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GUEST EDITORIAL

What Activism Looks Like in Institutions of Higher Learning

Busisiwe Seabe

The genius of the university in this country has been to portray young black students as the problem in the same terms as W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 treatise, *The Souls of Black Folks*. Black students now recognise, after 21 years of so-called freedom, that the rainbow project has been a failure. Black suppression continues in the symbolic power of academia and in their lived experience. The past two years in our universities have given expression to black suffering and our continued disillusionment with the reconciliation and new South Africa project. At the heart of this expression is a desire to construct an alternative discourse in academia. But more broadly, in society as a whole.

One of the fundamental objectives of the #FeesMustFall movement is also to suggest a different design towards memory-making, decolonisation, and the portrayal of the black lived experience as the trajectory for the debate on contemporary South African society. The fact that we are still teaching young South Africans that colonialism was the best thing for Africa in international relations is the problem. That our political studies teach that apartheid was a good democracy because black people agreed to oppression and death, is the problem. That the canals of black thought do not form a substantive part of our education is the problem. That poor students can be thrown out onto the street because they recognise these problems and approach alternative discourse and agitate for change is the problem.

Because we can't breathe, is the problem. After all, racism, colonialism and apartheid were never the creation of young black students but of all-white councils, senates and academic staff.

When we, young black students, are faced with blatant, sanctioned racism at our institutions of higher learning, we wonder how, after forgiving over 500 years of brutalisation and dehumanisation, we realise that have been betrayed so transparently. There comes a

time when silence is betrayal, and I for one refuse to betray myself. I chose rather to betray the false unity that has been forced down my throat and up my spin. I chose to #FeesMustFall my way to real, substantive and tangible freedom. That is why I believe that #FeesMustFall is more than just a movement centred around fee increments but is also heavily intertwined with the struggle of workers, and our parents. Thus any liberation or victory of students is void without the advancement and insourcing of workers and the unemployed. #FeesMustFall is an extension of the #RhodesMustFall movement. It comes as a response to the ridiculousness that is the education system as an entirety in South Africa. The fact that South Africa spends 0.75% of its GDP on tertiary education which is less than the African or world average was something that we as students, and I myself as an individual, found unacceptable.¹ Education in this country has been and continues to be commodified, which means only a certain calibre of people are able to access higher education, let alone good quality primary and secondary education. Echoing the same sentiments as the protests at Wits in 1995 and in the #RhodesMustFall, #FMF is also a call for decolonization and not *just* transformation. It seeks to address the lack of social decolonisation and transformation as well as to broaden socio-economic and racial inequality issues. #FMF is our generational obligation and it is one we intend on seeing through to the best of our ability. #FMF speaks to identity and positioning within the country, continent and world as a whole. It attempts to structurally and systematically rid our country, identity and socialisation and economy of our colonial history that persists in subliminal ways. It seeks to move South Africa from its post-apartheid apartheid nostalgic era into true Freedom and Liberation through Education.

October 6 happened and I was in Limpopo working on a Free Sanitary Pad drive across various rural communities. It was in that moment that I understood and recognised that October 6 was but a stepping stone to a genuine struggle for free quality decolonised education. I rushed back to Johannesburg and met comrades outside of Solomon House, then known as Senate house. Upon getting to Wits, my first point of entry was to go past Micky's, a local tavern in Braam to grab a couple of beers and land for students.² I had noted through the radio that comrades had had a tough day and would need social lubricants in order to firstly relay the day's events to me, but also to destress and

consolidate accordingly. With black label beer in my bag and land tightly rolled, I made my way onto campus. The atmosphere was electric. There was a certain level of spirituality in the air. It was as if the cries of my forefathers who had died in the mines of Wits were holding a rite of passage ceremony for us. It felt as though we were finally positioning ourselves correctly with the blessings of our forefathers. I felt a sense of calm come over me, as if to comfort me but also to prepare for the long struggle ahead. I found comrades hurdled up in a corner outside Solomon House, singing revolutionary songs with pride and vigour. I remember clearly imagining an instance where we would return to the mountains and cliffs that birthed us. I remember clearly how we knelt down singing ‘Emaweni weMama noBaba...sohLalemaweni amabunu siwagqibile’. Without clearly understanding the nature of the words, I found myself transfixed between my spiritual self and the physical body with which I was now rolling on the floor. There was a certain level of detachment from the world we see and breath in, it was as if *inyanya zami* had prepared a feast for me.³ I cannot remember being as happy as I was the day the ‘revolution’ began.

The coming days that followed were intense and filled with long walks from pillar to post, or rather protests from Braamfontein to Johannesburg Central Business District under the leadership of the then infamous Vuyani Pambo, Nomphendulo and Dlamini. My role was simple, to serve, sacrifice but more especially learn. I found myself comfortably occupying the position of being the caregiver, one of the mothers of the revolution. The one to feed and at times bathe comrades. I found myself so preoccupied with the role of logistics and negotiations behind closed doors and in secret corners and meetings, that I neglected my role in the direct action task team. I vividly recall being summoned at 3am in the morning because breakfast had not been sorted out for students that had occupied Solomon House the previous night. I found myself frantically calling NGO’s and Shelters asking for donations for students. I found myself on social media begging for food and toiletries. It was in that moment that I realised, in fact, that I refused to allow the role of women, my role as a black woman, to be that of a circumstantial mother. I knew my role in the #FeesMustFall struggle was greater than the kitchen duties I had assumed and I would be proven right when we went to the union buildings. It was on this day, the day students, workers,

parents and sympathisers came out in a performance of false power; that I got an opportunity to truly test myself. I had the opportunity to see not only how much I believed in our struggle, but also what I was willing to give for the attainment of victory. The union buildings were a stepping stone in the struggle. It was a moment that separated the non-whites from the blacks. The have's from the have not's. When the announcement was made that there would not be a fee increment for the academic year of 2016, it was then that I realised that the struggle for free quality decolonised education had in actual fact really begun. Heading back to campus after our 'leaders' had embroiled us into what is now the infamous #FeesMustFall Tswane shutdown, and run away, I found myself running through the streets of Pretoria hunting for Wits students in an attempt to get them back to the safety of air conditioned buses filled with food. I needed to return them to the privileged part of our struggle. It was on that very same day that I realised many students were not genuine about the struggle but rather worried about a mere fee increment that would inconvenience their calculated loans. We got back to Braamfontein with students singing and chanting victory slogans, honestly believing that we, David, had conquered our Goliath. With just a few of us resolute in that the struggle had just begun, students then demanded to go back to classes and complete their academic year.

This was a dark time for me. Apart from being threatened into resuming my studies, I had to fight off the very same students and comrades I had spent days on end with, having not showered, having been hungry and having even shared clothes with. I had a choice to either stay true to myself and what I believe is my generational obligation, or betray it. So when 2016 arrived and many of us had spent the December holidays on campus strategizing for the coming year, you can only imagine the feeling of despair and defeat we felt when in January, we had moved from a group of thousands, to but a couple of hundreds, and as the academic year began and students were swept up in the beer garden festivities, to literally under 50. We were the 50 that were determined to keep on fighting; it was as if we had all silently made a blood pack to continue to fight regardless of the consequences. Believe me there were consequences: many of us weren't allowed to register; we didn't have accommodation and had to squat in the post-graduate residences. Everywhere we went we were heavily guarded

by security and refused access into other parts of the university. We were essentially locked out, while being locked in. We got ourselves into a very unhealthy relationship with not only each other but the university. Our anger became misdirected and the goal-post seemed too far and unattainable, but as we had held on to song throughout the 2015 Fees Must Fall ‘journey’, it was again music that pulled us out of the pits of anger and desperation. I realise today, that what we needed was to transcend to a state of Rage: it was then that we channelled Lauryn Hill’s *Black Rage*.

*“Black rage is founded on two-thirds a person
Raping and beatings and suffering that
worsens*

*Black human packages tied up in strings
Black rage can come from all these kinds of
things.*

*Black rage is founded on blatant denial,
sweet economics, subsistent survival,
deafening silence and social control,
black rage is found in all forms in the soul,*

*Black rage is founded on dreaming and
draining*

Threatening your freedom

To stop your complaining

Poisoning your water

While they say it’s raining

Then call you mad

For complaining, complaining

Old time bureaucracy

Drugging the youth

Black rage is founded on blocking the truth

Murder and crime

Compromise and distortion

Sacrifice, sacrifice

Who makes this fortune?

Greed, falsely called progress

Such human contortion

*Black rage is founded on these kinds of
things*

So when the dog bites

And the bee stings

And I’m feeling mad

I simply remember all these kinds of things

And then I don’t fear so bad

*When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when
I’m feeling sad,
I simply remember all these kinds of things,
and then I don’t fear so bad*

*Black rage is founded who fed us self hatred
Lies and abuse while we waited and waited
Spiritual treason*

This grid and it’s cages

*Black rage was founded on these kinds of
things*

Free enterprise

Is it myth or illusion

Forcing you back into purposed confusion

Black human trafficking

Or blood transfusion

*Black rage is founded on these kinds of
things*

Victims of violence

Both psyche and body

Life out of context IS living ungodly

Politics, politics

Greed falsely called wealth

Black rage is founded on denying of self

Black human packages

Tied and subsistence

Having to justify your very existence

Try if you must

But you can’t have my soul

Black rage is founded on ungodly control

So when the dog bites

And the beatings

And I’m feeling so sad

I simply remember all these kinds of things

And then I don’t feel so bad”

It is through that bittersweet melody and deafening truth that we learned the importance of moments, we realised that #FeesMust-Fall 2015 was a collection of moments, it wasn't a revolution, it wasn't a struggle, it unfortunately wasn't resistance either. It was rather what those moments said it was, what the moments made it at the time. A lot of psychological and emotional abuse occurred as a result of #FeesMustFall, and also honestly as a result of our 'consciousness'. I vividly remember the beginning of 2016, in the midst of all the chaos we were part of, be it from being shot at while inside residences to being arrested for running on soccer fields. I recall being handcuffed and thrown into a police van and getting to the Hillbrow police station. I remember an old woman crying on the floor of my arresting officer's office, pleading to be recognised, to be listened to. I remember she walked out sobbing and handed me a piece of paper that had 'PLEASE' written on it. It would be that very same piece of paper months later that I would carry in my back pocket as I assumed my rightful place in the movement. But that place would come after a long, yet short battle with alcohol in such a space as a 'Revolution' like the one we assumed we were having. A book I had read in my first year, Hussein Bulhan's *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, came to mind, after we had been thrown off campus, with no place to sleep and no food to eat. I recall never lacking for any alcohol or land as it was constantly in abundance. Looking back, I recall how the book clearly detailed how the role of alcohol in slavery and colonialism required greater appreciation. At the time, as a first year virgin in all forms, I had never been exposed to 'illegal' substances such as marijuana. Recalling how alcohol of different varieties was produced in large quantities for Europe's conquest of other lands and psyches, I remember having a discussion with comrades on the relation between alcohol and oppression and how it is here more blatant and more ominous today, as it has always been. The fact that the racist government of South Africa hardly disguises how it uses alcohol for social control and for the subjugation of black people was something I worried about when I thought of #FeesMustFall 3.0. For instance, the West Rand Administration Board, charged with administrative control in Soweto, held a monopoly on all legal sales of alcohol in the huge township. In Soweto alone, it used to sell 160 million barrels of beer annually. The blood and tears shed due to this level of

induced and manipulated consumption are impossible to measure. The number of lives lost, homes broken up, psyches destroyed – these retell the same story of ordained auto-destruction. The wilful design of a racist government knows well the helplessness and painful withdrawal symptoms it can inflict on so many in the black community. Thus in retaliation for the 1976 rebellion in Soweto, the government deliberately burned many beer halls and liquor stores. Looking at our state of being while at Miceys, tongues deep inside beer bottles, I wondered to myself if we truly had been defeated and erased by Rum, Slavery and Molasses! Yet alcohol and other substances would not by themselves be sufficient to force slavery and subjugation on a people without the power of deadly and superior arms. And those arms we would come to know would be those of our mothers and fathers in campus security, whom we had and still do advocate for.

There is a lot one can say about #FeesMustFall, and I often get asked why I jumped in so carelessly. For me, it is simply because Black students and black people at large are dispensable to these anti-black institutions. Black students in South Africa do not matter. We still don't belong here. I am tired of screaming inside, I want to scream and shout and let it all out, I deserve to #FeesMustFall.

Notes

¹ “Wits submits report on higher education funding,” *University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg*, August 10, 2016. Accessed August 26, 2018. <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/general-news/2016/2016-08/wits-submits-report-on-higher-education-funding.html>

² “Land” is local slang for cannabis.

³ *Inyana zami* translates to “my ancestor.”

⁴ Lauryn Hill, *Black Rage*, 2013.

