# ☙ Opinion Piece 02 ❧

## The Fallists and White Male Hegemony

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In this opinion piece, I turn my lens onto the genesis of the Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa 2015, when students at the University of Cape Town organised a mass call for decolonisation. I argue that the impact this movement had on the psyche of White masculine hegemony became the mirror image of the very thing that Whiteness does to Blackness in its gaze upon the 'Black skin' – that oppressor's gaze which in their imaginary erases its (wearer's) humanity, thus eviscerating the soul of Black humanity and the personhood of the Black individual. This remains the gaze of Whiteness on the Black subject even after the so-called emancipation of the dispossessed majority in South Africa because neither economic nor cultural emancipation occurred when the ANC came into power. In this 'post-apartheid' state, Whiteness has remained stuck in the master-slave narrative precisely because there has been no pressure on the White collective to move out of their apartheid consciousness. The power/race dialectic has had no reason to budge in the White imaginary, decades after independence was declared, and the White population continues to view the Black population in terms of the master-slave framework. It was this untenable reality that gave rise to the decolonisation movement under the banner of #RhodesMustFall.

As the collective call for decolonisation by a mass body of Black students spread nationally and gained traction, it shook the White status quo to its very roots of coloniality, creating collective paranoia in those who occupied White hegemony – a status quo that has remained obdurate and static in relation to the majority. This crisis then mirrored their own ontological and epistemological violence back onto them as they, in turn, fell into their crisis mode at the possible invisibilisation, or worse, eradication of themselves in the


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framework of the potential shifting of power in a decolonised reality. This neurotic response occurred precisely because, in the White academic imaginary, the possibility of a Black collective challenging their superior positionality in their space of certainty, had not occurred to them as remotely possible. In the White masculine hegemony, particularly in a settler country like South Africa, this gave rise to Fanon's assertion on page 109 of *Black Skin White Masks* that:

> ... As long as the Black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of 'being for others', of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonised and civilized society.

I write from the position of a White woman born in the 1960s in an apartheid South Africa and socialised to accept the tenets of White privilege and racism. At a certain time in my life, I recognised all the ways my identity has encouraged me in reproducing racism. Whilst I do not believe that I cannot not be racist I enter this discussion as someone who has been named a race traitor because I refuse to look away from structural and day-to-day racism perpetrated by White people in this country. My consciousness was spurred on by various acts of rebellion and defiance that I took up willingly in my youth as well as a continued deep reflection of my place in a White society.

As a social critic and op-ed writer, I covered many aspects of the ***Rhodes Must Fall*** and ***Fees Must Fall*** uprising between 2015 and 2017 and published my writing in various newspapers. What follows is an extrapolation of some of my observational opinion pieces with additional writing drawn from the fieldwork and film work that both I, and social justice activist Sipho Singiswa, did when we extensively covered the Fallist movement. I must declare that there were many times in the struggle where White presence was inappropriate and sometimes not welcome. In those instances, I recused myself. Singiswa, however, camped out with the students as they occupied Bremner Hall, at the University of Cape Town (UCT), for weeks and he recorded the struggle as it grew into a momentous nationwide action which eventually became known as ***Fees Must Fall***. It was out of this movement that a decolonial body of theory and praxis took place under the title of Fallism.

In March 2015, 21 years after the rise of democracy in South Africa

(in the framework of liberation) a single UCT student performed the act of throwing human faeces onto the statue of Cecil John Rhodes – which was erected on the stairs in front of the main hall on the campus – a monolithic structure of Rhodes staring contemplatively over the landscape towards Cairo, signifying his dream to build a railway track across Africa and colonise all the people, land and resources in its wake.

The fact that this colonial statue still occupied a space of honour in a so-called post liberated South Africa tells us all that we need to know about the utter failure that this 'liberation' had been for the majority, because since the negotiated settlement in 1994, though there had been some change as seen in the building of a Black middle class and the cessation of apartheid laws, that is where it ended. Not much had, nor has, changed for the majority of Black South Africans in the systemic and institutional racism that had continued to plague this so-called Rainbow Nation. This continues to manifest both in high levels of racial incidents on our social landscape as well as in the silent and violent scourge of the covert and insidious racism that Black people are exposed to daily in institutional attitudes by the White and privileged. It is still most obviously seen in the gross economic inequalities between White folk and the majority of Africans, who continue to live in desperate poverty, still landless.

By the time Chumani Maxwele threw human faeces onto the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, it was clear that Black people were *gatvol* of (loosely translated as 'fed up') the bourgeois democracy that entrenched Whiteness and gave rise to market values in place of a developmental state – which resulted in corporate rule from which the African National Congress (ANC) leadership benefitted economically at the expense of the majority in a frenzy of neoliberalism which adamantly put profits before people. Post 94 South African politics can rightly be described as the theatre of the grotesque, a spectacle of neoliberal desire which adamantly put profits before people and cuts off the majority from any possibility of joining the economy while usurping them of all social safety nets in the drive for privatisation and profit. The rainbow had long since been shattered and the illusionary electric kool-aid, shoo, wow, non-racism lies had been exposed.

So, when UCT student Chumani Maxwele executed the subversive act of throwing human faeces on the Rhodes statue that had lauded itself over the UCT campus for decades, his systemic disobedience gave rise to collective combustion of defiance premised on the rage of Black students and their

ongoing struggle against systemic racism in the socioeconomic sense and institutional racism in the university sphere. This act shed light on the collective ontological break experienced by Black youth and gave voice to the crisis of their banishment to the space of non-beingness in the dominant White discourse. It was the cry from Black students collectively as they expressed the outrage they had long suppressed around the erasure of Black epistemology on White-dominated campuses as well as in the social spaces of a post-liberated South Africa that continued to privilege the White race over the majority. Chumani Maxwele's use of carnivalesque performance, along with tights and cerise pink hard-hat, viscerally made the connections between the phenomena of the perpetuity of social cultural and economic deprivation imposed on the majority Indigenous to this land vs the perpetual privileging of Whiteness in a so-called liberated South Africa. This, Chumani Maxwele's systemic disobedience told the world, was the stuff that is too intolerable to withhold. It must come out. It must be seen, smelled and experienced by those who perpetuate it. The genius of throwing faeces collected from the impoverished community of Khayelitsha in which he grew up, was a powerful statement about the ongoing dispossession of the Black majority who were still forced to live in untenable poverty with little or no adequate sanitisation in conditions that can be described as medieval serfdom, while the White population had largely grown exponentially richer under the neoliberal dispensation that had replaced what was meant to be reconstructive and developmental reformation.

Frantz Fanon writes that racism denies recognition of the dignity and humanity of the colonised subject and relegates him to the zone of non-being which is viscerally felt by the Black-skinned subject relegated to what Fanon calls 'an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge'. And it was from this dark chamber of the colonial imaginary, this space of nothingness in the face of White superior depravity, that Chumani Maxwele rose from inaction to utter defiance of the Whitist erasure of his humanity and the humanity of all Black-skinned humans. In this act, he courageously assaulted White certainty by forcing the system to recognise that this zone of non-being to which they had banished Blackness could never erase the palpable humanity of the oppressed. The nothingness of Black skin is only in the eye of the White beholder, not in the souls of the Black subject.

Chumani Maxwele's direct action also brought to light the violence of the Whitist erasure of Black beingness (in this case in the academe) – that

which causes the splitting off from the self in their collective psyche as Black-skinned humans who are forced to traverse and navigate a White-dominant epistemological logic that does not recognise the ontological or epistemological reality of being Black. Moreover, it did not acknowledge the impossibility of Black expression of their full human capacity and agency in the straight-jacket of a Whitist discourse that squeezes the breath from them. Chumani Maxwele's carnivalesque disobedience gave life to Fanon's metaphysical assertion that 'Man is a 'yes' resonating from cosmic harmonies'. His action was a performative function of life breaking free from the sterile region to which Whiteness has relegated Blackness.

And once the lid had come off, the national rising of students was inexorable. It quickly became a spontaneous mass movement predicated on a combined phenomenon of Black rage and youthful life force that could no longer abide the state of 'not being' – of not being recognised as equal to their White counterparts; of not being allowed to be Black and proud, of not being offered a slice of the economy via their educational endeavours. When the movement began it did not even occur to the students to look anywhere other than inside themselves and draw the revolutionary fervour from their collective lived experience of Blackness that is constantly up against the violence of a White supremacist system that alienates and divides them, rips their skin from their bodies and tells them they are less than they are. They expressed themselves in frameworks that spoke of the coming of age of a new race discourse, a new race theory that rubbished the notion of non-racism and instead resonated with the unique situation of being Black in South Africa at the same time as being connected to Blackness in the world.

They spoke of the terrorism of Whiteness in the constant attack on their psyches via a perpetual anti-Black social discourse. They said they lived in a system that expects them to accept their gains in a democracy and overlook the wants and needs of the communities that gave birth to them. Theirs was a discourse that ran counter to the institutionalised nation-building, national identity, non-racism propaganda that is pushed by the ANC-led government as the social cohesion that binds us.

But Fallists asked how they were supposed to talk of national identity in a country with the highest Gini coefficient/index and ongoing separate development? How do they speak of social cohesion when Black people Indigenous to this land own a mere 3 percent of the economy and White graduates are six times more likely to gain employment than their Black

counterparts and earn better salaries based on their hue?

How do they speak of non-racism when the macro-economic policy is predicated on protecting White monopoly capital and putting profits before people? The resounding answer to these questions lay squarely in their mass student uprisings: their answer to these questions was clear when they declared that they don't. They erupt instead in their ontological insistence that the Black youth are seen, heard and valued.

As the visceral call for decolonisation proliferated, so too did the evidence that this antihegemonic movement had created an ontological break in the certainty of White masculine hegemony. It was clear to me that they were in no way psychologically prepared for this mass action and in response they set about doing what White males know best how to when their survival is threatened - that is to attempt to dominate and colonise the movement of decolonisation to ensure their longevity and non-erasure in the process of change. This attempt at an ideological coup to unseat the Black collective in the decolonisation wave masked White neuroses in response to having the very seat of their power threatened by Black epistemology, which I argue, they do not recognise as fully developed nor remotely plausible. Thus, they set about engaging in a counter-attack that reduced the intellectual basis of the movement into one that was seemingly only concerned with identity politics.

This was seen in writing such as by DA member of Parliament and UCT board member, Michael Cardos' patronising article posted on Politics web at the time, in which he posited:

> The driving force behind the #Rhodesmustfall campaign is an amalgam of racial nationalists, leftists, self-styled social justice activists, and politically correct ideologues who view the world (and the humanities in particular) through the narrow prism of critical race theory, 'Whiteness studies' and 'White privilege
>
> For them, the whole history of humankind can be reduced to the colonial encounter between 'Black' and 'White', 'us' and 'them'. This inevitably gives rise to a form of identity politics based on racial mobilization.

https://www.politicsweb.co.za/news-and-analysis/the-sinister-underbelly-to-the-rhodes-must-fall-ca

Equally curious was the positionality of some Black academics in this debate, specifically those who, perhaps inadvertently, re-inscribed White masculine privilege by assisting in the circumvention of open discussion about the role of White male academics in neo-colonialism.

Achille Mbembe's essay on the matter caused particular public ire and Black backlash. In his article 'The state of South Africa' this Cameroonian-born, Wits academic, hypothesises seemingly to the White Wits academics, about the collective psyche of middle-class Black South Africans:

> Ironically among the emerging Black middle class, current narratives of selfhood and identity are saturated by the tropes of pain and suffering. The latter has become the register through which many now represent to themselves and to the world. To give an account of who they are, or to explain themselves and their behaviour to others, they increasingly tend to frame their life stories in terms of how much they have been injured by the forces of racism, bigotry and patriarchy. Often under the pretext that the personal is political, this type of autobiographical and at times self-indulgent 'petit bourgeois' discourse has replaced structural analysis.

https://africasacountry.com/2015/09/achille-mbembe-on-the-state-of-south-african-politics/

While the students rubbished these perspectives on their positionality, White and Whitist male gatekeepers, on the other hand, were overcome with relief and joy at Mbembe's articles which ratified their disavowal of 'the personal is the political' and shifted the onus for Black pain, frustration and rage to Black people themselves, suggesting this is a state of mind that should all too easily be transcended since it is not valid. So, Mbembe asks, 'Could it be that the concentration of our libido on Whiteness, pain and suffering is after all typical of the narcissistic investments so privileged by this neoliberal age?'

These essays set off a protracted public debate on the issue of Black pathology, deflecting the attention away from the historical privileging of White males. Unfortunately, this intervention occurred just at a time when the momentum had been gathered to effectively challenge the politics of language and power.

On social media platforms, White academic gatekeepers congratulated Mbembe for his wise words – many taking the opportunity to denigrate Black opinion. They also paid particular attention to the 'personal narrative', which they more or less collectively agreed, was a poor substitute for structural analysis. Terms such as 'paranoid', 'over the top', 'pernicious', 'violent', 'self-victimised', 'angry' and 'irrational' were bandied about in Whitist male dissent of the Black responses to Mbembe.

In a fit of spontaneous colour-blindness, they joined in the chorus that Black and White as racial categories do not in fact exist. This narrative, of course, works to obfuscate the truth that they have benefited from the social constructs of Black and White which undoubtedly do exist and are undoubtedly what students were fighting to deconstruct.

On mainstream media what should have been robust debate about the historical privileging of White male intellectuals in public and academic discourse, instead became a discussion about Black behaviours and how to contain and discipline them. It became a discussion seeped in White outrage at the so-called misdirection of Black rage and about the low intellectual quality of personal narratives and accounts of lived experience. All of this cast Black people in the struggle as either violent or victims, accusing them of entitlement and generally circumventing Black concerns. Once again, this deflected away from White racism and privilege and overlooked White racist pathology and its dangerous collective libidinal projection onto the Black collective.

It also reinscribed the White masculinist tendency to assert power overall it defines. So, by defining Black responses as 'paranoid' 'empty' and 'personal', power is maintained in the logic and reliability of the Whitist masculine discourse. These anti-Black narratives, some charged, created decoys and distractions that only served the agenda of White supremacy and detracted from the real issue of decolonising academic, social and cultural spaces – all of which speak to the actual shifting of White males out of their historical position of privilege. This, it seemed, was the reality that the White male psyche could not fathom.

The insistence on the Whitist masculine enlightened input into decolonisation, with its talk of staggering transformation, progress and preferential 'structural analysis' in opposition to other knowledge systems and narratives of Black pain, rage, suffering, and humanity, was simply another form of power that legitimates the structural dominance of Western, White, educated middle-class males over all others. It also arrogantly assumed that

processes outside of this framework are not intelligent, rational and humane.

Those 'not White men' were relegated to the status of the other and essentialised. Their narratives were diminutised and scorned as the monolithic White male academic club seem unable to appreciate other humans' capacity for multiple and heterogeneous narratives of knowledge, history, pain, suffering and immeasurable joy, whether in first-person accounts, poststructuralist theory, lyrical lexis or feminist language. But the decolonial movement, in tandem with Fallism declared that the time had come when people othered by Western patriarchy had begun to inundate academic and public spaces with narratives that emphasise the feelings and experiences of the colonised, of women, of gender non-conforming people, of historical pain, alternative or Indigenous knowledge systems and lived experience. This was decolonisation and 'depatriarching' in motion. It happened on the streets, in communities and in public spaces. It lived in the realm of a multiplicity of expressions where diverse narratives, personal narratives, feminine narratives, Black narratives are used as a means to disrupt and deprivilege the orthodox language of White patriarchy which has held all those 'not White men' hostage for far too long.

It was, however, the unseating of the Cecil John Rhodes statue at UCT that all but did the White male academe in as this signified their demise as top dogs in all that is considered rational and enlightened and this gave rise to more neurosis, recognisable in their, by now, shaky postulation which emulated from their newfound nervous condition. And then, when they had reconstituted their hegemonic, we witnessed a counter wave of pompous hot air and hubris, a response which most certainly gave them a tenuous sense that they were still in control of their possible expiration, for from their perspective no Black-skinned collective was going to unseat them. The call for the decolonisation and the actualisation of the Fallist movement to have the statue of Cecil John Rhodes removed shook the very roots of White masculine hegemony and gave rise to the possibility of social suicide in the scholarly White male collective psyche.

In a Settler-biased neocolonial society, it is the Settlers' fear of their own usurpation that evokes a savage and violent response from Whiteness, which they easily project onto that which threatens it. In no time institutional and systemic violence was meted out on the dissident students under the auspicious of the UCT management and VC at the same time as an underhanded anti-Rhodes Must Fall social media campaign flourished.

However, this insidious social media violence that emanated largely from the White academic echelon went unnoticed in the public sphere. This in turn evidenced the ongoing facilitation of Whitist views – and exposed the trick of Whiteness to position itself as reasonable, working within the rule of law and even upholding human rights standards while enacting violence on Black skinned humans. By drawing on all these tropes they are able to convince themselves and the general public that their adversary is not as rational as they are and this they manifested through their ongoing use of derogatory terms in social media for Black students. This method was clearly seen in Cape Town University lecturer, Ron Irwin's proclamation on Facebook about Rhodes Must Fall being a movement of rapists, an assertion he made in response to the alleged sexual assault of a female student during their occupation of Bremner House, which the students had renamed Azania House. To many, these Facebook comments may have seemed innocuous. But the ease at which a UCT academic paints the movement as one which is made up of 'rapists' based on a single case that had not yet reached the court of law, smacks of coloniality and reiterated the inherent assumption that Whites are above the rule of law in their proclamations on the lack of collective Black morality.

Yet he got away with these broad brush strokes at the time, evidenced in the lack of response to his public hate speech and ad hominem attack on the Rhodes must Fall movement as a whole. It was this lack of societal response that enabled the unleashing of systemic physical violence onto the dissident students as the movement grew.

Though this occurred in the 21st century, it is clear to me that that the imagined bestial nature of the colonised Black subject has not shifted much at all in the Whitist imaginary and is used in the same way as it was centuries ago – right down to the rules of engagement. This lack of recognition of the humanity of those in Black skin, in turn, allows Whites individually, or obliquely through the Whiteness construct, to enact horrific physical violence onto the Black body. Thus, over and above the epistemological violence from the White academe, you will often find Black policemen enacting this violence on behalf of this system which, in the Western world and South Africa, is geared towards protecting White wealth and asset ownership. As Fanon denotes – in most 'previous' colonies and settler countries, the role of the state is often reduced to managing White capital using brutal methods, as revealed in the ongoing propensity for police and the state to punish and discipline the impoverished Black population. This happens even though the protests may be

for basic human rights to water, housing and education, or against corporate abuses – a systemic reality that alienates an entire group of so-called liberated people who are reduced to non-human status by being excluded from the trope of Human Rights.

Fallism heralded the possibility of decolonisation, where Western pedagogy would be turned on its head, and signalled a vibrant possibility for the future. It was in this movement that alchemy happened and theories born out of Black philosophies and practices became the basis for decolonisation and incorporated the pillars of Black Consciousness, Pan Africanism and intersectionality. But some four years later the decolonisation movement has been frustrated and universities remain in the clutches of Western epistemology. This, I posit, is as a result of the collusion between the White academe, state, business, media and University Management as they worked to manufacture the public consent required to finally smash the already demoralised movement, given the multiple attacks on the Fallists during the uprising. By 2017 the Fallist movement had seemingly been infiltrated with various engineered narratives and divisive neo theoretical frameworks that ran counter to the collective call for justice and students began to devour each other in a frenzy of power struggles based on gender and ideological differences. In the final stages of the Fallist struggle the state engaged the full might of the security cluster and over weeks violently brutalised what was left of the more radical Black consciousness and anti-capitalist contingency of students who had remained on the forefront of the struggle. Students were interdicted and many male students jailed – not a surprising outcome in a country where the dominant discourse remains Whitist and White hysteria and demands are facilitated by a captured government that is beholden to White monopoly capital.

Both the psychological and physical violence enacted against the Black youth by the White male establishment and the state proclaimed the untenable truth that the Black subject is not heard and Black body is not safe where Whiteness remains dominant, even in a 'liberated' democracy. It demonstrates that no matter how post-race a multicultural discourse tries to convince us we are, this does not accurately reflect the world.

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