Decolonisation is now: photography and student-social movements in South Africa

Kylie Thomas

To cite this article: Kylie Thomas (2018) Decolonisation is now: photography and student-social movements in South Africa, Visual Studies, 33:1, 98-110, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2018.1426251
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2018.1426251

Published online: 15 Feb 2018.
Decolonisation is now: photography and student-social movements in South Africa

KYLIE THOMAS

The 2015–2016 student protest movements to decolonise universities and to bring about free education in South Africa have been accompanied by striking images that capture the Zeitgeist of the post-apartheid state. This paper focuses on photographs taken by students who also took part in the protests and argues that a new iconography has emerged that references the past but that also breaks away from the social documentary forms of representation that characterised the struggle against apartheid. I explore how the resurgence of black consciousness is made manifest in visual images and argue for reading photographs by student-protestor-photographers as tangible signs of the emerging ‘woke’ subjectivities of young black people in South Africa today.

One fine day, you’ll realize that people don’t want to be better. So you’ll have to make them better. And how do you think you’ll go about it?”

James Baldwin (1998, 659)

On 22 February 2016, a group of black students who were protesting against systemic racism at the University of the Free State in South Africa disrupted a rugby match, the quintessential symbol of white male Afrikaner masculinity and aggression, taking place on the campus. Within minutes, a large number of white spectators rushed onto the field and began assaulting the protestors. Once the protestors had been chased from the field the rugby match resumed.

My friend Mohammad Shabangu and I had arrived at the campus that afternoon in order to meet with Professor Andre Keet, then director of the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice. The institute had been founded 5 years before, in the wake of ‘the Reitz incident’, where four black workers at the university were forced to eat dog food by white students who had urinated in the food and filmed the workers eating it. Since that time, the work of the institute had centred on addressing the deep-rooted racism at the university.

While it has had some measure of success, the events of February 2016 made clear the scale of the problems and just how intractable they are at this university, which under apartheid was reserved for white, Afrikaans-speaking people.

After we dropped our bags at the residence where we were staying, Mo and I decided to walk around the campus and found ourselves in the midst of an ever-growing group of students who had just been beaten and who had fled from the rugby field. Several people spoke at once, trying to relate what had just occurred and showed us their torn clothes, the rels, bruises and cuts on their skin, and their crushed glasses.

The students, who had legitimate grounds for anger after being physically assaulted by white students and their parents at the rugby ground, refused to leave the campus and continued to sing protest songs. A stand-off took place outside a student residence at the centre of the campus, which, in spite of attempts to desegregate the campus, continues to be inhabited by white men renowned for their racism. A large group of protestors gathered outside the building. An enraged white man appeared, and ran towards the protestors from the direction of the rugby field. Two black students chased him back into the night. In a farcical scene, a group of white Christian students joined hands and began to pray, some of them dropped to their knees. They were accompanied by Christian songs blasted through a large amplifier in an attempt to drown out the songs of the protestors, songs composed in resistance to apartheid that were being sung on the campus for the first time in the history of the university.

Among the police who stood at our backs with their weapons poised were the same officers who killed activist Andries Tatane at a protest in this same province in 2011. Stones were thrown at the protestors by unseen people standing in the distance and suddenly the police began shooting and people ran, scattering in all directions. A pregnant woman fell and was injured. The terror of that night conjured Mississippi, the Freedom
riders being beaten in the South, Alabama, the death of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and closer to home, Sharpeville, Soweto, Langa, Athlone, Marikana.

Mo and I began to run. There was a hail of stones and Mo was struck on the back. We held hands, running across an empty lot. A young man appeared next to us and we followed his terrified flight. We found ourselves alongside a chain-link fence and crouched in the darkness trying to assess the scene. We needed to cross a bridge that was just ahead of us, beyond which lay the road leading to where we were staying. At the far end of the bridge were two pick-up trucks, facing each other. In the trucks were groups of white men filled with hatred for the protesters who had been patrolling the edges of the campus waiting for the opportunity to shoot at us. Groups of protesters appeared on the road nearby. If we waited there any longer the police would arrive and we would be trapped. Behind us there were people running and the sounds of gunfire. We ran across the bridge, through the centre of the blinding light of the trucks; it was as if we were no longer there, as if we had been disintegrated by fear. On the other side of the bridge we emerged into darkness and kept on running.

The following day the campus was deserted except for the protesters and police. The right-wing militia gathered at the entry gates. Occasionally a pick-up truck passed ominously through the campus. Statues honouring the founding fathers of the university and the apartheid state had been toppled. A group of students tried to start a fire in the doorway of a building, but it did not take. Protesters were standing around, unsure of what to do next. The ugly violence of the previous night made manifest the undercurrent of hatred that contaminates everything in that place. To speak of reconciliation in such a context seems a perverse joke. A man seethed through his teeth at me, ‘white flesh, white flesh’. The threat of violence was everywhere and despair set in.

In South Africa, the struggle for freedom has been met with violence for so long that much of the time it feels like an unbearable place to live. The student movements that emerged in 2015 were read by many as a sign that a new generation – the so-called ‘born-frees’ – were returning to an earlier moment, the time of black consciousness in the 1970s, and, at the same time, forging a new and positive path. During the protests students called for universities to be decolonised and for curricula focusing on black history, philosophy and politics. Many of the students involved in the protests were profoundly sceptical of what might be termed the constitutional path and were dismissive of the role of the law in bringing about social change. At the same time, many students seemed to have a rather naive view about the place of violence in the struggle to bring about change in South Africa, which has always disproportionately affected black people. Ideological uncertainty emerged in contradictory positions taken by some members of the student movements who, for instance, supported the struggles of workers and at the same time aspired to a place within the neo-liberal socio-economic order. The turn to black consciousness philosophy is arguably a psychological necessity for young black people fighting against racism in a supposedly post-racist society. Yet in other ways it was anachronistic and did not offer the critical tools required to formulate a political response to the new forms of violence of the neo-liberal post-apartheid state.

In this paper, I focus on how visual representations of the protests make it possible not only to reflect on the significance of the events of 2015/16 but also to contest dominant versions of the history of these movements. Reading images made by student activist photographers, I describe the new iconography of resistance that has emerged with and through the struggles of young people in South Africa today. This iconography draws on, references and re-animates the past and yet breaks away from the social documentary forms of representation that characterised the struggle against apartheid. I focus on the performative force of photographs in the context of the student’s struggle against ongoing injustice, and argue that the student social movements represented acts of decolonial world-making within which visual images, and particularly photographs that were circulated through social media and through online news sites, played a central role. What emerges from these protests is not a clearly articulated statement or argument, verbal or written, but rather a performative politics and a lucid visual language. The country is, after all, no stranger to political theatre. In 2015, the opposition party formed in the wake of the Marikana Massacre, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), attended the inauguration of parliament dressed in red worker’s uniforms, the clothing of domestic workers, gardeners and miners, those who earn the lowest wages in the country and who represent the exploitation of black bodies and their labour by white South Africans and white capital as well as by the rising black elite.

While certainly not all student protestors are EFF members, the performative power of visual protest was not lost on them. Photographs of the student movements not only document the events as they happened, they also produce tangible signs of the emerging ‘woke’ subjectivities of young black people in South Africa today.
RISING AND FALLING, REDUX

After the murder of South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko by the security police on 12 September 1977, South African artist Paul Stopforth produced a series of images representing Biko’s corpse. He also created a large-scale work called ‘Freedom Dancer: The South African’ (1993). When I wrote to him to ask him about his work he sent this image along with the Biko series (Figure 1). He wrote, ‘I have attached the painting “Freedom Dancer” because it is the metaphorical rising of the ideals that Steve embodied.’ For him, the image represents Biko’s ideas, the freedom of the spirit, a liberated person. However, Stopforth’s image does not represent a purely joyful subject, but also invokes the dances that form part of protests in South Africa. Behind the dancing figure are five large light-coloured hands that produce a radiant arc, the hands of others who form part of the protesting crowd perhaps, or hands raised in an attempt to arrest the freedom dancer’s flight. If Stopforth’s sombre images of Biko’s murdered body appear to be becoming stone, the life-force of the freedom dancer seems to be rendered in points of light and can barely be contained by the plane upon which it is manifest. The person’s face is resolute, body suspended in mid-air, intent on a leap into the future.

Stopforth’s suggestion to me in 2011 that Freedom Dancer be understood as a part of the series he made about Biko’s death was prescient and Biko’s famous statement, ‘It is better to die for an idea that will live than to live for an idea that will die’ was to be realised almost 40 years after his murder, when students across South Africa, many of them inspired by the philosophy of black consciousness, rose up to protest against injustice in the present. The protests began after students at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg released a document entitled ‘Wits Transformation Memo 2014’, which critiqued the slow pace of change at the university after the end of apartheid. This was followed by a series of protests at the University of Cape Town (UCT), when a student at the university, Chumani Maxwele, threw excrement at the statue of colonist Cecil John Rhodes that loomed over the steps leading up to the campus buildings. The statue was subsequently removed though the students who campaigned for its removal continued to call for the decolonisation of the campus and curriculum.

As Harry Garuba observes in his notes towards an African curriculum,
Protests continued throughout 2015, including against the seemingly immovable forms of economic and structural violence bound to the colonial paradigm students were seeking to overturn. By the end of the year the protests focused on financial exclusion and the outsourcing of workers on university campuses. The Rhodes Must Fall movement at UCT was swiftly followed by the formation of Open Stellenbosch, a collective of students and staff who sought to rid Stellenbosch University of the remnants of apartheid. Similar movements began across the country and by the end of the year had become a national movement calling for the end of fee increases and, ultimately, free education for all: #feesmustfall (Figure 2).

The start of the 2016 academic year was marked by incidents of racist violence that made all too clear how deep the problems are: at the University of the Free State white students and their parents attacked black student protestors when they disrupted a rugby match on the campus (described above); and at the University of Pretoria the conservative grouping AfriForum attacked black students. The violence visited upon protestors by the police and private security officers culminated in the shooting of students at various campuses, and led to the indefinite closure of North West University Mahikeng campus.9

Just as in 1976, when school pupils rose up against apartheid and against the education system of the oppressor, and like the Black Panther movement in the United States, these protests were led by young black people who faced considerable violence in response to their dissent. The student movements in South Africa emerged at a time of a growing global consciousness and resurgence of resistance to the ongoing racist violence to which black people are subject. The student movements can certainly be linked to the actions of the striking workers at Lonmin Mine in 2012, who were calling for a living wage and who stood their ground in the face of the army of police officers brought in to subdue them. Marikana was the first massacre committed after the legislative end of apartheid and it threw all the ways the system has not changed into sharp relief.

Widespread protests against the state, the mine-owners, and the systemic inequality and injustice in the country were slow to emerge. Footage and images of the murder of community activist Andries Tatane in 2011 and the massacre at Marikana were widely circulated, and photographs played a critical part as evidence in the trials of those responsible for these acts. In the case of Tatane, the police officers were acquitted on the spurious grounds that it was not possible to identify them accurately as they were wearing helmets. In the case of Marikana, two documentary works – Rehad Desai’s film ‘Miners Shot Down’ (2014), and Greg Marinovich’s photographs of the site of the massacre and the book that followed, Murder at Small Koppie (2016) – have been central to public perception of the events and the commission of inquiry into the massacre. In spite of clear evidence against the police, none of those responsible for the deaths at Marikana have been held accountable. In my reading of the student protests, while Marikana may not have been a direct cause, the murder of the striking miners and the widely circulated footage of police hunting down those who fled from the scene and executing them in cold blood, played a significant role in the emergence of the student movements. This is not simply because students were able to see the horror of the white supremacist capitalist system at work and the ways in which the current state perpetuates the forms of violence it claims to oppose, but also because they were forced to question their
own role within that system and that of the institutions to which they were affiliated. Within Open Stellenbosch, for instance, debates began about the racist institutional culture of the university and the way in which the language policy was a form of discrimination against black students, and moved outwards to engaging with social and economic injustice in the country as a whole. By the time of the third anniversary of the Marikana massacre the students who formed part of Open Stellenbosch initiated a ‘Remember Marikana’ campaign and planted 34 large white crosses at the centre of the University campus.

Right from the first, both police and private security were present at the protests on campuses, and the relationship between members of university management, the state, those policing the protests, and students, grew increasingly volatile. The right to freedom of assembly and peaceful protest, important and hard-won rights after the end of apartheid, had never been secured in the post-apartheid context – protest continues to be criminalised and the militarisation of the police over the last 10 years has intensified the use of violence in public policing. The same officers responsible for the death of Tatane in 2011 and the murder of the striking miners at Marikana in 2012 were among those deployed to police the student protests in 2015 and 2016.

What was it that motivated the protests and kept the students together in the face of significant opposition, threats of disciplinary and legal action, and the risk of violence and arrest? The protests on university campuses were the focus of mainstream media and drew significant national and even international attention. The continual documentation and circulation of images of the protests certainly played a role in sustaining their momentum. The historical moment in which these protests began is significant and cannot be overstated – 20 years after the legislative end of apartheid, 3 years after the Marikana massacre, 2 years after the death of Nelson Mandela and 5 years into the presidency of Jacob Zuma, young South Africans are beginning to find their voices. There is much to be angry about – South Africa remains the most unequal country in the world, there are high levels of murder and rape, many black South Africans still do not have access to essential services or adequate housing, and corruption in the government has led to a crisis in confidence in the ruling party, and in particular the current President, Jacob Zuma.

There has been considerable debate about whether the student movements have brought about ‘real’ change and about whether they will be sustained in the future. These arguments focus on the outcome of the protests, rather than the emergence of the movements themselves and their significance for the young people who formed them. As political theorist and the former Vice Chancellor of the University currently known as Rhodes, Saleem Badat notes, ‘It is important to avoid seeing the student protest movement in purely political and instrumental terms, for this could miss possible cultural, expressive, and symbolic aspects of the movement’ (2016, 16). He goes on to write that ‘the student protest movement may not only be a challenge to dominant cultural codes, but also a possible laboratory of cultural innovation’ (17). Badat’s suggestion offers a productive way to understand the creative and critical strategies employed by the student movements and to think about the significance of images produced by students themselves. While the students drew on earlier forms and practices of struggle, for instance singing anti-apartheid songs, a new iconography of resistance was born with these nascent movements.

In the sections that follow I offer an analysis of photographs by two student photographers who documented the protests in the Western Cape and in the Free State, and I discuss a photographic exhibition that took the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town as its focus. Nigel Zhuwaki was an engineering student at Stellenbosch University in 2015 and a member of the Open Stellenbosch collective. He documented student protests at Stellenbosch and at other universities in the province, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, UCT and University of the Western Cape. Lihlumelo Toyana was a student at University of the Free State and documented the protests that took place on that campus in 2015 and 2016. Both Stellenbosch University and University of the Free State were reserved for white students under apartheid and until the protests began Afrikaans remained the predominant language of instruction at both campuses. The student movements on both campuses contested what they considered to be the exclusionary language policies of the universities, which, they argued, favoured white Afrikaans speakers. Both campuses are notoriously conservative and remain strongly associated with apartheid ideology. The student protests of 2015 were the first significant interventions to challenge white supremacy at these universities and the failure of the post-apartheid government to dismantle institutional racism.

‘BIKO LIVES WITHIN US’

The return to black consciousness in the present indicates that many young South Africans recognise the need to
uproot and overturn the remnants of apartheid in the present as well as to challenge the current African National Congress (ANC) government, guided in its approach first by the Freedom Charter, and then by a succession of increasingly neo-liberal economic policies that have betrayed its founding doctrine. However, the visibility of signs and images representing Steve Biko were nowhere more significant than on the campuses of former Afrikaans universities such as Stellenbosch and University of the Free State, which remain dominated by white Afrikaans speaking students and fiercely protective of white hegemony.

While those who hold power in such places feel no qualms about asserting the right to safeguard their heritage, they are decidedly upset when this is called by its proper name: white supremacy. Nigel Zhuwaki documented the Open Stellenbosch Collective from its formation in March 2015. He took several photographs of the protest staged by the collective at the ceremony marking the removal of the plaque honouring H. F. Verwoerd, one of the primary architects of apartheid, and Prime Minister of South Africa from 1958 until 1966 when he was assassinated. In addition, he has made a number of portraits of student protestors that convey elements of black consciousness philosophy in visual form. Zhuwaki’s series of silhouettes of the heads of young black people incorporating other photographs, including images of the protests on the Stellenbosch University campus, were made using double exposure. These photographs refer to Biko’s claim that ‘the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed’ (Biko 1987, 68). Zhuwaki’s photograph (not pictured here) of the head of a young man that contains an image of the empty corridors of a university building is in marked contrast with the ‘freedom dancer’ who resides in another version of this same silhouette (Figure 3). In another image, the freedom dancer is replaced by an ominous portrait of a young black security guard or police officer pointing a gun directly at the photographer, and viewers of the image, through the head of the silhouetted figure (Figure 4).

The visual references to black consciousness in Zhuwaki’s work can be read in relation to photographs by Tony Maake, a former student at Stellenbosch University and a talented photographer, whose professional moniker is Tony Mac, who participated in the protests. He has taken a large number of portrait photographs in Kayamandi, a township neighbouring the town of Stellenbosch where many of the black people who work in the town reside. His images of children and everyday life in the township are interspersed with photographs of beautifully clad sartorialists, evoking the legendary style of Sophiatown at the height of the jazz era in the 1950s, before forced removals, and the Amapantsulas – those who defied the apartheid order and developed a distinctive mode of dress and dance-style in the 1960s. These images draw on the iconography created by photographers who produced photo-essays for the influential Drum magazine, which documented the experiences, music and style of black South Africans from the 1950s onwards. While the connections between fashion and black consciousness and liberation may seem tangential, those who are familiar with the history of black resistance movements in the 1970s will recall slogans such as ‘Black is Beautiful’, and will recognise how the art of self-fashioning was and is central to contesting racist representations of blackness. Mac’s photographs also recall an even earlier set of images of educated, well-to-do, black South Africans in the early 1900s before the catastrophic Natives Land Act was passed in 1913, which form the subject of Santu Mofokeng’s The Black Photo Album/Look at Me: 1890–1950. Some of Mac’s photographs of sartorialists include students who participated in the protests and the way in which the photographs are captioned, and in particular Mac’s
The photographs that came to signify the 2015 student uprising contain an echo of documentary struggle photography of the 1970s and 1980s, and at the same time break from that tradition. One fundamental difference between the documentation of the student protests that began in Soweto and spread across South Africa in 1976, and continued into the 1980s, and the contemporary student movements is that the images of the earlier protests were taken by journalists and documentary photographers rather than by the students themselves. While many of the photographers who documented the struggle against apartheid were also activists (for instance, some of those who formed part of the Afrapix collective, founded by Omar Badsha and Paul Weinberg in 1982, were, as Afrapix member Gille de Vlieg states about herself, ‘activists first and photographers second’), there were not many student-activist-photographers. In the case of the recent protests on university campuses, many powerful images were taken by students who are photographers and who themselves form part of the movements for change, and hundreds of thousands of images were taken by students who would not describe themselves as photographers but who took photographs with their mobile phones. This is both because of the widespread use of camera phones and digital media and because some of the student protestors are practicing photographers who own digital cameras. While journalists were often present at the protests, the images that were circulated most widely and rapidly were often those taken by student photographer-protestors. In addition, these student photographer-protestors were able to photograph ‘behind-the-scenes’ events and not only the marches or large-scale events attended by mainstream journalists. In this sense, some of the images produced by student-activist-photographers resemble those taken by activist-photographers under apartheid who documented the meetings of trade unions and of organisations such as the End Conscription Campaign and the United Democratic Front.

The rapid and wide circulation of images was a significant difference between the contemporary protests and those that began in 1976, when the apartheid state controlled the media and photographers were routinely jailed for documenting protests. All the student movements established their own Facebook and twitter pages and circulated information among themselves. Within a few days of their formation the Rhodes Must Fall and Open Stellenbosch Facebook pages had thousands of members, growing to around 10 000 and 5000 respectively. Interestingly, the students I worked with as part of the Open Stellenbosch Collective were often oblivious to the fact that they were featured on the front page of printed newspapers such as The Argus, The Cape Times and Die Burger. This seems to indicate the degree to which online media has supplanted print media among young people in contemporary South Africa. The newspapers were keenly aware of this and the editors of The Argus invited Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) activists to edit a special edition of the newspaper. Many of the student protestors were acutely aware of the role of images in shaping perceptions and used visual media to great effect. For instance, the Open Stellenbosch collective created circular signs that contained an image of the apartheid-era South African flag with a red cross painted over it and held these up en masse during the ceremonial removal of the plaque honouring H. F. Verwoerd in 2015. The university was obliged to take down the plaque due to the insistence of the students and the bizarre, formal ceremony paid homage to Verwoerd even as the removal of the plaque was framed as a form of redress. Students held up the signs in unison during the speeches delivered by the Vice Chancellor and by Verwoerd’s grandson. The message of the silent protest was widely received due to the photographs of the protestors, which were published in print and online newspapers. In 2015, Contraband Cape Town (a small group of students at the University of Cape Town) produced a documentary about the experiences of students at Stellenbosch entitled Luister (Listen). After the film was viewed by close to 400 000 people online within a matter of weeks, a national debate about racism in the country erupted and the Open Stellenbosch collective were called to a meeting at Parliament to address their grievances. Neither the filmmakers nor anyone who appeared in the film anticipated that it would be so widely circulated. The effects of the documentary testify to the power of the combination of film and social media to rapidly widen the circle of engagement and draw the attention of those who were outraged by racism at the university, as well as that of right-wing detractors.

Even more important than the images produced to be viewed in the public sphere, were those that were shared between student protestors via WhatsApp, which made the rapid transfer of information about protests across the country possible. Images of protests, security guards and police officers, and of court interdicts would be sent to let protestors know where to gather, which spaces to
avoid, and to document the presence of heavily armed guards. These images circulated beyond the protestors themselves through friends, family members, and networks of lawyers who were supporting the student movements, to NGOs and the public more broadly. To some extent these images served to counter representations in the mainstream press of the student protestors as violent, and to contest accounts issued by university management. While the ways in which the management teams of universities across the country made use of visual and social media is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems important to note that the communications, marketing and public relations arms of the various institutions – key components of the corporate university – went into overdrive in order to keep up with and fight back against what they, for the most part, perceived as an attack by the students on institutions they needed to defend.

A photograph by Nigel Zhuwaki’s of student activist Ijeoma Opara coolly surveying the movements of a white woman, most likely a member of staff at Stellenbosch University, from her leopard-like position on an office chair outside of a university building that students had occupied in protest, perfectly captured the disdainful view young activists have of the persistence of apartheid-era modes of thought and being in the present. The power of this photograph is magnified once the viewer is aware of the location in which it was shot – Stellenbosch University was the birthplace of Afrikaner ideology and the university attended by all the Presidents who led the apartheid state. The chair, which has been liberated from its former role as office furniture, appears outside of one of the many large white buildings that dominate the university campus. The seemingly permanent order of white supremacy on the campus is shown to have been radically disrupted in this photograph in which the chair, rather than the black student who sits on it, is out of place. If this image is read through the lens of the resurgence of black consciousness in South Africa, Ijeoma Opara’s act of claiming the chair evokes Biko’s insistence on the right to a chair in detention. According to the account of the Security Police given in the aftermath of Biko’s murder, an argument began after Biko demanded his right to a chair in his cell and thereafter ‘a scuffle ensued’ that lead to Biko’s death. Those responsible for his murder were not found guilty of this act.

Zhuwaki’s digital copy of the image of Opara disappeared from his collection however, and in the aftermath of the protests he has not been able to locate it. When I asked him about it he said he could not recall whether he took the image, or whether it was taken by Tony Mac. In place of the image of Opara seated on the chair, he sent me a photograph taken on the same day in which Opara is shown standing alongside student activist Khule Duma, who is sitting on the chair, while a group of student protestors are pictured on the steps behind them (Figure 5). While this photograph also portrays how the students claimed the space of the campus, it does not capture the affective charge of the divide between black and white people in Stellenbosch 20 years after the end of apartheid. Having become a phantom image, existing only in the description I have provided here, the first image comes to stand for how so much that was made visible through the protests of 2015 and 2016 has disappeared again, absorbed back into the quicksand of post-apartheid amnesia.

Zhuwaki’s photograph can also be linked to the work of Greer Valley, visual artist and Open Stellenbosch student activist, in particular her exhibition ‘The Chair’, which took as its subject the continued homage Stellenbosch University pays to former leaders of the apartheid state. Valley dis-located the chair that forms part of the collection of the Stellenbosch University Museum that belonged to D. F. Malan, Prime Minister of South Africa from the beginning of apartheid in 1948–1954, and repositioned it as part of a critique of the ways in which the violence of apartheid is disavowed in the narrative the university produces about itself in the present. The exhibition opening included powerful spoken word performances by the Inzync collective and poet Adrian ‘Diff’ Van Wyk, who conducted an imaginary dialogue with a bust of D. F. Malan’s silent stony head. Collectively these creative works can be understood as part of what Badat terms ‘the laboratory of cultural innovation’ that did not simply emerge through the protests, but rather played a key part in the formation of the student movements.

The disappeared image of Ijeoma Opara on the chair outside of the building, and its replacement in the...
archive of accessible images of the student protests with one that positions a prominent male leader of the Open Stellenbosch movement at its centre, provides a disturbing parallel to the forms of erasure I discuss in the section below.

‘DEAR HISTORY, THIS REVOLUTION HAS WOMEN, GAYS AND QUERS TOO’

There have been at least two photographic exhibitions that have taken the student-social movements as their subject.25 ‘Fees Must Fall’, curated by photographer Tony Maake, was held at EineWeltHaus in Munich, Germany in January 2016 and included photographs by Tony Mac (Maake), Justin Sullivan, Justice Machaba, Megan Damon, Nigel Zhuwaki, Christian Helgi Beaussier and Keshia Lee. This exhibition, probably as a result of its location away from the epicentre of the protests in South Africa, did not lead to the same contest over the nature of its content and the narrative it portrayed as was the case with ‘Echoing Voices from Within’ held at the Centre for African Studies Gallery, UCT in January 2016. The latter exhibition was curated by Pam Dhlamini and Wandile Kasibe, both of whom formed part of RMF, and Paul Weinberg, curator of the gallery.26 For some, it came much too soon and represented an attempt both to control the representation, and thus the narrative, history and meaning, of the protests and to turn events that were still unfolding into history. The exhibition included framed photographic prints of what the curators perceived to be key moments in the chronology of the protests. The orderly display of the images, as though the content of the exhibition should not affect the form, was bound to provoke dissent, and the decision to stage an exhibition on the university campus could certainly be read as an attempt to defuse and even neutralise the calls to decolonise the institution.27 Black staff and students were in the midst of making powerful arguments about how structural racism at the university ensured that they could not belong there. Through institutionalising Rhodes Must Fall, and in spite of the intentions of the curators, the exhibition seemed designed to undercut these claims.

The opening of the exhibition was stunningly interrupted by the UCT Trans Collective who powerfully refused the neat chronicle of events portrayed through the static images with their physical bodies and through their inscriptions over some of the photographs in a substance that resembled blood.28 This act of resistance evoked Chumani Maxwele’s earlier act where he threw excrement at the statue of Rhodes at the centre of the university campus. The act of the Trans Collective in one sense replicated Maxwele’s protest, and at the same time significantly queered it. Smearing the image with the blood-like substance may not have permanently overwritten the meaning of Maxwele’s act, but it fundamentally threw into question what was widely considered to be the founding moment of the student protests, leading to the removal of the Rhodes statue.

The protest by the Trans Collective sought to make visible a different set of images, including one of Chumani Maxwele assaulting a protestor who formed part of a group of black queer women who questioned a secret #FeesMustFall meeting dominated by men held at the University of the Witwatersrand.29 In spite of the alleged intersectional politics of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, Trans people who formed part of the movement experienced discrimination and even violence both within and without the student movement they helped to found. In their statement released after their protest at the exhibition the Trans Collective wrote,

> It is disingenuous to include trans people in a public gallery when you have made no effort to include them in the private. It is a lie to include trans people when the world is watching, but to erase and antagonise them when the world no longer cares. We have reached the peak of our disillusionment with RMF’s trans exclusion and erasure. We are done with the arrogant cis hetero patriarchy of black men. We will no longer tolerate the complicity of black cis womxn in our erasure. We are fed up with RMF being ‘intersectional’ being used as public persuasion rhetoric. (UCT Trans Collective, March 10 2016, Facebook page)

Members of the Trans Collective lay on the ground at the entrance to the exhibition, insisting that if people wished to see the images they would have to step over their bodies in order to do so, repeating the elision of Trans experience in the show itself. They asserted that, ‘There will be no Azania if black men simply fall into the throne of the white man without any comprehensive reorganisation of power along all axis [sic] of the white supremacist, imperialist, ablest, capitalist cis heteropatriarchy.’

As the night came down
I heard it’s lonely sound
It wasn’t roaring, it was weeping

(Bright Blue 1987)

The Trans Collective drew attention to the fissures within the student movements and the larger context of violence against women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) people both
during the protests and more generally in South Africa. Similarly, the work of Lihlumelo Toyana offers perspectives on the protest movement at University of the Free State and makes visible the violence experienced by women and LGBTQI students.

Toyana’s photograph of a young woman student being dragged along the ground by a private security guard at the University of the Free State campus is certainly one of the most disturbing images taken during the protests (Figure 6). In spite of this it has not assumed iconic status as a symbol of the protests, nor has it been widely circulated or discussed. It powerfully conveys the extent and extremity of the violent measures employed by private security guards and the police in their attempts to block the protests. The photograph is an indictment of the impunity that makes such forms of violence possible and of the normalisation of violence against black women and queer people in South Africa. The composition of Toyana’s image draws attention to how structural violence is compounded by an unwillingness or refusal to see what is before you. In the photograph two heavily armoured male security guards, armed with riot shields and batons, are pictured walking through what appear to be bushes of the sort planted at the roadside. It is an area on the margins of the shared, public spaces of the campus and its isolated location gives the image an even more sinister quality than it would have were the woman in the centre of a group of protestors or in a more publicly visible place. The image conjures up stories of women and LGBTQI people who have been dragged into the bushes at the roadside and who have been raped, beaten and killed at so many places across the country that the landscape reads as a map of horror.

Between the security guards is the woman, her body concealed by the dense foliage in the foreground. Her face appears resolute. The security guard in the foreground holds her by her backpack and is dragging her backwards. He seems to be walking towards the camera, his face angled towards the ground, his expression inscrutable. A man who appears as though his terrible actions will haunt him in the future, in fact, already seems haunted, and indeed, this is at least part of the task of this photograph. It resolutely asserts that this man dragged this woman along the ground. That this scene was not witnessed other than by the perpetrators is captured in the photograph itself – in the background a small group is pictured sitting together on the edge of a low wall. It is clear that the woman who is being dragged along
the ground is not visible to them. It is an event no one was meant to see. And yet the photographer has witnessed this violence and has made it visible, and once it has been seen, it cannot be unseen. The guard standing a short distance away from the woman, who could easily kick her or hit her with his baton, looks over his shoulder with an expression that implies he suspects they have been seen, or that he has caught sight of the photographer as she documents their act.

Toyana’s photograph does not show the woman struggling or resisting arrest. Rather the image conveys the woman’s powerlessness at the hands of the police. The presence of the police van affirms the unequal balance of power between the protestors and the forces that seek to restrain them. The police are agents of the state – they are armed and have the means to both cause serious injury to the students and to arrest them. In some of the images from the protests at Wits University in Johannesburg that took place in October 2016 students are shown holding riot shields they have liberated from the police in order to protect themselves from a hail of rubber bullets. The students begin to resemble a makeshift army, donning the stolen, discarded or invented armour that is the thoroughly inadequate uniform of civilians everywhere in times of war and state-sponsored violence. Women and LGBTQI people were particularly vulnerable to the violence of the police and private security guards and several students recounted being groped and assaulted during the protests.

Toyana’s photograph provides chilling evidence of the way in which women and queer students have been targeted, threatened and abused by security guards and police officers. It evokes footage and still images circulated on social media of a female student at UCT being dragged by her hair by a police officer, and whose braids were torn from her head, in October 2016. Female students have occupied central roles in the movements challenging racism and sexism at South African universities as well as in the Fees Must Fall movement. At the same time, these collectives and the protests they have held have been dominated by the heavy presence of heteronormative male aggression and violence. This has taken form in the presence of a phalanx of physically intimidating and ostentatiously armed and armoured private security guards and police officers at every protest and through the actions and words of some of the angry and less critically informed protestors who are either oblivious or blatantly opposed to the intersectional politics that underpinned the formation of these movements. The powerful role women have played in the protests, as well as the key part of LGBTQI students, has been a wake-up call to the majority of South African men and the emergence of queer and feminist activism on campuses across the country revivifies hope of young people resisting and addressing ongoing gender-based violence and inequality in the country. At the same time, speaking out and standing up against the marginalisation of women and queer people has been met with violence both from inside and outside of the student movements.

Photographs representing the violence students experienced at the hands of the police and private security affirm the epistemic, symbolic and physical violence students have recounted experiencing at universities prior to the time the protests began. Thando Njovane, who completed her Master’s degree at the University currently known as Rhodes, writes powerfully of her experience of enduring ‘the accumulation of seven years of hateful and hurtful violence’ while she was a student there (2015, 119). The student protests in 2015 and 2016 have sought to chart a course away from the violence of the past and, in the process, have been met with intense resistance and violence in the present. Although, as of yet, little has been resolved, young people in South Africa are refusing to have the question of a decolonised future deferred any longer. For those who insist on the need for patience, James Baldwin’s retort in his essay ‘Faulkner and Desegregation’ is apposite:

But the time Faulkner asks for does not exist – and he is not the only Southerner who knows it. There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now. (Baldwin 1956)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Mo and Emile. Thanks to Paul Stopforth for allowing me to include ‘Freedom Dance: The South African’ in this paper. Thanks to Lihlumelo Toyana and Nigel Zhuwaki for their photographs. I am grateful to Thando Njovane for sharing her chapter with me. I am grateful to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, where I presented a version of this paper. Thanks to Emile Engel, Mohammad Shabangu, Simone Cupido, Thato Phatlane, Wamuwi Mbao, Majaletje Mathume, Neil du Toit, Stephane Conradie, Portia Lujabe, Ijeoma Opara, Khule Duma, Athini Mzaiyi, Nwabisa Makaluza, Monde Petje, Rabia Abba Omar, Phumile Sikiti, Thando Joka, Jodi Williams, Tshepo Modiri, Anelisiwe Mbude, Kara Ikaneng, Greer Valley, Leonard le Roux and all the students who made the Open Stellenbosch collective possible. Thanks to Mandy Mudarikwa at the Legal Resources Centre and Tracey Lomax, Johan Pienaar and the response team who offered legal support and advice to Open Stellenbosch. Thanks to Andre Keet for politics and solidarity. Thank you to Alastair, Sophie and Jemma for not only standing by me, but for marching with me through a very hard year.
DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

FUNDING

This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers Grant number 106045. All ideas expressed are my own and the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard. I also acknowledge the support of the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna and the EURIAS Fellowship co-funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, under the 7th Framework Programme.

NOTES

[1] The response of the white spectators to the protest can be read as a horrifying reversal of Nelson Mandela’s famous gesture of national reconciliation, when he donned a Springboks rugby jersey at the Rugby World Cup in 1995. It could also be argued that that earlier moment was an instance of the superficial gestures of reconciliation that sought to paper over the deep-rooted racism of white South Africans and that the roots of the violence that erupted at UFS in 2016 can be traced back to the failures of the negotiated transition. Thanks to Darren Newbury for suggesting that I draw attention to this connection here.


[3] There have of course been numerous statements, memoranda and lists of demands issued in the name of the various student movements and articulating the aims of the Fees Must Fall movement. The Open Stellenbosch Collective drafted a new language policy for Stellenbosch University and members of the various movements have published articles online and in the newspapers. However, it is certainly the visual (performance, photographs and film) that dominates during the protests themselves, on social media and in the press.

[4] The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is a socialist revolutionary political party founded in 2013 by party leader, Julius Malema, after he was expelled from the ANC Youth League.

[5] ‘Woke’ is a term associated with the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and it has been taken up by young people in South Africa to refer to those who are conscious of intersecting forms of oppression and are seeking to contest injustice.


[9] On the violence directed at the protestors by the white spectators at the rugby match at the University of the Free State, see Nicolson (2016).

[10] For instance, at UCT students called out the university management and Council for having blood on their hands for holding shares in Lonmin.


[12] A selection of these photographs can be viewed online. See: http://dambakuombera.tumblr.com.

[13] Lihlumelo Toyana is a documentary photographer and visual activist. She was born in the Eastern Cape and has completed two degrees at the University of the Free State. In 2014, she completed her certificate in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography from the Market Theatre Photo Workshop in Johannesburg, an organisation founded by David Goldblatt and that has trained some of the most influential photographers working in South Africa today. Her photographs were included in the ‘40/40 – Politics of Photography’ exhibition held at the Market Photo Workshop Gallery in 2016 see: http://www.contemporaryand.com/exhibition/4040-politics-of-photography/.

[14] ‘Biko Lives Within Us’ appeared on posters during the 2015 student protests at various campuses across the country.

[15] On the renaming of buildings by student protestors at the University of the Free State, see Hatcher (2016).


[17] Photographs by Tony Mac can be viewed online: http://tonyshouz.tumblr.com.


[19] Perhaps the most important work documenting the student uprising in 1976 is photographer Peter Magubane’s June 16: Fruit of Fear, 1986.

[20] In an interview I conducted with Gille de Vlieg in 2012 she described herself as an activist who also took photographs, whereas she said of the other Afrapix members that ‘they were activist photographers, they saw themselves as photographers’ (Thomas 2012).


[23] For an account of Biko’s life and murder see Bernstein (1978) and Mangcu (2013).


[25] The heading for this section is drawn from a poster made by Sivu Siwisa and displayed at a protest at the University of Cape Town, 2015.

[26] The press release for the exhibition can be viewed here: http://webcms.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_
REFERENCES


Johannesburg: Wits University Press.