would be implemented through bursaries funded by the Department of Higher Education (de Villiers, 2018). Even so, universities still have autonomy over setting their own fees. Although provision for first year students has been made, the demands of a higher education for all are yet to be met.

Lastly, student protests at SU resurfaced the need for a transformation office for marginalised students’ grievances. The Equality Unit was established in response to this call, supplementing efforts such as the *Hope project*, *SciMathUS* and the recruitment bursary scheme for black prospective students (SU, 2013). According to the university website,

“The Equality Unit at the Centre for Student Counselling and Development, formerly the Institutional HIV Office, promotes collective action towards social justice and discourse regarding social asymmetries at SU. The Equality Unit coordinates, educates and raises awareness around sexualities, gender, HIV/Aids, and anti-discrimination in partnership with relevant campus structures.” (SU, 2016a).

Prior to the establishment of the Equality Unit as part of the Centre for Student Counselling and Development, it was announced that the appointed director of the office was a white man, and not a black professional as demanded in the OS referendum. Although the efforts of the university were recognized, students raised concern about the appointment. Considering the importance of the appointment, and indeed the fact that it was an office that

would deal directly with the issues raised by marginalized students, the decision to make the appointment without consulting these students was perceived as a disregard for their opinions and sentiments. This suggested that black students remained unacknowledged and unrecognized in the space, showcasing the institutions continued difficulty in grasping the heterogeneity of its student body.

### **The forces that be: the black woman, LLL and the internet**

Student protests around the country have continued throughout 2016-7. At Stellenbosch University this has not been the case. In light of this, the question of activism in the institution's future emerges. Who might drive such resistance? Under what circumstance might such resistance arise?

Following the 2015-6 OS and FeesMustFall movements, black women have become the dominant voice for black people in the space.<sup>83</sup> Central to their discourse has been the issues of women, leadership, violence, gender identity, sexuality and sanitation. The #EndRapeCulture campaign, #PadDrive, a black woman SRC president, alongside the push for increased discussions about the concerns of women on campus is illustrative of a move towards more woman-centered discussions in activist circles<sup>84</sup>. It is important to note that although emphasis has been placed on gender specific issues, there is a continued identification with the plight of other black students in the space. Therefore, race and class continue to resonate in their discourse alongside gender and sexuality.

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<sup>83</sup> This sentiment was also echoed in a speech by Lovelyn Nwadeyi during the 2015 FeesMustFall campaign, who stated that the renaming of occupied buildings after black women was symbolic of black women being at the forefront of student activism in South Africa (Bonfiire ZA,2015).

<sup>84</sup> The #PadDrive was an initiative through which women advocated for sanitation and women's rights. Through this initiative, sanitary wear was collected from donors, in an effort to provide free sanitary wear in toilets at the university.

Furthermore, the increase in black student enrolments in a space that still presents challenges for black students, as well as the inception of the Listening, Living and Learning (LLL) housing initiative, presents sites for future black resistance on the ground. Nkomo (1979) and Badat (2015) note that the irony of black higher education under Apartheid is that it produced resistance rather than assimilation. Nkomo (1979) further notes that residences and communal spaces provide spaces for dialogue, robust debate, and discussions around matters of social injustice and shared grievances. This is strikingly evident at Stellenbosch University in the Listening, Living and Learning (LLL) housing project.

LLL, a student housing initiative initially intended for senior students enrolled at the university, was initiated in an effort to remedy the lack of cross-racial integration at the institution. The initiative is “posited on the idea that if people of different races, or ethnicities, or religion, interact and engage with one another on an equal level, then less stereotyping by them will occur” (Dunn, 2013:55).

The program aims to create a space for integration across social identities, by placing different students in a house together for a year. Despite of the initial idea behind the program, what has emerged is the perception that LLL is the alternative to traditional residence for black students. Consequently, the program, which recruits students via a lengthy application and interview process, has become a popular alternative for many black students seeking affordable university accommodation but seeking to avoid the traditional residences. Considering that the initiative prides itself in upholding views that challenge institutional norms, it is no coincidence that during the 2015-6 protests, a large majority of students involved in the movement lived or had close friends at LLL (Field notes, 2015). In fact, the LLL houses have been dubbed the hub of Open Stellenbosch. The nature of the program not only

attracts students that are already more inclined to opposing the status quo, but further provides a conducive environment where ideas can be exchanged and refined. The concentration of students with shared grievances within this communal space carves out a niche for the emergence of student resistance.

While LLL housing provides a physical space for resistance at the institution, social media provides a virtual cyber space for the same purpose. 2015 and ongoing protests captured a lot of social media attention and activity. Facebook and Twitter became a virtual space for original content production, representation, communication, expression of solidarity and community building. The hashtag on Twitter has particularly been instrumental in the formation of online communities, raising awareness about social issues, as well as mobilizing support behind these issues.

Social media, unlike traditional forms of media, allows real-time interaction enabling the rapid exchange of ideas and experiences. In effect, this has allowed online communities to emerge rapidly, around multiple issues and in creative ways. *Black Twitter* as such a community, is a space in which conscientisation of prospective student activists occurs.<sup>85</sup> This was illustrated in 2017 during a tutorial I was giving to second-year anthropology students. During the tutorial, one student asked why it is that the prescribed material was not 'decolonial' texts that are Afrocentric. The student argued that the material was rather Eurocentric. In response to this question, the class of about 20 students applauded.

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<sup>85</sup> *Black Twitter* is the term used to refer to the Twitter content produced by, and that mainly appeals to, black people (Sharma, 2016). This is usually 'racialized humour' content, that typically captures the experience of being a black person in particular contexts. In other instances, it is socio-political commentary on a public issue, again from the perspective of black narratives and the experience of being black.

The question raised by the student was not isolated to a trend I had been observing among younger students who were not present during the 2015-6 protests. It came to my attention that although these students were not present at these protests or in these spaces at the time, they had grasped the language of the ‘struggle’ and exhibited some form of conscientisation, albeit in varied ways. Arguably, the student may not have fully comprehended the academic debates around decolonial theory, nor exhibited the prose of a well-read academic, however, she understood that something was problematic about the material. Her access to social media and other activists when she finally did come to university had provided her with schooling on the subject<sup>86</sup>.

Sharma (2013) argues that hashtags on black twitter serve the purpose of online community building by making central the shared experiences of black people. Hashtags, or *black tags* in the context of *black twitter*, such as #TholukuthiHey #FMF #Becky #Bringbacktheland, act as transmitters of shared “meaning and affect”, disrupting dominant narratives and knowledges (ibid.:48). Black Twitter’s function as a cyber community presents one avenue through which conscientisation<sup>87</sup> may take place online. The use of hashtags such as ‘#woke<sup>88</sup>’ in conjunction with *blacktags* such as #theland, #FMF or #RMF become vital transmitters of the ever-

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<sup>86</sup> Bundy (1987) is relevant here in that he argues that much of the political socialization of the 1980s in the youth took place in the streets. That is, it was an education that was acquired outside of the formalized curriculum. In a similar way, social media is the school of the streets.

<sup>87</sup> I use *conscientisation* as Mies (1973) does in her reflections on Paulo Freire's education method. *Conscientisation* in this definition refers to a knowledge or awareness that not only serves as information, as in making the student aware of social injustice, but also facilitates mobilization, as in mobilizing to reactify the identified issues.

<sup>88</sup> *Woke*, is a term used in popular culture to refer to having social awareness or consciousness. Collins (2017:5) defines it more precisely as “the term woke refers to an awareness of racist attitudes and governing practices and to attempts to address racist attitudes and transform racist governing practices”. The term has its origins in African American vernacular English, and has been appropriated by student activists in South Africa, used particularly on social media in decolonial and apartheid-related discourse.

increasing contradictions in higher education. Through the wider circulation of such *blacktags*, sociological understanding is facilitated, while political action by way of collective activism is proposed as a feasible option to resolving social issues.

Statements that are perceived and granted legitimacy as being ‘woke’, or illustrating ‘wokeness’, effectively communicate the sentiment that “[we are] no longer accepting the things [we] cannot change, [we are] changing the things [we] cannot accept” (BBC News Africa, 2016). Social media therefore not only impacts the understanding of student activism in 2015 and 2016, but also has important implications for how the intellectual, ideas, and the form and character of student movements are conceptualized in times to come.

Since 2016, Stellenbosch University has failed to produce an activist collective such as Open Stellenbosch. However, this is not to suggest that students are not ‘woke’. As I already noted, observation of students suggests that they are socially conscience. A study of social media threads also suggests this. Admittedly, it is black students that exhibit this more sharply. Even so, my own experience with some white students in numerous settings, particularly in tutorials and through the way in which students respond to socio-economic debates, suggests that there is an awareness of sorts, even if it merely translates as policing each other’s word use or an obvious cringe at the sound of another student’s ignorant remark. Considering this, it seems contradictory that there has not been continuous protest at the university. Perhaps one way of accounting for this would be a consideration of the factors that led to the demise of Open Stellenbosch, as outlined in chapter 3. In addition, like Apple suggests for scholar-activists, social awareness does not inevitably translate into activist action. The threat of sacrificing one’s own individual advancement, both academic and social, presents a legitimate challenge for students as well.

Despite these challenges, Open Stellenbosch successfully laid the foundation for black students at Stellenbosch University. The movement started conversations that many were reluctant to engage with publicly. In addition to this, the advent of OS affirmed black students by recognizing them as part of the space. Perhaps the most evident effect of this has been the surge of black students in leadership roles at the institution in subsequent years, including the 2016/17 first black woman SRC chairperson. In addition to challenging how the black student was conceptualized, the protests also gave rise to rethinking the scholar-activist.

I have noted in my reflexive piece earlier in the thesis that I found myself in a position where I had to be intentional and aware of my position as a researcher and how this relates to the people, the content and the complexities of the field in which I worked. Many academics at the university came out in support of the movement, thus positioning themselves as scholar-activists. It must be said as well that many more academics remained in their offices and unengaged. Scheper-Hughes (1995) argues that sometimes the demands of the task are so high that it is paralyzing, especially in the face of self-sacrifice. It is also true that the staff composition at SU is such that there may have seldom been a point of relation between the personal values and experiences of staff and activists. Again, this evokes Scheper-Hughes' call for ethical scholarship. That is, scholarship that is devoted to fighting evil even if it does not present itself in ways that one can immediately identify or easily empathize with. It may be said then, that in as much as the protests presented an opportunity to rethink the student-intellectual relationship, it also presented an opportunity to rethink the position of the scholar and, or as, the activist. Perhaps future studies may investigate what is possible in the space for the scholar and the nature of the student-and-scholar relationship.



In summation, I engaged the demands of student movements while providing insight into the status of these demands at the present moment. I argued that Open Stellenbosch showcased what was possible in the space, even with a small group of people. It may be argued that the movement influenced the landscape of the institution by making it possible to engage the views of students on questions of race, class, and knowledge production in productive and significant ways. OS challenged the university to rethink its position and role in society by introspectively considering their responses to, and relation with, students that are not a representation of its student body under apartheid. An extension of this difficult task also means a consideration of the student-and-scholar relationship. Open Stellenbosch has unequivocally challenged the legacy of apartheid at the institution, thus creating a legacy of its own. That is, it demonstrated that student resistance is possible at the institution. As for student resistance in times to come, it may be said that the knowledge of past resistance, the legacy of OS, unresolved student demands, as well as a new generation of socially conscious students in LLL housing, may all collectively give rise to opportunities for student activism post-Open Stellenbosch.

### **Thesis summary**

This thesis has attempted to grapple with student activism in post-apartheid South Africa by paying attention to Open Stellenbosch, a collective aiming to highlight the challenges and experiences of black students at Stellenbosch University. As one piece of literature through which to access the specifics of SU and the nature of activism in the space, this work is

fashioned in a way that it can be located within a growing stock of efforts towards balancing serious theoretical scholarship and engaged activism<sup>89</sup>.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I argued that Open Stellenbosch (OS) can be located within a broader discourse of student activism, both past and present, globally and locally. Drawing on Altbach and Badat as theoretical anchors throughout the chapter, I here defined student activism, student activist organizations and, student activist movements in an attempt to position OS within this broader framework. I demonstrated that the fragility and short life span of the movement, a discussion I engage in-depth in the third chapter, characterized OS as a student movement. Moreover, I argued that in thinking about student movements in the present moment, the question of representation is central. I illustrated that the emergence of OS outside of the formal student representation channels such as student political parties and more specifically the Student Representative Council (SRC), suggests a dissatisfaction with, and inadequacy of, current modes of representation in voicing the interests of marginalized students in the space. This, I suggest, illustrates that higher education has not yet adequately come to terms with the diversification of its student body. As such, the grievances of black students' and perhaps black students themselves, are not taken seriously nor recognized as belonging in the space, echoing the concerns raised by student activists in the recent protests.

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<sup>89</sup> I have in mind Heffernan and Nieftagodien (2016) *Students Must rise: Youth struggle in South Africa before and beyond Soweto '76*, as well as Booysen (2016) *Fees Must Fall: Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa*. Both these works share themes raised here, reflecting a devoted effort by both student-intellectuals and scholar-activists to fighting for social justice in higher education.

The second chapter further engaged the issue of representation. In this chapter, I attempted to draw considerable attention to the student activist as an intellectual, characterized by her role as a political actor as well as a knowledge producer and disseminator. Using Gramsci and Said as anchors, I characterized the student activist, and the OS movement, as an intellectual whose representations are aligned with the interest of the marginalized and excluded. As a political actor, I argue, student activists are invested in the world, concerns and interests of the subaltern, thus distinguishing them from traditional intellectuals. The ability to produce and disseminate knowledge however, an endeavor that is necessitated by their position as political actors, resembles that of the traditional intellectual. The advent of social media and the widespread use thereof in recent student movements, has framed the discussion of knowledge production in new terms. Social media has significantly enhanced the operations and status of student activists as authoritative knowledge producers, thus contesting the distinction between traditional and organic intellectuals. The ability to partake in content production and disseminate such content at a rapid pace to a wider audience, has not only enabled activists to mobilize support from a broader terrain, but has also enabled them to participate in setting the political agenda and public opinion. This suggests a weakening of the monopoly traditional intellectuals have of the knowledge economy and the representation of minority interests. Although social media has added a new dimension to the conversation about intellectuals and the characterization therefore, existing power dynamics in which it emerges and exists limit such characterisations.

The third chapter engaged the decline of Open Stellenbosch. I argued that the 2015 FeesMustFall campaign disrupted the cohesion Open Stellenbosch as a movement. Fatigue, as a result of both physiological and psychological strain, rendered activists hesitant to

participate in activism in the new year. The high level of commitment necessary to undertake activists' efforts in OS threatened the academic success of students in the movement thus demotivating many activists to continue high levels of participation in the movement. Furthermore, internal conflicts within the movement, centered on identity politics, compromised the collective's seamless continuation. Central to the internal contentions was the role and views of women, as well as the concerns and place of queer bodies in the movement. For potential recruits outside of the movement, the lack of a collective identity they could relate with undermined potential commitment to the movement. Noting that OS emerged in a predominantly white, Afrikaner, and Christian environment, I argued that the predominantly black, non-Afrikaner movement offered little in terms of linguistic, cultural and world-views that its prospective recruits could identify with. As such, the shared experiences and shared understanding of the 'enemy' necessary for collective mobilization and identity lacked, consequently staggering the movement's growth. In addition to this, both prospective members and actual members of OS were discouraged by institution repression. Indirect repressive strategies such as threats of legal action, interdicts, legal charges and suspension from the university, evoked fear and anxiety in activists such that they withdrew from protest action and activist efforts. Direct force repressive strategies such as violence, administered by private security, not only criminalized student activists, but further illustrated the institution's perception of such activism as not a legitimate form of political action.

I conclude the thesis by reflecting on the legacy of Open Stellenbosch. Here I illustrate the impact of OS. I locate students' demands within the present moment. In addition, I engage the relationship of academic and students, drawing attention to the scholar as activist as well

as engaging the possibility of future student activism at the institution and the circumstance that may give rise to this.

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