

Challenging the Masculine Story of the Fees Must Fall Movement

A half thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

(POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS)

RHODES UNIVERSITY

By

Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe

(g23s4364)

Supervisor: Dr Mandisi Majavu

March 2025

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Jesus Christ – Yeshua of Nazareth, my personal Lord and Saviour for all that he is, has done and continues to do for me and in my life. This study began in conversation with him and was completed in obedience to him. It is paramount for me to acknowledge the divine presence of God through the Holy Spirit throughout this journey. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for waking me up, nurturing me, aiding my comprehension and for your guidance, which transcends all human understanding. Your presence, love and patience have been paramount throughout this academic journey. I submit and surrender this thesis to you as my Master, my King and my Sovereign God who rules and reigns supreme. Throughout this journey, I have been reminded of your omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence. Just as in John 1v1–3 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made”, the beginning of this journey, already was through you.

I would also like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr Majavu, my supervisor, for his exceptional guidance, support and insightful constructive criticism throughout my master’s programme. Dr Majavu, you have been a guide and motivation for me during tough times, uncertainty and self-doubt. At some point, I gave up on completing this programme but you calmed me down and reminded me of the value of my own voice. You validated my experiences and those of the amazing Black feminists I wanted to archive through this project. You inspired me to look at life differently and assured me that my contributions were important for building African epistemology. I honestly completed this programme for both of us. Firstly, for you because I couldn’t be the first student under your guidance who didn’t complete their studies, and secondly for me, because I have never failed at an academic pursuit. Dr Majavu, your steadfast support and intellectual guidance – from start to finish – have been invaluable to me and paved the way for me to wander intellectually, with only an occasional tug to bring me back to the topic – I am honoured to have had you as my supervisor.

Last but definitely not least, in the words of the iconic Snoop Dogg “I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I wanna thank me for having no days off. I wanna thank me for never quitting. I wanna thank me for always being a giver and trying to give more than I receive. I wanna thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I wanna thank me for being me at all times” (Snoop Dogg Receives His Walk of Fame Star

Followed by the Best Speech, 2024). Most importantly, I pray that the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ – Yeshua, the love of God and the sweet fellowship of the Holy Spirit, rests and abides in me now and forever more. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, and ever. Amen.

Abstract

This thesis critically explores the often-disregarded contributions, marginalisations, and resistance towards Black radical feminist activists within the Fees Must Fall (#FMM) movement. The #FMM movement, which emerged in 2015, marked a pivotal moment in South Africa's post-apartheid history, speaking to the deep-rooted inequalities embedded within the higher education system. Considering that ample attention has been placed on the movement's comprehensive political and economic demands – like the call for fee-free and decolonised education – this research accentuates the gendered dimensions of #FMM, highlighting how patriarchal structures sought to dominate the leadership, narratives and the activism of Black women involved in the movement.

The study uses a transdisciplinary qualitative methodology, incorporating semi-structured interviews with Black female activists, and analyses the data through the lenses of intersectionality and Black radical feminism. The findings of the study identified five central themes, namely: the motivation that drew Black women to #FMM, the daily sexism they faced within the movement, the marginalisation of Black radical feminist perspectives, the silencing of women's voices in the official discourse of #FMM, and the strategies of resistance and resilience employed by Black feminists to confront these challenges. Notably, one such strategy was the establishment of feminist collectives like Mbokodo Lead, which presented women with free spaces to organise, assert leadership and critique the patriarchal structures entrenched within the movement itself.

This study argues that #FMM can be seen as a microcosm of broader societal struggles, mostly reflecting the unresolved tensions within post-apartheid South Africa concerning race, class and gender. The analysis exposes how, while #FMM stood in opposition to the neoliberal commodification and colonial epistemic dominance in higher education, it often overlooked its own internalised patriarchal practices. Black radical feminist activists, however, challenged the “masculine story” of #FMM by reframing the movement within an intersectional lens that prioritised gender justice alongside the decolonisation of education.

This study makes a noteworthy contribution to scholarship on decoloniality, intersectionality and feminist resistance by centring on the voices of Black women, whose roles have historically been marginalised in dominant narratives. It argues that the true decolonisation of education

requires not only the dismantling of Eurocentric curricula but also the challenging of hetero-patriarchal power structures within activist movements and institutions. By positioning #FMF within the broader context of global grassroots struggles for justice, this study emphasises the movement's implications for reshaping activism, education and policymaking.

In essence, this study calls for a reconceptualisation of movements like #FMF, ensuring that they are not only inclusive but also transformative. It insists that the fight for decolonised education and social justice must centre on the leadership and experiences of marginalised groups, especially Black women. It urges educators, activists, and policymakers to engage critically with the intersectional challenges posed by systemic oppression and presents a framework for creating movements that resist not only external inequalities but also internal exclusions. This research underscores the transformative potential of feminist resistance in reshaping activism and rethinking what it means to achieve equity and justice in a postcolonial world.

Table of Contents

Challenging the Masculine Story of the Fees Must Fall Movement.....	i
Acknowledgements	i
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Acronyms/Abbreviations.....	viii
Chapter 1	1
The Political Emergence of the #FeesMustFall Movement.....	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The Political Ideology of the #FeesMustFall Movement.....	4
1.3 Black Women and the #FeesMustFall Movement	9
1.4 Goal(s) of Research.....	14
Chapter 2	17
Literature Review	17
2.1 Introduction	17
2.2 First Theme: In the Beginning: Gendering the #FeesMustFall Movement	18
2.3 Second Theme: Who is Afraid of Black Women’s Collective Agency?	25
Chapter 3	35
Methodology and Research Positionality.....	35
3.1 Introduction	35
3.2 Sampling Strategy	38
3.3 Interviews	39
3.4 Data Analysis	42
3.5 Theory: Black Radical Feminist Theory	43

3.6 Ethical Considerations.....	47
Chapter 4	50
Data Analysis.....	50
4.1 Introduction	50
4.2 Why did Black Radical Feminists Join the #FMF Movement?	51
4.3 Everyday Sexism Within the #FMF Movement	59
4.4 The Marginalisation of Black Feminists Within the Movement.....	63
4.5 The Silencing of Women's Voices in #FMF's Official Discourse.....	67
<p>It is imperative to not how the decision to separate Sections 4.4 and 4.5 was informed by a deliberate analytical distinction between internal organisational marginalisation and the external, discursive silencing of Black womxn in public representations of the #FeesMustFall movement. Although these forms of exclusion are deeply interconnected, each section addresses a distinct dimension: the former explores structural marginalisation experienced within the movement, while the latter examines the ideological silencing reproduced through media and institutional narratives. These layers of exclusion warrant separate, yet complementary, analysis. Building on this, the following section explores how violence—both physical and psychological—functioned as a mechanism to enforce this silencing and reinforce patriarchal dominance within the movement.</p>	
4.6 Violence as a Mechanism of Silencing.....	72
4.7 Conclusion.....	76
Chapter 5	77
Data Analysis.....	77
5.1 Introduction	77
5.2 Black Radical Feminist Strategies Employed to Counter Misogyny and Erasure	78
5.2.1 Resistance and resilience	78
5.2.2 Use of public spaces for visibility	88
5.2.3 Carrying symbols of resistance	90
5.3 Conclusion.....	92

Chapter 6	94
Conclusion and Recommendation	94
6.1 Introduction	94
6.2 Chapter Four.....	95
6.3 Chapter Five	97
6.4 Contributions of the Research	98
6.5 Recommendations	98
References	101
Appendices.....	114
Appendix A: Ethical Clearance.....	115
Appendix B: Informed Consent	116
Appendix C: Interview Schedule	121
Appendix D: Editing and Proof-Reading	127

List of Acronyms/Abbreviations

BRF	Black Radical Feminism
#FMF	Fees Must Fall
GBVCC	Gender-Based Violence Command Centre
#RMF	Rhodes Must Fall
UCT	University of Cape Town

Chapter 1

The Political Emergence of the #FeesMustFall Movement.

1.1 Introduction

Roughly two decades after South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, the Fees Must Fall (#FeesMustFall) movement which emerged in October 2015 nationally, sparked by the Asinamali campaign against fee exclusions at Wits University, soon became one of the biggest student-led movements since 1994 (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). The rise in the movement was a reaction to the so-called "post-apartheid apartheid state", a system that ironically has contributed to some of the highest levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality in South Africa (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). While Berdahl and Moore (2006) were writing against the backdrop of the former apartheid system's demise, racialised social inequality and an internalised exclusion of Black Africans – the bulk of South Africa's population – continues to be a significant challenge even today. Sinwell (2019) describes how the #FeesMustFall movement responded to these challenges by interrogating the status quo and challenging the transformation of both higher education institutions and society in general. He goes on to note how the movement (in its various expressions) became a way for Black students to reclaim their identity and place in society (Sinwell, 2019).

The #FeesMustFall movement, described as a form of resistance "from below", aimed to destabilise South Africa's embedded, racialised socio-economic order, which still defines South African society and its complementary educational establishments (Sinwell, 2019). In recognising universities as microcosms of society, the #FeesMustFall movement called into question the role played by institutions of higher learning in postcolonial South Africa (Sinwell, 2019). Despite the tensions it created, #FeesMustFall also inspired moments of solidarity, which shed light on the coming-of-age of a new generation of post-apartheid activists (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). It also delivered a new brand of social justice-orientated politics that aimed to tackle disparities in education, poverty and joblessness (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017).

The popular movement, #RhodesMustFall (#RMF), emerged at the University of Cape Town in March/April 2015 when activist Chumani Maxwele threw faeces on the statue of Cecil John Rhodes on the campus - an act which later inspired nationwide decolonial activism and is believed to have sowed the seeds and laid the groundwork for the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement. Equally, it encourages us not to forget a far longer history of student migrations and protests against financial exclusion, specifically at historically Black institutions of higher learning such as the Tshwane University of Technology and the University of Limpopo. The real catalyst for #FMF, however, is located in the post-1994 politics of higher education, notably in the government's decision to halve the number of higher education institutions through merger (Jansen, 2003). These mergers, instead of encouraging transformation, preserved inequalities that reflected those found in the rest of society. At an institution like UCT, Black African students resisted colonial structures, demanding the removal of the Rhodes statue and the decolonisation of the university's curricula.

This racialised inequality remains a common reality in post-apartheid South Africa, where Black students are racially and financially excluded and marginalised in the system, largely as a function of the types of opportunities afforded to them – or lack thereof. This asymmetry, which enables discrepancies, is evident in their access to resources, academic assistance and financial endowment, where Black students disproportionately encounter poverty and economic exclusion (Sehoolo & Adeyemo, 2016). While there is a democratic promise of equity and justice, the post-apartheid government inherited an unequal higher education system that did not adequately address the division between privileged and marginalised students (Sehoolo & Adeyemo, 2016). This lack of representation of Black South Africans, especially in executive academic and/or leadership positions, mirrors complex broader societal patterns of exclusion (Bunting, 2006). As microcosms of society, higher education institutions replicate these structural inequities, reflecting the socio-economic power imbalances of the broader society. Bunting (2006) describes the way South Africa's higher education system was conceived as to “entrench the power and privilege of the ruling White minority” (p. 52).

The struggle for access to education for many Black students is not only one of academic viability but also of recognition, respect and the right to mould one's future. Through this struggle, the #FMF movement insisted on agency and demanded a “transformed, decolonised higher education system that responds to the needs of all South Africans equitably” (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017, p. 35).

To fully contextualise the origins of the race-based inequities plaguing Black students in post-apartheid South Africa (and why these inequities continue), it is imperative that we consider the historical context of apartheid. Before South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the apartheid government used institutionalised policies to segregate citizens by race, class and gender (Puttick, 2011). This was in a higher education system that was fragmented and unequal from its very inception and institutionalisation in the early 1990s, designed around a racist, exclusionary system to produce a compliant workforce for the benefit of the apartheid state (Bunting, 2006) and White minority. This framework shaped the politics of higher education long into the post-apartheid era, ensuring that Black students continued to experience barriers to access and success. These existing historical divisions and discriminations in post-apartheid South African higher education can be directly attributed to the residue of this and similar historical legacies.

The historical background of South Africa's education system exposes how historically Black universities did not emerge from an academic need but rather to serve the agenda of the apartheid state. In their inception, these institutions were constructed as vehicles to train Black people who would be amenable to preserving the socio-economic and political architecture of apartheid. In Bunting's (2006) words, "South African higher education was perverse in specific ways that served to bolster the power and privilege of the ruling White minority" (p. 52). The post-apartheid government that assumed power in 1994 inherited the legacy and character of apartheid's higher education system. According to Sehoole and Adeyemo (2016), "the post-apartheid government...inherited an inequitable and unjust higher education system" (p. 2). This was due to a racially discriminatory and segregated education system structured and purposed to serve the interests of the apartheid regime (Badat, 2009). One such mechanism was the unbalanced access to education, which was based on racial lines, with Black South Africans being the most deprived – as highlighted by Sehoole and Adeyemo (2016).

The racial inequities in access to higher education had significant consequences for the rates of participation. Although the gross participation rate in higher education was approximately 15% in 1994 – the highest in sub-Saharan Africa at that time – it was still very low relative to developed countries (Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016). Such figures conceal stark inequalities when broken down by race. According to Sehoole and Adeyemo (2016), "whereas Africans constituted 80% of the total population, their participation rate in higher education was only 9%" (p. 2). By comparison, the participation rate for Coloureds was 13%, and for Indians, 40%;

but for White South Africans, it was 70%, despite constituting only 10% of the population (Schoole & Adeyemo, 2016). These figures bluntly illustrate how Black South Africans, who made up the majority of the country, experienced intentional systemic exclusion during apartheid.

The ongoing racialised inequality in post-apartheid South Africa has produced long-standing consequences for Black students, particularly regarding educational access and opportunity. It has created even greater inequality and systemic dysfunction and erodes the democratic values on which a just and equitable society must rest. Schoole and Adeyemo (2016) comment that the legitimisation of South Africa's higher education system should be assessed based on its transformative capacity to promote higher education opportunities for all South Africans, particularly marginalised groups like Black South Africans, rural communities, women and working-class students. As Brown (2002) suggests, this includes offering opportunities to non-traditional learners, such as adults with work-related knowledge, to ensure broader inclusivity and fairness. To contextualize the origins of the #FeesMustFall movement, it is essential to examine the historical and socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa.

1.2 The Political Ideology of the #FeesMustFall Movement

The #FeesMustFall movement, which started in 2015, was not just a knee-jerk response to the RMF protests at UCT; it was a wider, student-led revolt against systemic problems in South Africa's education system (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017). Though the movement had its genesis in protests and demonstrations against the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist structures and institutions (the statue of Cecil John Rhodes was viewed as symbolic of these evils), it soon broadened its scope. The #FeesMustFall movement addressed the wider systemic oppressions embedded in the educational system and institutions, which affected all students, but especially Black students and Black women in particular (Xaba, 2017). In this context, these demands represented some of the few shared interests, including calls to stop the ongoing increase of student fees, demand better government funding for universities, and end the outsourcing of workers who were subjected to exploitative and precarious labour conditions (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017).

Ultimately, however, the #FeesMustFall movement was not solely about the material economic conditions; it was directed at confronting the coloniality embedded in the fabric of higher education in South Africa. Two overlapping issues fundamentally shaped the movement:

economic exploitation of academic labour and epistemic oppression, rooted in the colonial legacy that continued to influence contemporary university structures (Nyamnjoh, 2019). According to Nyamnjoh (2019), the movement's overarching demand for "free decolonised education" was unambiguous in its challenge to what Grosfoguel (2011) identifies as the "colonial power matrix." The movement illuminated both economic forms of oppression (increased tuition fees) and epistemic forms of oppression that Black students were subject to; however, students found the economic outcry more visceral and galvanising (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

As a group and as individuals, members of #FMF wanted their work to address the impacts of "multiple types of systemic oppression that were rooted in structural and symbolic violence" (Finigan-Carr & Sharpe, 2024, p. 2). In many ways, the #FMF movement was fuelled by the spirit of previous protests and demonstrations (such as the 1976 student uprising in Soweto) and offered students the opportunity to reclaim their position as agents of social transformation (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017). The movement evolved into a vehicle for student dissatisfaction that questioned the government's argument that free education was not feasible, which they vehemently disputed (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017). Demand for free, quality and decolonised education was at the centre of the protests and was made incongruous with the state's neoliberal approach to education (Sinwell, 2019).

A unique and innovative distinguishing characteristic to come out of the #FMF movement, which was shared across institutions, was that of the "Fallist" (pronounced "FAW-list") (Sinwell, 2019). By coming together irrespective of their class consciousness, philosophical ideals and dogmatic beliefs, students embodied the Fallist identity as it allowed them to unite against and resist hegemonic hetero-patriarchal structures and the systems that upheld the current prevalence of oppression (Xaba, 2017). As a national leader of the movement, my experience as a Fallist was geared towards resisting all forms of systemic oppression and silencing. This was done through the use of an intersectional lens that advocated for an education system that would be all-encompassing, free and decolonised (Xaba, 2017).

The #FMF movement consequently turned into a criticism of neoliberalist educational ideals and quickly became a location for essential theorisation on how sex, social class, sexual orientation and race influenced differences in resistance and popular struggles (Xaba, 2017). #FMF raised burning questions about individuality and situatedness and the necessity for an

intersectional lens to grasp and tackle the intricacies of subjugation and marginalisation in South African education and social environments. The #FMM mobilisation challenged this complacency and fundamentally reconfigured the debate on higher education and social justice in South Africa, demonstrating an incisive critique of the role of the state and institutions in creating and perpetuating inequality.

At its core, the movement was about breaking away from the colonial legacies, particularly White supremacy and the hetero-patriarchal system, among others, that were attached to the colonial project (S. M. Ndlovu 2017). The theme of historical colonial oppression, while not the main impetus for revitalising student protests, was best captured and articulated by the #FMM movement, becoming particularly visible in the campaign for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from UCT on March 9, 2015, known as #RhodesMustFall (#RMF). The protest, which was launched after calls to remove a statue of the colonial figure Cecil John Rhodes, represented a general demand for accountability of colonial history and its residual effects on South African society (Sinwell, 2019).

Since its inception, the #FMM movement has been based on grassroots engagement and democratic processes (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). Students went for transparent and inclusive collective decision-making processes and dismissed the traditional forms of institutional representation. This helped to ensure that the voices of students from diverse backgrounds were reflected in the movement's objectives, keeping the movement focused on its transformative goals (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017).

One of the demands at the heart of the movement was the decolonisation of the curriculum. Drawing from notions of imperialism, #FMM activists critiqued the Eurocentric, patriarchal and capitalist ideologies that permeated South African higher education, arguing against their disregard for African knowledge systems, histories and perspectives (S. M. Ndlovu, 2017). The movement advocated for the incorporation of African epistemologies and positioned African scholars and their contributions at the centre of academic discourse. This drive for a decolonised curriculum was about so much more than just the content of what they were taught; it was about transforming the culture of academic practices overall in universities and making them more inclusive. The goal was to ensure universities were representative of the lived experiences of their students, which would, in turn, transform academic practices, making them

more inclusive and reflective of Black students, particularly Black women, who had long been excluded from mainstream academic life and spaces.

Consequently, the #FMM movement ignited an essential re-evaluation of higher education in South Africa, by acknowledging the exploits and commitments of individuals whose opinions and contributions had been disregarded and ostracised, provoking the system of colonialism and subjugation that continues in academic establishments to this day.

The insistence on challenging colonial systems through decolonisation with the #FMM movement was not purely about a desire to transform the layout of the educational system; it was a broader fight for educational justice. By pressing for the transformation of the curriculum, #FMM wanted to tie educational change to a bigger fight for political, financial and social equality and equity. In essence, the movement identified education and academia as a way to influence a social revolution, a catalyst that would inspire independent thinking, interrogate the prevailing system and contest the intersecting conditions wherein tyranny is maintained across ethnicity, social stratum and gender. Using a reformist tactic towards diversity, the #FMM movement focused on building an equal and fair educational system that would empower people while also undoing the systemic marginalisation they may have faced due to their ethnicity and sex (Weber & Duderstadt, 2008).

The concept of education that the movement criticised for conserving and perpetuating inequality and social injustice was outlined against the background of colonial legacies, neoliberalist methodologies and globalisation (Knight, 2008). The #FMM movement's demands for a decolonised education system were, and still are, not merely about correcting the injustices of the past; they are about rejecting the current effects of global forces on South Africa's academic institutions, curricula and characteristics.

The movement stressed the need for increased access to quality education and the dismantling of discriminatory hierarchies, all while ensuring that the fight for equality would also be ethnically centred (Sinwell, 2019). Tied to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, #FMM demanded a transformed education system that ensured everyone received a comprehensive and inexpensive education across all institutions of higher learning and Technical Vocational Education and Training colleges by placing the decolonisation of the curricula and the changing institutional ethos at the centre of its mission.

The call for the decolonisation of institutions of higher learning was also part of a larger mandate to reclaim the culture and identity of the different groups of people who were subjugated and persecuted under the apartheid regime. The movement insisted on the importance of recognising and celebrating African cultures, telling African histories and including African-authored texts in educational materials. Such a move would subvert the hegemony of Eurocentric understandings and centralise African epistemologies within the setting of knowledge production and, hence, development itself (Sinwell, 2019). In doing so, and in line with their ancestral tradition, the #FMM movement aimed to reclaim the educational space so that it could resonate more with the lived realities of African communities.

The imperative to decolonise was not only something that was confined to institutions of higher learning as microcosms of the broader society. In fact, decolonising education was seen as a cornerstone to redressing colonial legacies by confronting them at the roots (Criser & Knott, 2019). Understanding that education was leveraged by colonisers to sustain their domination and knowing how the historical narratives embedded in dominant institutions of education are/were too often alienating to Indigenous culture, decolonising education would challenge these colonial frameworks to genuinely transform society (Lopez & Rugano, 2018). According to Battiste (2013), knowledge production needs to recognise and embrace the diversity of the Indigenous experiences and the histories that come from it – and therefore multiple ways of knowing rather than a single discipline need to intersect, interact and inform one another. As such, this/the process of decolonising would become an ethical space in which communities meet, reflect and dialogue to include one another and fight alongside one another (Sinwell, 2019).

The #FMM movement's decolonisation efforts were about more than merely altering curricula in schools. They were largely about reshaping society and challenging the ongoing colonial structures that continue to influence and shape education and, by extension, the social and political landscape.

While the movement's ideological foundations were rooted in anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal struggles, its internal dynamics mirrored broader societal inequalities, particularly regarding gender.

1.3 Black Women and the #FeesMustFall Movement

We learn about the history of exclusion and marginalisation of Black women in the #FMF movement as we read through their stories and narratives. From its inception, the movement cloned the broader patriarchal structures of society, forcing women into backseat roles despite their pivotal role in mobilising students and workers. Hlengiwe Ndlovu (2022) details how the role of Black African women was habitually disregarded and rarely recognised in popular histories about the movement and its governance structures. Despite being the driving force and backbone of the movement's foundation, upon which protest actions, strategies and tactics were organised, Black African women were marginalised yet were the catalysts that kept the momentum alive.

One of the most egregious examples of misogyny in the movement can be seen through the systematic sidelining of women in leadership positions. As women were often tasked with behind-the-scenes responsibilities like logistical coordination and caregiving, men were given visible, authoritative roles. Nicolson (2016) alludes to how such behaviour produces "toxic masculinity" that can linger within a movement and preserve the continuation of the kind of masculine dominance that ultimately pushes women into more submissive and docile positions. While some Black women such as Nompandolo Mkhathshwa gained national visibility, this thesis argues that such representations were selective and did not always reflect a broader feminist politic. As Ndelu et al. (2017) notes, prominence does not equate to inclusion, especially when it is shaped by heteropatriarchal gatekeeping. In the case of the #FMF movement, women were either muzzled or snubbed during meetings, strengthening the culture and practice of exclusion and marginalisation.

Yet, Black women did not sit back and accept this treatment. They fought back against their marginalisation and tried to reshape the movement. A defining moment in the struggle against the masculine, male-controlled doctrines that permeated the entire movement was the establishment of #MbokodoLead, a radical revolutionary feminist collective within the #FMF movement. #MbokodoLead also organised feminist protests and led discussions around the intersections of race, gender and class oppression. As Lewis and Hendricks (2017) state, "Mbokodo Lead boldly challenged [the] gendered dynamics which sought to render invisible [the significant contribution] of women" and demanded that "male leadership be held accountable" (p. 63).

Women also performed symbolic acts of resistance to contest the movement's gendered hierarchies. In one example, female students held protests and occupied university spaces that had been marginalised and controlled by patriarchal structures. In doing so, women created an environment where their presence became potent expressions of empowerment, redefining the goals of the movement to include gender justice along with racial and economic justice. The occupation of university and campus spaces became a key site of struggle, as women challenged the male leadership who attempted to control decision-making processes. In these struggles, women lobbied to keep feminist principles at the forefront and to address the specific challenges it presented for Black female students and workers.

According to Gqola (2015), these acts of defiance were a demonstration of how “Black women in movements such as #FMF recalibrated what resistance is by doing more than speaking out and challenging the very structure that seeks to silence them” (p. 122). Through such actions, Black women were, in fact, at the forefront of and most influential in reshaping the movement, as well as making sure their struggles for gender justice were included as fundamental to the wider struggle for race and robust economic justice.

Women's activism within the #FMF movement extended way beyond the framing of internal misogyny – it was also about speaking out about broader society, especially the fact that economic exclusion affected Black women disproportionately. These women, working-class and rural women in particular, caught at the intersection of the gender and economic barriers to participation in the movement, nonetheless supported it and helped cement free education and decolonisation as #FMF demands. In doing so, they also highlighted the importance of looking at systemic oppression through a gender-critical lens.

In order to adequately appreciate exactly how gender dynamics and misogyny, which are both outcomes of colonialism and patriarchy, moulded the #FMF movement, we need to look back to the #RMF movement. The #RMF movement similarly had a gendered orientation that portrayed the same structure and ideology as #FMF. For African Black women (whether students or workers) in both these defiance movements, being excluded and/or blotted out mirrored a broader social custom of patriarchy and marginalisation. Black women fought against their erasure and aggressively reconstructed the movements, defying the established patriarchal structures. This resulted in the development of a challenging environment for feminist voices to emerge. As previously mentioned, a vital facet of this resistance was the

establishment of #Mbokodo Lead, a revolutionary and radical feminist cooperative that arose within #FMF. Through acts like public protests and the use of personal narratives, radical feminists not only fight against their marginalisation, but they also contend that the movement embraces a more all-encompassing and intersectional approach to activism. In order to adequately engage the role and struggles of Radical feminists in the #FMF movement and #MbokodoLead, it is imperative that we make the distinction between Radical Feminism and Black Radical Feminism clear in that Radical feminism critiques patriarchy by foregrounding systemic gendered power and insist on dismantling institutions that uphold gender oppression which somewhat differs from Black Radical Feminism which emerged to address both racial capitalism and patriarchal domination, asserting that Black womens liberation is not secondary but central to radical transformation (Taylor, 1998),

Understanding that Radical Feminism centres its critique on the patriarchal structures that systematically uphold gender inequality, arguing that true liberation requires the dismantling of these systems rather than their reform (Tong, 2009). Black Radical Feminism, while emerging from this tradition, expands the analysis to include race, class, colonialism, and capitalism as intersecting systems of oppression that uniquely shape the lives of Black womxn (Combahee River Collective, 1982; Taylor, 1998). This framework is particularly relevant to the present study, which investigates the erasure, resistance, and leadership of Black womxn within the #FeesMustFall movement. By foregrounding BRF, this research centres the lived experiences, strategies, and epistemologies of Black womxn as vital to understanding both the internal dynamics of the movement and the broader socio-economic structures it contested

This study focuses on the leadership of Black Radical Feminists (BRFs) within the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement and examines how their contributions have been systematically erased from dominant narratives. While the terms “Black Radical Feminist” (BRF) and “Radical Black Feminist” (RBF) are occasionally used interchangeably in existing literature and by participants themselves, this thesis primarily adopts the term BRF to emphasise a political tradition rooted in anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal struggle. Variations in terminology throughout the thesis are intentional and contextually informed, “BRF” is used for consistency and clarity, while “RBF” appears when citing scholars or participants who self-identify using that specific formulation. These linguistic shifts reflect the plurality of feminist identities within the movement and are retained to honour the diverse ways Black womxn articulated their politics and positionalities during #FMF.

Chapter Three of this thesis contains an extensive examination of the history and philosophy of Black Radical Feminism (BRF) and its relevance to this dissertation. This chapter, on the other hand, lays the groundwork for understanding its relevance in analysing the #FMMF movement.

For now, it is sufficient to point out that radical feminism highlighted the overlap between race, class and gender oppression, advancing the demand for free education and decolonisation with a commitment to addressing gender inequality. In doing so, radical feminism reframed the internal dynamics of #FMMF and drew critical attention to the ways that gendered power dynamics must be addressed as part of the ongoing struggle for social justice, both within higher education and society more generally.

However, much of the scholarly writing has ignored the contributions of Black radical feminists involved in the #FMMF movement. The role of these feminists in mobilising students, workers and other community members, as well as their refusal to be erased, is sorely underappreciated. As Lewis and Hendricks (2017) suggest, the strategies and tactics of BRFs have frequently been called into question or overlooked even while their input was pivotal to the movement's success.

One critical lesson learnt in that period was the extent to which #FMMF had replicated gendered power relations within the movement, which, when intersecting with patriarchal and racial dynamics, marginalised women and other minority groups. This was particularly evident in the movement's internal power struggle and challenges to the hetero-patriarchal order that still informs university culture today. Despite this, Black female students played a crucial role in strengthening the movement's radical feminist faction, #MbokodoLead, which fought against the sidelining of women within the movement and rejected the prevailing patriarchal structures (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017).

Thus, when exploring the #FMMF movement, it is imperative to understand it as a space for contestation of leadership, marked by internal gendered contestations. The scholarship of local Black feminists like Gqola and analysis from researchers like Lewis and Hendricks provide invaluable insight into how BRF informed the movement's understanding of gender justice. Gqola (2015) argues that Black women are not merely participants in movements like #FMMF; they are foundational to these struggles, actively reshaping the structures of marginality that

seek to silence them. She details how patriarchal and racial violence intersects to make Black women hyper-visible as labourers in liberation struggles yet invisible in leadership and historical narratives. This reflects my assertion that Black women do not participate in movements like #FMM, they underpin movements like #FMM as they are actively remaking the structures of marginality. Their erasure is not incidental but a deliberate function of a system that resists acknowledging their intellectual, political and activist contributions. Gqola's critique underscores that without addressing the gendered dynamics within activist spaces, movements risk reproducing the very exclusions they claim to resist

Black radical feminists played an especially important role in the #FMM movement because they were able to articulate a form of resistance that cut across class lines. According to Lewis and Hendricks (2017), the campaign for free education and the abolition of the outsourcing and contracting out of university workers was a common agenda of importance for Black women in the movement. Moreover, their activism was highly successful in raising awareness of the marginalisation of gendered problems in conventional discourse. Lewis and Hendricks (2017) note how women reclaimed their own narratives to demand recognition for their own particular experiences of oppression. These authors also describe how they challenged the movement to embrace a more gendered examination of issues relating to broader topics such as economic exclusion and institutional violence (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). A feminist centre led the movement in the direction of broader engagement with gender justice and made certain that feminist ideologies were at the heart of its goals.

Because of their activism, BRFs could reimagine the movement and pave the way for a deeper and more intersectional tactic geared towards social justice that accounted for race, gender, class and the legacies of colonialism. By exploring the contributions of BRFs and their work within the #FMM movement, it becomes clear that this is not merely a fight against patriarchy, but rather a fight that is able to address the complexities of oppression and its intersection with race, gender and class. Lewis and Hendricks (2017) explain how the involvement of Black women in the #FMM movement illuminates the need for gender justice in other social movements, especially those addressing the decolonisation of education and activism. In doing this, Black feminists in #FMM were able to resist the erasure of their contributions and ensure that the movement pursues social justice in a truly inclusive manner that attends to the nuances of overlapping struggles.

The marginalization of Black women within #FMMF underscores the need to interrogate the movement's gendered dimensions, which this study seeks to address.

1.4 Goal(s) of Research

This dissertation critically engages the often-neglected role of BRW activists in the #FMMF movement. It also examines how these women experienced marginalisation while resisting exclusion and erasure as they worked towards transforming the movement.

This research stems from two key questions:

1. What political languages, vocabularies and discourses were deployed by Black feminists in the #FMMF movement, and how did they articulate their resistance to the sexist dynamics of a homogenous grouping within the movement?
2. What political practices and strategies did Black feminists adopt, and which worked to challenge patriarchal tendencies in the #FMMF movement?

Through examining these questions, this study will elucidate how BRWs in the #FMMF movement resisted gendered oppression and agitated for a more inclusive, intersectional agenda within the movement's larger goals. Throughout this thesis, the terms "women," "woman," and "womxn" are used with intentionality and contextual sensitivity. The conventional spellings "woman" and "women" are retained when directly quoting participants, referencing authors who use these terms, or when describing gendered dynamics as they were expressed within the #FeesMustFall movement-where not all actors or discourses recognised gender non-conforming identities. However, the term "womxn" is introduced in the literature review and used in analytical sections of the thesis to signal an inclusive, intersectional feminist politics. "Womxn" explicitly includes trans women, non-binary people, and others marginalised by cisnormative and patriarchal definitions of womanhood (Coles & Pasek, 2020). Its use in this thesis is not meant to universalise identity, but rather to acknowledge and make visible the diversity of Black feminist actors involved in the movement, especially those who have historically been erased or excluded. This distinction allows for both fidelity to the language of sources and participants, and a deliberate feminist framing that aligns with Black Radical Feminist critique.

Limitations of the Study

While this study seeks to foreground the often-erased leadership of Black Radical Feminists (BRFs) in the #FeesMustFall movement, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. One key limitation is the constrained engagement with LGBTIQ+ experiences, particularly the limited inclusion of trans and non-binary participants. Despite deliberate efforts to recruit a broader spectrum of voices, including trans BRF-aligned activists, the final participant group comprised cisgender Black women only. As a result, the specific experiences of trans women and gender-nonconforming activists—especially in relation to intra-movement dynamics such as tokenism and exclusion—could not be directly addressed through interviews. Nevertheless, the analysis adopts a consciously inclusive and intersectional lens that foregrounds queer feminist scholarship and seeks to engage with broader LGBTIQ+ concerns where possible. Additionally, the study is methodologically limited by its reliance on retrospective narrative accounts, which, while rich and insightful, are shaped by memory, subjectivity, and the politics of self-representation. These limitations point to important areas for future research, particularly around queer leadership, trans participation, and the nuanced negotiations of identity within student movements.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As a rich topic of study and discussion, the role of women in activism, particularly in university student movements, has grown increasingly significant. Understanding Black womxn's leadership in campus-based activism is critical in South Africa, a country where the fight for gender equality contends with broader struggles for social justice. Yet, this is an underexplored topic, contributing to the erasure of Black women in the #FMF movement. In this thesis, when the term "womxn" is used it is intentionally inclusive of all women, including transwomen and nonbinary people, to help disrupt the gendered assumptions inherent in standard spellings of "woman" and "man" (Coles & Pasek, 2020).

This chapter explores important work related to the #FMF movement in the categories described here, emphasising the foundational contributions made by various activists. As a frame, it critically addresses the work of BRFs, the critique of the mainstream concept of intersectionality and the gendered politics of the #FMF movement. However, as gender dynamics are increasingly acknowledged and explored, the role of women in activism – and the context of the #FMF movement specifically – is still under-theorised. Given this complexity, this literature review unpacks the fluid dynamics of identities of gendered activism and racial confrontation in the South African higher education space that informs the current body of activism in contemporary campus movements.

The studies examined in this chapter highlight the gendered character of the #FMF movement. They depict how women activists were often pushed to the sidelines or otherwise had to negotiate spaces predominantly monopolised by men. These studies also highlight the importance of feminist lenses in movements in creating gender equality as a foundational rather than a peripheral goal. The review provides insight into the challenges and achievements of women during this transformative period in South African student activism, garnering

alternative views on the development and growth of the #FMM movement and its impact on society.

The discussion of literature is organised in three central themes: *Gendering the #FMM Movement*, *Black Women's Collective Agency* and *The Banality of Patriarchal Violence*. It starts with the fact that the gendering of the movement was crucial in dealing with systemic issues and shaping the dynamics of the wider social movement. The following themes emerge from the literature, revealing how gender dynamics shaped the #FMM movement.

2.2 First Theme: In the Beginning: Gendering the #FMM Movement

A crucial yet overlooked component of the #FMM movement is the marginalisation of Black women, the marginalisation of radical feminists and the intentional gendering of the movement itself. Pillay's (2016) article critically explores the gender dynamics within #FMM. Drawing from the work of Pillay (2016), the movement publicly asserted its inclusivity, albeit without consistent and clear representation of female voices. Most leadership positions in the #FMM were held by men, she argues, further entrenching traditional gender roles and excluding women activists from key decision-making processes and status.

Pillay (2016) aimed to expose the underlying structural and cultural influences that shaped the gendering of the #FMM movement, asking, as her primary research question, "How did gender dynamics emerge in the #FMM movement, and how were women's voices marginalised or silenced?" (p. x). In her analysis, Pillay (2016) demonstrates that cultural practices, rooted in the patriarchal structures of the movement, often kept women in supportive, minoritised roles that limited their visibility and influence. These entrenched patriarchal norms were reflected in the #FMM movement's cultural practices that typically relegated women to supportive roles. Pillay (2016) observes, "Cultural practices within the FMM movement frequently saw women relegated to supportive roles, mirroring the pervasive patriarchal traditions" (p. 157).

Pillay (2016) employs a qualitative methodology in her study and uses interviews, personal narratives and participant observations to generate data. This technique enables her to offer insights that are rich and textured regarding the lived experiences of female activists in the #FMM movement. In addition, she uses a feminist theory with a focus on intersectionality as a lens through which to examine the gender dimension. Through this lens of intersectionality, Pillay (2016) explores how intersecting oppressions, such as race, gender, and class, informed

female activists' experiences in the movement. She explains, "This intersectional approach demonstrates how the gendered power dynamics that developed within the #FMF replicated wider patriarchal structures in society" (p. 157).

Pillay's (2016) work highlights some of the contradictions within the #FMF movement. Though the movement sought to dismantle structural inequalities, it largely reproduced patriarchal practices, leaving women on the margins. "Even though the FMF was intended to be progressive, the movement frequently displaced the voice of women and mirrored the ongoing patriarchal sociocultural norms of South Africa" (Pillay, 2016, p. 156). This critique highlights the ways in which the movement reinforced gender biases and bound the role of women, making their work less visible. Pillay (2016) calls these "unique challenges for female activists within [the] FMF movement" (p. 159).

Nonetheless, there are limitations to Pillay's (2016) study. Though it is a searing examination of gendered dynamics, it largely centres on women, without considering the erasure of marginalised groups such as Black radical feminists and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer+ (LGBTQ+) activists. A broader analysis taking these perspectives into account will create a more nuanced understanding of inclusivity and hyper-masculinisation in the #FMF movement. Furthermore, the study is based on a relatively small number of interviews, which may restrict the generalisability of its results. Widening the pool of participants could also increase the robustness of its conclusions. Pillay's writing was published in 2016 and only deals with the earlier stages of the movement, so she provides little insight into how gender dynamics might have changed in later phases of the #FMF movement.

In contrast, Xaba's 2017 article, "Challenging Fanon: A Black Radical Feminist Perspective on Violence and the Fees Must Fall Movement", published in *Agenda*, offers a complementary perspective. While Pillay's (2016) study is roughly orientated towards gender marginalisation, Xaba (2017) explores Black radical feminists and the #FMF movement more critically. She provides a multifaceted analysis of the experiences of Black women in the movement, which centres on the interplay between race and gender. Using an intersectional framework, like Pillay (2016), Xaba's (2017) research is more engaging because of the extensive interviews and personal narratives she draws from. Xaba explains how "the analysis of race and gender oppression in relation to the FMF movement reveals the necessity for an inclusive framework that is considerate of the specific struggles of Black women" (Xaba, 2017, p. 98).

Unlike Pillay (2016), Xaba (2017) offers a rich overview of how Black feminists were marginalised despite their critical contributions by highlighting the challenges they faced in the movement and how their voices were pushed to the margins. Looking at the #FMF movement through a gendered lens, both studies present contrasting findings but highlight the aspects in which the #FMF movement was indeed gendered and the ways in which a more inclusive approach that recognises the different struggles in the movement is needed.

The guiding question that shaped Xaba's (2017) research was, "How were Black radical feminists involved in the FMF movement and what struggles did they face in asserting their voices and leadership in a predominantly male-led movement?" (p. 98). Xaba (2017) explores this query to uncover the different layers of gender oppression and class struggle within the movement. Through the use of a feminist and intersectional analytical framework, Xaba (2017) delves into how both gender and race dynamics impacted the experiences of Black women in the movement. She observed that, while the #FMF movement, which began in 2015 and was born out of rising university fees, led to many being empowered, it also sidelined Black women and marginalised them, especially radical feminists.

The use of an intersectional approach is one of the most profound strengths of Xaba's (2017) work. Xaba (2017) writes from an intersectionality perspective of race and gender to demonstrate how these challenges are magnified for Black women and, in addition, how they face compounded issues within the #FMF movement. These activists were contending not only with racial discrimination but also with the gendered oppression that existed within the movement, which, for all its progressive aims, had a tendency to marginalise their voices. Xaba (2017) writes, "The intersection of race and gender oppression within the FMF movement highlights the need for an inclusive approach that recognises the specific struggles of Black women" (p. 100).

In her work, Xaba (2017) also critiques the internal dynamics of the #FMF movement, illustrating that certain patriarchal practices in the movement were reminiscent of the same societal structures they sought to dismantle. Moreover, she argues that the movement's radical promise only replicated patriarchal structures, excluding the very women who were central to it. "The movement's objectives were revolutionary; however, it often retraced the patriarchal hierarchies it had aimed to dismantle, and marginalised some of its own: female leaders" (Xaba, 2017, p. 102). Xaba (2017) critiques the erasure of Black radical feminists and women from

the mainstream narratives about the #FMF movement. She cites the bias of reporting and the inherent favouritism accorded to male leaders in the movement. Xaba (2017) writes, “Black radical feminists have been methodically erased from the narrative of the FMF movement, just as they were erased in yester year liberation movements” (p. 103). This analysis reveals a consistent theme in social movements, whereby the roles of women, particularly Black women, are either disregarded or downplayed.

Several other studies echoed the same sentiments as Xaba’s (2017) study. For instance, Xaba’s (2017) claims are corroborated by Dlakavu (2017a), who points out that the media marginalised the contributions of Black women in the movement or portrayed them through a biased lens. Xaba’s (2017) research was yet another piece that added nuance to Dlakavu’s (2017a) argument, noting that “the protests were often reported by the mainstream media where the role of Black women was minimalised to the proceedings as emphasis was placed on male leaders and sensationalization of violence” (Xaba, 2017, p. 90).

The work of Maringira and Gukurume (2021) is also relevant to this work. They conclude, “As revolutionary as the Fees Must Fall movement was in its purpose, it often reproduced the patriarchal orders it aimed to disrupt, effectively sidelining the very women leading its charge” (p. 489). Madlingozi (2017) provides an additional perspective on the matter with his articulation of the compound oppression of Black women. As Madlingozi (2017) points out, the intersection of race and gender oppression within the #FMF movement demonstrates the “importance of an inclusive approach that recognises the unique struggles faced by Black women” (p. 130). This assertion echoes Xaba’s (2017) findings and contributes to how Black women continued to be marginalised even as the process of gendering the movement remained intentional.

Generally, Xaba (2017) presents an essential evaluation of the gendering and racialisation of social movements. She does this by highlighting the need for an intersectional and inclusive approach in a social movement like the #FMF movement, which holds both the potential to reproduce transformative change and the capacity to replicate the systems of oppression it seeks to disrupt.

Similarly, Mazibuko's 2020 article, "Being a Feminist in the Fallist Movement in Contemporary South Africa", presents an insightful feminist perspective on the challenges Black women faced within the #FMF movement while also accentuating the strategies feminist women engaged in the fight for visibility and leadership in the male-dominated environment that embodies hegemonic hyper-masculinity. Mazibuko (2020) details the manner in which female activists were forced to assert their existence while confronting marginalisation, demonstrating the significance and need for feminism to expose embedded gender biases in social movements.

The central questions guiding Mazibuko's (2020) study were, "How did feminist identities develop and manifest within the Fallist movement in South Africa, and what challenges and opportunities did feminists face in this context?" (p. 2). Mazibuko (2020) uses these questions as a means to examine the functions of Black feminist interventions in the #FMF movement in order to adequately understand the particular form of Black feminist mobilisation deployed. Mazibuko (2020) makes a distinction between the kind of feminist engagement in the #FMF movement vis-à-vis that of the women's movement during the apartheid era. According to Mazibuko (2020), the engagements are different because the integration of the gender struggle with the decolonial struggle results in a unique analysis that intertwines both intersectionality and decoloniality. This integrative analysis/approach becomes crucial for understanding how the oppression experienced by Black women within the movement was compounded.

Framing her analysis through the lens of intersectional feminism, Mazibuko (2020) uses intersectionality not only as a framework but also as a methodology. This strategy enables her to probe the experience of Black women in the #FMF movement, which reflects the intersection of racial, gendered and class-based oppressions. According to Mazibuko (2020), intersectionality is not just a diagnostic device but instrumental as an approach informing how feminist and LGBTQIA #FMF activists use different protest modalities to fight systemic injustice (Mazibuko, 2020, p. 488). Yet, despite the effectiveness of Mazibuko's (2020) study in weaving together these different perspectives, she could have further elaborated on the specific decolonial feminist theorists who informed her analysis and also reinforced the nuances in her theoretical framework.

In her qualitative study, Mazibuko (2020) draws on in-depth interviews with feminist activists and participant observations to investigate the internal dynamics of the movement. This methodology allows for a deep dive into the complexities, synergies and tensions between feminist political and broader decolonisation agendas by the #FMF movement. It shows how feminist activists grappled with patriarchal inclinations in the movement while also pushing for gender justice and racial and class-based equality. However, this study could have better described its rationale for selecting interview questions, as well as the context for participant observation, in order to emphasise which biases are likely in the data, and their impact on representativeness

There are three important takeaways from Mazibuko's (2020) study. The first key takeaway is centred on the alienation of feminists in the #FMF movement, which came about because many of these women felt their contributions were trivialised and their voices silenced. As one study participant put it, "Despite our active participation, our voices were often sidelined" (Mazibuko, 2020, p. 493). This reflection is in line with marginalisation patterns observed in similar studies (Pillay, 2016; Madlingozi, 2017; Xaba, 2017).

The second takeaway that Mazibuko (2020) mentions relates to the challenges of gender-based struggles experienced by women in the FMF movement. She alludes to how there were high occurrences of misogyny within the movement that often led to women not being represented in leadership positions. Moreover, the third takeaway relates to how because the movement was largely male-dominated and hyper-masculine, female activist contributions were often overshadowed, highlighting the gender dynamics at play within the movement. This provides a glimpse into the numerous obstacles that female activists had to confront to establish their voices in the male-dominated environment. Generally, Mazibuko (2020) presented invaluable inputs that helped in ascertaining the intricate dynamics between race, activism and gender in the #FMF movement in order to gain more insights into how Black feminist activists managed to manoeuvre their marginalisation within a wider and predominantly male-led hyper-masculine movement.

A critical point that Mazibuko (2020) highlights in her study centres around the importance of using intersectionality as a tool to probe how Black women and feminists interpreted the different and intersecting forms of oppression in the movement. During Mazibuko's (2020) interviews with her research participants, she engaged them on the prospect of using

intersectionality as a method for interrogating outdated concepts of activism and activist thought. By emphasizing the intellectual contributions made by student activists or ‘Fallists’ through the use of memory work and storytelling as tools of research, Mazibuko (2020) was able to redesign the ways in which we could conduct research and write about the movement to memorialize and archive the lived experiences and collective histories of activists. Beyond centering marginalized groups and their experiences, this methodological approach also invites a re-examination of what constitutes activism, especially feminist activism and how it ought to be documented.

Intersectionality is central to Mazibuko’s (2020) analysis of solidarity and resistance within the #FMMF movement. In the face of adversity, feminists and women in the movement banded together, forging a collective resistance against the numerous challenges they confronted. As one activist described it, “We found strength in our common struggle and fought for gender justice in the movement” (Mazibuko, 2020, p. 495). This sharing of responsibility helped to maintain the feminist presence in the movement, even as they were often pushed to the margins.

Mazibuko’s (2020) findings are consistent with those of Pillay (2016), who found that women often received little credit for their contributions, and their leadership roles in the movement were rarely acknowledged (Pillay, 2016). Xaba (2017) conducted similar research that confirmed this view. In her study, Black women involved in the #FMMF movement stated, “While we performed an imperative role, we were often relegated to the sidelines of the feminist movement as more significant anti-colonial narratives were prioritised” (p. 100). These three works, together – Mazibuko (2020), Pillay (2016) and Xaba (2017) – provide an integrated account of the gender dynamics of the #FMMF movement. Pillay (2016) offers a structural analysis of the gendered power dynamics, Mazibuko (2020) an experiential focus, and Xaba (2017) a distinct ideological framing through her exploration of BRW. Collectively, these studies add nuance to our perspectives on the intersectional challenges that Black women encountered in their activism but also document how their contributions were often marginalised.

While the existing literature provides vital insight into the gendered exclusions and erasure of Black womxn within the #FeesMustFall movement (Xaba, 2017; Ndelu, 2017; Dlakavu, 2017; Mahali & Matete, 2021), this thesis contributes to the field by specifically focusing on Black

womxn's leadership as a distinct site of political agency and radical praxis. Rather than centring only on marginalisation or symbolic erasure, this study documents how Black womxn actively resisted patriarchy and asserted themselves as strategic organisers, intellectuals, and movement builders during #FMF. Their leadership was often informal, collective, and grounded in Black Radical Feminist (BRF) politics that challenged the masculinist framing of student activism.

In building this analysis, the study draws on and extends the contributions of scholars such as Simamkele Dlakavu (2017), who foregrounded the ideological silencing of Black feminist voices within #FMF, and Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2016), who critiqued the gendered dynamics of representation in the movement. Similarly, the work of Pumla Dineo Gqola (2001; 2015) and Desiree Lewis (2009) provided a foundational understanding of Black feminist intellectual resistance in South Africa, which this thesis applies to a contemporary activist context. While these scholars have critically examined the structural and symbolic marginalisation of Black womxn, this study diverges by explicitly theorising Black womxn's leadership not merely as reactionary or peripheral, but as a radical, agentic practice. It is this reframing of leadership—as a mode of resistance, organisation, and political reimagination rooted in feminist ethics and collective care (hooks, 2000; Sutherland, 2013)—that marks the study's key contribution.

By naming and theorising this form of leadership, the thesis honours the intellectual labour of previous Black feminist scholars while also carving out new conceptual ground. It foregrounds the ways in which Black womxn's leadership was performed, negotiated, and theorised in practice, which remains underexplored in current scholarship. In doing so, the study not only addresses a critical gap in the literature but also pays homage to the scholars whose work made this theorisation possible. Building on the gendered critique of #FMF, the next chapter explores Black womxn's collective agency and strategies of resistance.

2.3 Second Theme: Who is Afraid of Black Women's Collective Agency?

Dlakavu (2017a) addresses the erasure of women in the #FMF movement through her chapter in *Writing and Rioting: Black Womxn in the Time of Fallism*, a profoundly necessary analysis of perceived erasure. Based on her own lived experience as a Black feminist activist, Dlakavu (2017a) reflects on the ways in which male activists turned #FMF into a masculine narrative. She also highlights how Black feminist voices were challenged, marginalised and/or made outlaws inside a movement that largely embraced male leadership. Dlakavu. (2017a)

interrogates the deliberate and systematic invisibilisation of Black women, both in student movements and in society at large. She describes how female student leaders at institutions such as Wits University faced hyper-masculinity and patriarchal structures that developed within the #FMF movement.

One big issue that Dlakavu (2017a) mentions is the domination of male participants in the first days of the protest. She remembers men leading songs and being sanctioned as the voices of the movement, while Black women's contributions were downplayed. Another form of gendered marginalisation was the demand for Black women to facilitate "women's work" – which meant doing the catering for the movement. Some Black women and queer bodies in the catering team were willing to help, but they also resented their work being taken for granted or overlooked. Dlakavu (2017a) recalls some of the dismissive remarks made by the cis-hetero men: "When is the food coming?" or "Why is the food so dry?", which were the perfect encapsulation of how their contributions were undervalued. "When a woman started to speak, few would listen. Whenever a woman would lead a song, she would get scolded, and a man would lead another, and everyone would follow" (Dlakavu, 2017a, p. 109).

Black women in the movement rallied against this, erupting into a campaign dubbed Mbokodo Lead with the hashtag #MbokodoLeadUs. Dlakavu (2017a) recalls the group's formation: "We wanted to create safer spaces where Black women's ideas, political agency and being would be valued and we started the hashtag #MbokodoLead on the 17th of October 2015, three days after the first Wits Shutdown" (p. 109). This kind of movement started informally via a WhatsApp group to give voice to Black women and promote their leadership. Women across political lines and academic ranks came together to resist the patriarchal components of the #FMF movement. Eventually, these Black women became more visible, and their contributions started getting recognised, but their rise was met with violent backlash, including misogynistic comments and sexism by male activists.

Despite this, Dlakavu (2017a) highlights the strength of Black women who managed to defy erasure. Her study demonstrates that through grassroots organisation, media creation and the establishment of women's caucuses, Black women found avenues to assert their leadership. According to her, "Black women implemented numerous tactics to resist marginalisation and claim their leadership, such as creating their own media platforms and forming women's

caucuses” (Dlakavu, 2017a, p. 107). The #MbokodoLead movement evolved to represent resistance to gender-based oppression in the context of the greater #FMMF battleground.

Moreover, Dlakavu (2017a) points out how the deliberate exclusion of Black women from social justice movements similar to #FMMF is both historical and contemporary, thus it needs to be interrogated. Dlakavu (2017a) asserts the importance and need to include the stories and contributions made by Black women in any political narrative. She provides an in-depth understanding of the inner workings and motives behind the #FMMF movement, which entrenches the findings around the unique challenges and roles of Black women in contemporary movements. A more thorough comparative analysis of other social movements could further enrich Dlakavu’s (2017) argument about strategies Black women used to resist erasure.

Meanwhile, Mahali and Matete’s (2021) article, “#MbokodoLeadUs: The Gendered Politics of Black Womxn Leading Campus-Based Activism in South Africa’s Recent University Student Movement”, offers a theoretical and content-based analysis of gendered power relations within campus-based student activism. Their work is not based on empirical fieldwork; rather, it draws from protest discourse, public narratives, and symbolic representations of formations such as #MbokodoLead to critically assess the ideological exclusions of Black womxn within the broader #FeesMustFall (FMMF) movement. Using intersectionality as a guiding theoretical framework, the authors explore how race, gender, and power intersect to shape the visibility, legitimacy, and silencing of Black feminist actors in student-led movements.

Instead of drawing on interviews or participant data, Mahali and Matete (2021) employ a content analysis approach, examining textual materials and media representations to illuminate the symbolic and discursive marginalisation of Black womxn. Their work is important for showing how exclusion operated ideologically—beyond physical spaces and direct encounters—and how alternative feminist collectives like #MbokodoLead were formed in direct response to these erasures. Building on earlier feminist critiques such as those by Dlakavu et al. (2017), the authors trace how Black womxn challenged gendered forms of erasure through intellectual and activist resistance that redefined leadership and voice within the movement.

Mahali and Matete (2021) frame #MbokodoLead as a site of feminist insurgency that sought to disrupt the heteropatriarchal dominance of male-led protest cultures. Their intersectional critique shows how gender, race, class, and sexuality co-constituted the conditions of marginality that Black womxn encountered within the movement. Their analysis underscores that Black womxn's leadership was not always institutionally recognised but was often asserted through alternative discursive, symbolic, and collective strategies. Importantly, their work draws attention to how queer and gender non-conforming Black activists were also central to this leadership, even as they were systematically invisibilised.

The authors further highlight how class dynamics exacerbated gender-based exclusions. Working-class and economically marginalised womxn, for instance, often lacked access to platforms or networks of visibility, reinforcing multiple layers of exclusion (Mahali & Matete, 2021). This adds a material dimension to the analysis of symbolic and ideological erasure, illustrating the complex ways class, gender, and race intersect in shaping movement dynamics. Their work aligns with critiques by Xaba (2017) and Ndelu et al. (2017), who also identify the persistence of patriarchy within ostensibly progressive student movements.

Although their article does not present interview-based data, Mahali and Matete's (2021) contribution is crucial in establishing a discursive foundation for theorising Black feminist leadership within #FMF. By examining protest formations like #MbokodoLead through a content-analytical lens, they provide a nuanced understanding of the ideological terrain within which Black womxn organised and resisted marginalisation. While this thesis differs in its use of qualitative interviews and transdisciplinary analysis, it builds on the insights of Mahali and Matete by grounding their symbolic critique in the lived realities and embodied narratives of Black Radical Feminist (BRF) actors within the movement.

Ultimately, Mahali and Matete (2021) make a significant contribution to the literature on student activism and Black feminism in South Africa by reasserting the centrality of Black womxn's resistance. Their work complements empirical studies by offering a broader ideological reading of exclusion and feminist praxis within FMF. This thesis extends their critique by adding empirical depth through interviews with BRF participants, thereby linking the discursive framing of leadership and erasure to the lived experience and strategic political actions of Black womxn in #FeesMustFall.

When looking at Mahali and Matete's (2021) findings, Xaba's (2017) article titled "Challenging Fanon: A Black Radical Feminist Perspective on Violence and the Fees Must Fall Movement," expands on the discourse around Black feminist activism within the #FMMF movement. Xaba (2017) critiques the theories on violence from three works of Franz Fanon according to a Black radical feminist perspective of student-led protests. Xaba (2017), for example, investigates how students in different South African universities used social media to create a radical movement that did not simply resist institutional policies but also organised under a variety of banners, including Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, BRF, queer theories and decolonisation.

Xaba (2017) approaches Fanon critically by reinterpreting his theories within the contours of BRF and arguing that his original work does not pay due attention to the gendered dimensions of violence witnessed by Black women activists. For instance, she declares, "The experiences of Black women tend to be sidelined in theoretical and activist applied practice, thus requiring critical analyses from intercultural perspectives" (Xaba, 2017, p. 92). This reading deepens Fanon's insights into revolutionary violence, approaching the issue through an intersectional lens that recognises the specific logics of oppression faced by Black women. Reiterating that, "Fanon's analysis, while groundbreaking, fails to account for the gendered dimensions of violence that uniquely impact Black women" she highlights the need for feminist frameworks that incorporate the intersectionality between race, gender and violence (Xaba, 2017, p. 96). Xaba (2017) further interrogates the impact of militarised masculinities in the #FMMF movement on the leadership and involvement of Black women.

She criticises the masculine militarisation of the movement's responses to state violence and institutional oppression, pointing out that their responses frequently marginalised Black women and gender non-conforming bodies. These issues are explored in greater detail by Xaba (2017) through the lens of Black feminist theory, employing "intersectionality as a radical Black feminist praxis to critique the militarised masculine responses to institutionalised (state and university) violence embodied within FMMF, and how this affected the movement internally" (p. 92).

Moreover, Xaba's (2017) work expands on these insidious dynamics by discussing the realities of students in the #FMMF movement, including queer students and students with disabilities. Their findings, although briefly mentioned, on how patriarchy, ableism, sexual

violence and queer antagonisms were acceptable within the #FMF movement, unearth the limitations of inclusiveness in the movement. For example, she highlights the exclusion of students with disabilities in her scholarship: “The lack of accessible transport and facilities effectively excluded students with disabilities from participating, highlighting the movement’s failure to address their needs” (Xaba, 2017, p. 95).

Similarly, Xaba (2017) explains “the inclusion of queer students” but quickly follows this with “however, their concerns around inclusion and safety were not only dismissed, but often ignored” (p. 96). These nuanced examples highlight the ways in which the #FMF movement while pursuing systemic reconciliation with the establishment, shifted its radical focus away from intersectionality and its capacity to directly confront the specific challenges marginalised groups faced in the activist space. Xaba (2017) contends that the movement’s limitations were due, in part, to the lack of attention paid to the multiple forms of oppression that these groups experience, and she argues that “an intersectional approach is essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression and for building truly inclusive and equitable movements” (p. 94). Citing the marginalisation of queer students, students with disabilities and Black radical feminists, Xaba (2017) urges for a broader and more inclusive framing of activism that better reflects their needs, which are frequently ignored in much mainstream activism. While understanding that Black Radical Feminism in #FMF explicitly challenged heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity, which were entrenched by colonialism, space constraints do not allow for a comprehensive discussion of this line of inquiry. It is also worth noting that this thesis discursively builds on the work and struggles of the Trans Collective (e.g., at UCT and UFS) which resisted the erasure of trans womxn and nonbinary activists (Ndelu, 2017; Mathandela, 2017) within #FMF. While This thesis acknowledges these struggles and the important role they played in creating political space for trans womxn and nonbinary activists within the movement, the main focus of the research foregrounds gender oppression in the movement more broadly.

In essence, the complementary pieces from Mahali and Matete (2021) and Xaba (2017) provide a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics underpinning South African student activism, particularly with respect to leadership and the marginalisation of Black women. Across both studies, there is a consistent emphasis on centring on the experiences and voices of those who have been historically marginalised from activist discourses and advocating for more inclusive,

more diverse, and more intersectional approaches to activism and social change. The silencing of Black women's voices was often reinforced by patriarchal violence, a theme examined in the next section.

2.4 Theme Three: The Banality of Patriarchal Violence: Gender-Based Violence, Roughhousing Politics and the Glorification of the Boys Will Be Boys Masculine Ethic

As noted, Xaba's (2017) "Challenging Fanon: A Black Radical Feminist Perspective on Violence and the Fees Must Fall Movement" offers an excellent critique of the patriarchal violence that existed within the #FMF movement. As Xaba (2017) explains, although this movement had nothing to do with institutional oppression, it was still borne out of societal norms that perpetuate gender-based violence. "The Fees Must Fall movement was focused on, and showed resistance to, the deep-seated institutional oppression it faced, but did not engage with the deep-seated patriarchal violence women in the movement faced" (Xaba, 2017, p. 96).

As she explains in her analysis, Xaba (2017) examines the impact of aggressive behaviours, or "roughhousing politics", on the movement, discussing how physical and verbal aggression was often romanticised and seen as a necessity for leadership and influence, espousing a hyper-masculine ideology. Such an environment pushed to the margins those who didn't fit in with such brash norms, women and queer people in particular. "Roughhousing politics became a normalised aspect of the Fees Must Fall protests, sidelining those who did not conform to these aggressive norms, particularly women and queer bodies" (Xaba, 2017, p. 98).

Xaba (2017) critiques the dominant "boys will be boys" mentality that permeated the #FMF movement in which male dominance and violence were excused and celebrated. This ethos, she contends, fostered a culture of impunity in which male activists were not held accountable for their actions. As she states, "The 'boys will be boys' mentality not only justified male aggression but also reinforced the marginalisation of women who resisted these norms" (Xaba, 2017, p. 99). According to Xaba (2017), this culture of violence is cemented by the movement's reliance on Frantz Fanon's theories of violence and was underpinned by Fanon's (1952) *Black Skin, White Masks*, which, though useful for a gendered examination of the impact of White supremacy, lacks a gendered account of the decolonial response to violence. Xaba (2017) observes that Fanon's (1952) work also fails to note the strong gendered dimension of resistance in the #FMF struggle with imagery of male students as protestors carrying sticks and knobkerries.

Xaba (2017) relates these masculine forms of resistance with alternative feminist actions, like the naked protests at UCT and Rhodes University against rape culture. These protests are contextualised within a historical tradition of African women's resistance, evoking similar actions in countries such as Kenya, Liberia, Uganda and Nigeria. Sure enough, despite these feminist and queer-led approaches, Xaba (2017) notes the phenomenon whereby some Black radical feminists, queer-identified individuals and people with disabilities actively perpetuated hyper-masculinity through their activity at protests and within organisations. Xaba also states that although oppressed, marginalised groups proliferated institutional violence during and around the movement (Xaba, 2017).

Xaba (2017) goes on to speak of the resilience and the resistance of Black women within the #FEMM movement, which actively challenged patriarchal structures and racial hierarchies. She said, "Black women in the movement demonstrated extraordinary resilience and resistance, consistently pushing back against patriarchal and racial hierarchies that tried to silence them" (Xaba, 2017, p. 96).

Similarly, Maleby's (2020) study, "Fallist Feminist Futures in South Africa", also explores the normalisation of gender-based violence within activist spaces. Maleby (2020) emphasises that this violence is often viewed as an unavoidable part of activism and silences women's voices and experiences. As one participant puts it, "Aggressive behaviour and roughhousing were tolerated, because they were part of the activist culture, and it made us feel, half the time, unsafe and disempowered" (Maleby, 2020, p. 61). Maleby (2020) argues that this normalisation of violence both perpetuates and propagates harm while silencing women within the movement, which reinforces the need for a more intersectional approach to activism that takes into consideration the gendered experiences of all individuals involved.

These features of "roughhousing politics," which straddle popular activist spaces, contribute to the further marginalisation of women. In her 2020 study, Maleby explores how such behaviours are frequently justified as integral to militant activism, despite the fact that the over-representation of women and nonbinary persons in Gamergate-type hate movements gives rise to fears about the safety and comfortability of these individuals in such environments. The glorification of hyper-masculinity within activist circles, she points out, often silences women and creates a culture that enables and condones acts of gender-based violence" (Maleby, 2020).

According to a report released by the Gender-based Violence Command Centre (GBVCC) in 2020, there are multiple definitions for the term “boys will be boys”, but what this phrase represents is the factors that contribute to hyper-masculine behaviours, which subsequently lead to relatively high cases of violence against girls and women. The phrase also acts to reinforce patriarchal norms as men engage in these behaviours without the fear of consequences (Malebye, 2020). And this attitude, she writes, if widely accepted in activist or feminist circles, marginalises women and contributes to the perpetuation of violence. Malebye (2020) argues that this dynamic is especially damaging as it creates an environment in which women’s voices are muted and gendered violence is minimised.

Based on 25 in-depth interviews with activists, Malebye (2020) provides qualitative insights into the lived experiences of participants within the movement. She supplemented interviews with participant observations at protests and meetings, situating the analysis in a more dynamic understanding of activist space (Malebye, 2020). By employing a specifically intersectional feminist theoretical lens, she investigates the multilayered forms of power and systemic inequalities within which activism operates. The Fallist movements are situated within a broader narrative of feminist praxis, in which the Fallists respond to patriarchal structures in a way that also makes space for gender equality (Malebye, 2020). Focusing on the racialisation of gender-based violence at the intersection of activist culture, she provides a perspective not made available in other studies of the Fallist movements.

Nonetheless, Malebye’s (2020) study has certain limitations. One of these is her focus on more prominent urban universities, which may reduce the generalisability of her findings to other, less prestigious or rural centres of academia. Thus, she observes that “the focus on well-known universities in metropolitan regions may not allow for the generalisability of the findings to Fallist movements in rural or less prominent academic institutions” (Malebye, 2020, p. 25). Further, the use of self-selected participants for interviews leads to bias, as those who take part may have stronger or more specific opinions than those who do not (Malebye, 2020). In addition, Malebye’s study is situated in a specific moment in time, whereas a longitudinal approach could provide “fascinating insights into the evolution of the movement and the ways in which feminist dimensions continue to shape the movement” (Malebye, 2020, p. 29).

Even within the limitations of her available sources, Malebye (2020) draws important conclusions about the role of feminist activism in South Africa’s struggles against the systems

of violence that pervade everyday life, advancing the conversation to new territory in the efforts of feminist activist scholars.

This study builds upon and extends the work of scholars such as Zethu Matebeni, Simamkele Dlakavu, Sandla Ndelu, Lwando Xaba, and Zamantungwa Mazibuko, who have foregrounded the gendered exclusions and erasures experienced by Black womxn in student movements such as #FeesMustFall. For instance, Xaba (2017) and Ndelu et al. (2017) offer critical insights into the masculinist politics and patriarchal violence embedded in the movements internal culture, while Dlakavu (2017a) highlights the media's role in erasing Black womxns leadership. Mazibuko (2020) further interrogates the development of feminist consciousness within Fallist spaces and the challenges feminists faced in asserting their identities. While these scholars have been instrumental in establishing a critique of gendered marginalisation, this thesis departs from their work by explicitly documenting and theorising Black Radical Feminist (BRF) leadership as a distinct and politically coherent praxis rather than a reactive critique. Rather than focusing solely on marginalization, this study centres Black womxn as agents of resistance and leadership, tracing their intellectual contributions, political strategies, and collective organising as critical to the transformation of #FMF. In doing so, this research offers the first in-depth account of BRF praxis within the movement, shifting the frame from exclusion to feminist insurgency. Having established the gendered challenges within #FMF, the next chapter outlines the methodological framework used to analyze these dynamics.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Research Positionality

3.1 Introduction

This study was conducted using a transdisciplinary qualitative research approach that blends knowledge and methodologies from diverse disciplines in order to address complex societal challenges, focusing on qualitative research methods. This method allows for the exploration of issues that cannot be studied through one academic lens, as it draws from multiple disciplinary perspectives. This study will investigate the perceived erasure of Black radical feminists in the #FMF movement to better understand how historical, social, and political nuances influenced the marginalisation of Black women that transcended even the general fight for social justice. Researching the political contributions of BRFs within the #FMF movement, and how patriarchal tendencies within the movement meant that Black women's leadership was often silenced and erased, required a transdisciplinary methodology.

A transdisciplinary approach allows the study to confront both the problem of erasure and the broader systems of patriarchy, racism and neoliberalism that reinforce it. This study draws on a variety of intellectual tools and perspectives, such as psychology, anthropology, economics, gender studies, education and sociology, to provide a more robust and nuanced analysis that draws on a wide range of research approaches and touchpoints to better understand the various issues at hand. Because of this, a transdisciplinary approach became the ideal discipline with which to unpack the silencing of Black feminist voices in the #FMF movement.

It involved synthesising insights from BRF, the lived experiences of activists, and qualitative research methods. This intersectional approach refracted the interrelation of various forms of oppression – including racism, sexism and classism – and their effect on one another, all of which framed the experiences of Black women within the #FMF movement. Transdisciplinary research “aims to transcend disciplinary boundaries so that the problem can be addressed as a whole rather than in its parts, which cannot be handled within the strictures of [a] single discipline” (Klein, 2004, p. 516).

This way of seeing was important in understanding how Black women activists were marginalised because of the interplay of race, gender and class in the #FMM movement. This approach allowed the research to not only explore the historical and social structures responsible for the erasure but also produce room for counter-stories that placed the lived experiences of Black women at the forefront. Avoiding reductionist explanations, this methodology highlighted a more holistic and context-sensitive view of the power dynamics at play. In the long run, it was part of the bigger picture of social justice and went against the mainstream paradigms that had marginalised the worthiness of Black women within activist scenarios.

This method proved especially useful for tackling what are referred to as “wicked problems”. These are multidimensional, complex problems that need multidimensional solutions, for example, climate change, public health crises and social inequalities (Pohl et al., 2017). Rittel and Webber (1973) first coined the term “wicked problems” while reviewing the need for social planning. They called these wicked problems hard to pin down and impervious to easy answers. Rittel and Webber (1973) contend that these problems “can’t be described definitively” as they are intermingled with other societal problems and are frequently within the fabric of cultural, political and economic systems (p. 160). Moreover, wicked problems offer no easy solutions; any intervention almost inevitably has meaningful consequences and may even culminate in creating new problems in the process.

The word “wicked” is not a moral characterisation but describes the complexity and challenge of addressing these issues. Tackling wicked problems is challenging; Rittel and Webber (1973) described them as “messy, circular, and aggressive” (p. 161), unwilling to be resolved through simple and linear solutions. This is even truer for Black feminist struggles, as the intersectional networks that bind race, gender, class and historical forms of oppression tend to shape quotidian problems in the society around us. “Wicked”, in this context, describes the complexity and stubbornness of such challenges.

The word “wicked,” when used in the context of Black feminism, may feel disconcerting in the beginning, since it tends toward negativity. It is necessary, however, to provide clarification that the term was not developed to pathologise the struggles of Black women; rather, it is meant to urge us to consider how the complexities of interconnected systemic challenges may be intricately related. These intersecting forms of oppression are precisely the kind of “wicked

problems” that are often at the centre of Black feminist theory, which – as Crenshaw (2013) famously noted – is always about intersectionality. The “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” Crenshaw (2013) noted, showing that the systemic inequalities experienced by Black women are deeply intertwined and cannot be addressed using conventional solutions (p. 42).

So while the word “wicked” might seem counterproductive to Black feminist struggles, its use in this research highlights how these challenges are multidimensional and resistant. Rittel and Webber (1973) pointed out how some issues that seem to have no clear definitions are entrenched within existing structures and are resistant to solutions – but this is evidently obscured by systemic oppression, seen most clearly through the experience of Black feminists who hold movements like the #FMMF movement together.

My research question was therefore a direct response to these wicked problems, addressing the chronic, systemic and structural nature of pervasive social inequalities, particularly regarding race, gender and power relations. According to Rittel and Webber (1973), wicked problems are interrelated and not amenable to simple solutions. The framing of the study thus helped highlight the complex, overlapping nature of the issues that Black women face, both within activist movements and outside of them in the real world.

Because wicked problems are not necessarily solved and instead need repetitive efforts to address them, by paying close attention to the power dynamics within the #FMMF movement, this study presents an overview of the marginalisation of Black women in activist spaces while offering adaptable strategies to amplify their voices and experiences. This helped to deepen the analysis and contributed to a wider conversation on how to uphold and challenge structural hierarchies of oppression that are responsible for disparities within the #FMMF movement.

While this study centers Black Radical Feminism, it recognizes the limitations of excluding LGBTQ+ perspectives. Future research should explicitly address transphobia and homophobia in #FMMF (Ramaru, 2017).

As a former national leader of the #FeesMustFall movement who aligned with the principles of Black Radical Feminism, I approached this study from both an academic and activist standpoint. Guided by disciplinary conventions of Politics Studies, My positionality as an insider shaped the formulation of the research questions, the design of the study, and the

interpretation of data. Having directly experienced many of the power dynamics explored in this research, I was able to engage with participants in a manner that fostered trust, mutual recognition, and shared understanding—particularly in interviews that required reflection on deeply personal or political experiences. My role within the movement allowed for access to spaces, networks and knowledge that may otherwise have remained obscured. However, I remained critically reflexive throughout the research process, recognising the need to bracket my own experiences to privilege the voices and perspectives of the womxn I interviewed (England, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Although I drew inspiration from the work of scholars such as Xaba (2017), Mazibuko (2020), and Mahali and Matete (2021), who examined gendered exclusions within the movement, this study extended their contributions by documenting Black womxn’s leadership as a distinct site of political praxis. While much of the existing literature reflected on erasure and marginalisation, my research focused on how Black womxn actively organised, led, and theorised resistance from within the movement itself. This required a careful balancing of my dual role as researcher and participant-witness—recognising that my involvement in the movement brought valuable insight, but also necessitated a continuous process of reflexivity, accountability, and ethical consideration (Smith, 2012; Pillay, 2022). This approach was underpinned by a decolonial feminist ethic of research that emphasised relationality, inclusion and responsibility in knowledge production. Furthermore, As a Black womxn who witnessed #FMF, my activism and academic lens unavoidably shape this research. I employ Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (2012) decolonial framework to navigate my subjectivity, acknowledging how my proximity to the movement informs my analysis of erasure and resistance.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling method was used in this study to recruit and select participants whose experiences would provide rich, meaningful data. This approach was especially helpful because it was able to unravel the complex realities of the politics and lived experiences of BRFs in the movement (Gill, 2020). This is because purposive sampling, which is also known as judgemental or selective sampling, allows for the targeting of participants according to a specific criterion that is directly aligned with the goals of the research. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants strategically so that those sampled are relevant to

the research questions being asked. This research uses a combination of two purposive sampling strategies, namely homogenous sampling and maximum variation sampling.

Homogenous sampling was also used because participants shared experiences, worldviews and values, including a commitment to BRF, making this approach important for unpacking particular experiences of Black feminists in the #FMF movement (Patton, 2015). This means that the study was able to provide more nuanced dynamics that characterised the participation and activism of the participants by honing in on people with shared perspectives.

On the other hand, maximum variation sampling made it possible for the study to include a broader range of experiences by including participants from various universities across the country that formed part of the #FMF movement. This approach assisted the study in engaging an array of Black feminist experiences across different geographical and institutional contexts. This approach was the most suitable because it helped standardise data in a manner that identifies key patterns and commonalities across a wide range of experiences (Patton, 2015), which broadened the study's understanding of this complex social issue.

By using a maximum variation sampling method, the study captured a more holistic understanding of the contributions of Black feminists in the #FMF movement. The use of both homogenous sampling and maximum variation sampling was very useful for data collection, as it assisted the study in capturing both the unique and shared experiences of participants across different universities in the country. The eight participants in this study all fulfilled the criteria that the research sought. These criteria were:

1. Black female students actively involved in the #FMF movement and leadership.
2. Individuals who were able to articulate their experiences using a BRF lens.
3. Students who were studying at a university in South Africa.

With the participants identified, the next section details the interview process and data collection methods.

3.3 Interviews

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data (see Appendix C). This was the most suitable format for the research, as it allowed participants to feel safe sharing their personal

narratives of the experiences they went through. In addition, semi-structured interviews were used since they aligned with the study's methodology in allowing the use of open-ended questions, permitting the researcher to examine both the unique and shared experiences of participants. The format of the interviews helped to create a trusting and friendly relationship between myself, as the researcher and the participants, which led to constructive dialogues that produced rich insightful data.

A semi-structured interview format is built around a pre-defined set of open-ended questions, yet permits participants to express themselves and tell their stories as they see fit. This adaptability is vital when working with the complexities and delicacies that come with activism and marginalisation experiences. Gillham (2005) believed that this approach to interviews was not only structured but that it provided a flexible framework that allowed the researcher to follow up on themes, topics and issues that were salient in the interviews.

The flexibility of this method was especially useful in understanding the personal and collective experiences of the participants in the movement. By using this approach, this study was able to expose the complexities at the intersection between race, gender and power (among others) and how it shaped Black feminist activism. Semi-structured interviews are a powerful means of gathering rich data because all the respondents describe and reflect on their actions and experiences in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviews with the participants were undertaken in different settings and places in order to make the participants feel comfortable. This was done in order to provide a more relaxed environment that would foster open and candid conversations. The interviews comprised open-ended questions, with each interview ranging between 60 and 90 minutes long so that participants could narrate their experiences and actions with as much depth and detail as possible without feeling rushed. These interviews were then transcribed for analysis from audio recordings.

Before each interview, I carefully and slowly explained the purpose of the study and detailed the aims and objectives I hoped to achieve. After this, I answered any questions and on obtaining the participants' acknowledgement of their understanding, I provided each one with a consent form that outlined their rights, including the confidentiality clauses and reminded them of their option to withdraw from the study at any time. This facilitated a sense of trust

and rapport, laying a positive foundation for participants to feel safe enough to tell their truth. I also informed all participants how I planned to ensure that their contributions would be kept private and safe. This helped to reassure them that they were respected and that it was safe to provide me with sensitive information.

The participants spoke of their political struggles and extensively elaborated on their emotional responses to their erasure because of the semi-structured nature of their interviews. Qualitative interviews must capture the emotionality of participants' experiences, and this aspect was crucial for interrogating the marginalisation faced by Black feminists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The open-ended nature of the questions also allowed participants to reflect on their roles and identities, allowing them to communicate a nuanced, intersectional experience that a more structured interview method would have failed to capture.

Moreover, this method of conducting interviews empowered participants to express the emotional complexities of their journeys, including how they navigated personal and political challenges in their lives while part of the movement. Because semi-structured interviews allow participants to describe and reflect on their experiences in their own words, they were able to provide insights into how systemic erasure impacted their activism and sense of self (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). What became apparent as a result of the semi-structured interviews is that Black feminist activists struggle with the external constraints of institutionalised oppression and the internal structures within activist spaces that refuse to recognise and validate their contributions.

While the study sought to include a broad spectrum of voices within the Black Radical Feminist (BRF) framework, no trans-identifying participants were ultimately recruited. Efforts were made to reach out through established activist networks, but the inability to secure participation may be attributed to factors such as gatekeeping, the precarity of trans visibility within political spaces, and the ethical complexities of disclosure and safety for trans individuals in public-facing research. This absence is recognised as a significant limitation of the study. Nonetheless, queer and trans feminist critiques are incorporated through engagement with relevant literature, including the work of Matebeni (2013), Booysen (2016), and Gqola (2015), whose analyses highlight the intersectional exclusions experienced by LGBTIQ+ activists within broader political movements. These perspectives, although not present through direct narratives, informed both the study's analytical framework and its critique of the cisnormative logic that

continues to marginalise trans and gender-nonconforming individuals within social justice spaces (Ratele, 2013; Dolezal, 2015). The interview data was then analyzed using thematic coding, as discussed below.

3.4 Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews produced data that was then systematically organised and coded to facilitate meaningful analysis and interpretation. Coding is a systematic process that can be used for organising qualitative data into smaller parts or units. This helps researchers recognise patterns, themes and insights that emerged from the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process requires assigning specific codes to the relevant text extracts that capture the essence of significant parts of participants' responses. In this study, coding was done to both manage the data and establish connections between the various themes that emerged during the analysis (Saldana, 2016).

In this study, I used manual coding to analyse data from the interviews because it did not require the use of technological tools or software. Instead, it allowed me to approach the data directly, which made it possible for me to be hands-on and intimate with the material. Given the qualitative nature of my data, this strategy allowed me to become more attuned to the participants' voices and, at a deeper level, facilitate a more finely-tuned observation of the richness of the data (Saldana, 2016). As part of the initial stages of my manual coding process, I transcribed each interview verbatim to ensure that the details and nuances of the participants' narratives were accurately captured.

Once the interviews had been transcribed, I read through each transcript multiple times, underlining significant quotes and assigning preliminary codes that captured recurring ideas and abstract themes that emerged from the data. Throughout this process, I looked for codes that were grounded in the participants' own words, letting their lived experiences guide the coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Having determined the initial codes, I then started grouping them into categories and broader themes based on their relevance and how frequently they appeared in the data. This demonstrates how thematic analysis allowed me to identify which of the themes appeared salient and warranted further investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To select the themes that needed more robust investigation, I considered their prominence in the data, their relationship to my research questions, and their relationship to the theoretical

framing of BRF. I similarly looked for emergent themes that exemplified contradictions or different worldviews, as these themes shed light on the tensions of Black feminist activism within the #FMF movement (Saldana, 2016). Through this manual coding approach, I sought to achieve a complete and sensitive analysis that accurately represented the richness of the participants' voices and provided insights into the interactions at play in the study.

I did this iteratively. That is to say, I refined and revised the codes repeatedly as new experiences came to light in the process. This enabled the themes to evolve and grow according to the new data that emerged. From this rigorous ordering and analytic process, five major themes emerged:

- 1) The factors that drew female students to the #FMF movement
- 2) The everyday sexism experienced within the movement
- 3) The marginalisation of BRF
- 4) The silencing of women's voices in #FMF's official discourse
- 5) The strategies employed by Black radical feminists to combat misogyny and erasure.

The third theme, called Black radical strategies, had two sub-themes: a) resistance and resilience and b) carrying symbols of resistance. The analysis was guided by Black Radical Feminist Theory, which provides a lens to interpret the findings.

3.5 Theory: Black Radical Feminist Theory

This study used a methodological approach that includes qualitative methods and was grounded in Black radical feminist theory in the exploration and analysis of the experiences and struggles of Black feminists in the #FMF movement. Bringing radical activism, rather than liberal politics, specifically to the Black female body, BRF was focused on encouraging Black female militancy (James, 1999). In this regard, "radical" means going to the root of the matter and addressing the systemic cause of oppression, socio-economic problems, and other causes so as to change the system itself (Grant, 1998, p. 230). Within the discipline of this study, "radical" focused on the necessity of addressing a system that does not serve the marginalised community and the potential of addressing and changing that system (Grant, 1998, p. 230).

We leveraged this theoretical framing to not only name the urgency associated with Black women's specific needs but also to frame their experiences in broader socio-political contexts.

BRF challenges the narratives that portray the ‘Black women matter’ movements as secondary to other movements, showing the need for the intersectionality of their lived experience and history in addressing the past and present systemic oppression. “We must work to dismantle the institutions that reinforce the social order that devalues Black women” (Davis, 1983, p. 84). By prioritising the voices of Black feminists within the #FMMF movement, this study aimed to reposition their activism as an expression of agency and autonomy rather than as a response to oppressive experiences. This study sought to illuminate ways in which Black feminists fought to shape the narrative of their violence and strife, contributing to an understanding of resistance to intersecting oppressions.

While liberal feminism primarily addresses electoral politics to advocate reforms, social service programmes, and changes within the existing structure, BRF strives for a more radical transformation of the social structures (James, 1999). Along with the power of the state and labour relations, BRF stresses social cohesion through political participation and managing demands for social justice by equilibrating power that persists in the social system rather than focusing on service delivery for disadvantaged groups (James, 1999). Crucially, BRF demands the autonomy of women away from patriarchal, masculinist and exploitative systems, be they misogynistic, state-based or corporate (James, 1999). Critics that have had the most radical critiques of racism, sexism and imperialism have historically been BRFs (Neville & Hamer, 2001). At the core of this new form of feminism is a recognition of the inherent worth of Black women and their liberation, not as an add-on to the struggle of others, but as a necessary act of freedom for a human being (The Combahee River Collective, 1977; Eisenstein, 1978).

BRF identifies a multitude of liberatory strategies that Black women have employed to resist oppression. BRF is founded on the notion of intersectionality, the idea that individuals endure multiple, interacting systems of oppression. Crenshaw (1989) stated that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (p. 140), which highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of Black women with a combination of intersecting identities such as race and gender. Because intersectionality is able to recognise the interdependent nature of oppression, specifically regarding race, gender, class and sexuality, it is easier to integrate into BRF to expose how Black feminists negotiated their intersecting identities as a means of resisting hegemonic masculine narratives.

By understanding intersectionality through the lens of BRF, we can examine the unique challenges faced by Black women activists in the #FMMF movement. Since intersectionality reveals how race, gender, class and sexuality interact to create distinct forms of oppression, it equally highlights the resilience and agency of Black women in confronting these challenges.

Because Black women's lives are constructed at the intersections of race, class and gender – which are all integral parts of their experiences (Collins, 2000) – it is easy to understand why Black feminists navigated social injustices while asserting their rights and voices in a movement that relegated them to secondary roles behind the men who led. Thus, it is only through qualitative research that we will be able to identify how Black feminists navigated and resisted patriarchal and institutionalised barriers that sought to erase their contributions.

Black Radical Feminism (BRF) has its roots in the mid-19th century, with early activists, including its pioneer Sojourner Truth, playing a vital role in abolitionist and women's rights movements. Truth's famous "Ain't I a woman?" speech, given in 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, addressed the intersection of race and gender oppression in a powerful way. She highlighted how Black women struggled and how many mainstream feminist movements failed to recognise their struggles. Truth infamously said, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" (Voices of Democracy, 2020).

That declaration powerfully frames the unique experiences of Black women and calls into question the eternal narratives of victimhood and femininity that, until then, had been dictated primarily by the experiences of White women. Truth's activism paved the way for Black Feminist Thought, laying the groundwork for the idea that the freedom of Black women was inextricably tied to a broader liberation from racism and sexism. This made BRF a unique and important criticism inside the feminist movement. The origins of BRF solidified and grew through the 1960s, to include important voices such as Lorde and hooks who all helped to broaden the conversation.

The declaration by Truth, together with the voices of Lorde and Hooks in the origin story of BRF provided a means for Black activists and women to examine their lives through Black Feminist Thought. It is a reminder, amid the chaotic years of identity, that the world holds us

accountable for our lived experiences – encouraging women to consider the complexities of their lives and to realise that no matter how hard they try, not everyone can see. As Lorde famously said, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde, 1984, p. 63). Such a statement highlights the need for an intersectional feminism – a feminism that recognises that race, gender, class and sexuality are intertwined.

For her part, hooks scrutinised patriarchal systems in both pop feminism and society, noting how women of colour are often pushed to the margins of feminist movements. She stated, “The feminist movement has been a movement of White women” (hooks, 1981, p. 8), highlighting the exclusion of Black women from feminist spaces and discourses. Lorde (1984) and hooks (1981), through their revolutionary work, not only expanded the feminist frame but also pushed for a more inclusive, radical lens that captures the lived realities of Black women.

In South Africa, the effects of BRF were apparent through the struggles of Black women with a history of systemic oppression as a consequence of colonialism and apartheid. South African activists, inspired by the tenets of BRF, leveraged these ideas to express their own realities and resist ongoing injustices. A prime example of how BRF ideas were realised is the #FMMF movement that emerged in 2015. Originally focused on the struggle against increasing tuition fees, it eventually incorporated the broader issues of economic inequality, access to education and social justice. Mthethwa and Chikoko (2020) highlight how “the Fees Must Fall movement is more than just a fight against tuition; it is a struggle for the very identity and dignity of Black students” (p. 213).

The feedback the #FMMF movement received from the BRF gave Black women activists a stage to air grievances and struggles that highlighted the disenfranchisement of Black women's space, both in the education arena and the larger activist world. In situating themselves within the framework of BRF, members of the #FMMF movement both challenged the hegemonic representations of Black womanhood and constructed alternative identities and self-agency as Black women. The intersection of the three aspects of race, gendered exploitation and class provided in the #FMMF movement helped to highlight how BRF had been mobilised and had evolved in the global South in general, and the South African context in particular, thus allowing a partial understanding of the complexities of activism and resistance in the post-apartheid society.

Acknowledging the relevance of BRF to the #FMF movement, also pointed to the urgency of solidarity across diverse activist groups seeking to challenge broader oppression. As the movement began, Black women not only highlighted the economic obstacles to higher education they faced but also pointed to the more general issues of gendered violence, racism and sexism that remain within many academic environments today. As Nkopo et al. (2018) strongly emphasised, “The voices of Black women within the #FMF movement must be amplified in order to precisely represent the intersections of class, race and gender that is essential in the struggle for justice” (p. 22).

This focus on inclusivity and collective resistance integrated BRF into social movements like the #FMF movement, ensuring that the voices of Black women were not only heard but also embedded in the narratives and discussions surrounding justice and equality. In doing so, however, they not only formed an integral part of the #FMF movement but also assisted in the work of combatting systemic inequalities affecting their communities more directly, allowing South African activism to become deeper and wider.

While many activists identified as feminists, Black Radical Feminists (BRFs) often explicitly named their politics in relation to race, class, and gender oppression. This label was sometimes self-ascribed, but often retrospectively applied by scholars. As a former #FMF leader who identifies with BRF principles, I recognise my dual role as both subject and researcher in this study. Moreover, ethical considerations were central to this study, ensuring the safety and agency of participants.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

An ethical clearance application was submitted and approved by the Rhodes University Ethics Committee (see Appendix A) prior to recruiting participants and commencing the interviews to ensure the study adhered to all ethical standards. This validated my intention to carry out the research as ethically and responsibly as possible. As I entered each interview, I focused on clearly communicating the study’s rationale, research goals and risks to each participant, particularly regarding a feminist critique of the masculine-driven narrative within the movement with which I was engaging – #FMF. This was important to ensure participants could make informed and voluntary decisions about their participation (Patton, 2015). Each

participant provided informed, written consent after being made aware of their rights and the fact that participation was voluntary (see Appendix B).

I assured them that all data collected would only be used for my research purposes for this study and would remain confidential; I would use pseudonyms to protect their identities in publications or research reports. As Gill (2020) stressed, “the affirmation of anonymity plays a key role in protecting participants’ privacy in qualitative research” (p. 580). This study was conducted in accordance with these principles, so no personal information was shared that would risk the confidentiality of any individual.

As the topics of discussion were sensitive, it was important to also address potential emotional risks. Debriefing sessions were provided after each interview to support participants. These sessions provided participants with the opportunity to process what they had experienced and how they were feeling and also deal with any emotional discomfort they may have had in reflecting on difficult parts of the #FMF moment’s history. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, and they were provided with contact details for counselling services such as those offered by the GBVCC.

Taking a step towards more participatory research, the study was conducted with participant autonomy as its priority: interviewees never had to share something they were not willing to talk about. In the beginning, participants were informed that they could leave the study at any time without any repercussions. This level of participant autonomy, which is informed by consent as the ethical premise of qualitative research, made it easier for participants to take control of their surroundings. For privacy reasons, all raw data (audio recordings and interview transcripts) were securely stored on a password-protected laptop at Rhodes University, with access limited to the researcher and their supervisor. Because safeguarding data security and maintaining anonymity is crucial for preserving confidentiality in qualitative research, participants were given pseudonyms (Gill, 2020). Any individual or any institution that was named during the interviews, especially concerning sensitive topics like sexism, was anonymised so as not to threaten the autonomy of the study and its participants or cause reputational harm. Moreover, to ensure that there was constant transparency throughout the interview processes, participants were informed of these measures. In essence, this study made sure to entrench ethical integrity at every phase.

This ethical integrity also included, but was not limited to, providing the space for authentic storytelling by allowing participants to write without fear of reproach and focusing on providing safe and trustful environments. This mindful development of ethical aspects ensured not only a high quality of data but also highlighted the relevance of ethical vigilance in qualitative research in feminist contexts.

In conclusion, the bioethical principles used in this study can be considered as a guide to future studies, as the pursuit of knowledge should always respect the life and dignity of human beings. This insistence on ethical research was so that meaningful engagement could be maintained and thus a deeper understanding of the type of complex dynamics involved with social movement struggles could be gained. The following chapters present the findings of this analysis, beginning with the motivations and challenges faced by Black feminists in #FMF.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter highlights the experiences of Black radical feminist activists in the #FMF movement, particularly in relation to their experiences with the erasure and marginalisation of Black women and feminists in a larger social movement. Using thematic analysis, the chapter discusses key themes: (1) What motivated female students to join the #FMF movement? (2) The everyday sexism they encountered within the movement, including the broader issues of the marginalisation and erasure of Black radical feminist voices, and (3) The deliberate silencing of women's contributions in #FMF's official discourse.

Underlying theme three is an underlying theme of violence which further deepens its analysis, highlighting how intersecting themes build on each other to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of BRFs and how their experiences inside #FMF bled into their Black radical Feminism. The findings detail how BRF activists negotiated multifaceted forms of oppression by offering insight into the structural forces that silenced their voices and erased their actions. These lessons serve as critical insights for any movement striving to build an equitable and all-encompassing environment.

This chapter starts by examining the reasons and factors that led female students to join the #FMF movement. It then proceeds to provide an analysis of how everyday sexism, the marginalisation of RBFs and the ways in which women were institutionally silenced in official #FMF discourse, contributed to the perceived erasure of women in #FMF. The themes explored herein play an important role in shedding light on the ways that gender, race, and power relations in activist movements influence dynamics in social justice work. The participants' narratives reveal that their involvement in #FMF was driven by intersecting struggles against race, class, and gender oppression.

4.2 Why did Black Radical Feminists Join the #FMF Movement?

Eight of the participants interviewed for this study shared how they engaged with the #FMF movement as a means to visibly counter the exclusion of Black people's perspectives within institutions of higher learning. For participants, the movement was a stage that provided an opportunity for them to challenge the broader societal ills of racial injustice, colonialism and economic marginalisation. The two remaining participants were attracted to the movement following a symposium called Black Thought where student activists regularly provided political education to students studying different disciplines. It was at this politically charged gathering that the two participants resonated with the thirst for action to combat systemic inequalities in higher education. Inspired by this symposium, they felt an obligation to disrupt the intersections of race, gender and class oppression in order to create a more equitable and inclusive space educational environment.

Ultimately, all 10 participants shared one belief: their involvement in the #FMF movement was not only about access to education but about creating a radical overhaul that would begin with acknowledging their lived experiences as Black women. They wanted to make sure their contributions and struggles were seen and heard, calling for a disruption of systems in the academy and society at large to create more equitable and inclusive spaces.

Adanna, who attended UCT, wrote about how she got involved in activism with the #FMF movement and her experience participating in it:

For me, the Fees Must Fall movement was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It wasn't just about fighting for education; it was about challenging the systems that perpetuate inequality, both in and outside of the classroom. As a Black radical feminist, I couldn't ignore the gendered and racial aspects for our struggle. I knew that if I did nothing, Black women wouldn't have a story to tell (Adanna).

Adanna forcibly calls attention to the all-embracing and intersectional nature of her activism, reminding us how race, gender and class issues intersect and influence the lived experiences of Black women as part of the #FMF uprising. She reiterates the tenets of Black feminist thought, namely Oyèrónkè Oyèwùmí, whose work criticises how the dominant ideas of women's issues in both academia and activism render African women's experiences invisible (Oyèwùmí, 1997). Recognising the "gendered and racial dimensions" of this struggle, Adanna

signals the interlocking marginalisation of Black women – in society at large and the very movements that profess to speak to justice and equality. This resonates with Oyěwùmí's (1997) argument that African women are often the ones having their voices muted within spaces where their perspectives would be more helpful, thereby adding to the importance of a broadening of activism.

Such omissions are not the result of not being seen but are the products of deep-seated structural inequalities and feminist critiques. Adanna's insistence on foregrounding Black women's stories is a counterpoint to the frequent urge in many activist spaces to privilege race or gender but never both. This insistence upon recognising both sides of identity parallels the critique levelled by Oyěwùmí (1997) of the way frameworks of oppression tend to emphasise its multifaceted dimensions while ignoring their intersection. Oyěwùmí (1997) critiques and deconstructs the Western binary and hierarchical conception of gender that has shaped African societies across histories in her work on the 'invention of women'. She advocates a return to African epistemologies that acknowledge the multiplicative forms of oppression that African women experience.

Lewis (2011) in *African Feminisms* similarly critiques the marginalisation of feminist concerns in wider anti-colonial struggles, highlighting Adanna's commitment to centring Black women's experiences. Lewis (2011) notes that African feminist activism needs to confront the colonial and racial oppressions and the gendered exclusions that continue to be felt from within liberation movements themselves. This dual critique is embodied in Adanna's statement which claims that any movement claiming to be about justice must centre the voices and experiences of Black women.

In the same vein, Hassim (2006), in her book *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*, stresses that women's contributions to anti-apartheid and post-apartheid struggles were underappreciated, despite the central role women played, predominantly due to the patriarchal legacies of apartheid. Hassim (2006) calls for a gendered lens to avoid the marginalisation of women's agency and leadership in the larger movements. Adanna's honouring of her complicity, as a Black radical feminist within #FMF, makes visible this call, reiterating the necessity with which we need to acknowledge the women who lead the struggle for justice. This is aligned with Oyěwùmí's (1997) imperative to decolonise narratives so that African women's lived experiences are not just acknowledged but central to transformative activism.

As a response to marginalisation and a reclamation of agency, Adanna's statement carries great weight. By uplifting Black women's voices, she proves to everyone that the flight from her ancestors is the winds of change that all of us have sailed on, and it is the calling of Black and African women to reach for the shore, to fight for our freedom – and in so doing, she is challenging the "blot on our history" of our ancestors – their erasure. Her activism represents a clear stance of intersectional justice: namely, that the struggle for educational equity is inseparable from the greater struggles against racial and gendered oppression. As the #FMF movement had begun to do, I argue that many Black Radical Feminists saw the #FMF movement as an opportunity not only to liberate themselves from historical exclusions but to create space for their views to inform the movement's legacy and future.

Moreover, another participant, Nompumelelo, coupled with her own desire to amplify Black women's agency and stories, also recognised that to do so within the movement was as imperative as doing so outside of it. As she shared:

My participation was born out of necessity. As Black women, we were at the intersection of multiple struggles, and #FMF was a platform to confront the ways education, race, and gender shaped our reality (Nompumelelo).

This view complements hooks' position that activism must confront both forms of oppression, material and ideological, to achieve effective change (hooks, 1984). Nompumelelo's involvement with #FMF shows a profound understanding of how systems of oppression – from race to gender to class – intersect to affect the lives of Black women. In the process of contextualising her advocacy regarding affordable education, she calls attention to the fact that we need to address the different struggles of racial and gender justice all at once.

This approach has a strong alignment with feminist theories such as Crenshaw's intersectionality and Collins' (2000) "matrix of domination," concepts that highlight how intersections of structural power create unique and compounded forms of marginalisation. Nompumelelo's understanding of the education system as a site of oppression echoes hooks' (1994) critique of how institutions routinely marginalise or erase Black women. Her #FMF activism also demonstrates its transformative potential as it created pathways to decolonise education and dismantle oppressive structures that infringe on Black women's agency.

Although Nompumelelo and Adanna were aligned in their activism to amplify Black women's voices within the #FMF movement, their respective activism also brought out the differences in the approaches to Black feminist engagement. Adanna sees the #FMF movement as a tactical vehicle for Black women making an impact in the greater narrative, with an emphasis on systemic change long after the “Hashtag” goes cold. On the other hand, Nompumelelo highlights the immediacy of addressing the intersectional struggles of Black women at the coalface, so the movement is a solution not to be led around but rather to confront head-on. These contrasting viewpoints highlight the differences in how Black women navigate feminist activism and the necessity for intersectional analyses to not only illuminate gender inequities but also impact #FMF and other movements to disrupt systemic inequality.

Unlike Adanna and Nompumelelo, Natasha’s involvement with #FMF was connected to a wider political vision for justice. As she explained:

As a Black radical feminist, I knew the fight for justice couldn't be separate. Me and my friends joined #FMF not just for access to education, but to ensure that the struggle included all of us, with our specific concerns, histories and strategies. I joined because I wanted to be part of something big. Me and my friends could see from the many institutions shutting down that this movement would be bigger than ‘76 (Natasha).

Natasha’s words emphasise the importance of inclusivity, recognition and intersectionality in any social movement. Her role in #FMF was a dual one: it represented both the desire to combat systemic injustice in South African society more broadly and the desire for Black women's struggles to have a prominent place within that movement. Natasha's insistence that the fight towards achieving educational equity must encompass racial and gender justice also resonates with the primary tenets of African Feminist Thought. This line of thinking highlights collective liberation, which entails tackling the unique oppressions faced by marginalised groups, particularly those that land on the gender spectrum, particularly Black women. Natasha’s activism speaks to a point Oyěwùmí (1997) makes, namely, that marginalisation along axes of reason and emotion, as it pertains to activist spaces dominated by Western White feminisms, can result in the erasure or suppression of African women’s realities and struggles. Natasha’s work in #FMF, then, emphasises the need for representation of Black women in any discourse on social justice.

Oyèwùmí's (1997) theoretical framework presents a challenge to Western paradigms of universal gender oppression. Rather than imposing a one-zero-fits-all or binary understanding, she calls for a more contextual engagement with African women's realities, one that includes Indigenous forms of knowledge. She argues that the pain (containing also aspects of struggle) of African women must be viewed through these cultural paradigms, paradigms that realise the complexity of intersectionality in different, culturally specific manners. Perhaps by acknowledging how race, gender and class intersect in the #FMF movement, Natasha resonates with Oyèwùmí's (1997) work, which has argued that colonial narratives serve to marginalise African women in activism and academia.

In referring to #FMF as "bigger than '76," Natasha situates the movement in the long history of resistance in South Africa, connecting it directly to the iconic 1976 Soweto Uprising, in which young people led a mass resistance to apartheid. However, in also insisting that we need to centre the lack of women's concerns in #FMF, Natasha is also challenging the historical trends of the erasure of both women and the contributions of all women to these struggles. This resonates with Lewis's (2002) analysis in *African Feminist Studies: 1980–2002*, on how women have been written out of anti-colonial and post-apartheid politics in many ways. Lewis (2002) emphasises that these movements need to be inclusive of people with different identities and experiences, not merely for the sake of inclusivity but instead to ensure that the movement accurately represents the diversity present in the struggle.

Furthermore, Natasha's perspective resonates with Nzegwu's (2006) contention in *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, which critiques patriarchal institutions that are so prevalent in African societies and deny the agency of African women. These practices are grounded in both cultural and historical precedents, and according to Nzegwu (2006), women's leadership in social and political movements must be thought of as the standard rather than the exception. Natasha's foregrounding in #FMF embodied this reclamation of leadership, challenging the dominant narrative that regards Black women's contributions, strategies and narratives as peripheral to the sacred ideals of liberation and reimagining the movement towards justice.

Natasha highlights that the disease of "extractors" such as "neoliberalism, colonization, patriarchy – all of these things that are killing Black and brown people" were also notions of judgement which should be put at the forefront of the #FMF struggle; again, echoing the idea

rooted in feminist thought that collective liberation must be a result of intersectional justice. This viewpoint is consistent with the framework of Mama (1995) on African feminism which calls for countering not only local patriarchies but also the global forces maintaining them. Mama (1995) critiques how liberation movements can marginalise gendered voices and advocate a feminist approach to unite struggles across various forms of oppression. Natasha's position is not unique but does embody this approach – that for #FMF to be successful, it needs to listen to the voices of people often subsumed under far too many labels – most especially Black women.

By positioning #FMF as a follow-on from the Soweto Uprising, Natasha highlights the historical context of the movement, while also making a case for a reframing that takes both gender and racial inequality into account. Her emphasis on reclaiming Black women's agency as part of #FMF directly challenges their historic disappearance in movements of resistance. For Natasha, #FMF was not just about accessing education or fighting for ourselves or others; it was about creating a more just society that addressed the nuanced, intersecting vectors of oppression that Black women face.

Through her engagement, Natasha models a radical feminist approach to inclusion, solidarity, and transformation. Her perspective emphasises that movements such as #FMF cannot be narrowly focused on the short-term barriers to education – they need to address deeper forms of structural inequality that underpin exclusion. Such an approach resonates with the calls for activist engagement that is decolonised – and intersectional – such as those made by Oyěwùní (1997) and other African feminists to ensure that the struggles of the most marginalised, notably Black women, are rendered fully in the social justice project.

Similar to Natasha, Tshepiso emphasises the importance of inclusivity in activism, particularly within the #FMF movement, where she felt the need to specifically look after marginalised identities and the need for systemic changes to begin. Both activists represent a feminist call for transformative approaches that are intersectional. Tshepiso said in a statement:

FMF felt like a space where we could finally demand the kind of radical change that reflected our Black feminist principles – dismantling not just colonialism and capitalism, but patriarchy too (Tshepiso).

Tshepiso notes how the #FMMF movement was transformational in the way it incorporated Black feminist principles to challenge interstitial forms of oppression, colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. Her plea for transformative justice echoes the principles of intersectional feminism and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), which draw attention to how intersecting systems of power exacerbate the marginalisation of oppressed populations (Crenshaw, 1989). Tshepiso's argument is simple: fighting one kind of oppression is not enough. She pushes for holistic models that dismantle every form of power conditioning Black women's existences. Hers is a vision that shows just how central gender must be in the wider fight for justice, revealing that true liberation requires dismantling patriarchy and other systems of inequality.

Tshepiso's activism is in line with radical feminist theories (hooks, 1981) that envision a fundamental transformation of society instead of just reforms. Her perspectives resonate with Angela Davis's (1981) contention that the struggle for racial justice and that for gender equality cannot be considered in isolation, as well as hooks' (1984) insistence that feminist movements should speak to race, class, imperialism and patriarchy simultaneously. Framing #FMMF as a space for anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and Black feminist activism, Tshepiso illustrates the central and pressing need for the gendered dimensions of struggle to be made explicit in order to resist the erasure of Black women's contributions. Her commentary reminds us that true systemic change only comes when we actively combat all forms of oppression together.

Like Tshepiso, Siphokazi calls for a radical, intersectional approach to activism, insisting that multiple forms of oppression must be addressed at the same time. She shared:

I joined because I knew that the fight for freedom wasn't just academic – it was about dismantling all forms of oppression, and as Black women, our voices were critical to that vision. I knew it wasn't going to be enough that we as women were present, we had to be radical and bold – unapologetic about our oppression and exclusion. I knew the fight would transcend freedom and be about survival (Siphokazi).

Siphokazi (a writer, researcher and academic activist) attests to the intertwined struggles of academia and systemic oppression, emphasising the marginal positions Black women find themselves in even within the #FMMF movement. Her assertion that the struggle was a fight for "survival" as opposed to liberation also displays a radical unapologetic stance on the systemic

exclusion and marginalisation of Black women that she was determined to confront. This perspective resonates with feminist frameworks that call for action towards interconnected systems of oppression – race, gender, and class. Siphokazi stresses that at the centre of any transformative justice account are the voices of Black women. The fight for access to education, she notes, is not separate from the larger fight for social justice and equality, highlighting the need to include the lived experiences of Black women in order to make lasting change.

Her injunction to radical feminism as bold and unapologetic activism resonates with radical feminist thought, in particular with the work of scholars such as Audre Lorde (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), who echo the need for a feminist praxis.

Siphokazi's orientation towards "survival" speaks to Lorde's (1984) insistence that the oppression of Black women requires the most fearless and transformative voices that can heal both individuals and the community. Somewhat accordingly, Collins (2000) argues that practices in which Black women are marginalised must be confronted with an analysis that recognises the systemic nature of the structures involved in keeping them marginalised. The activism of this project resonates with hooks' (2000b; see also, 1993) vision of feminism as a struggle for collective survival, addressing oppression in all its forms and continuing to seek systemic change – the revolutionary restructuring of society for the benefit of the oppressed – that feminism demands if true justice is to be achieved. Siphokazi's work, alongside Tshepiso's, Natasha's, Adanna's and Nompumelelo's, speaks to the diverse but unified Black radical feminist engagement with #FMF. These women each bring a unique lens, with survival, visibility, inclusion or holistic liberation at its core, yet share a common goal of dismantling the systems of oppression that exploit, silence and impact Black women's daily lives. Their presence speaks to the importance of centring Black women's leadership and voices in activist spaces, ensuring that #FMF, and movements like it, are inclusive, but also transformative. Many different people, often taking very different approaches to their activism, collectively provide a powerful vision for justice and equity that challenges what is both structural and interpersonal about marginalisation. Having discussed the pervasive sexism experienced by Black womxn within FMF spaces, the next section shifts focus to the structural marginalisation of Black Radical Feminists (BRFs) and how these exclusions shaped leadership dynamics and the manifestation of everyday sexism within the movement, illuminating how the very spaces intended for liberation often reproduced patriarchal norms.

4.3 Everyday Sexism Within the #FMF Movement

Everyday sexism in the #FMF movement became a major obstacle to the full participation of Black women in the movement's struggle. While #FMF had broad goals of dismantling colonial, capitalist and educational inequalities, many Black radical feminists insisted that this work would only succeed if the movement directly confronted sexism within its own ranks. It was important for these women that the leadership and voices of Black women were at the forefront of the movement's goals. They maintain that the fight for gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal systems could not be separated from the wider battle for justice and that if anything was going to be transformative in #FMF it had to engage the sexism that was holding back its cause.

Belinda, a participant from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), spoke of her own experiences with sexism in the #FMF movement, saying:

Being a woman in the #FMF movement sometimes felt like walking a tightrope. The men assumed that we were open to advances just because we shared the same space. It wasn't just uncomfortable; it was a constant reminder that our presence was often seen as secondary to 'real' activists – the men (Belinda).

Belinda's experience resonates insightfully with the gendered power dynamics that still serve to marginalise women as a group even where the movement is, on its surface, for justice and equality. The metaphor of "walking a tightrope" underscores the tension between women as active contributors to the cause and as objects and sexualised figures not just of the men they sought to participate with, but also the other men of the movement. This experience is congruent with Black Feminist Thought, specifically Collins's (2000) "matrix of domination," which examines how the intersectionality of race, gender and class renders Black women additionally marginalised. Moreover, Belinda's narrative supports the theory of the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975) because the role of women is marginalised, and they are perceived only as a tool of sexual desire without any agents of change. This dynamic is further exacerbated by colonial gender constructs, which push African women to the margins in activist spaces, as Oyèwùmí's (1997) critique of Western gender norms (1997) shows.

Belinda's story illustrates how continuing sexism holds the movement back from fully transforming society and calls for activism that is intersectional and more inclusive. Putting

Black women's voices (and leadership) at the forefront, #FMM – and movements like it – are capable of working towards dismantling both external and internal systems of oppression to secure our true liberation.

Belinda's testimony echoes the insistence of feminist scholars such as Mama (1995) and Mohanty (1988) that social justice movements must embrace patriarchy as a target of struggle next to other power structures if those movements are to gain expansive roots towards holistic liberation. Her experience also highlights the continued fight within activist spaces for gender egalitarianism and a more radical social analysis that takes into account corrupt coercive practices that inhibit the full liberation of Black women in transformative justice mobilisation spaces.

Tshepiso, a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, considers her experiences of everyday sexism in the #FMM movement a phenomenon that reflects some of the latent gender politics in the activist space. She shared:

There was this unspoken expectation that if you were there as a woman, especially around the male leaders, you were there to be 'accessible.' It went beyond camaraderie – it felt like they thought we owed them attention or something more just by being part of the movement (Tshepiso).

Tshepiso's quote highlights the gendered power structures that exist in activist movements, and how women's participation can be powered by masculine expectations. This is more than their roles in the fight itself, marginalising women in supportive roles while male activists are viewed as the key movers in reform. Her experience reflects feminist theories, such as the "feminist killjoys" of Sara Ahmed (2017), in which women who "cause trouble" and resist their assigned roles in these spaces are often perceived as ruining the party. Tshepiso's unwillingness to be objectified and treated as an accessory to male leadership subverts these norms and upsets what is seen to be the collective spirit of the movement.

Thato, another activist from UCT, echoes this sentiment, stating:

We faced pressure to maintain appearances of unity, even when we were uncomfortable. If we spoke out against the inappropriate behaviour of the male leaders, we were accused of causing division within the movement, as if our discomfort was less important than their entitlement (Thato).

Thato's experience underlines how women who address their subordination in activist spaces are often marginalised, dismissed or accused of bringing disharmony rather than confronting feminist structures or hierarchy in place.

The stories of Tshepiso and Thato highlight the continuing gendered nature of #FMF, which implicitly requires women to be "accessible" to their male leaders. This assumption enforces a patriarchal hierarchy, even in a movement that claims to battle for equality. It is here that Joan Acker's (1990, p. 146) conceptualisation of "gendered organisations" becomes important, showing how even "progressive movements" can replicate patriarchal norms through strategies that sustain women in the background. By "accessible," Tshepiso calls out an expectation that women would make themselves available when called upon, which she believes exemplifies a systemic imbalance; women's significance is marginalised and men invariably become the focal point of the narrative.

Adrienne Rich's (1980) theory of "compulsory heterosexuality" exemplifies the gendered expectations with the #FMF movement: patriarchal norms, Rich (1980) explains, presume the availability of women's bodies and emotional labour to men. This idea resonates with hooks' (1984) "politics of domination" (p. 19) which considers how patriarchal attitudes permeate all structures in society, ensuring that both women remain silent and powerful men dominate. Tshepiso's experience is a clear example of this; the silent expectation of women's availability contributes to male entitlement and as a result, reduces the movement's capacity to attain actual equality and justice. Such a normalisation of behaviours further exemplifies the difficulty of challenging gender inequities within spaces that claim to promote social justice.

Thato's experience highlights the continuous silencing of women's concerns in activist movements. She remembers that efforts to combat sexism were often met with this reaction:

We were constantly told that our issues weren't as urgent or relevant to the movement's goals. When we spoke up against sexism or tried to raise feminist perspectives, the response was always, 'We'll get to that later.' but later never came (Thato).

This is a long-standing feminist critique: issues of concern to women if even covered by the mainstream media, tend to be given less attention than more "universal" movement goals, even those that are no longer relevant to finding a way of life and supporting individuals that survive without exploiting the planet. Thato's experience resonates with hooks' (1984) observation that

women of colour in particular are often eliminated or rendered peripheral from movements that are framed around universalisms and common struggle, rather than the specificities of gendered violence.

Likewise, Davis (1981) challenges male-dominated movements that prioritise women's liberation as secondary or postponed, and Mohanty (2003) warns against the temptation to universalise activist goals under the guise of solidarity, as this may obscure the particular needs and struggles of marginalised women. These feminist scholars point out that the marginalisation of women's voices and concerns makes movements less likely to be genuinely inclusive and transformative. We were assigned to organise and support, but never to lead.

Charlotte, another activist from the University of the Witwatersrand, describes her experiences within the #FMF movement:

We were given roles to organise and support but never to lead. It was clear that opportunities for growth were reserved for men. In the movement, our contributions were framed as supplementary, never central, no matter how much we gave or sacrificed (Charlotte).

Charlotte's account holds up a mirror to the ongoing gendered dynamics that exist in even the activist spaces that purport to be fighting for justice. Her experience is consistent with Joan Acker's (1990) idea of "gendered organisations" (p. 146) which posits that structural inequalities often place women in supportive, secondary roles within institutional hierarchies and deprive them of leadership opportunities. Although the movement aims to combat oppressive structures, the deeply embedded patriarchal principles inside its framework hinder women's engagement and acknowledgement. The marginalisation of women within these movements highlights that achieving real equality between the genders is far from being a reality, even in those communities that strive for social change.

This reinforces patriarchal structures, as sexist behaviours are common within the #FMF movement. Charlotte, and many like her, had their ideas readily dismissed (or, worse, co-opted by their male peers), thus effectively undermining their authority and marginalising the worth of their contributions. This phenomenon resembles Cynthia Cockburn's (1991) investigation into women's and men's respective roles in activist spaces, where also progressive movements inadvertently sustain "deeply held divisions" (Cockburn, 1991, p. 1043), prioritising male voices over those of women. The way women's ideas are dismissed and appropriated is just

one part of an ongoing trend where women's contribution within activism is subtly diminished, making it more difficult to ever reach true equality and even undermining the root structures these movements aim to eradicate. These were some of the abuses that led to a big backlash against non-White gaze past movements, revealing the important principles that drive these spaces and the difficulties each new movement faces in building truly egalitarian spaces, even among those focused on ending systemic injustice.

Charlotte, Tshepiso, Thato and Belinda's collective experiences give insight into the deeply entrenched daily "feminism" within the #FMF movement. Each of these women faced pervasive gender-based marginalisation in their respective places of work, despite their immense contributions to the fight for justice. Charlotte's and Tshepiso's reflections on the absence of opportunities for women's leadership and the expectation that women will be emotionally available for their brothers, Thato's experience of having feminist concerns marginalised within that movement, and Belinda's efforts to resist objectification all point to ways women were simultaneously being marginalised within the movement by the similar patriarchal dynamics that devastated the world outside. Their experience reflects the continuing struggle for truly inclusionary spaces that recognise women's contributions and leadership. While the previous section outlined the pervasive nature of everyday sexism within the movement, this section expands the analysis by examining the broader patterns of structural and ideological marginalisation that limited the participation and visibility of Black feminists in leadership and organising roles.

4.4 The Marginalisation of Black Feminists Within the Movement

The #FMF activists, particularly Black radical feminists, had to confront multiple layers of kickback – as women and as Blacks learn to exert influence in a male-headed and racially constructed activist-linked space. Several participants shared how their contributions were often undercut and dismissed or outright erased.

Charlotte, for example, spoke about how the erasure of Black women's voices was not just a matter of oversight but a systemic issue. She explained:

The erasure of Black women's voices wasn't accidental; it was systemic. The leadership structure itself ensured that Black radical feminists were marginalised, both ideologically and practically (Charlotte)

This observation is in accordance with Collins's (2000) notion of an "outsider within," which refers to the marginalisation of Black women's narratives from hegemonic discourse, including those claiming to promote their empowerment. Charlotte's experience mirrors the flawed incongruity of being central to the movement's aims, yet sidelined by its machinations thanks to institutionalised sexism. It underscores the complicated place of those on the margins who push back against and critique their own exclusion while being shaped by systems of oppression.

Liesl, a student from the University of the Western Cape, further illuminated the dual oppression Black women faced within the #FMF movement. She noted:

Being a Black woman in #FMF felt like fighting two battles—one against the system we were protesting and another within the movement itself, where our contributions were routinely dismissed or overlooked. They praised our efforts in public but systematically shut us out of the spaces where power and progress were negotiated (Liesl).

Liesl's quote reveals a double standard; as Black women, we are recognised for our contributions publicly but systematically excluded from the spaces where real power, policy and progress are being discussed and negotiated. This illustrates some of the intersectional oppression Black women experienced – where their contributions not only fell on deaf ears but were actively marginalised in discussions about what direction to take in the movement. This is part of an ongoing dynamic in which social justice movements' speech includes the particular goal of equality but often reproduces the hierarchies they are trying to undo.

Liesl's experience speaks directly to Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality – that Black women's specific experiences of oppression are often ignored in movements that focus on single-axis identities. The erasure of the role of Black women in the leadership structures of #FMF provides an intersectional example of this kind of erasure, where the role of Black women at the centre of movements is marginalised to peripheral spaces. The experiences of Liesl resonate with Lorde's (1984) rhetorical inquiry into activist movements that do not recognise the complexities of race and other interconnected identities. Lorde (1984) urges women to nurture one another and refuse to stifle their own power for the comfort of others. This isolation of Black women in leadership in #FMF, as seen through Liesl's experience, reveals a larger pattern of suppression under the guise of unity.

Charlotte's experience underscores a widespread issue within activist spaces, where women are often relegated to supportive roles and excluded from leadership opportunities. As she explained:

We were often assigned to tasks to help organise and support, but leadership roles were never within our reach. It was evident that the opportunities for advancement were only offered to men. Despite how much we contributed or sacrificed, our efforts were always treated as secondary, never central to the movement's objectives (Charlotte).

This is illustrative of a wider gendered division of labour, which feminist theorists, such as Acker (1990) and Cockburn (1991) wrote about at length, argue is engrained in organisational structures, where women are found in absent/nurturing roles and men in power. Charlotte's story illustrates this dynamic within the #FMF movement – despite the critical contributions women made to #FMF, their roles were always framed as auxiliary, leaving women out of leadership and decision making.

This marginalisation reflects Rich's (1986) critique of patriarchal states' appropriation of waged and unwaged women's labour to reinforce the perpetual primacy of the male, which hides the sacrifices women make from view. Charlotte's discomfort at wanting to be needed at the top of the movement while simultaneously being opposed in moral, missional and pragmatic terms from that position as a member of the clergy, resonates with feminist analyses of social movements. This exclusion of women is something Taylor and Whittier (1992) point out is a feature of even progressive movements, which can inadvertently reproduce patriarchal hierarchies by pushing women's efforts to the margins. Sinha and McClintock (1998) help to elucidate the notion that women's labour is sometimes considered “natural” and supportive in political movements rather than being identified as essential; this idea resonates with Charlotte.

Furthermore, Charlotte's story is reminiscent of Mohanty's (1988) critique of movements that marginalise women's voices and leadership, which restricts their transformative potential. The marginalisation of Black radical feminists was not just an acknowledgement of sexist violence but rather served to constrain an initiative that had real potential for meaningful, systemic change. By relegating women to supportive functions, the #FMF movement ultimately sat on its hands.

This situation also corresponds with Crenshaw's (1991) idea of intersectionality, which describes how overlapping identities specifically race and gender, exacerbate marginalisation. Charlotte's observation that "Opportunities for growth were reserved for men" suggests the degree to which Black feminists were doubly marginalised in the movement. This dynamic mirrors Cockburn's (1991) feminist analysis of gendered divisions of labour, even within ostensibly progressive social movements where women are again relegated to secondary roles, reinforcing patriarchal power hierarchies. The #FMF's institutional entrenchment of discrimination meant that Black women and other women of colour were being systematically excluded from leadership spaces, not only reinforcing gender inequity but also deepening the intersectional oppression they faced.

For example, the ideological marginalisation of Black feminists within the #FMF movement demonstrates how the needs of Black feminists seemed secondary or divisive to the movement's overall objectives. Tshepiso captures this tension when she says:

#FMF felt like a space where we could finally demand the kind of radical change that reflected our Black feminist principles – dismantling not just colonialism and capitalism, but patriarchy too (Tshepiso).

This statement illustrates the growing rift, with the movement's leadership focused on more immediate demands like educational reform and the Black feminists in the movement calling for a more radical, intersectional analysis in terms of the overarching systems of oppression – colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy – that inform their experiences.

Black feminists faced resistance from their male counterparts whenever they tried to bring more transformative ideas into the discussion. Their cries for deeper, structural change were at times dismissed as too extreme or disruptive, exposing the limits of the movement's focus. This omission of more holistic demands aligns with Rich's (1979) critique of tokenism, where women can join movements, but their contributions are primarily ignored. Black feminists realised that although they were included in #FMF, their agenda of gender justice was placed a distant second to the primary focus of educational reform within this movement. In this way, their efforts to centre women's experiences were undermined and undermined the movement's capability to address the entire range of oppressions that intersected with education concerns.

By relegating Black feminist perspectives to the status of extreme, divisive forms of feminism, the #FMF movement exhibited the precise behaviour of exclusion and marginalisation that it sought to confront. It is an ideological marginalisation which reminds us how movements for social justice can mirror the structures of oppression that they seek to dismantle, particularly when the feminist perspective and the experiential realities of women are not adequately included in the movement's mission. Building on the analysis of structural marginalisation within the movement, this section focuses on the discursive silencing of Black womxn in #FMF's official narratives. It interrogates how exclusion was not only enacted through internal hierarchies, but also through the public framing of the movement's demands and leadership.

4.5 The Silencing of Women's Voices in #FMF's Official Discourse

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was the consistent silencing of womxn's voices within the #FeesMustFall movement. While marginalisation and silencing are closely related, this section focuses specifically on how exclusion was embedded in the movement's official discourse and strategic framing, distinguishing it from interpersonal or organisational dynamics discussed previously. Several participants reflected on how their contributions were routinely overlooked, overshadowed, or dismissed during formal meetings and decision-making processes. This systemic silencing is routinely underplayed, but it is an important part of the marginalisation of women's lives and the dominance of male-focused agendas.

Nompumelelo, a postgraduate student at the University of the Western Cape, spoke about her experience of this silencing within the movement. She recalled:

When we tried to add our perspectives to the official narrative, they acted like we were creating unnecessary divisions. We were told that talking about women's experiences was divisive, even though it was our lived reality (Nompumelelo).

The exclusion of Black radical feminist perspectives in the #FMF movement as shown in her statement demonstrates a wider trend of female voices being disregarded in favour of dominant, male-centric narratives. This exclusion is in keeping with feminist scholarship, such as the work of Gqola (2001a), who has critiqued the propensity to erase women's contributions to social and political movements. Gqola (2001b) speaks directly about how Black women's lives are made invisible and blackness erased in order to protect patriarchal dominance, while

also elaborating how their specific needs are overshadowed to achieve a more general masculine-oriented goal.

The dismissal of women's concerns as “divisive” also resonates with the concept of “epistemic injustice” as discussed by South African feminist theorists Davids and Matebeni (2017). Davids and Matebeni (2017) more directly link such non-recognition of the lack of women's lived experiences and knowledge to a re-estimation of existing disparity dynamics in activism and the academy. This kind of exclusion reflects a greater pattern of marginalisation, in which the experiences of marginalised groups are often overlooked or dismissed in political conversation and actively excluded from the political agenda.

Nompumelelo's being told that her concerns were divisive to the unity of #FMF is also suggestive of this gendered bias that often marginalises the intersections of oppression facing Black women. This echoes African feminists such as Aidoo's (1992) examples of activist positions that are much broader. Struggles that address the pervasive multiple forms of oppression that Black women encounter. Nompumelelo's experience highlights the real barriers Black women face in movements that profess to fight against oppression but cannot achieve that goal without fully integrating an analysis of gender so that true transformation is possible.

Nompumelelo shared her frustration with the dynamics within the #FMF movement, explaining:

It was frustrating because we were there fighting for change too, but every time we raised concerns about gender, they acted like we were betraying the movement. Our voices were silenced to keep the image of unity (Nompumelelo).

Nompumelelo's experience reflects a common pattern within social movements, in which women's concerns are silenced in the name of appearing united, often at the expense of their contributions. This echoes Mama's (2007a) critique of “political responsibility,” where women's voices are sidelined in favour of male-centred ideologies that are seen as less threatening to a movement's cohesion.

Certain elements of Iris Marion Young's (2000) notion of “internal exclusion” also resonate here. It describes the act of incorporating disenfranchised voices in formal settings but shutting

them down within the movement to uphold hegemonic views. Nompumelelo's case speaks to how even within a movement that included women, gendered experiences were erased deliberately in an effort to demonstrate a unified cause and downplay any fragmentation. The force of her being accused of betraying the movement by raising serious, if divisive, questions about gender is a reminder that if one pushes towards evolutionary gender equity is not being endorsed, it is being seen as mere obstructionism to genuine social change. Guy-Sheftall's (2003) work laments how people affected by socially dominant ideologies, particularly women, are coerced into following the majority viewpoint, further bolstering the critique that this capitalist, patriarchal structure is not conducive to liberation. In the context of the #FMM movement, this meant that gender issues were seen as divisive to the struggle, and thus male-centred agendas over feminist perspectives were endorsed.

Siphokazi, a student from UCT, shared a similar experience, describing how male counterparts dominated conversations:

In meetings, men would often speak over us or dismiss our contributions, making it clear that our voices didn't carry the same weight. It felt like our role was to listen and follow rather than lead (Siphokazi).

This echoes a longtime feminist critique of the silencing of women's voices in male-dominated spaces, especially in activist movements. Tannen's (1994) notion of "conversational dominance" provides insight into this phenomenon, where men often dominate the conversation, interrupting women and dismissing their input. Such a power imbalance carries over into hierarchical structures that silence women and their opinions as if their voices are worth less than their male counterparts. Bourdieu's (1991) notion of "symbolic violence" is also at play as these soft forms of inequality get internalised by women, leading them to accept these forms of marginalisation within the movement. Women (cis- and trans-) who get pushed out of any meaningful conversation on intersectionality end up being seen as "blinders on" citizens who need to push out their thoughts in order to excel, rather than the kind of leaders we find within the gendered dynamics of our activist spaces.

The sidelining of women in the context of #FMM mirrors widespread feminist critiques of systemic gender hierarchy in activist spaces. According to MacKinnon (1987), male domination frequently presents itself as cooperation and solidarity, reducing women to passive

supporters and not active contributors to the change, which is true in the dimension of how women's voices went unheard within #FMM and yet they were instrumental to the movement. Individual implications for unravelling these issues are also apparent, for instance, Fraser's (2008c) notion of "participatory parity" similarly emphasises that democracy is an exhaustively engaging affair and to be effective, all parties must be given equal opportunity to contribute and persuade decision making. The exclusion of women from important decision-making spaces within #FMM shows that this standard of equality has still not been met, which ultimately detracted from the movement's ability to transform itself to be more conscious of intersecting struggles. Had these imbalances taken a feministic route, we would have been able to boast about not just the voices of women being heard, but their impact being as valued and noted as the next man who walks in with the idea of changing the world.

Natasha, a student at the University of the Western Cape, also shared her experiences, describing how the silencing of women's voices in #FMM was not a matter of isolated actions, but a systemic problem deeply embedded in patriarchal structures. She explained:

When we spoke up, it wasn't taken seriously. They'd smile and nod, but no one made changes. It felt like women's voices were there only to check a box, not to influence the direction of the movement (Natasha).

Natasha's statement strikes at the heart of the phenomenon of performative inclusion, where women's voices are seen as lip service, where they publicly acknowledge their challenges but do not take action to address them; therefore, when it comes to the decision-making process, they are not heard and deferred to. This is an example of tokenism, defined by Kanter (1977) as a real but superficial diversity, where members of marginalised groups are included only as proxy representatives without real influence or power. As for #FMM, the armies of female supporters simply served as mere window dressing, giving the movement a false appearance of inclusion while allowing the organisational landscape to remain patriarchal. Tokenism of this nature serves to reinforce the status quo, as it sidelines women's engagement, even though females have played a participating role in these movements and can inhibit the movements' ability to bring about long-term, albeit more meaningful change. The theory of tokenism (Kanter, 1977) sheds light on some of these dynamics, as marginalised individuals typically occupy a place of visibility yet have no say in meaningful decisions, continuing to reinforce existing power imbalances. Women's voices were often drowned out or ignored within the

#FMF movement, a point that is consistent with Kanter's (1977) assertion that tokenism corrupts authentic inclusion. The idea of symbolic representation, where marginalised groups are included in visible roles but are prevented from wielding real power, can shed light on why women's contributions were sidelined in #FMF.

Natasha's account reflects a larger pattern of "benevolent patriarchy," (hooks, 2004, p. 3) wherein the choices made by women are only acceptable as long as they do not interfere with the male agenda. Moving past individual experiences, these narratives further support institutionalised gender discrimination, a theme discussed by scholars such as hooks (1984) and Crenshaw (1989), who examined how these dynamics operate at a structural level within social movements.

Similarly, Reagile, a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, recalls experiencing the same patriarchal norms within the movement. She shared:

In meetings, if we voiced an opinion that didn't align with theirs, it was seen as disruptive. This wasn't just about one or two men; it was a broader issue where the movement's structure itself pushed women to the sidelines (Reagile).

Reagile's experience exemplifies the ways in which patriarchal structures in social movements like #FMF marginalise women's perspectives, especially when those perspectives disrupt male-dominated narratives. Reagile's experience resonates with African feminist scholars such as Ogunyemi (1996), who critique the systemic marginalisation and the subsequent invisibility of African women's voices in activism, public discourse and social movements. Reagile's account is similar to Ogunyemi's (1996) concept of "patriarchal silencing," as women's contributions are disregarded perhaps due to established patriarchal customs.

Reagile's frustration also speaks to Mama's (2007) concept of "male centrism," noting that the views of African women are often ignored in political movements, blocking the way to gender justice. In the same vein, Nzegwu (2006) asserts that African women's voices and experiences must be situated at the centre of liberation movements and that the understandings developed by African women are politically relevant to the struggles of all groups living at the intersection of multiple oppressions. Reagile's experience – in turn – lays bare a broader systemic issue, where movements claiming to fight for social justice, continue to unwittingly perpetuate systems of patriarchy, marginalising the voices of women, particularly Black women. In

rejecting their contributions, these movements are missing a chance to engage with the complete range of cross-cutting oppression, limiting the scope for transformative change. This highlights the necessity of decoupling feminist lenses to focus on the lived experiences of African women, which should inform and shape their voices within the movement's ultimate mandate of attaining holistic and inclusive justice.

It is imperative to not how the decision to separate Sections 4.4 and 4.5 was informed by a deliberate analytical distinction between internal organisational marginalisation and the external, discursive silencing of Black womxn in public representations of the #FeesMustFall movement. Although these forms of exclusion are deeply interconnected, each section addresses a distinct dimension: the former explores structural marginalisation experienced within the movement, while the latter examines the ideological silencing reproduced through media and institutional narratives. These layers of exclusion warrant separate, yet complementary, analysis. Building on this, the following section explores how violence—both physical and psychological—functioned as a mechanism to enforce this silencing and reinforce patriarchal dominance within the movement.

4.6 Violence as a Mechanism of Silencing

While the previous section examined the symbolic and discursive forms of silencing, this section turns to the role of violence—both physical and psychological—as a mechanism used to suppress the voices of Black womxn and reinforce patriarchal dominance within the movement. Such forms of violence functioned as powerful tools for disciplining dissent and excluding Black womxn from leadership and decision-making spaces within #FeesMustFall. . The use of threats, intimidation and violent confrontation to stifle their activism or prevent women in general from challenging a male-dominated narrative were themes many of the participants described. Reagile shared her experience, saying:

Some men in the movement used physical intimidation to keep us in line. They'd stand close, talk over us or even try to humiliate us publicly if we challenged them. It was clear that our voices were unwelcome unless we agreed with theirs (Reagile).

That reflects the physical presence and psychological strategies used to intimidate and quell dissent. Belinda also recalled a similar experience where violence was used to assert control, saying:

There was a moment when I saw a woman try to speak up, and a male leader slammed his fist on the table. It was a physical reminder that we were not in control of the space (Belinda).

Reagile's and Belinda's accounts, however, show how the movement used physical intimidation and verbal aggression to force obedience into patriarchal power. In addition to being forms of control, these tactics worked to limit the ability of women to participate and have full agency in important dialogues. Their experiences are backed by feminist scholarship (e.g. African women scholarship) like Achebe (2005), who examined how in more African contexts, physical and emotional violence is routinely used to preserve male power in political and activist environments. Achebe (2005) contextualises gendered violence within activist spaces as a means to silence women not through words, but through the ever-present possibility of actual violence against their bodies.

Further elaborating on this concept, Tamale (2020) argues that within activist movements, violence – both overt and subtle – acts to uphold patriarchy. As expressed by Tamale (2020), this form of violence is necessary to reproduce the marginalisation of a woman in power – thus ensuring that women are not explicit in representing and espousing these abstractions. In this sense, the #FMF movement used both physical and emotional violence as a means to undermine the agency and participation of Black women, alluding to endemic systems of patriarchy deeply embedded in #FMF.

The repeated use of intimidation in activist spaces is symptomatic of the wider cultural normalisation of male violence, a pattern that feminist intellectuals including Mazama (2001) have thoughtfully scrutinised. Mazama (2001) discusses how violence, especially against women, is instituted as part of many African movements, including the otherwise well-meaning approaches. Such tactics, she explains, help maintain masculine authority even in movements that seek social change. Reagile's and Belinda's experiences illustrate that aggression faced by women who challenge, criticise or disagree with male leaders in patriarchal settings is often designed to re-assert male control.

This resembles Butler's (1990) concept of performativity discussed in *Gender Trouble*, where the repetition of an act, including aggressive acts, crystallises gendered power systems. These accounts demonstrate how both physical and verbal violence serve as mechanisms upholding

the status quo of the patriarchal order, effectively impeding the potential for collective transformation by marginalising women's roles and leadership within activist spaces.

Thato's experience highlights similar patterns of micro-aggressions faced by women in the movement. Thato recounted:

During meetings, they'd cut us off mid-sentence, roll their eyes or raise their voices to overpower us. Any attempt to assert our voices was met with dismissiveness or outright hostility (Thato).

Thato's story shows that the ways in which patriarchal dominance is maintained are not only through conscious acts of violence but also through more subtle, day-to-day behaviours. Her characterisation fits the feminist models developed by Spender (1980) and Tannen (1990), who suggest these are calculated strategies that reinforce male power and control of conversations and decisions. Interrupting women, rolling their eyes and raising their voices are not some random acts of aggression – they are strategic silencing of women, asserting a power imbalance in which the male perspective reigns supreme. These tactics are not unique but act as structural means to ensure women participate at a subservient level only, enabling men to dictate the direction of the movement.

Siphokazi also reflects on the psychological toll of this environment, recalling:

At some point, we were scared to walk alone at night through campus because of threats of possible assault. We knew we had to match fire with fire (Siphokazi).

Siphokazi's reflection shows that intimidation tactics in activist spaces can be highly psychological, leading to an atmosphere of fear. As Thato said, male leaders used psychological intimidation to intimidate women and make them feel like outsiders, even in spaces that they helped create. This echoes hooks' (1984) discussion of how explicit and implicit mechanisms of patriarchal power serve to marginalise women in a patriarchal social order. Siphokazi describes subtle gestures, eye-rolling or raised voices that added up to an environment in which women felt unsafe or unwelcome, ensuring that they felt inferior and secondary to the movement. In essence, these tactics were used to suppress the voices and agency of women and demonstrate the insidious, and often gendered, form of control that exists in activist spaces and social movements.

The reflections of Reagile, Belinda and Thato exemplify both physical and psychological forms of control that reflect broader patterns of marginalisation within the #FeesMustFall movement. These accounts demonstrate how Black feminist voices were systematically suppressed through mechanisms ranging from discursive exclusion to overt violence. The suppression of Black feminist voices in #FeesMustFall aligns with broader patterns observed in South African social movements, where women's leadership is often delegitimised through both structural and physical violence (Booyesen, 2016; Bosch, 2017). Incidents such as the physical assault on Thenjiwe Mswane at Wits University (Msomi, 2016), along with instances of homophobic rhetoric from within the movement, illustrate what Hassim (2014) refers to as the 'gender paradox' of liberation struggles—where marginalised groups reproduce the exclusions they ostensibly oppose. These dynamics exemplify the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), wherein intersectional violence becomes normalised in political spaces.

This tendency also exposes a deeper ideological tension within the movement: many male participants failed to recognise #FeesMustFall as simultaneously a decolonial, feminist, and LGBTIQ+ struggle. Instead, they often framed the movement through the lens of African nationalism, echoing liberation ideologies that have historically centred masculinist notions of resistance and sidelined feminist and queer concerns (Gqola, 2015; Matebeni, 2013). As a result, Black feminist and queer voices were not only marginalised within activist spaces but also denied legitimacy within the broader political imaginary. These contradictions reveal the need to interrogate the ways in which progressive movements can inadvertently perpetuate cisnormative, patriarchal, and heterosexist power structures—thereby undermining their own claims to radical transformation.

These silencing tactics were not just used as an exclusionary practice; they intentionally implied how there was an effort to ensure women did not significantly guide the movement's direction. These dynamics underscore the complexities of intersectional identity, revealing how a cause that ostensibly advocated justice ultimately mirrored the patriarchal structures it purported to reform. This physical and psychological violence reproduces the power structures that are engrained in our culture and social movement and sends a message to Black women that their contributions, which are often disregarded, do not hold equal weight to those of men. The following chapter examines how Black feminists resisted these oppressive dynamics.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we see the layered and complex experiences of Black radical feminist activists within the #FMF movement as they navigate systemic sexism, marginalisation and erasure. Using a thematic analysis of the motivations for Black women to get involved in the movement, the everyday sexism they experienced and the silencing of their voices, this chapter showed how intersecting oppressions informed many participants' decisions to get involved in the movement. Moreover, while #FMF's broader objectives centred on addressing questions of race and class, it was also patriarchal structures that informed the deliberate sidelining of Black feminists from the narrative and leadership of the movement. It is imperative to note that Black feminists' contributions were silenced not just by overt acts of violence but by more subliminal tactics of psychological intimidation that prevented them from actively taking part in the conversations about the leadership and decisions in the movement.

The chapter additionally highlights how patriarchal control in activist spaces – particularly within spheres dominated by males – was actively silencing women within organisations, even while they were involved ostensibly in a joint way. This marginalisation was not limited to physical silencing but also included a more general dismissal of Black women's voices in decision making. The Black radical feminists' absence from the official discourse of the movement was a result of a larger systemic problem where race, gender and power intersect to maintain a status quo of male power. The movement was, therefore, limited in its success in addressing the scope of oppression and its chance at real, transformative change was compromised; there is depth and power in efforts that address the nuances of oppression and give voice to multiple perspectives and struggles.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis

5.1 Introduction

The findings show that although the #FMMF movement initially attracted many women with its idealistic messages about systemic change and social justice, their voices and contributions were often undermined or overlooked on account of deeply entrenched sexism, marginalisation and patriarchal norms. These findings highlight that the erasing of Black women from the formal conversations of the dominant leaders or decision makers was not just a series of random events but a systemic problem that is evidenced and played out in the larger power construction. These were just some of the formidable obstacles – however, the BRFs used several tactics to challenge misogyny, reclaiming space and pushing for an inclusive movement that genuinely represented the wide spectrum of struggles at the heart of activist life.

Faced with the silencing and erasure they experienced, BRFs created powerful resistance tactics. These included vocal opposition, staking their claim to key spaces and challenging the male-dominated leadership. Black radical feminists (BRFs) responded to the various and intersecting sources of oppression they experienced through a multilayered framework of analysis, approaching race, gender and class as intersecting sites of oppression. For the movement to be genuinely transformative, they insisted, it could not just confront one of these injustices without the others.

This chapter offered a deeper understanding of how Black Radical Feminists (BRFs) resisted and navigated the intersecting oppressions they encountered both within and beyond the #FeesMustFall movement. By foregrounding their strategies of resistance, the chapter built on existing literature to demonstrate how BRFs actively challenged structural exclusions, highlighting the necessity of sustained, transformative change.

The discussion centres on the following three key themes, namely (1) Resistance and resilience, (2) The use of public spaces for visibility, and (3) Carrying symbols of resistance. Black

feminists employed multifaceted strategies to counter erasure, beginning with collective resistance.

5.2 Black Radical Feminist Strategies Employed to Counter Misogyny and Erasure

5.2.1 Resistance and resilience

Black Radical Feminists (BRFs) faced significant challenges within the #FMM movement; these challenges ranged from having their voices systematically excluded to being subjected to openly dismissive sexist tropes that deliberately reduced their contributions. Moreover BRFs were faced with blatant violence and intimidation tactics that were designed to silence them. The BRFs' responses to this deliberate exclusion were both strategic and transformational and despite the challenges they faced, they remained committed to being visible and vocal in a space that was created to eradicate oppression and repress them.

Natasha, who was one of the BRF activists, describes the strategies she and others used in response to this marginalisation:

Our response to any kind of dismissive behaviour and tactics was to amplify our own voices tenfold, ensuring that their attempt to erase us was met with an undeniable resistance. We made it clear: fighting for justice meant finding for all of us, and we would not let their misogyny define the movement we were building (Natasha).

Natasha's declaration taps into a vital feminist approach to resisting oppression – the act of speaking up, claiming space in an environment where being excluded is the status quo. This directly correlates with feminist approaches which state that those voices on the outskirts have to battle to be let within, to influence the storyline and power structures that frequently position them on the margins. Her focus on amplifying voices connects to Collins's notion of the "self-defined standpoint," in which marginalised groups make explicit their unique realities and knowledge as a way of challenging dominant narratives (Collins, 2000).

In realising #FMM, BRFs asserted their voices, audibly resisting the silencing practices that aimed to exclude them. Natasha's tactic of listening and amplifying their voices did not just disrupt but actualise their own power hierarchies. Natasha's approach even reframes how to think about the fight for justice, inclusive of all identities, thereby questioning the echo of other activist spaces where topics such as education are prioritised over gender hierarchically.

This insistence on intersectionality is well-founded in Crenshaw's critique of social justice movements that obfuscate the complexity of multiple oppressions by relying on single-axis frameworks.

Natasha's willingness to fight misogyny on her own terms illustrates the importance of feminist praxis in movements. Lorde's well-known dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1984, p. 112) expresses this idea beautifully. However, this highlights the reliance on patriarchal methods to achieve liberation, revealing inclusion as a mere strategy that ultimately preserves the same systems and gatekeepers of exclusion. Natasha's commitment to intersectional justice resonates with Lorde's exhortation for solidarity, and the necessity of transformative activism that breaks down the legacies and continuities of power.

Natasha's statement illustrates the complex dual struggle that BRFs faced within the #FMMF movement; they were fighting not only against structures of oppression from outside the movement, but they had to also confront and challenge the inherent patriarchy within the movement. What an incredible testament to the resilience and creativity of Black women activists who would not allow themselves to be silenced or erased. Rather than simply acquiescing to their marginalisation, they sought to restructure the definitions of #FMMF in ways that forced their struggle for justice to encompass not only the toppling of colonial or capitalist institutions but also the internal patterns of power within the movement itself.

Natasha's response signals an association with a wider feminist effort – one characterised by persistence and visibility, particularly in places where voices are frequently disregarded. Her refusal to fight for "all of us" begins the reprimand of contemporary social movements for their lack of focus on inclusivity and the continuing journey of Black women, reminding them that the success of a movement rests on the active participation of everyone, but most potently of Black women.

Through turning up in force and refusing to be rendered invisible, feminists like Natasha proved not just that #FMMF was replicating prevailing patriarchal power relations, but that with effort, social movements can become real spaces of sharing, where all input matters. This tactic builds on the activist agendas of African feminist scholars like Mama (1995), who argues that marginalised women need to resist exclusionary forces by making themselves visible and creating alternative narratives. Natasha's emphasis on inclusivity harkens back to Ogunyemi's

(1996) critiques of social justice movements planning in silos, thus reducing justice to one dimension, particularly race or class while failing to include gendered lenses. It pushed for a more inclusive movement that addressed structural elements of oppression and resisted the patriarchal nature of #FMF by ensuring that their voices were amplified.

This connects with feminist praxis, where we are reminded that all meaningful change is predicated on confronting both external and internal oppression. Natasha's conduct echoes broader calls within activism for intersectional solidarity – something African feminists like Tamale (2011) have written about extensively. In social movements, Tamale (2011) remarks how justice is not only about/doing the right thing, but is also a reflection of the struggles and voices present in the movement, therefore, no one should be excluded from the conversation and fight for change.

Much like Natasha, Belinda reflects on how a pivotal structure within the movement helped propel the feminist agenda forward:

We formed alliances with other women, building a solidarity that dismantled the idea that oppression could be ignored in the name of unity. Through WhatsApp messages and alerts, we sent messages to Black women in the movement, who then shared them with their friends. And just like that, our call to action came alive, #MbokodoLead was born (Belinda).

Belinda's remark is a testament to an important feminist strategy: the establishment of grassroots networks to push back against marginalisation and prioritise women's lived experiences within broader activist movements. This emphasises the feminist values of solidarity and collective mobilisation. It also highlights the importance of women organising and challenging hegemonic patriarchal structures and norms. Belinda's persistence in forming alliances reinforces the argument presented by Mohanty in *Feminism without Borders* (2003). Mohanty (2003) points to the importance of the power of transnational and intersectional solidarity among women in the face of systemic oppression. It is through this lens of collective action among women that #MbokodoLead was born as a direct response to the exclusion of Black women from the #FMF movement and a challenge to the broader patriarchal systems that sought to erase their contributions.

As previously discussed in Chapter One, #MbokodoLead emerged in 2015 as a response to the gendered exclusion faced by Black women in the #FMF movement. It arose out of a

WhatsApp group initiated by leaders such as Simamkele Dlakavu, Dr Danai Mupotsa, and Panashe Chigumadzi in October 2015, and brought together women from various fields. This group made up of Black Feminists, labourers, Black womxn, and female academics in the Black community, united to fight against the marginalisation of women within #FMF. #MbokodoLead was founded with the aim of creating a space where Black women would not only express their voices but also demand a place and environment to call for gender justice, which was overlooked within the greater activist space. The collective advocated more inclusive leadership while addressing gender inequalities, all intending to bring a much-needed feminist lens to the movement (Hlatshwayo & Fomunyam, 2019; Mahali & Matete, 2021; Nayak, 2014; Sinwell, 2019).

#MbokodoLead was deeply rooted in a political vision of Black feminism, which sought to address the intersectional oppressions that Black women experience, including race, gender, class and colonial histories. Their collective aims included dismantling the pyramid structure of #FMF that reproduced patriarchal structures, ensuring the representation of Black women in leadership and decision-making processes, and the demand for structural changes beyond the immediate notion of educational reform presented by the movement. #MbokodoLead's strategic direction was shaped by leaders like Simamkele Dlakavu who organised protests, hosted workshops, and mediums of public discourse to challenge #FMF (Chinguno, 2017) and disrupt their male-dominated leadership. Through direct action and grassroots organising, #MbokodoLead worked to establish itself as a force in the student activism landscape – seeking to intersectionalise #FMF, to provide a platform which was as much about gender as it was about racial injustices (Khuzwayo & Bashonga, 2022; Sinwell, 2019).

The statement by Belinda, who said their oppression would not be brushed aside “in the name of unity,” is a critique of the tendency many social movements have to put forward a single goal in which specific struggles or marginalisation is assigned less importance than one goal. Kasou's argument also resonates with hooks' (1984) critique in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* to the unifying idea that erases the different realities of the marginalised. For Belinda and the women who built #MbokodoLead, unity became an inclusive intersectional concept instead of a one-size-fits-all idea that would obliterate differences. This strategy answered the opportunistic themes of patriarchally framed collective action, ensuring that the

“particularities” of Black women’s lived experiences were not absent from (silenced) movement building.

Belinda’s comment about using WhatsApp as an organising tool also highlights the evolving role of technology in feminist activism. This digital turn is one aspect in a wider move in feminist scholarship that grounds feminist practice in the transformational potential of digital platforms as counterpublics – places where otherwise silenced voices can organise, speak and amplify their perspectives. As researchers such as Schradie (2018) denote, the nature of the internet means it can facilitate the emergence of decentralised, heterarchical networks that cut across spatial and material divides, giving new life to the concept of digital activism. Paramount in this sense was WhatsApp as a platform that removed constraints of traditional organising between radical Black feminists as it opened up a space for their messages to be heard by women from different spaces and social contextualities.

What Belinda’s statement shows is the commitment of Black radical feminists in pushing back against patriarchal silencing. #MbokodoLead enabled them to retake space in the movement and provide a different model of leadership, one rooted in collaboration, inclusivity and shared agency. This collective action is an intentional hallmark of feminist organising and demonstrates the power of women-led collectives in addressing the complex, intersectional oppressions that many find themselves facing.

There is also the wealth of experience that #MbokodoLead brings to both the broader movement and the specific community in terms of the necessity for autonomous configuration of marginalised groups within sub-social movements. It shines a light on the urgent need to interrogate the erasure of women’s contributions in activist spaces – none more so than for Black women. This model of activism has some important lessons for the movements of today, such as how effective activism must not remain separate and focused on only certain issues in striving for outcomes that would benefit everyone. Instead, it must take on all forms of oppression simultaneously, and no group’s struggle must be put behind another.

Mbokodo Lead’s impact went beyond Wits University and became nationally significant. Thato, at UCT, remembers a particularly significant call from a feminist friend at Wits University, whom she had met at a critical diversity studies conference the year before. Thato busied herself at first, listening to her friend excitedly filling her in on the latest news about

developments at Wits and the emergence of #MbokodoLead, and how they had even interrupted a meeting at Solomon Malangu and made it clear that they were not to be silenced anymore. Thato recalled:

That call changed everything for me. From then on, when they sidelined us, we created our own platforms – circles where our voices couldn't be drowned out and our ideas could thrive unapologetically (Thato).

Through this shift, Thato and her peers embraced #MbokodoLead's movement, calling for other feminists to join and amplify their voices on their own campuses.

#MbokodoLead was born out of pure rebellion and resistance (Thato).

This moment in time was transformative for activism as it demonstrated how a group of tenacious Black radical feminists wielded resistance and solidarity to ensure their contributions and perspectives were heard and considered important in the ongoing fight for equality. Thato's memory embodies some of the most important feminist tenets, such as disrupting intersectionality by resisting the structures that segregate us from one another, the potential of self-organised labour, and the need for alternative structures to resist patriarchal exclusion. Her story highlights how feminist networks can continue to fill gaps between geographical and institutional borders. Collins (2000) argues for the importance of "self-defined and self-actualized communities" and the effort to elevate the #FMF movement into a "national call" is also in the same vein. By both Thato and her Wits University friend, feminists model how working with others and in solidarity can break open spaces outside the confines of localised struggle, putting the voices of many in open visibility.

Thato's decision to say, "We created our own platforms – circles where our voices couldn't be drowned out" alludes directly to the concept of "space of radical openness" in hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1989). These are spaces in which marginalised groups can feel free to express their truths, ungoverned by the distortion of dominant power structures. In that way, Black radical feminists were actively responding to the existence of patriarchal logics within the #FMF movement by forming #MbokodoLead. They created new avenues for their voices to not just be heard, but amplified, upending existing power dynamics and redefining activism in myriad ways. It was a powerful statement to describe #MbokodoLead as "born out

of pure rebellion and resistance,” connecting it to Lorde’s (1984) definition of resistance as transformative in *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*.

Thato’s disruption of meetings, her creation of independent sites, and her work of sending personal invites to others to join her in this practice are concrete examples of feminist praxis in action. According to Lorde (1984), speaking out against injustice is not simply a matter of survival, it is also a mode of destroying the oppressive systems that strive to stifle marginalised voices.

Thato’s narrative demonstrates the strength of decentralised, feminist-led organising in pushing back against exclusionary practices found in large movements like #FMF. #MbokodoLead embodied how Black radical feminists fought against the silencing of their voices and helped reframe norms around who leads, creating change at all levels through collective action and shared agency.

Thato’s account illustrates one of the key lessons in social movements: we must be intentional about uplifting marginalised voices, for fear that movements like #FMF inadvertently mirror the oppressive systems they are trying to dismantle. #MbokodoLead is one of the most recent examples which shows how inclusive activism demands the establishment of autonomous spaces that embody intersectional approaches that actively seek to resist practices of exclusion within movements that profess progressive aims.

In contrast to the approach of Thato and Belinda, Adanna’s resistance and resilience took a different form. As she reflected:

While Black radical feminists were fighting to lead, control and be heard, I decided to gather Black women who didn't necessarily align or agree with BRF, and we held workshops and taught each other how to counteract intimidation tactics – every glare, interruption, and raised voice became a lesson in resistance (Adanna).

Adanna’s framing shows the richness and multiplicity of resistance in the wider context of #FMF, which shapes a form of activism that is neither a given nor singular – it can be intellectual, strategic or grassroots-orientated as it was in #FMF.

Adanna’s intervention showing that the activism of BRFs is different from her own work draws attention to the diversity of feminist praxis. Compared to BRFs who employed more

visible and confrontational methods (sjamboks to push back against male intimidation, for example), Adanna's intellectual resistance came primarily in the form of workshops and memorial work. This is an approach consistent with the argument Fraser (1990) makes in *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, for she believes activism must encompass material conflicts along with the symbolic, discursive battleground where ideologies emerge. As Fraser (1990) describes subjects who exist in "subaltern counterpublics," leading education workshops permitted Adanna to create important, counter-hegemonic discourses.

Adanna's work also expresses what Mohanty (2003) calls for in *Feminism Without Borders*, solidarity through difference. Mohanty also called for movements that recognise and respect the range of needs, experiences and identities of the people who participate. Adanna's choice to create spaces for women beyond the parameters of BRF is an example of this inclusive method. Her workshops offered a forum for women to interact on their own terms, affirming Mohanty's (2003) dream of feminist solidarity that celebrates difference and diversity.

The workshops Adanna facilitated as a way to combat everyday intimidation tactics align with hooks' (1994) concepts in *Teaching to Transgress* where she argues that education is a practice of freedom. Through feminist pedagogy, Adanna flipped the script on subtle orders of domination by teaching Black women to resist micro-aggressions – glaring, yelling, interrupting – making them sites of empowerment. This method reflects hooks' view of education as a vehicle for nurturing critical consciousness and challenging oppressive circumstances.

Adanna's approach demonstrated that feminist activism took multiple forms, including intellectual and educational resistance that challenged patriarchal structures and the broader racialised patriarchy in South Africa. By emphasising resistance through thought and education, she created alternative platforms that empowered Black women—both individually and collectively—within the #FeesMustFall movement, outside the perceived constraints of institutional authority.

Adanna's attention to "academic and memorial work" closely aligns with Ahmed's (2017) observation in *Living a Feminist Life*, where she argues that feminist scholarship in itself constitutes a form of activism. According to Ahmed (2017), documenting and theorising feminist practices play a key role in sustaining movements by ensuring the ideological basis

of movements is preserved. Adanna's work within the #FMF movement foregrounds the not-always-recognised labour of women in activist spaces.

Adanna presents a crucial tension that underlines feminist movements in their struggle to balance both visible, confrontational forms of activism and discreet, more intellectual methods of resistance. Adanna's approach highlights the ways in which social movements like #FMF could be strengthened using multiple tactics. She stresses that while physical confrontations and visible acts of resistance are essential, intellectual resistance is as important. Through this statement, it becomes clear that Adanna is calling for tactical pluralism. Not just to confront ideological resistance but to equally use it in the face of physical intimidation.

Furthermore, Adanna's attempts to reach women who would not always identify with BRF expand the spectrum of feminist activism. She proposes a different approach; one that questions the very notion of feminist identity and opens the movement up to a shift in beliefs and practices. In doing so, she invites a broader definition of feminism that accepts differences and allows for diverse means of resistance.

A similar spirit of diverse resistance is reflected in Tshepiso's account. She explained:

Each time they tried to silence us, we wrote, we protested and we documented – ensuring our stories and resistance could never be erased. We published articles, conducted studies, produced art installations, plays, performative art, music, and clothing ... we exploited every field of study we were in – be it humanities, law, commerce, health – and incorporated it into the movement (Tshepiso).

Tshepiso's statement shows the effect that multi-modal resistance – the use of intellectual, creative and performative expressiveness – has on resisting marginalisation and erasure. It is important to note that this speaks to the intersectional dimension of feminist activism, which involves the comprehensive approach of mobilising multiple strategies to work against both structural and ideological forms of oppression. Tshepiso's dedication to documenting and producing creative work to hold on to narratives of resistance is an elegant alignment with Ahmed's (2017) notion of "feminist survival" in *Living a Feminist Life*, where Ahmed (2017) warns us against the powerlessness of storytelling and documentation as acts of resistance. According to Ahmed (2017), feminist movements need to work to establish witnessing records of their labour to transpose the systems that attempt to wipe out their contributions. Tshepiso's

approach to producing outputs across different disciplines is part of a larger endeavour to build a cultural and historical archive for feminist resistance. In checking the histories of the #FMF movement, she lends attention to the often-overlooked accomplishments of Black women, who are responsible for forming the movement in South Africa.

Tshepiso's interdisciplinary approach aligns with hooks' (1989) notion in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* that embedding creativity and literal sensations into feminist praxis requires flexibility amid the footsteps of material life. As hooks (1989) points out, feminist expression is not limited to more traditional forms of activism, it can also come from art, storytelling, and cultural creation. Tshepiso's activism across multiple disciplines provides an example of how feminist movements can be enriched by incorporating a range of tools and perspectives. This sensibility is consistent with hooks' larger conception of intersectional feminism as an inclusive project encompassing diverse strategies and perspectives.

Fortunately, Tshepiso's use of art installations, music, and performative art as activism also resonates with Davis's (1998) insights about cultural production in *Blue Legacies and Black Feminism*, where she discusses how marginalised communities use cultural production to address their existential crises. Art and music have always been important vehicles for expressing resistance and building solidarity (Davis, 1998). Tshepiso exemplifies this tradition of using creative expression as a means of both personal and collective resistance against silencing and oppression – her art is in strong defiance of her experience; it serves to humanise the experiences of those who feel invisible, to honour those whose circumstances have made invisible.

Furthermore, Tshepiso's engagement with humanities, law and health illustrates Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought* concept of the “matrix of domination.” To put it plainly, Collins (2000) claims that oppression is multidimensional and crosses different axes of power that would necessitate complex strategies of resistance to oppose. Putting threads from different academic disciplines together challenged the silos that frequently enclose activist work for the likes of Tshepiso and others in the movement. Her guidance in bringing together different kinds of knowing and doing supports feminist praxis when its strategies are drawn from complex forms of knowledge, illustrating ways in which activism can be more productive when it engages with a range of intellectual and creative practices.

Through this network, they are the kind of activists who shape the political landscape by integrating diverse knowledge and creative experimentation into their feminist movements, enabling them to engage the multivariate nature of oppression that more traditional approaches may fail to account. Public spaces also became sites of defiance, as discussed next.

5.2.2 Use of public spaces for visibility

In this sense, the claim to public space and visibility translates a corporeal existence into a psychological form of resistance against the desires of those who want women silenced. Nompumelelo offers a vivid reflection on this tactic, stating:

We stood in the centre of their meetings, uninvited but unapologetic, reminding them that the movement wasn't theirs alone to control and by stepping into spaces where we weren't expected – or wanted – we forced them to reckon with our presence and our power. I remember how the act of taking up space became a radical declaration: we are here, we are part of this struggle, and we will not be silenced (Nompumelelo).

Her statement articulates a feminist truth: that power is reclaimed through visibility, particularly in arenas dominated by men. Nompumelelo's words challenge patriarchal structures that, even within movements that would oppose larger systems of oppression, make women invisible. It further emphasises the feminist perspective that women's physical bodies and vocal expression in public spaces are essential resistance and empowerment strategies, ensuring that women's experiences and contributions are not ignored.

The idea of “standing in the centre” and taking up space, as Nompumelelo describes, resonates with hooks' (1984) argument in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, which emphasises the necessity of those who have been marginalised claiming centrality in power structures. For BRFs, putting themselves in the centre of male-dominated spaces was an affront to the hierarchical dynamics that have historically relegated women to the margins. hooks (1984) argues that the move from the margins to the centre represents more than just a symbolic act, it is a fundamental restructuring of power dynamics and a challenge to prevailing systems of oppression. Nompumelelo and so many like her asserted their presence in spaces they had not been invited to, and in some cases, spaces they were not anticipated in either, ushering in a form of acknowledgement and respect that could not be overlooked.

As feminist geography critiques the ways both public and private spaces are often gendered, the notion of “taking space” has a particular resonance. Massey establishes place as a site of belonging in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), highlighting the possible tensions between identities of origin, but in Nompumeleli’s case, belonging was only one reason behind her actions. For Massey, space is not only a mere backdrop to social life, rather, it is an extended social construction and, in many ways, it reflects existing power structures and reinforces existing power structures. By occupying the spaces that were not only unexpected but even unwelcome, Black feminists were destabilising these gendered norms, claiming place and culture in public spaces as sites of inclusion and resistance.

Nompumelelo’s claim that “we are here, we are part of this struggle, and we will not be silenced” echoes the feminist critique of silence as complicity. Lorde, in *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1980), writes that breaking silence is survival and defiance against systems of oppression. By placing themselves in hyper-visible spaces dominated by men, BRFs were collectively rejecting the expectation of their invisibility, whereby their very presence acted as a form of collective defiance. This resonates with Lorde’s writing on how silence in the face of injustice only perpetuates oppression, and that speaking out interrupts the structures that rely on silence.

Moreover, Nompumelelo’s articulation resonates with Butler’s theory of performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), which points to how behaviour can disrupt social conventions. This redirection to no longer reduce Black women to unwanted subjects but to instead assert their arrival in both physical and vocal presence is/was an act of resistance in and of itself, disrupting the gendered and anti-Black tendency to render them unallowable in those spaces. Their bodies and voices became, in this way, tools of disruption, interrogating the patriarchal structures that wished to make them invisible.

Nompumelelo’s reclamation of space invokes ideas that Hartman has engaged with under the framework of “critical fabulation” (2008), which probes the act of reclaiming presence – both historical and contemporary – as a tool against erasure. Reclaiming presence is, in Hartman’s eyes, an essential form of resistance against invisibility, a means of writing the lives of those whom others would rather not see. Collins (2002) also argues in *Black Feminist Thought* that Black women have produced their own epistemologies to combat the marginalisation they encounter in both the knowledge production apparatuses and social structures.

Nompumelelo's entry into male-dominated spaces was, therefore, an epistemic intervention in that she was forcing men to see her and also claiming her right to shape the intellectual and strategic direction of the movement.

Beyond this, her actions expose a deeper contradiction within the #FMM movement itself. Even as the movement attempted to challenge structural inequities, it unwittingly reproduced some of the coercive forces it sought to disrupt. As Nompumelelo's story illustrates, Black feminists challenged not only external forces such as colonialism and capitalism but also internal patriarchal structures that sought to silence them. This dual struggle underscores the need for an intersectional approach to activism as true liberation demands that activist movements contend with the compound modes of oppression that exist within and outside the movements themselves.

Ultimately, Nompumelelo illustrates the transformative capacity of the feminist praxis. Her conscious presence and unyielding voice can be seen as not just a mere act of symbolism, but also a radical assertion that emphasises the interlinkage between personal and political liberation, reminding us that meaningful revolutions must combat both external structures of oppression while simultaneously interrogating internal systems that perpetuate inequality. Symbols of resistance, such as sjamboks, further embodied their unapologetic presence.

5.2.3 Carrying symbols of resistance

Siphokazi's story speaks to the power of symbolic resistance when faced with physical and psychological intimidation. She refers to weapons like sjamboks (whips) and knobkerries that were worn by members of #MbokodoLead, including Siphokazi, as markers of their willingness to defend themselves and dominate. This was not only a reaction to overt threats, but it was also a means of taking back power in a sphere where their occupation was rarely welcomed.

As Siphokazi reflected:

Public spaces became our battlefields, and our voices, amplified by resistance, echoed louder than their attempts to exclude and silence us (Siphokazi).

She goes on to describe how, in response to growing aggression, she and a small group of women took action:

We snuck them back on campus ... the next morning we walked along the side and the front of the masses during a demonstration with our knobkerries and sjamboks (Siphokazi).

By carrying these tools, they sent a clear message to their male counterparts: they were prepared to defend themselves and their space within the movement. This method of resistance can be analysed as a form of feminists' survival and embodied protest, using Ahmed's (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, particularly by women who have to navigate the threats of violence that limit their mobility. Siphokazi's reluctance to be immobilised by fear is represented in her use of these tools. Instead of shrinking in response to threats, she and her peers used their presence and tools to transform fear into a potent act of defiance, reclaiming agency.

hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000a) provides a useful guide for understanding how women's resistance can destroy patriarchal norms by reclaiming objects associated with masculine supremacy – objects that men ironically dismiss. In doing so, they signalled their willingness to stand up to aggression and assert their own autonomy, a direct challenge to the patronage structures within the movement itself.

Butler, in *Excitable Speech* (1997), talks about the idea of performativity in resistance – the very act of speaking, moving, being is a disruption. Siphokazi's choice to stand between the knobkerries and sjamboks and the crowd in the middle of the protest was not only one of self-defence, it was a performative act of defiance. They asserted their existence, not only against the patriarchal forces within the #FMM movement but the broader systems of society and politics that want to silence them.

Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* (2003) also gives insight into how women in postcolonial contexts use cultural and historical symbols of resistance. The sjambok and knobkerrie tools, which are deeply embedded in African history and resistance movements, become potent symbols for these Black women. What they did with these objects was both a form of protection and a way of reclaiming their autonomy and voice in the movement.

Enloe's (2014) book titled *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* looks at how women negotiate militarised and male-dominated spaces by deliberately employing strategies that subvert and imitate masculinity. The #FMF movement was used as a martial and aggressive strategy by men against the uprising of women because by seizing the means of power, the women were seizing their own narratives, ensuring that their resistance would be neither sanitised nor unwritten. By arming themselves, Siphokazi and her peers redefined what it meant to be a Black woman in the #FMF movement and instead of remaining passive victims of oppression, they emerged as active agents of resistance, showcasing a new narrative of empowerment.

Siphokazi's experiences highlight the multilayered complexity of Black women's resistance through social movements. As Black feminists, they not only fought against external challenges from systems of institutionalised violence but also fought internal patriarchal structures that sought to marginalise their voices. Many of the feminists had to embody and perform their resistance, forcing them to negotiate notions of femininity, passivity and vulnerability in society.

Through creativity and defiance, the women of #MbokodoLead redefined the terms of engagement within the #FMF movement. They asserted their voices, bodies and presence as integral parts of the movement's success. Using sjamboks and knobkerries as symbols of resistance, Black feminists were not just defending themselves, they were equally laying claim to their right to live unapologetically in spaces that sought to keep them out. This reclamation of space, reiteratively, both substantially and symbolically, was a necessary feminist act and praxis that countered internal and external systems of oppression.

5.3 Conclusion

Using multifaceted strategies, BRFs historically resisted marginalisation, sexism and violence. In the #FMF movement, instead of being passive, they raised their voices, formed feminist collectives and established places where intersectional experiences and narratives could thrive. These efforts mirror The Combahee River Collective's (see Section 3.5) principles of organising around the intersections of oppression.

A common thread across their experiences was that Black feminists remained committed to regaining their agency, despite being met with physical and psychological intimidation. Similar to Siphokazi's symbolic resistance strategy of carrying knobkerries and sjamboks, Belinda

created Mbokodo Lead and other coalitions to oppose exclusion and resist internal and external hindrances by turning weakness into power. Thato, on the other hand, focused on working with various national actors and building alternative spaces that ensured that women's voices were not only heard from different campuses but were connected, amplifying their collective power.

This chapter in essence highlights the different methods of resistance that were used by Black women in the #FMF movement. For instance, Natasha used persistence and physical appearance as a means to resist exclusion and amplify women's voices while Tshepiso adopted a rather more creative and interdisciplinary tactic to spotlight Black women's contributions in the movement. On the other hand, Siphokazi used more confrontational methods, unlike Belinda who highlighted the importance of quiet solidarity.

What is clear is that these strategies reflect a wide and adaptable approach to intersectional feminist activism by Black women. Although these women drew upon different tactics to dismantle their systemic oppression, they were all committed to challenging patriarchy, advocating justice and fighting erasure. These women were able to create justice and transformative social change by using the power of intersectional feminism. By leading direct action programmes, producing intellectual work, providing alternative leadership and engaging in cultural productions, these women disrupted oppressive systems in order to ensure that their contributions, experiences, voices and existence were integral to the movement's history and legacy. The final chapter synthesizes these findings and offers recommendations for future research and activism.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendation

6.1 Introduction

This master's dissertation explored the experiences of BRF activists within the #FMF movement, particularly how #FMF patriarchal dynamics marginalised, resisted and silenced Black women leaders. While this study does not fully explore LGBTQ+ experiences in #FMF, which is a critical gap given the movement's documented heteropatriarchal violence. It does attempt to support future work that could center trans womxn and queer activists like Seoketsi Moeketsi and Sandile Ndelu (Ndelu, 2017; Mbutho, 2018). Irrespectively, the study provided a close examination of these struggles, showing how the work and leadership of Black women were routinely ignored or erased within the broader movement. The findings presented in Chapters Four and Five were examined across five central themes, namely: 1) The motivations for female students to engage with the #FMF movement, 2) The normalisation of everyday sexism under the #FMF movement, 3) The marginalisation of RBF, 4) The silencing of women's voices in the official discourse of #FMF, and 5) The strategies developed by BRFs to combat misogyny and erasure. The fifth theme was divided into two sub-themes: Resistance and resilience and Carrying symbols of resistance. The rest of these sub-themes were covered in Chapter Four under the first four themes, and Chapter Five dove deeper into the fifth theme.

The research positions the #FMF struggle as an important site of struggle in unpacking historical injustices, continuous resistance and the calls for transformative justice within South Africa's higher education space. Informed by existing literature, this thesis shows how the movement addressed complex interrelated forms of exclusion sparked by racial, economic and gender inequities in South Africa, exposing prominent societal difficulties in the post-apartheid context. What remains constant within this backdrop is the persistence of racialised inequality in education (Bunting, 2006; Schoole & Adeyemo, 2016). This exclusion, coupled with a demand for an imagined education system that can serve as an agency for social justice, resonates with Xaba's (2017) claim that education should be a public good rather than a commodified service. One of the demands central to the #FMF movement was a call for free

quality decolonised education. The decolonisation demand is a call to confront and dislodge colonial ontologies which are entrenched in the existing knowledge systems, and for African epistemologies and values to be included in educational institutions. Decoloniality, as explained by Sinwell (2019), also demands a reclaiming of the curriculum and institutional culture to be representative of African identities, addressing permeating injustices of the past and enabling the generation of emancipatory knowledge for the future. Another widespread issue within the movement was gender dynamics, specifically the marginalisation of Black women.

Patriarchal structures of power also reflected wider society within #FMM, marginalising women and their contributions. The responses of BRFs to this marginalisation, echoing scholars such as Tamale (2011) and hooks (1984), highlight the need for intersectionality as a lens through which to view and combat such coagulated nodes of oppression. While not writing exclusively about #FeesMustFall, both Griffiths (2019) and Grosfoguel (2011) offer important theoretical insights into how contemporary student movements, including #FMM, engage in critiques that extend beyond patriarchy to encompass broader systems such as neoliberalism and global coloniality. The movement's demands for free education, anti-outsourcing, and genuinely democratic decision-making were a direct challenge to hierarchical power both within universities and in society generally. This chapter concludes the analysis of the data and focuses particularly on the main themes emerging from the research. The information discussed in this section explores and analyses all the outcomes in Chapter Four, also discussing the findings in more detail of how patriarchy intersected with gender and decolonisation to shape the #FMM movement. The findings collectively illustrate how #FMM replicated patriarchal structures while Black feminists forged transformative resistance.

6.2 Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, the study investigated the structural adversities faced by BRFs during the #FMM movement revealing their marginalisation and the imposition of patriarchal ideologies within the movement. A key takeaway from the research is that, for many Black women, engaging in the movement was not only about demanding equal access to education but pursuing education as a means to challenge the historical excision of Black voices from formal educational institutions and society at large. Activists like Adanna and Nompumelelo cited their participation in efforts to contest the intersecting forms of oppression they were subject

to, namely those relating to race, gender and class. This is consistent with Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality and how the intersection of multiple identities creates intersectional and often compound forms of discrimination. In the same vein, Oyěwùmí (1997) examined how Eurocentric gender frameworks are imposed on African women, pushing them to the margins, thus prompting movements to handle their activism intersectionally across communities.

Another major theme that emerged from Chapter Four was the constant presence of everyday sexism in the movement. Several of the participants described experiences of being sidelined, objectified or undervalued by their male colleagues/women at #FMF. Belinda's metaphor of "walking a tightrope" underscores the straddling women have to do between contributing significantly and resisting objectification. This reinforces Laura Mulvey's (1975) idea of the "male gaze," which states that the presence of women is always mediated through the male gaze. This is further evidenced by Collins' (2000) appeal to the "matrix of domination," which suggests that the intersections of race, gender and class work in tandem to reinforce systemic inequalities. The dynamics underscore how entrenched patriarchy in #FMF manifested in the sidelining of women's voices, which were read at times as disruptive or secondary to the movement's broader objectives. On the contrary, Chapter Four reveals how systemic silencing and marginalisation played a prominent role in the overarching dynamic of the movement. So-called feminist views were widely considered divisive, and several such sentiments echo Rich's (1979) critique of tokenism. Tokenistic practices accept women's physical presence, but their real contributions are often lost or ignored. This also raises the concern laid out by Gqola (2001a) in her analysis of the erasure of African women in political struggles, in which entrenched biases shut the door to more inclusive forms of activism. Gqola's (2001a) work reveals the structural difficulty of the denial or silencing of women, specifically Black women, which is a persistent challenge for movements that seek to address social justice but do not engage with the inadequacies of gender.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding of all is that violence and intimidation were weaponised to suppress opponents. Although The People's Student Assembly (TPSA) positioned itself as a non-hierarchical and inclusive organising space committed to challenging patriarchy, several participants recalled being subjected to verbal abuse and physical threats within it—tactics that reflected the very patriarchal violence the space claimed to resist. This is consistent with

Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, which posits that the repetition of acts of aggression or violence helps to reinforce gender hierarchies. In the same vein, Tamale's (2011) work on gendered violence within an activist setting illustrates how such behaviours have become systemic, maintaining the status quo of silencing women in political movements. Building on these themes, the next section highlights the contributions of this research.

6.3 Chapter Five

Chapter Five provided a more detailed discussion of the ways in which BRFs resisted their marginalisation and invoked their agency within the context of the #FMF movement. One powerful way to do this was to create collective systems of organising structures like #MbokodoLead which elevated their voices. This tactic links closely to Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) concept of the self-defined standpoint, which emphasises how oppressed groups develop unique narratives to resist and subvert mainstream narratives. Natasha's emphasis on resignifying space and reclaiming feminist points of view demonstrates how this type of resistance redefines power within activist spaces.

Another important theme in Chapter Five was the adoption of intersectionality as praxis. Several participants stressed the importance of a simultaneous approach to one another's challenges, opposing an anticorruption framework which treats issues of race, gender and class oppression separately. This parallels Crenshaw's (1989) foundational theory of intersectionality which seeks to understand how different forms of identity and oppression interact.

When examining Lorde's (1984) critique of movements that do not embrace diverse identities but rather marginalise them, the importance of integrating a feminist praxis into activism becomes imperative for redressing the challenges of the most marginalised. Cultural and symbolic forms of resistance were crucial to the #FMF movement, with Black feminists such as Siphokazi using cultural symbols like sjamboks as means of explicitly defying symbols of oppression – we learn how these actions exemplify Butler's (1990) theory of performativity that details how symbolic actions can contest dominant power structures and Mohanty's (2003) analysis of localised resistance in postcolonial contexts.

The use of cultural symbols went beyond defiance; it documented the lived experiences of Black women who resisted not only external oppression but also their internal marginalisation

in the movement. Equally, the movement also exposed its internal struggles with patriarchal practices. In this instance, Thato's and Belinda's experiences spoke to how gender norms persist within leadership, including progressive activist environments, underscoring the complexities associated with dismantling patriarchal systems.

Drawing on hooks (1984), the need to engage with differences – to challenge institutions, practices, values and human relations – not only outside society but also inside social movements themselves, is central to the analysis. This highlights the importance of constant introspection and change within activist spheres. In addition, #MbokodoLead represents a much-needed feminist intervention as an example of how to build autonomies where the voiceless do not just participate but also influence the voices of agents to change the perspective of movements. This data agrees with Tamale's (2011) works which promote independent spaces for establishing the power of women to lead and resist oppressive systems.

6.4 Contributions of the Research

This research matters as it offers an insight into #FMF not as just a symptom, but as a product of, and response to, South Africa's persistent structural inequalities. The movement underscores the failure of post-apartheid policies to comprehensively and sustainably undo the racial, economic and gendered exclusion that remains widespread in society. The #FeesMustFall movement offered a model of intersectional and transformative activism with relevance beyond the university context. #FMF's lessons in particular emphasise grassroots organisation, intersectionality and systemic analysis, which apply to global struggles against inequality. The demands for decolonisation and equity echoed in these movements offer vital lessons for policymakers, educators and activists dedicated to achieving social change. To address the gaps identified, the following recommendations are proposed.

6.5 Recommendations

This dissertation highlights the importance of using intersectionality as a basic foundational principle for any kind of liberatory or social movement. Movements like #FMF have a duty to engage intersectionality in order to ensure that all forms of marginalisation and struggles are recognised and a part of the movement's discourse. According to Crenshaw's (1989) framework, there is a deeper need to comprehend the realities of oppression in order to better understand the overlapping and interconnected nature of identities.

Moreover, by centring Black women's voices in all decision-making processes, leadership structures become instruments that cultivate inclusive and equitable frameworks. Movements like #MbokodoLead demonstrate how the establishment of independent spaces that serve to empower the marginalised to self-organise, challenge systemic oppression and foster meaningful change are pivotal to ensuring that movements exhaust all efforts to combat oppression.

These efforts echo Tamale's (2011) call to decolonise spaces so that the leadership and agency of marginalised women can be nurtured and amplified. These types of inclusive and self-determining spaces will only enable movements to more effectively respond to the underlying causes of systemic inequities and advance towards sustainable transformation.

To effectively transform movements, it is vital to adopt decision-making processes that have few hierarchies to marginalise those who are considered on the periphery. This hinges on a familiar argument from feminist praxis about participatory governance as a form of shared leadership in which power is equally distributed to give voice to and elevate the views of marginalised groups. According to hooks (1984), breaking down systems of patriarchy and racism involves not just institutional restructuring, but also a re-education on just how intertwined these modes of oppression are. For that reason, enriching political education programmes with feminist and anti-colonial theory can provide participants with a critical, yet practical framework to effectively challenge the systemic injustices in which they exist.

In addition, in order to mitigate internal inequities, it is necessary for movements to implement clear accountability practices. For instance, feminist movements such as the #MeToo movement and the One in Nine Campaign have adopted grievance procedures and gender sensitivity training to address internal biases and ensure that women and marginalised groups can participate fully and safely. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement has emphasised decentralised leadership and intersectional advocacy, creating spaces where Black women, queer activists and other marginalised voices are centred rather than sidelined. These practices are essential for establishing spaces where all participants can engage without fear of ostracism or violence. These practices are an essential part of establishing spaces where all participants can partake without fear of ostracism or violence.

Lastly, movements should actively organise to uplift marginalised voices so that their histories make it into the archives and beyond. Community-based research is vital in this regard, as developmental paradigms must be interpreted through local knowledge (Fricker, 2007), especially because marginalised groups outside the Global North experience epistemic injustice. To counteract this, and as discussed by Mohanty (2003) regarding the need for localised resistance strategies, movements should incorporate emotional fabric and culturally rooted tools that have meaning for their communities. It includes highlighting that those with the power to affect change should be at the front and centre of the movement, but that the movement must contend with external forms of oppression and internal divides that may have developed through exclusion.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance



Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee

PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa

t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727

f: +27 (0) 46 603 8822

e: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za

<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>

15 January 2024

Busisiwe Seabe

Email: g23s4364@campus.ru.ac.za

Review Reference: 2023-7582-8264

Dear Ms Seabe

Title: Challenging the Masculine Story of the Fees Must Fall Movement

Researcher: Busisiwe Seabe

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Humanities Faculty Research Ethics Committee (HF-REC). Your Approval number is: 2023-7582-8264

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please ensure that the Humanities Faculty REC is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the Humanities Faculty REC should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,

Dr Priscilla Boshoff

Chair: Humanities Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Informed Consent



PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(To be signed by research participants)

Research Project Title: *Challenging the Masculine Story of the Fees Must Fall Movement*

Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe from the Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University, has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The research project aims to examine and achieve two epistemological objectives, 1) to document the political contribution of Black Radical Feminists in the Fees Must Fall Movement, and 2) to research and theorize various ways in which patriarchal tendencies within the Fees Must Fall Movement resisted, marginalized, and attempted to silence and erase Black Radical Feminist leadership within the Social Justice Movement. Simply put, this transdisciplinary qualitative study aims to capture black feminist voices that are not recorded in the official history of the Fees Must Fall Movement.
2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project 2023-7582-8264 and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)
3. By participating in this research project, I will positively contribute to the scholarship that challenges the masculine story of the Fees Must Fall Movement. Understanding that there has been little research done in this space this thesis intends to fill those

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Ethics Coordinator: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za
t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707
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gaps and contribute to the ongoing conversation of how Black Radical Feminist Activists have and continue to challenge male chauvinistic politics with political organizations and in society at large. Furthermore, by being part of the research project, I will be granted the opportunity to address the perceived erasure of Black Radical Feminists in social movements while exploring the mirrored historical trend of sidelining the voices and contributions of Black Radical Feminist women in social justice movements. This will all be a part of investigating how Black Radical Feminists within the Movement perceived, understood, and made sense of their marginalization/erasure.

4. It has been fully explained to me that a potential risk of this study is that by doing a feminist study that contradicts the dominant masculine narrative of a student movement that has become mainstream could result in a political backlash which could generate controversy and expose research participants to social and professional repercussions. To mitigate this potential harm to research participants, the researcher has clarified that all information provided by research participants during the interview sessions will be treated as strictly confidential. And that all the data collected from research participants will be anonymized to protect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants. All research participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities.
5. The potential benefits of this research are to produce knowledge and expand the conversation and debate to include previously marginalized stories of Black Radical Feminists in Social Movements and Institutions of Higher Learning (Universities). It is also a means to contribute to ongoing feminist conversations about black women's liberation in post-1994 South Africa. In doing this, this research aims to rectify the epistemological erasure of women's contributions to one of the most important student movements in our recent political history to foreground the experiences of women within the Fees Must Fall Movement.

By providing black feminists with an academic platform to reclaim the voices and the

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t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707
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political experiences of Black feminists who have been erased in the historical narrative of the movement, this research will help shape the historical narrative about the movement.

6. I will participate in the project by conducting a semi-structured interview with the researcher, Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe. The interview will take place on Zoom, via phone call, or in a designated space where I am comfortable and safe. Interviews are expected to take up to 60 minutes and will be arranged at a time and place that suits me. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded. I understand that should I desire a copy of the audio recording or a copy of the transcript, this will be made available to me.
7. To participate in this project, you must be 18 and older. My participation is entirely voluntary, and should I wish to withdraw from participating further at any stage, I may do so without any negative consequences.
8. I will not be compensated for participating in the research, but my out-of-pocket expenses (if any) will be reimbursed.
9. The Researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of a Master's thesis, as well as academic journal articles and possible presentations. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained, and my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in conducting the research unless I indicate to the contrary/recognize that as a public figure, my identity will inevitably be/become known in which case I agree to and accept the loss of confidentiality.
10. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act, it remains my right to request that the Researcher provide me with a detailed explanation of whether confidentiality and anonymity will be achieved. I may request to know how my personal information

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t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707
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will be stored securely, for how long it will be stored, and whether it will likely be used again in further research.

11. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of Master's thesis that will be made available to the research participants. The researcher will provide a summary of the main findings with the group of participants as soon as the researcher has examined the findings unless I elect not to receive feedback.
12. Any further questions that I might have regarding the research or my participation will be answered by Dr Mandisi Majavu and Busisiwe Cathrine Seabe- 0722074360 23s4364@campus.ru.ac.za/ Giselle.seabe@gmail.com
13. I am not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies by signing this informed consent declaration.
14. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record.

I,, have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all the questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

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t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707
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I have not been pressurized in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

I **agree/disagree** with the Researcher's request to voice record my comments and opinions during interviews, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views. Furthermore, I have the right to request a copy of interview transcriptions to confirm that my opinions are accurately recorded.

.....
Participants signature

.....
Date

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t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707
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Appendix C: Interview Schedule

This Schedule assumes a semi-structures interview format, with each interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes.

General Information

- Research Topic:
- Researcher:
- Interview Format: Semi-structures interviews
- Duration per interview: 45-60 minutes (possibility of exceeding)
- Mode: Phone and Video call.
- Location: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Whatsapp and Google Meets

INTERVIEWEE	DATE	TIME	LOCATION/PLATFORM	NOTES
Boikhutso	20 August 2024	11h00 am	Zoom	Remind Boikhutso to send consent form
Cleo	31 August 2024	19h00pm	Whatsapp Video Call	Remind Cleo to send consent form
Mbalenhle	31 August 2024	16h40pm	Whatsapp Video Call	Remind Mbalenhle to resend consent form with requested changes

Siya	12 August 2024	12h00pm	Whatsapp call	Remind Siya to send preferred pronouns
Tumelo	04 August 2024	11h30am	Whatsapp Video call	Remind Tumelo to send her recent interview regarding the upcoming 10 year anniversary of FMF
Wenie	18 August 2024	20h00pm	Google meets	Remind Wenie to send her written responses as well
Zukiswa	13 August 2024	16h30pm	Google meets	Remind Zuki to share her recent article on FMF and queer women
Enhle				
Tumi		12h00pm		

Tebogo	09 August 2024		Conference call on Google meets	Remind them to send their consent forms.
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Preparation Checklist

1. Before Each Interview:

- Send a reminder email 1-2 days before the interview
- Confirm the interview format
- Test recording equipment and ensure it works properly
- Prepare interview questions
- Review the interviewee's background, where applicable.

2. During Each Interview:

- Start with a brief introduction of the research and the purpose of the interview
- Obtain verbal or written consent for recording
- Follow the interview questions but allow flexibility for follow-up questions
- Take brief notes to supplement the recording.

3. After Each Interview:

- Thank the interviewee for their time and insights
- Send a follow-up email/message expressing gratitude and offering to share findings
- Transcribe and analyse the interview data promptly
- Store recordings and transcripts securely, adhering to data protection guidelines.

Timeline

- Week 1: Conduct interviews with Interviewees 1-3
- Week 2: Conduct interviews with Interviewees 4-6
- Week 3: Conduct interviews with Interviewees 7-10
- Week 4: Transcribe and analyse all interviews



PARTICIPANT RESEARCH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Section 1: Background & Political Consciousness

1. Can you share your experiences of how and why you became involved in the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement?
 2. How did your identity as a **Black feminist (If you identified as such)** shape your participation in the movement?
 3. Were there particular moments in FMF that deepened your commitment to **Black Radical Feminism**?
-

Section 2: Gendered Power Dynamics & Marginalization

4. Can you describe instances where you or other women activists faced **sexism and misogyny** within FMF?
 5. How did gendered hierarchies shape leadership and decision-making within the movement?
 6. In what ways did **hyper-masculinity and patriarchal norms** manifest in activist spaces?
 7. Did you experience any **backlash or resistance** when advocating for feminist issues within FMF?
 8. Were there moments when the movement's focus on race and class **overshadowed** the struggles of Black women?
 9. How did male leaders and other activists react to **feminist critiques** of the movement's internal gender politics?
-

Section 3: Erasure, Silencing & Media Representation

10. Do you believe Black women's contributions to FMF have been **erased or downplayed**? If so, how?
 11. How did media narratives **represent or misrepresent** the role of Black women in FMF?
 12. In what ways did the movement's discourse (slogans, speeches, social media) reflect or **fail to reflect** intersectional feminism?
 13. Were there **specific instances** where women's voices were deliberately silenced or ignored?
-



Section 4: Resistance & Strategies of Black Feminist Activism

14. How did Black women challenge their **marginalization within FMF**?
 15. Can you describe the role of **Mbokodo Lead** and other feminist collectives in resisting patriarchy?
 16. What strategies were effective in **amplifying feminist voices** and reclaiming space within the movement?
 17. How did feminist activists navigate the tensions between **race, gender, and decolonial politics** in FMF?
 18. What were the key **challenges and victories** in advocating for Black feminist leadership within FMF?
-

Section 5: Reflections & the Future of Feminist Activism

19. In hindsight, what structural changes could have made FMF **more inclusive** of feminist perspectives?
20. What lessons should **future activist movements** learn from the experiences of Black feminists in FMF?
21. How has your experience in FMF shaped your views on **Black Radical Feminism, intersectionality, and decolonial activism** today?
22. Do you see any **continuities or shifts** in how feminist activism is being mobilized in South Africa post-FMF?

Appendix D: Editing and Proof-Reading

Nikki Watkins

Editing/proofreading services

Cell: 072 060 2354

E-mail: nikki.watkins.pe@gmail.com

17 February 2025

To whom it may concern

This letter confirms that I have copy-edited and proofread the master's thesis

Challenging the Masculine Story of the Fees Must Fall Movement

by

Busisiwe Seabi



Accredited Text Editor

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EDITORS
30 Guild
1993-2023

Promoting excellence in editing

Nikki Watkins
Associate Member

Membership number: WAT003
Membership year: March 2023 to February 2024

072 060 2354
nikki.watkins.pe@gmail.com

www.editors.org.za

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