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# Challenges to Democratic Inclusion and Contestation of Space: Contemporary Student Activists in Transforming South Africa

Momo Wilms-Crowe  
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CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRATIC INCLUSION AND CONTESTATION OF SPACE:  
CONTEMPORARY STUDENT ACTIVISTS IN TRANSFORMING SOUTH AFRICA

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South Africa: Social and Political Transformation  
Fall 2018

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Literature Review .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Theoretical Overview: Democratic Deficit.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Youth Positionality in South African Democracy .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>The University as a Space for Political Contestation and Transformation .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Significance of #FeesMustFall in Democratic Theory .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>Methodology .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Findings and Analysis.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b><i>“How free was I really born?”: Youth Experiences of Post-94 Democracy .....</i></b>	<b><i>24</i></b>
<i>Reflections on a Hollow Transformation .....</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Disillusionment with Democracy and Politics .....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Redefining Political Action for Contemporary Issues.....</i>	<i>29</i>
<b><i>“Spitting truth but not following through”: The University as Site of Struggle .....</i></b>	<b><i>31</i></b>
<i>A Microcosm of Society.....</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Institutional Failures to Address Transformation.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Opportunities for Agency and Change.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<b><i>“Why can’t we create something else?”: Prospects for Transformation .....</i></b>	<b><i>39</i></b>
<i>Reform vs. Revolution .....</i>	<i>39</i>
<i>Significance of Education.....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Role of Young People .....</i>	<i>43</i>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b><i>Appendix A: Participant Biographies .....</i></b>	<b><i>50</i></b>
<b><i>Appendix B: Sample Interview Guide.....</i></b>	<b><i>51</i></b>

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## Abstract

Twenty-four years into democracy, in a time marked by stark inequality and rising levels of political disillusionment, student activists are key players in the pursuit of a more just, more equitable, and more democratic South Africa. Using universities as spaces to contest, disrupt, and challenge the status quo, student activists challenge narratives of youth political apathy and act as agents of change, encouraging society to meet the goals established in the 1996 Constitution, the document enshrining the very promises they were born into believing would be their reality. Through mobilization and organizing, student actors boldly engage in questions of substantive equality and reveal the limits of South African democracy. Yet, while #FeesMustFall protests in 2015-2016 temporarily garnered international media awareness and scholarly recognition, prolonged attention to student activism is lacking in the field of democratization and youth are often popularly conceived as apathetic or disengaged from politics. This study aims to correct this epistemological oversight by focusing on students as political agents and their contributions to the process of social transformation. Drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups with seven student activists at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), this project reflects on the role that student activists and institutions of higher learning play in the larger project of transforming post-94 society and deepening South African democracy. Informed by the voices of student activists involved in #FeesMustFall and more recent campaigns against gender based violence, this study considers how student activists operate within and beyond the university to influence social change. Ultimately, I focus on how student activists conceptualize their role in creating a new social order and how that ideal translates into action. As student activists are often misunderstood, misrepresented or overlooked all together, this work fills a critical space and has important implications for our understanding of transformation in post-94 South Africa.

## Introduction

The freedom struggle in South Africa, led by the African National Congress (ANC), culminated in 1994 with a formal political transition and the accompanying establishment of democratic institutions dedicated to the founding ideals of dignity, equality, and transformation.<sup>1</sup> A national architecture for transformation included efforts to secure free and fair elections, enhance horizontal and vertical government accountability, and reconcile the horrors of Apartheid. South Africa's dedication to the ideals of transforming society and rectifying historical injustice reads perhaps most obviously in the 1996 Constitution, which outlines the goals of "healing the divisions of the past" and "laying the foundations for a democratic and open society" (SA Constitution, preamble). In support of the political project, an impressive collection of state institutions supporting constitutional democracy were established and major efforts were made to restructure and transform other institutions such as schools and universities. Scholars of democratization, however, recognize that democratic institutions are not necessarily indicative of democratic politics (Lukham et al 2000). Twenty-four into democracy, South Africa is still undeniably struggling with issues of inequity, exclusion, and marginalization and many would argue the liberation promises have fallen flat, revealing a critical dissonance between ideals and realities. Therefore, we must examine the quality of South African democracy by focusing on the lived experiences of citizens. Questions then emerge such as to what extent South African democracy is actually inclusive and how has it fared with regards to creating substantive equality as it set out to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study, I have referenced former Chief Justice Pius Langa's definition of transformation: "a permanent ideal, a way of looking at the world that creates a space in which dialogue and contestation are truly possible, in which new ways of being are constantly explored and created, accepted and rejected and in which change is unpredictable but the idea of change is constant" (Langa 2006: 354).

Recent youth protest action and organized student mobilizations suggest that there is not sufficient opportunity for all citizens, regardless of background or identity, to contest state power and engage in the democratic space, as theoretically required of a quality liberal participatory democracy. Rather, there appears to be a distrust of state institutions and formal politics as a result of corruption and diminished accountability, political disillusionment given the slow pace of transformation and unmet expectations, and a distance between the populace and institutions core to South African democracy. Largely neglected by the political establishment, student actors have taken up alternative means to assert their voice and access the full rights of their citizenship as promised in the 1996 Constitution by engaging in forms of action outside formal politics. Their mobilizations, while located predominantly on universities, have directly engaged with the state and should not be considered separate from national politics. By conceptualizing the university as an institution of the state apparatus and therefore inherently reflective of broader inequities and exclusionary tendencies, student activists have actively politicized the university, creating spaces for political contestation and opportunities to assert their political agency. This dynamic, when considered against the backdrop of rising inequality, extreme unemployment, and chronic poverty reflects the urgency of addressing the question of how to “deepen” South African democracy (as theorized by Gaventa 2006 and Fung et al. 2003) and create a more inclusive political space.

This study situates student activism in relation to democratic theory, particularly that of democratic deficit. I posit that by challenging the rules of access to political space through confrontational means of engagement, students have precipitated a reflection on South Africa’s democratic quality. By nature of their unique positionality at institutions supposedly dedicated to transformation, student activists in particular highlight dynamics of power, space, and access and

therefore create critical opportunities to deepen democracy and create a more egalitarian power structure through their activism. This study thus considers, through a combination of theoretical framing, policy analysis, and ethnographic research, how students and young people have theoretically been drawn into the discourse of transformation while being practically marginalized and excluded from full citizenship. It also locates the South African university within the state's framework for change and reflects on the significance of recent mobilizations around #FeesMustFall in challenging the state and revealing diminished experiences of democracy.

With the recognition that contemporary student activism is built upon a vibrant history of student mobilization in the anti-apartheid struggle, this study examines the unique position, goals, strategies, and focus of student activism today through in-depth interviews with seven student activists themselves. Examining the South African university context in the aftermath of #FeesMustFall – the largest student protest since the Soweto Uprising in 1976 – this study explores themes of transformation, substantive equality, decolonization, and political agency by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of young student activists at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Durban. UKZN offers unique context for this research as the university has made an explicit attempt to encourage transformation as an institution of higher learning. In September 2015, the university publically adopted a Transformation Charter, the first of its kind in the higher education sector in South Africa (Mail & Guardian 2015). Yet despite this formal institutionalization of transformation rhetoric, the university, much like the state, appears to be resistant to transformation according to student activists, highlighting once again the importance of looking beyond what is written on paper.

Expanding on literature of citizenship, democratization, education, and youth studies, this research hopes to emphasize the need for a growing and alternative discourse on student activism. In the field of education studies, scholarly attention has been given to how educational institutions have changed in the transition to democracy. In the field of democratization, ample literature has explored the process of democratic dispensation. Yet, outside of temporary consideration surrounding #FeesMustFall protests, limited scholarly attention has been given to student activists themselves in supporting processes of transformation and youth are often conceived as apathetic or disengaged from politics. This research therefore bridges multiple fields of study and inserts students into the debates about social transition as *agents* of change rather than simply the subjects of policy.

This paper begins with a review of relevant literature on democratic deficit, youth positionality in the African context, universities as spaces of transformation, and the significance of #FeesMustFall. I then discuss the methodology that informs this study and limitations on the scope and size of this research. Next, I present an overview of my primary findings and analysis, organized thematically as they relate to the objectives of this study. Finally, I present my conclusions and offer recommendations for further study as it pertains to student activism in a society undergoing transformation.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Overview: Democratic Deficit*

“We were primed to be the generation that enjoyed the fruits of democracy... here we are angry that the fruit tastes bittersweet.” (Chikane 2018: 45)

Growing from the field of democratization, ample literature has outlined the need the “deepen” democracy, emphasizing that democracy entails more than just establishing a set of policies and institutions. Scholars from around the globe have examined old and new democracies alike, encouraging us to consider the strength of democracies and reflect on how practice has often strayed from democratic ideals (Skocpol 2003; Rice et al. 2015; Crenson et al. 2002; Cornwall 2002; Collier et al. 1997). Gaventa (2006) pictures democracy as an ongoing process of contestation and explains the need to critically examine the inclusiveness and substance of democracy, “especially in terms of how citizens engage with democratic spaces to create more just and equitable states and societies” (8). In an era characterized by the unprecedented spread of democratic institutions, he notes that there is new work to be done, focused on going beyond the institutional design and “deepening” democracy through involvement of civil society organizations and strengthening of participatory governance structures. Lukham et al. (2000) similarly distinguishes between democratic institutions and democratic politics, in doing so suggesting that the existence of democratic institutions does not necessarily come along with more democratic politics. They outline four types of “democratic deficit: “hollow citizenship,” lack of vertical accountability, weak horizontal accountability, and international accountability dilemmas (22-23). All pose unique challenges to accessing the full benefits of participatory democracy and are important to examine in the context of a young democracy such as South Africa.

The theories of democratic deficit are especially important to consider with regards to marginalized groups, who are often incorporated into democracy only theoretically. Democratic institutions may exist, but if they are too far removed from marginalized citizens to impact their lived experiences and therefore exist only in theory, one can't help but question their value. Lukham et al. notes that the political struggles of marginalized groups are only considered when they disrupt, creating conditions of urgency that demand attention. Furthermore, their incorporation is often seen not as a requirement to democracy in its own right but "solutions to the problems of political order or governability in fledgling democracies" (18). This second-hand consideration questions the ideals of equal citizenship and suggests that institutions alone are not sufficient to ensure experiences of quality participatory democracy.

Student protesters' experiences in #FeesMustFall mobilizations illustrate this narrative in the South African context. In line with Lukham et al.'s definition of "hollow citizenship," students felt that they did not enjoy equal rights and entitlements so democracy means little to them. These sentiments are clear in Chikane (2018), where he writes "the [post-1994] state is the same apartheid state, only with democratic institutions" (38). Similarly, in Chinguno et al. (2017), Moloi writes that "there is little difference between the apartheid government and the ANC government" based on how the government responded to student protests with violence and militarization (66). Students' diminished experiences of democracy were not considered relevant to the state given their marginalized positions and garnering a response required dramatic protest action. Further, given the nature of the response (violent suppression by militarized police and private security forces), their incorporation was framed as a need to maintain order not a requirement in its own right. This reveals key limits to South African democracy and highlights the need to look beyond institutions and policy.

### *Youth Positionality in South African Democracy*

“A nation that does not take care of its youth has no future, nor does it deserve one.”

-Oliver Tambo, late president of the ANC

Before considering university students in South Africa’s democracy, it is useful to consider more broadly youth in the African context. Africa is the youngest continent on Earth and African youth hold a key role in the processes of development and transformation. The African Union has recognized their central importance in documents such as the AU Youth Charter (2006) and AU Youth Decade Plan of Action (2011). The Youth Charter reflects a determination that “Africa’s greatest resource is its youthful population” and highlights youth’s resilience, energy, and innovation. Similarly, the Plan of Action envisions youth as key players in the process of realizing national development goals and priorities, grounded in “the belief and conviction that a strong and accountable leadership and successful integration needs to be anchored on participation, the investment in youth, and mainstreaming the great potential of the population of which the Youth are an essential pillar” (vii). Yet despite the rhetorically impressive frameworks for youth empowerment and involvement, youth are too often excluded from full citizenship and marginalized from political participation.

Through economic and political marginalization (inextricably linked), youth are often excluded from participation in politics and encounter diminished experiences of citizenship. Comaroff & Comaroff (2005) highlight the concerning trend in post-colonial Africa, increasingly integrated into globalized neoliberalism, of treating young people as “consumers, appropriately welcomed by the market in the immediate interest of industrial capitalism, but too often excluded from the fruits of participation in society...political recognition and civil responsibility” (34). This paradox reflects democratic deficit in a society where a neoliberal macroeconomic

orientation benefits off the ideals of democracy while simultaneously undermining the democratic practice. In these cases, democratic institutions are present, but as a result of limited access to socio-political power, they remain out of reach for the majority of citizens and governance therefore lacks vertical accountability.<sup>2</sup> Honwana (2013) recognizes the interconnectedness of democratic voice and economic agency in her discussion of the recent wave of youth protests across Africa. Building on in-depth interviews conducted with young people in South Africa, Mozambique, Tunisia, and Senegal, she argues that the protest movements “stem directly from the economic and social pressures they suffer, and from their pervasive political marginalization.” Their taking to the street and other public spaces to demand a response from the national political elite thus reflects both frustration with their social exclusion and the inaccessibility of formal political routes to young people.

In South Africa, despite formally recognizing youth as key to transformation of both the past and the future and implementing frameworks for youth empowerment and inclusion, young people’s experiences reflect a discrepancy in ideals and practice. Theoretically, there is large-scale appreciation for the paramount role youth played in the liberation struggle and government officials have recognized that youth are a core part of supporting transformation. Yet recognizing youth’s role has often failed to translate into recognition of agency or substantive inclusion. For example, in a 2012 keynote address, ANC minister of Social Development, Bhathabile Dlamini, highlighted the importance of youth in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid before

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<sup>2</sup> In the African post-colonial context, democracy often came paired with structural adjustment programs which introduced a neoliberal hegemony and shaped experiences of democracy. To understand experiences of democracy, we must thus consider it within the larger context of neoliberalism. South Africa is consistent in this pairing of democracy and neoliberalism. Although historically dedicated and initially committed to a socialist orientation with the Reconstruction and Development program (RDP), the ANC soon transitioned to a model of Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) in 1996 which reflected a decidedly neoliberal framework, featuring fiscal austerity, export-oriented production, and privatization of public sector services (Narsiah 2002). This economic framework must be considered when discussing South African experiences of democracy.

outlining the various programs implemented by the ANC, “for the empowerment of our youth” (Dlamini 2012). Even rhetorically, this construction reflects a dissonance. Despite recognizing youth are agents in the liberation struggle, he nevertheless characterizes them as vulnerable objects of policy and in need of empowerment. This symbolic integration of youth into the democratic project often contrasts youth’s experiences of democracy, as revealed in youth’s engagement with formal politics.

Various studies have examined young people’s formal political engagement in South Africa, revealing practices that challenge the narrative of democratic inclusion and suggest democratic deficit. The generation colloquially called “born frees” are of particular interest to scholars as they came to voting age in nascent democratic SA and have no direct experience of apartheid politics. Oyedemi & Mahlatji (2016) note that youth voter registration is noticeably lower among “born frees” than other age groups and explores youth apathy to electoral politics. Sadler & Muller (2004) further explores young people’s perspectives on voting. Amoateng (2015) also asserts that youth political participation in formal politics is low even though political awareness is “very high.” All studies reveal that driving young people away from the polls is not so much a lack of interest in politics, but rather a suspicion in politicians who discuss change but fail to deliver on promises when in power, the perception of voting as meaningless and unable to make a substantial difference, and a broader disillusionment in formal politics which has failed to improve their socio-economic realities. These explanations can be understood theoretically as experiences of “hollow citizenship” and perceived lack of vertical accountability (Lukham et al, 2000). Scholars have examined youth diminished support for democracy itself (Mattes 2012), and it must be asked to what extent youth’s experience of democratic deficit contribute to their disillusionment with the process.

The African National Congress (ANC) offers an especially interesting case in its failure to maintain youth support given its apparent commitment to incorporating youth voices and the historical prominence of youth in the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). Nkala (2018) critiques the ANCYL, arguing that despite existing to reflect youth voices within the ANC constituency, it does not accurately represent youth voices and leadership. This exemplifies the point that democratic institutions may not reflect democratic politics. With the perception that youth are not given an active role to partake in governance processes through the ANC, many young people have looked to alternative options. Within formal politics, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by the notoriously polemic Julius Malema has risen in popularity and is largely considered a youth party. Azania (2013) explains in an op-ed titled “Why are young people buying into Malema’s party?” that one obvious factor is “that our people feel let down and hard by the ANC.” She describes that most of those supporting the EFF are in fact former and current members of the ANC who are tired of failed promises and a “posture that is dangerously excluding of its own constituency.” This narrative of exclusion is consistent with youth who choose alternative means of engagement, outside formal politics and in other political spaces, including that of the university.

### ***The University as a Space for Political Contestation and Transformation***

“True politics requires at least two elements: first, a demand, what I call an infinite demand that flows from the perception of an injustice; second, a location where that demand is articulated. There is no politics without location.” (Critchely 2012)

In order to examine young people’s political action and exemplify democratic deficit at a small scale, I will now shift my attention to the South African university as a space for

contestation of power. The university offers an interesting location to study democracy as it is simultaneously designed as a space to promote democratic values and reflective of exclusionary tendencies mirroring larger democratic processes. Today, universities are in many ways microcosms of broader society; the university is not separate from the dominant socio-political-economic realities facing the nation and the issues students mobilize around are directly reflective of larger struggles. Underlying this analysis is therefore the understanding that the university is a politicized space and has been undeniably since its establishment. In the South African context, students and universities occupied a paradoxical role in the history of apartheid. On one hand, universities harbored the very minds that designed the Apartheid state. White academics used these spaces to theorize, construct, and maintain white supremacy, explicitly reminding us of the ways in which educational institutions have been intimately a part of the dark history of colonialism, imperialism, and oppression. Yet universities also offered the space to cultivate the voice and agency of generations of South African freedom fighters and birthed Black Consciousness ideology, operating as a key cog in the anti-Apartheid machinery (Badat 1999). This dual role continues to shape student experiences today and reminds us clearly of the ways in which universities are interconnected with larger social struggles for change.

In the post-94 transition, institutions of higher education were redefined with a wider social role, having been located within the larger architecture of nation-building and democratic consolidation. The architects of democracy understood that the political project would require the involvement of all institutions that had been shaped by apartheid. Accordingly, the Higher Education Act of 1997 established a new nationally coordinated higher education system and The Department of Education White Paper followed shortly which gave depth to the Act and conceptualized explicitly the role of the university in social and political transformation

(Department of Education 1997). The foreword by Minister of Education Dr. Sibusiso Bengu writes to this point:

*The transformation of the higher education system to reflect the changes that are taking place in our society and to strengthen the values and practices of our new democracy is, as I have stated on many previous occasions, not negotiable. The higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities.*

In an effort to accomplish this transformation and in response to the immense challenge of redressing a vastly unequal educational system, the White Paper details a vision of equity and a policy plan for change, including changes to admissions procedures, institutional governance, and financing. The state would build on these foundational documents as it continued to address universities through policies aimed at transformation and democratization success (Badat 2009).

Beyond transforming the institutions themselves, universities have furthermore envisioning themselves as key to contributing to larger social change. For example, at a panel at the University of Cape Town in March 2014, Vice-Chancellors and university professors from various institutions across South Africa discussed the universities' role in modern society (Omar 2014). Noting the desire to cultivate active citizens and students who were committed to social uplift, this panel held that universities occupied key roles in society as places that welcomed diversity and exposure to the "other." These formal statements of institutional value and purpose reflect a conceptualization of the university as valuable social tool. They are in line with educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey's conceptualization of the school in the larger process of social change. Dewey (1907) asserts that as an "embryonic democratic community" schools occupy a critical position in the development of a democratic society, as they give young learners the chance to practice democracy at a smaller scale. This logic is similarly reflected in Nussbaum (2006) who posits that a liberal arts education is key to democratic citizenship.

Drawing on a Socratic and Stoic understanding, she argues that by bringing students into contact with issues of identity, supporting critical self-reflection, and encouraging the development of empathy, education is linked to a “deeper and more inclusive kind of citizenship.” In a young democracy reconciling with a horrific past, the university, according to this logic, holds a core role in the process of deepening democracy in South Africa. The question then follows, as always, to what extent have these ideals been translated into reality?

In accordance with larger trends, challenges to substantial change persist and the policies established in the advent of democracy fell far from reality. Eradicating deep-rooted structural inequalities was not accomplished with a policy framework alone, which although “vitaly important,” was undermined by a context of inadequate state funding and financial constraint (Badat 2010). Literature reveals that the South African educational system is severely underfunded (UCT 2015; Calitz & Fourie 2016), which can be understood in the context of neoliberalism and fiscal conservatism. This financial context undermined the political project and limited the extent to which change was possible. Moreover, universities themselves increasingly reflected state tendencies, becoming commercialized and prioritizing market-oriented goals (Nayyar 2008; Berdahl 2008). By defining their roles as tools in economic development rather than holistic social and political transformation, universities continued to uphold exclusionary tendencies and failed to radically transform according to the goals outlined in the original White Paper. Some Marxist scholars have suggested this is not a mistake but rather by design. For example, Althusser (2006) builds on a Marxist-Leninist understanding of the state and theorizes how schools, through incorporation with the hegemonic state apparatus, disseminate the ideology and reinforce the power of ruling class in a capitalistic society. With

that in mind, the failure to transform according to professed goals could be understood as the result of South Africa's capitalistic orientation more than anything else.

By recognizing the parallels between the university and the state, reflected in both idealized policy and disappointing practice, it becomes possible to theorize the university student as an actor of democracy. The university as an institution of the state and a microcosm of broader society provides the space to challenge dynamics of power and access in ways significant to broader democracy. What the student learns through their experience in the university (or perhaps not at all due to financial exclusion) reflects a hidden curriculum, teaching lessons about South African democracy at large. As theorized in critical pedagogy, a hidden curriculum is the unwritten and unofficial lessons that students learn through experiences in educational spaces (i.e. schools) which are beyond, and at times in contrast to, the official syllabi. With this understanding, one must consider how the professed dedication to transformation and social uplift contrasts universities' tendencies. Although supposedly dedication to promoting democracy in the post-94 framework, universities' anti-democratic practices no doubt teach students equally as much as the curriculum they teach.

### ***Significance of #FeesMustFall in Democratic Theory***

“The establishment and maintenance of coloniality in higher education in historically White universities and the Apartheid legacy of under-resourced historically Black universities makes the university a microcosm of a broader colonial SA.” (Xaba 2017:100)

The recent student mobilizations around #FeesMustFall are significant to examine in the understanding of youth in South African democracy as they reveal how students have used the university as a location to insert themselves into politics as agents of radical transformation. In contrast to narratives of youth political apathy, students demonstrated the effectiveness of mass

direct action as a means of engaging government, emphasizing the value of alternative means of political action beyond the formal electoral realm in a context where power dynamics tend to limit access to those avenues for change. Scholars have discussed the significance of #FeesMustFall in relation to the impact on governance, revealing the weight of student action at a level of policy change (Booyesen 2016). While it is important to understand that universities have long been sites of struggle and youth have always been at the forefront of social change, the context of #FeesMustFall is especially interesting given the current democratic order. Students' theoretical emphasis on exclusion and colonization reflects on not only the university, the South African democracy at large. Their means similarly challenge the state and notions of democracy. That students had to disrupt the status quo so dramatically in order to garner a response suggests that formal political avenues were not open to students. Like Lukham et al. theorized, as a marginalized group, students (especially those who were poor and black) were only considered when they created conditions so urgent that demanded attention by the state. Using informal (extra-parliamentary) means to pursue change is nothing new to South Africans (Ndebele in du Toit 1991), but that it was required in a context supposedly dedicated to substantive equality and transformation highlights democratic deficit in contemporary South Africa.

Student activists in #FeesMustFall emphasized the politics of exclusion, pointing to democratic deficits in universities and society at large. Masilela (in Chiguno et al. 2017) describes how students physically barricaded the gates to the university to demonstrate the exclusion of students from the space through fee increases. By highlighting the "gatekeeping function" of the universities, students connected dynamics in the university to broader social trends that similarly limited radical redistribution of resources or restructuring of political power. Students were especially critical of the ways in which state and institution of higher learning

capitalize off the rhetoric of transformation while maintaining exclusionary practices. This paradox is reflected in Chikane's statement (2018) that "to build a nation we must break the rainbow" (82). Chikane, like many young people, criticizes *rainbowism* rhetoric, which highlighted unity in diversity and was a powerful rhetorical tool of nation-building. By labeling it as "probably the most toxic way of bringing our nation together," Chikane challenges the narrative of progress and reflects youth frustration with rhetoric that overshadows critical limits to democratic citizenship and sanitizes the story of democratic dispensation. In suggesting the need for revolution to create a truly "new" South Africa, student actors emphasize how little has changed despite the establishment of democratic institutions.

Rejecting the notion that since they didn't experience apartheid personally they cannot criticize the country that overcame it, young student activists reasserted their political agency and their ability to self-define issues and goals. Rising "against the liberators," they brought attention to the requirements of substantive equality and pushed back against any expectation to "shut up and be grateful" for the "half-eaten fruits of the struggle" (Chinguno et al 2017: 79). The #FeesMustFall movement redefined youth politics as students outlined their own visions of transformation. Decolonization became the rallying cry, defined as the "rejection of white supremacy and heteropatriarchal order along with any other form of prejudice that characterizes the ongoing colonial project, as well as the question to redress the socioeconomic, political, and spiritual depredations of colonial history" (Chinguno et al, 2017: 18). In emphasizing the continuity between pre-94 and post-94, this theorization challenges the state's supposed dedication to democracy and reveals the failure to transform the state at a level beyond the institutional framework, in line with democratic deficit theory.

## Methodology

This study relies on qualitative research methods as all primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with seven student activists currently enrolled as students at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) in Durban. Three students participated in a 120-minute focus group that took place at UKZN Howard College. The other four participated in one-on-one interviews, ranging in length from 45 to 120 minutes and taking place at various locations around Durban that were convenient for my participants. All participants were students at UKZN and all but one were studying at the undergraduate level. They were selected by nature of mutual contacts so are not necessarily representative of the “average” student activist (assuming that exists). Recognizing that their reflections are unique and not necessarily generalizable, I understand that their contributions are useful insofar as they offer me individual case studies of the lived experience of young student activists.

Prior to a discussion of informed consent, I approached each session with a brief discussion of my personal interest as a researcher and my framing of them as research “participants” rather than “subjects.” In doing so, I aimed to actively deconstruct the researcher/researched power hierarchy, using a critically conscious methodology to negate or at least mitigate power imbalances that may have arisen between me and the participants. I then proceeded to take the necessary precautions in order to uphold ethical standards. All participants signed an informed consent form and notified me whether or not they preferred me to use a pseudonym, which I respected in the analysis of their interviews.

Informed by my consultation with archival information in the form of news articles, social media accounts, and secondary literature, I asked participants questions centered on their role in the university, their perspectives as young people in post-94 South Africa, and their

understanding of student activism in a society undergoing transformation. As the sessions were semi-structured, I entered the conversation with an interview guide (attached in Appendix B), but allowed conversation to flow naturally according to participants' interests and was not concerned with sticking strictly to the guide. In doing so, I intended to cultivate a space that felt simultaneously casual and engaging, hopefully offering participants a chance to explore themes they found interesting so they felt as though they gained something from the time spent with me. From casual conversations had with participants afterwards, I believe I succeeded in this regard as many thanked me for taking the time to listen to them and expressed that they also enjoyed our conversation. All interviews were recorded on my cell phone to ensure data was stored securely and would be available for transcription at a later time.

This project was conceptualized, proposed, researched, conducted, analyzed, and written over a short timeline of only five weeks, so the size and scope of the study are necessarily limited. Having only interviewed student activists themselves, I can only speak on their experiences as they relate to my contextual and theoretical framing. I was not able to conduct interviews with other (non-activist) students nor university staff and administration within the university to gain alternate perspectives, so my understanding of student activism comes with an inherent bias. But in a study focused on student activists, I think this framing makes the most sense and I feel comfortable with the richness of data collected, which speaks to the complexities of their experiences. Ultimately, my findings are not meant to construct a singular truth, but rather to add depth to my understanding of the multifaceted dynamics of student activism in the unique contemporary South African context.

Inspiring the research that informed this project were my own experiences of student activism in the US context. I cannot write about student activism without first reflecting on my

personal experiences of it, which undeniably infuse the study given my positionality. As a researcher, I approach my work with the understanding that scholarship is never neutral and the personal is always political. Thus, I have always viewed my educational experience in the larger framing of what it enables me to do in the world beyond the university. I brought this motivation and this expectation to this project full knowingly. This research reflects my interests, questions, experiences, and challenges, and I made no effort to prevent that. Rejecting any goal of “objectivity,” I recognize my positionality as a white, cis-gendered, female, activist-researcher from the Global North and the role my identity inevitably played in creating, shaping, and framing my research. This critical reflexivity infused the research process in a way that I believe does not take away from its intellectual legitimacy or value. Rather, I believe it allowed conversations to be had more comfortably and resulted in a stronger, more nuanced, study. By connecting with my participants through our mutual identity as student activists, I had a certain level of “insider” positionality, which could be otherwise difficult to find in a foreign country. I therefore believe my personal inspiration and “bias” only added to the quality of this project.

## Findings and Analysis

Informed by the theoretical understanding of democratic deficit and youth positionality, I now shift to focus on the findings of my primary research. All data was collected through interviews with seven student activist (participant biographies includes in Appendix A). This section explores three broad themes of relevance from the conversations with the participants of this study which relate to student activists' conceptualizations of their positionality in the university and beyond. The first section, "*How free was I really born?*", explores their experiences growing up in democratic South Africa and the processes by which they became largely disillusioned with formal politics, opting to pursue alternative means of change. In the second, "*Spitting truth but not following through*", I discuss how dynamics within the university have mirrored larger societal patterns and how student activists have interacted with the university to assert agency and create change. The final section, "*Why can't we create something else?*", examines the participants' reflections on the future and their role in creating a society in alignment with their ideals of transformation. These themes do not encompass all that was discussed in interviews, but rather reflect the most salient points as they relate to the objectives of this study.

### ***"How free was I really born?": Youth Experiences of Post-94 Democracy***

#### *Reflections on a Hollow Transformation*

A narrative of contradiction and hypocrisy was immediately obvious from conversations with all participants about their experiences growing up in post-94 South Africa. They reflected the sentiment that the South Africa they were told they were growing up in was far from their reality, especially with regards to ideals of transformation. This dynamic was first made obvious when I questioned the focus group participants about their identity as a "born free." In response,

they all staunchly rejected the title, a reaction consistent in the remaining interviews. Lindelwa captured the common sentiment:

People think that just because you're "born free," the problems stop. Just because it [apartheid] happened twenty-two years ago means it's all ok. Well, we aren't "born frees." We are still struggling with the same struggles. Being born free just means you were born after the fact, it does not take away the ripple effect of the events that happened prior. If my parents were poor in 1992, and they're still poor and they're still struggling to send me to university and now I'm poor. That is the ripple effect. I am still stuck in that. So, I can't help but ask, how free was I really born?

Participants further elaborated on the psychological impact of being incorporated into the "born free" narrative, calling it "messy," "infuriating," and "crippling." Ali explained the difficulty of living with a title that contradicted her reality, explaining that it feels like "everyone is upholding a constant collectively agreed upon social denial." This sentiment aligns with Chikane's critique of rainbowism rhetoric (2018) and the belief that these narratives impede true progress. Relevant to their activism, my participants chose instead to challenge those narratives. Through their individualized rejection of the "born free" identifier, participants revealed a larger refusal to blindly accept romanticized post-94 narratives.

Accordingly, participants gave less recognition to 1994 as a significant marker of transition, in contrast to dominant narratives that dramatically emphasize the transition to democracy. This perspective was reflected both implicitly in Lindelwa's emphasis of what little has changed for her family with regards to their position of poverty and more explicitly by other participants. Sibongile reflected frustration with the assumption that things have radically transformed since the transition, asking "in what ways have I been empowered? Just because I can use the same toilet as you?" The perceived superficiality of change was captured when Thobani characterized contemporary South Africa as a "cosmetic apartheid." He explained that because of the many structural barriers that remain in place, "we do not live in a post-apartheid

society. It is a post-apartheid apartheid society.” Using a personal anecdote of wanting to attend a historically white university but being unable to due to structural inequalities, manifest in the underfunding of his all black primary and secondary schools, he explained how little has changed since 1994 and how the illusion prevents people from understanding what “freedom really tastes like.” Consistent among all interviews was the frustration that most South Africans accept the narratives promulgated by the ANC government and do not recognize how far short the promises of transition have fallen.

### *Disillusionment with Democracy and Politics*

The divergence of ideals and experiences is by now a familiar story, but participants emphasized their particular frustration with this dynamic in relation to democratic failings and the effect that has had on the development of their political consciousness. Despite all being politically active through activism work and many studying political science, participants consistently reflected a lack of faith in South African democracy. Ali spoke to how her experiences in democracy led to a diminished belief in the system itself, a phenomenon observed across young South Africans at large (Mattes 2012):

All these readings of democracy like John Stuart Mills and Rousseau sound fantastic. But the actual experiences of democracy discredited it for me because there was always this inheritance of trauma and problems that ferment democracy. Democracy likes to make a whole lot of empowering and participatory decisions at the top but with the inheritance of all those problems you still don't get to fully enjoy, fully benefit from it... There are all these undercutting social and political contradictions to the democratic process and what it delivers so that in translation it hardly works today, especially for the people it should work for most.

As a student with a firm grip on political theory, Ali carefully articulates South Africa’s dramatic failing to uphold the democratic ideals it supposedly is dedicated to.

Participants discussed particularly the perceived lack of accountability and responsiveness and the disconnect they felt from policy making. Their stories revealed that they are always the objects and recipients of policy, never involved in the policy making process itself, despite a supposed dedication to participation and vertical accountability. Lindelwa explained this vividly:

I think our democracy is like a cartoon of a man saying ‘You are as free as you want to be. Go do whatever you want!’ but in the background, they’re really running the whole show and you’re just puppets.

The feeling of being “puppets” was especially salient for them as youth. In discussing whether people in authority respected and responded the voices and opinions of young people, nearly all participants responded negatively. Sibongile reflected the sentiment succinctly, “they don’t give a shit about our voices and opinions.” Her fellow focus group participants nodded in agreement, explaining that the political elite in power do not understand their struggles or care to listen to their voices. In a separate interview, Amanda elaborated on interactions with older politicians, suggesting that the opinions of young people are discredited by older generations because “it always goes back to ‘you didn’t feel the struggle that we felt, so your struggles aren’t as important as our struggles.’” She felt that by holding on to their struggles during apartheid, older generations remained blind to the challenges facing young people and perpetrated the “born free” narrative, much to the disempowerment of young activists trying to challenge the status quo.

Furthermore, participants engaged in a discussion of intersectionality with regards to perceived legitimacy in formal politics. Nkanyiso explained that in order for a young person’s voice to be respected, “it has to be a certain alignment of different identities” and reflected on his own experience as a queer black man from a township. His positionality as such meant that his

voice was not respected in his experiences. Amanda similarly discussed gender in reflecting on her own experience, noting that:

I feel like any platform for young people to speak out about the issues that we are facing is null and void, especially for females. I think for males, up and coming politicians or those who have fathers or uncles that were involved in politics, it might be easier for their voices to be heard. But for us as females, they assume that we have a *tabula rasa*. The conception is that females actually don't know anything and all we are good for is to be in the kitchen. It's very frustrating, very annoying.

Nkanyiso and Amanda's comments remind us of the importance of considering identities in an intersectional context. In South Africa, like all societies, a person's unique experiences are a result of the interaction of their many identity markers, including but not limited to race, gender, class, sexuality, and age. Youth are not a monolith and their positionality in society vary according to their complicated identities. This fact emphasizes the need to go beyond a single-issue framework in any analysis of power and difference.

Participants' common disillusionment with democracy translated in varied ways with regards to their political engagement, but all forms of engagement contrast narratives of youth political apathy or disinterest. In reflecting on the development of his political consciousness, Thobani discussed why he left the ANC and decided to look beyond electoral politics. Growing up in an "ANC family," he had always been assumed it was a revolutionary organization that it was dedicated to transformation as it claimed to be. But he explained that as he grew older and read the writings of people outside the ANC, he grew to realize the politics he desired "had no home in the ANC." His pursuit of more radical change thus drew him to join the Black First, Land First party and engage in anti-establishment organizations that offered him more hope for change. Other participants explained that they did vote, some in the party of their family and

others outside, but begrudgingly or without much hope for any change to come from it. Ali, in contrast, explained her rationale for not voting at all:

As a political studies student, I don't vote anymore. Because I realize the democratic scam of voting is that when you tell people they've consented or made a decision, you equate that to them being empowered...Power is the representation of choices. Making the choice isn't power. Consenting to something isn't power if your options are practically the same. That was an important disillusionment I had with democracy. I don't want to assent to dumb choices. I don't want to choose between *Maggi* noodles, *Royco* noodles, and another brand of noodles. It's all fucking noodles!

The noodle analogy reflects the conformism across dominant political parties, which despite upholding different platforms are engaged in what students perceived as similarly meaningless work. Sibongile echoed the sentiment of lack of true choice and irrelevance of formal political action for young people. She recounted how many of her peers don't vote or "give a damn about what happens in politics" because the political sphere "doesn't represent them." Further, she said that "young people would much rather speak out on Twitter than on ballots." This comment is key in our understanding of youth political engagement. Measuring political action through formal means alone (e.g. voting, party membership) overlooks the many ways in which youth are indeed engaging beyond the traditional means, in increasingly innovating ways through the digital sphere and social media.

### *Redefining Political Action for Contemporary Issues*

In response to efforts to discredit and disempower young people, participants reflected on the urgency of their work and their profound dedication to making space for their voices and the change they seek. Much of the motivation to engage politically came from personal experiences and identity, in line with the feminist maxim "the person is political." Lindelwa reflected on a time when her feminist demands were discredited, saying, "people told me I was taking it too

seriously. But I have to! I am a woman! It's my life! How can I not taking it seriously?"

Similarly, Sibongile recounted the personal motivation for her political work, explaining that "lots of the inspiration for my activism came from the sense of me being a black woman." The motivation and dedication was clear across all conversations. Thobani discussed how activism was his lifeline: "the only way for me to survive is through the struggle. The only way to remain sane is to remain in the struggle." Amanda reflected a similar sentiment when she told me, "once the [activist] bug has bitten you, you're in for good." Inspired by the blatant contradictions facing their lived experiences, participants expressed a commitment to holding the state accountable for its empty promises of transformation.

Their desire to create change is rooted in an understanding of the continuity of both oppression and justice-seeking work. Through our conversations, it became clear that they believed that 1994 was not a book-end for activism; rather, *la luta continua*. With full appreciation of the work done by older generations in the battle against Apartheid, these young activists reflected on their intentions to hold South Africa accountable to the ideals established in the transition to democracy, especially with regards to self-determination. Lindelwa explained that the challenge of today is to put into practice what is written down in documents like the Constitution and transformation charters. This sentiment reflects the desire to "deepen" democracy, as theorized by scholars of democratic deficit (Gaventa 2006; Lukham et al. 2000). Ali characterized the process of building on work done in the past to address issues of the present, including democratic deficit:

It's like an endless relay with a baton. We are taking the baton from the last generation and running as far as possible with it. We are not ungrateful for the liberties they managed to secure and the ideas they brought up. But they served their place in the ideological stream and now it's my turn to serve my place. What did they leave me to work with? Now push it.

Emphasizing the changing nature of problems and oppression, participants' stories revealed the significance in their activism work. Sibongile warned that if citizens blindly accept the romanticized myths of the "rainbow nation" and do not question society as it stands, it will only result in "shackling ourselves to a rigid society," a condition few would advocate for. These student's activist work thus occupies a key role in supporting change and encouraging substantive transformation in contemporary South Africa.

***"Spitting truth but not following through": The University as Site of Struggle***

*A Microcosm of Society*

When discussing their experiences of contesting power and engaging in politics within the university, it became clear that in many ways, the university dynamics at UKZN directly mirrored those beyond the ivory tower. Participants explained that every issue affecting broader South Africa is also present at the university level, including most notably corruption, a policy/practice divide, exclusionary economic tendencies, and resistance to change. This became obvious first through a discussion of UKZN's transformation charter. An extract from the focus group reveals the feelings of frustration and disillusionment with the university's efforts:

**Momo:** In doing research for this project, I came across a Transformation Charter, published by UKZN in 2015. Could you speak to the impact that has had on you as students?

**Ali:** [*chuckles and rolls her eyes*] Oh yeah? Well I've never heard of it. No lecturers have mentioned it, no emails from any heads of schools, nothing.

**Lindelwa:** [*nodding in agreement*] How does an American student have the charter and I've never seen it!? The people who it's meant for don't know it exists.

**Sibongile:** Who made it then? If it's for students, why were we not involved? Why is it not in our student handbooks? Where did you even find it?

**Momo:** An online news article mentioned it, but I couldn't find it on the UKZN website when I looked later.

**Lindelwa:** [*shaking her head*] It needs to be accessible. If it's important, you better make sure it's on our website and widely publicized. Don't be hiding stuff!

**Sibongile:** I'm not really surprised though. The university is trying to do the bare minimum so they don't get into trouble and this Charter is the perfect example.

**Ali:** Yeah, when transformation was a buzzword [around Fees Must Fall], they responded. But only to the extent that they were covering their asses and then they kept going, business as usual. They're spitting truth but not following through...

This interaction reveals the extent to which the policy-making process fails to consider or incorporate student voices. Much as students felt like the political establishment at large fails to respect and respond to their voices in the national sphere, they discredited the university as an institution open to their involvement in the policy-making process. Amanda emphasized that those who are in positions of power “do not have a clue about the struggles facing students” and “don't bother to consult students,” resulting in policy that is designed around satisfying donors' interest rather than serving the students at the institution.

The conversation also highlights the perceived superficiality of the university's attempts to create change. In a later interview, Thobani reflected irritation with the empty promises of decolonization and deep transformation as laid out in the Charter, exclaiming “miss with the bullshit because you're obviously not actually doing anything meaningful.” This frustration with the university and disenchantment with the efforts to create substantive change mirrors participants' perspective towards formal politics at the national level. Much as they had little hope for change through formal political parties (especially the ANC), they gave little credit to the university bureaucracy as an avenue to create the change they wish to see.

Discourse around the Transformation Charter directly paralleled a discussion about the Constitution, as students reflected on the similarities between these documents and their role in society. Nkanyiso explained that the Charter – which he had heard about and read, but only because he purposefully sought it out – is “beautiful, just like our constitution. Oh, beautiful on paper. But the problem is that it does not translate into action.” The divide between paper and

experience infuses the university space in a manner identical to broader society, much as participants understood that the institutions capitalize off the rhetoric of transformation without investing in efforts to bring about real change.

Beyond the Transformation Charter and the policy-making process, participants discussed how student politics within the university reflect problematic partisan politics outside, especially in the Student Representative Council (SRC), their student government. Many suggested that as a body dedicated to giving students voice and political agency, the SRC was for the most part exclusive and conformist. Monde recounted that while the student group he is involved in, LGBTI Forum, found more support from the SRC as compared to the bureaucratic university administration, it is nevertheless “hectic” and often laced with “red tape.” Others were more critical of the SRC. For example, Nkanyiso explained how the SRC played a role in upholding gender based violence and resisting gender equity initiatives, labeling it as a “pillar of patriarchy.” He described how through the selective recognition of issues they want to address, the SRC acted as a barrier to initiatives to challenge the most deeply rooted patterns of inequality, such as societally ingrained patriarchal practices. Likewise, Amanda painted the SRC elections as largely a popularity contest, rather than a process to seek true representation of the student body. These comments reveal that democratic deficit exists at the university level too, as democratic institutions exist but fail to translate into democratic politics. In this way, the democratic process is failing in ways identical to South African democracy. If we understand the university to be a space where democratic citizenship is cultivated (as Nussbaum and Dewey theorize), we must then ask ourselves what these institutional experiences are teaching students about South African democracy.

*Institutional Failures to Address Transformation*

Despite their professed commitment to transformation as it appears in documents such as the Transformation Charter, universities appear to be failing to support efforts of transformation and in some cases actively suppressing change. Amanda explained that as an activist trying to challenge the status quo within the university, she was continuously shut down by fellow students, professors, and university administration alike. She recounted a story of trying to start a student group dedicated to addressing gender based violence during her second year in university and being told that she was “in a dreamland” and to “sober up because [she] was talking nonsense.” Moreover, she remarked that:

The minute you speak about being an activist, the moment you speak about being a feminist, immediately doors are shut on you and people just black out. Students and faculty members both...people just turn a blind eye and walk away. So, my experience has been very negative, I don't want to lie.

The reaction to Amanda’s efforts to pursue gender equity initiatives reflects a larger hostility to students who wish to redress harmful and hegemonic power dynamics and pursue initiatives to create safer, more equitable spaces within the university and beyond.

All participants emphasized that universities are reluctant to respond to issues until they reach the point when it becomes impossible to ignore, often a result of student direct action or protest mobilization. Lindelwa used the example of irresponsiveness to mental health issues to explain that rather than taking the agency to act proactively, the university bureaucracy waits to see that something is “hanging by a thread.” In this case, student suicides and rising attention to the impact of mental health on academic performance led to the university providing more counselors. Nkanyiso explained the same pattern with regards to campus rape and sexual assault. Only when the issue became too large to ignore and students protested dramatically did

universities begin to address it in a substantial way. Moreover, all students discussed this dynamic in the context of Fees Must Fall, reflecting on both state and university reluctance to address the issues facing students. Monde explained:

The fact that so many riots had to take place for the free education thing tell you explicitly that clearly, the message was not carried through to the university admin and to Parliament, or at least it was not listened to. If it had been there would have been no need for us to burn down our library in order to get the message across. I think that illustration speak volumes.

Monde's comment about the burning of the library at UKZN Howard College exemplifies the desperation that students faced. While they received harsh criticism for this act, alternatives proved fruitless and students refused to stay remain silenced by the university. Amanda explained that point, speaking about meetings she attended with the university administration as a student negotiator before the protests began:

In those meetings to discuss, you're just told that you are speaking nonsense and you don't know anything. I've sat in those boardrooms and nothing comes of it. It seemed like resorting to striking and protesting was the only way that we would be listened to. That's why the students had to resort to actually going out to the streets and burning buildings and burning tires... so they could be recognized and taken seriously.

This resistance to change aligns with Lukham et al.'s theorization of democratic deficit and the second-hand consideration of the needs of marginalized citizens. Despite the charters existing on paper and meetings behind held, students still felt as though their "citizenship" in the university was worthless and their voices were neglected. Only when they resorted to dramatic disruption were they considered and incorporated. The fact that they were not respected initially reveals limits to universities' and broader South Africa's democratic practice and reflects a contradiction with the most fundamental ideals, such as those in the Constitution outlining "a government based on the will of the people" and the inherent equal dignity of all citizens (SA Constitution preamble).

Given that, Ali reflected on the letdown of her expectations with regards to universities acting as an institution supportive of social transformation. She explained that she had expected universities would be an “inherently transformative space” given the role they played in “providing a space where people could talk politics during the authoritarian apartheid era.” But she found at both UKZN and the University of Cape Town that, “they’ve changed...Universities today are neglectful of their history and how they’ve served out society before.” Commenting on the changed nature of contemporary universities, multiple participants argued that a capitalistic orientation explained the change in priorities. Ali discussing her experiences further, saying, “they’re businesses and worried about making money now. They’re not the noble institution of enlightenment that use business practices to keep themselves afloat. They’re business first, knowledge second.” Lindelwa elaborated on the point, explaining that the delay or total lack of response to student needs was a matter of materialistic self-interest: “They try to keep us as quiet as possible so that donors keep donating money and the university has a good reputation so it can attract new students who can pay.” These comments support the literature which characterizes the increased commercialization of universities and the prioritization of market-oriented goals (Nayyar 2008; Berdahl 2008). By stifling student critiques and upholding a corporatist mentality, the university upholds exclusionary, anti-democratic tendencies to the detriment of student’s safety, psychological wellbeing, and academic performance. Simply put, when profit is valued above student needs, students suffer.

### *Opportunities for Agency and Change*

Despite a stifling bureaucracy and insufficient attention to students’ needs, student activists discussed how they assert agency and contest power in the university space, using what means

they can. Taking advantage of the opportunities presented to them as students, many explained techniques of subverting expectations and creating an educational experience that aligns with their political aspirations. Thobani referred repeatedly to the university as a “theater inside revolution,” describing the way in which students and academics “fight at the level of thinking and ideas.” By challenging society at the level of pedagogy and epistemology, students contribute to the larger project of revolution by supporting the radical reimagining of not only society itself but ways of thinking about society. He characterized the role of the university in that process:

The university helps us do the work. It provides information. This is the space where we can think. We were brought here to think so we have no choice but to think. But we don't think about how good it would be to go and work for the system, we think about how we can defeat the system.

Here Thobani captured how students can do what the institution expects of them methodologically (think) while simultaneously using the opportunity to subvert “the system” and cultivate their own ideas, knowledge, and agency. Amanda offered an example of an interaction that similarly reflected this way of engaging the system through challenging hegemonic ideas:

I was in a module and the lecturer said something that I totally disagreed with it. My hand went up at 100 kilometers an hour trying to oppose that. And I had people nudging me and saying, "No, you can't say that." But I can. It's my perspective, my view, I'm obliged to it. I paid R3,830 for this module. So I'll say whatever I want to say as long as it's relevant to the class and I'm not offending anybody.

By upholding her right to speak up and engage in a class she paid for, Amanda took advantage of her role in the university space and displayed her activism through her ideological confrontation. It is important here to note that Amanda and Thobani engage in a manner not unprecedented to South African history. Students have long been engaged in the development of the ideological underpinnings of struggles beyond the university. Steven Bantu Biko offers an unparalleled

example. As a university student, he developed the ideology of Black Consciousness, which infused activism for many generations to come, far beyond the university. Biko's writings and influence remains relevant with contemporary activists, many participants recalling their admiration for his work and legacy.

Participants discussed that creating a radical activist space within the university remains a challenge, but core to their pursuit of change. The university in this way offers activists a space for community and a chance to connect with likeminded individuals. Multiple participants recalled that the momentum around #FeesMustFall was especially significant in that regard. Amanda explained that student activism grew immensely around the peak in 2016 and student activists were taken more seriously as a result. Similarly, Nkanyiso commented that "the radical space that you had is a bit bigger now than before." Beyond students, participants recounted the significance of faculty who respected their ideas and support their activism. Nkanyiso stressed that professors such as that are rare ("I can count exactly four."), but hold a vital role in their work. Amanda discussed this as well with regards to her work in a student-led organization that relies on partnership with a university body. As these students reveal, despite challenges, the university does offer space for organizing and opportunities for the development of agency.

A common theme discussed in multiple interviews was the legitimacy that the university offers them as agents in change in broader society. Despite the challenges of existing in the institution, participants explained that the degree they are working towards is sure to help instill authority and respect with older generations. Thobani explained:

When you don't have a degree, if you're talking about these big things, people will not listen to you. The only way that I can be seen as correct is if I have the certificates that they have, unfortunately.

Monde reflected a similar sentiment, stressing that being in an institution of higher learning translated into automatically more respect for their voices as young people. Amanda linked the respect not to the certificate but to #FeesMustFall, recounting that in that context of wide-scale disruption, “the country had to listen to us, the government had to listen. So we were taken seriously.” Whether through academic accreditation or forced recognition through protest action, it is clear that the university does aid in developing activist agency and has the potential to provide platforms for change.

***“Why can’t we create something else?”: Prospects for Transformation***

*Reform vs. Revolution*

Discussing participants’ visions for change within and beyond the university led to a conversation about the tension between reform and revolution, a theme then explored at length. Some participants felt that large-scale socio-political revolution was the only way to reach the goals they strived for, including most notably the uprooting of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. In their mind, the current socio-political system as too deeply entrenched to allow for substantive change and any efforts that remained within the bounds of the current system would be coopted by the political elite and corrupted, turned into a superficial version of the goals. Their experiences in democracy as “born frees” and their repeated let-down by the system discredited politics as it stands. The perceived conformism of the establishment would therefore require something more dramatic. Thobani reflected on his revolutionary ideals:

Am I an activist I think so but I think I am beyond an activist. I am an aspiring revolutionary. I want to be involved in a project that does not only change one stream in society but totally changes society as a whole so that everyone can feel free - a student, an artist, an engineer, everyone. I'm a revolutionary in that sense... We have to confront society. But it must happen in such a way that it's not confrontation for the sake of

confrontation. It's confrontation for the sake of bringing about a new society, a socialist egalitarian society where there will be no majority and no minority, no white, no black, just people.

As Thobani emphasized, he is not disrupting society without reason. Rather, he is actively engaged in the process of creating a new reality, one that reflects his ideals and goes beyond what he believes the status quo can offer. Ali reflected similar doubt about whether the current system could be modified with regards to true gender parity, highlighting the harmful historical precedence:

Women don't have a place anywhere. And I mean anywhere. I only recently understood that being in the social justice spaces in FMF [Fees Must Fall], where I confronted patriarchy and sexism as well. Really the entire political culture in SA develop in a very patriarchal sense, excluding women. First the British colonial one, then the Apartheid colonial one. So half the population is excluded and represented in such a normalized way by the political culture... In the rainbow wave of 94, we addressed only the race and class issues - and we barely even dug in there. But we didn't address deep gender discrimination and violence that was everywhere you looked in the political scene. It was allowed to come along. That is my problem with democracy today. Will non-men South Africans really ever wholly participate if that is the culture we are working with?

Referencing a deeply ingrained patriarchal culture, built upon the legacy of colonialism, Ali reflects the suspicion that change is possible within the current context. Recognizing that patriarchy has infused even the most radical of spaces (despite a theoretical dedication to feminism) reveals the deep challenge in grappling with a society built upon roots of exclusion, oppression, and marginalization.

Despite a common sense of disillusionment, participants did carry hope that change is possible and a dedication to be part of the process, whether that comes from more mainstream or revolutionary avenues. Acknowledging the agency of social actors, Nkanyiso explained:

I mean human beings are able to create a system of patriarchy. Why can't we create something else? We were able to create patriarchy so I think we also are able to create

another system where everyone can be able to benefit and not just a minority of the population.

By recognizing the role of ideas and the power of innovation, Nkanyiso emphasized that a new reality is possible. Motivating their activism was thus the belief that they could be catalysts for this change and contribute to the reimagining. Amanda described this process as “starting with one person at a time.” She elaborated that, “if you're able to change one person's mindsets and perspective, then they can change someone else's and it becomes a cycle. That's how change happens.” Dedicated to the belief that change begins with the individual, participants reflected a common belief that transformation is possible, despite the barriers they encounter as activists.

### *Significance of Education*

In creating a new reality, participants reflected on the centrality of education. In line with the need to “fight at the level of ideas” as Thobani discussed earlier, participants discussed how important education is to the process of creating a new culture. Monde discussed his work in the LGBTI Alliance, which hosts regular dialogues and tries to normalize queerness in and beyond the UKZN campus:

We aim to most basically to educate society because we believe that education is the key to having peace between difference sections in society. Education is one of the most critical tools that we can use, as Nelson Mandela said, to try and change perception.

His reference to Mandela offers an especially interesting point for discussion. While many young activists remain critical of Mandela and the “Mandela-phoria” associated with the transition to democracy, his ideas nevertheless remain relevant. Moreover, beyond Mandela, participants' sentiments about the importance of education align with the theory as presented by the universities themselves and scholars like Nussbaum and Dewey. The participants similarly held that universities have the potential to be spaces that can foster critical thinking skills, encourage

engagement with people from different backgrounds, and create opportunities for intellectual exploration. Where they diverge, however, is in their challenge that universities have succeeded in accomplishing those goals. Participants recognized that while they agree with the ideals, they do not see them translating into reality and that is what drives their activism work today.

Beyond the university level, Amanda and Nkanyiso discussed the importance of education at large and the need to start far before students enter higher education. Speaking about his experiences in primary and secondary school, Nkanyiso explained that the curriculum failed to substantially teach him about issues of social justice and historical struggles. He reflected that as a result, many students overlooked the connection between Fees Must Fall to the student struggles of the past, especially the Soweto Uprising:

Fees Must Fall was not the first protest by students. It happened in the '80s. It happened in the early '90s. It's just that now, because our education is terrible, you know history education more specifically, we do not know. They're not in the history pages. We do not know about the strikes so 1976 [Soweto Uprising] is not even painted as a link to Fees today.

This lack of quality education is urgent to consider, given the framework for transformation as put out by the ANC government at the dawn of democracy (Department of Education 1997). Schools were considered central to developing democracy and new curriculum was developed for precisely that purpose, so that it has fallen short offers an important point for consideration, especially in the context of youth activism. Despite this failure, Amanda suggested that she has hope that this must not always be the case. She urged that primary and secondary schools must be part of the change, "because if the education system is able to address these issues with children when they are at a much younger age, then I think you wouldn't be experiencing most of the problems that we are experiencing now."

*Role of Young People*

Whether by means of revolution or reform of the current system, within or outside the walls of the university, and regardless of thematic focus, it is clear that participants believed young people and student activists have a key role to play in efforts of transformation. When asked about what young people can contribute, Lindelwa exclaimed enthusiastically, “We are so strong and so robust as young people!” Her fellow focus group participants nodded in agreement and recounted the importance of listening to youth voices and incorporating them in tangible and meaningful ways. Many reflected on the unique positionality of youth today and what they can offer. Monde explained that, “being young, there's lots of new information we have access to. New methods of doing things, for example, health wise, and lots of new technology.” In a rapidly changing world at the brink of what has been called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, efforts to create substantive change will increasingly rely on ability to navigate the digital sphere, something young people are notably adept at. Young people’s proximity to these platforms for change position them as key stakeholders in change-making processes.

Beyond their skills, young people bring dedication and experience. Having grown up in the post-94 context, they understand, in Thobani’s words, “where we are and what we need.” Their disappointing experiences of democracy offer suggestions about how to go about making a change that will result in an alignment of theory and praxis and “deepen” democracy. If South Africa truly wishes to uphold its professed ideals, then the need to listen and engage with young people and their demands is clear.

## Conclusion

2018 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Steve Biko's South African Student Organization (SASO), naturally inviting reflection the past, the present, and the future of student activism and its role in cultivating social change in South Africa. While it is clear that the context students are operating in today is institutionally distinct from that of the pre-94 era, this study reveals that democratic dispensation has failed to radically transform many young people's experiences and feelings of hollow citizenship are common. In alignment with democratic deficit theory, participants' narratives of disillusionment and frustration reveal that the establishment of democratic institutions, both at the university and state level, has not translated into democratic politics. Rather, the democratic space remains exclusionary and their voices often go unheard, against the very ideals that "new" South Africa was founded upon.

As this study reveals, student mobilizations highlight democratic deficit and compromised experiences of citizenship in the contemporary South African context. Student activists' experiences of exclusion and marginalization at institutions of higher learning are symbolic of larger dynamics, emphasizing the parallel between the university and the state. By recognizing these parallels, reflected in idealized policy, disappointing practice, and increased prioritization of market-oriented goals, it becomes possible to theorize the university student as an actor of democracy. The university as an institution of the state and a microcosm of broader society provides the space to challenge dynamics of power and access in ways significant to broader politics. Student activists thus reveal the urgent need to "deepen" democracy and aid in our understanding of democratic deficit in South Africa. By contesting power at the university level but in line with national political goals, student activists embrace their role as agents in the evolution of society and position themselves as staunch advocates of not only more inclusive

learning spaces, but more democratic society at large. The topic of student activism, while underexplored, is therefore critical to explore in our understanding of South Africa and its transformation in the post-94 era.

### ***Recommendations for further study***

Given the limits of this project, there remains much more to explore on the topic of student activism and democratic deficit. Beyond the possibility of incorporating more perspectives and more voices through a larger sample size, there are also further themes that I would encourage exploration into. In the framing and analysis of this project, I intended to bring an intersectional approach, grounded the research in the understanding that experiences of student activism vary widely according to the identities activists carry. But while that appeared in my analysis briefly, I was unable to explore this theme in the depth I would have liked. Given more time, I would therefore like to further explore how gender shapes the student activist experience. This particular focus is especially important in the South African context, where narratives are too often androcentric and neglectful of women's contributions to the liberation struggle and beyond. While a rich and growing collection feminist literature has explored this theme in depth, the topic of student activism remains underdeveloped in that regard and appears ripe for exploration.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Participant Biographies*

#### *Focus Group:*

**Ali Shangwe**, third-year undergraduate student studying political science and philosophy at UKZN. Was involved in Fees Must Fall at University of Cape Town (UCT) and UKZN and other activist mobilizations. Now working to establish intersectional feminist group at UKZN, the first of its kind. Described her activism as “an existence.”

**Lindelwa Mthiyane**, third-year undergraduate student studying law at UKZN. Involved in Fees Must Fall at UKZN and recent mobilizations around Gender Based Violence and feminism. Campus secretary of the Amnesty International UKZN chapter. Described her activism as “unapologetic.”

**Sibongile Shangase\***, third-year student at UKZN studying politics and law. Involved in Fees Must Fall at UKZN and currently holds officer position with campus ANC Youth League chapter. Described her activism as “a lifestyle.”

#### *Individual Interviews:*

**Thobani Zikalala**, second-year undergraduate student studying political science. Student movement leader for Black First Land First (BLF), a Black Consciousness, pan-Africanist, and socialist revolutionary political party founded in 2015. Involved in Fees Must Fall and various equity initiatives. Described his activism as “rebellious and confrontational.”

**Nkanyiso Mthembu\***, Graduate student at UKZN studying education with a focus on gender and sexuality. Involved in FMF at UKZN and currently involved in a student organization mobilizing around issues of gender inequity. This past year started informal student organization dedicated to coaching youth activists.

**Monde Ngwane**, third-year undergraduate student at UKZN studying geography and environmental management. Head of UKZN LGBTI forum, a student organization dedicated to creating an inclusive and supportive queer space and educating the campus and surrounding community about gender and sexual diversity. Described his activism as “redefining the definition.”

**Amanda Ngcobo**, third-year undergraduate student at UKZN studying education. Co-leader of student group, Gender Activist, dedicated to addressing inequality and changing narratives around feminism. Described her activism as “disruptive.”

\*Names changed to preserve anonymity.

## *Appendix B: Sample Interview Guide*

### **Introduction**

- Explain the project, my motivations, and my desire to make this experience reciprocal
  - Research ~~subject~~ PARTICIPANT
  - Thank you for being a part of this ☺
- Informed consent
  - Recording conversation
  - Right to withdraw
  - Explain and sign Consent Form
- Exchange contact information for future reference
  - Would you like a copy of the final paper emailed to you?
- Establish timeline and interview norms (e.g. phones off, respect, listening, non-judgement)

**Ice Breaker:** Briefly introduce yourself and your personal relationship with the word “activist” (inspiration, introduction to activism, how its changed, etc.).

### *Youth voices in change*

1. How do you as a student activist conceptualize your role in the university and broader civil society?
2. How does your experience of democracy as a “born-free” in the post-94 “rainbow nation” shape your activism?
3. What do you think of the current state of democracy in SA? Are you optimistic? Why or why not?
4. How do you engage with formal (partisan) politics?
5. Some are of the view that “born-frees” lack appreciation for the anti-apartheid struggle and take many of the benefits of democracy for granted. What is your view?
6. Do you feel that people in power (in the university and broader politics) take seriously and respond to the voice and opinions of young people?
7. In your experience, are all young people treated in the same way by those in authority or do other identity markers matter (race, gender, class, etc.)?

### *Focus of Activism*

1. What do you feel are the most critical issues confronting SA today?
2. Which of these issues do you feel student activists resonate with the most, and why do you think so?
3. “Decolonization” was central to the demands of fallists and has by now become a common word. What does it mean to you?

### *Study, Struggle: The University as a Space for Organizing*

1. From your experience, do universities contribute towards social transformation? Do you feel they have a role to play?
2. Describe the activist community at your university.

3. What platform does the university offer to students who pursue activism or want to create change?
4. In your experience, do universities pose barriers to student activists pursuing goals of radical transformation?
5. How does your experience in the university compare to your experience in broader democracy?
6. Has UKZN's "transformation charter" made a tangible difference in your experiences of student activism?

#### *Strategies of Student Activism*

1. How does student activism interact with university bureaucracy?
2. What tactics do students use in their mobilizing and activism?
3. Role of SRC?
4. Role of political parties?
5. Role of organized student groups?
6. Role of social media?
7. How do students engage with local community groups/non-profits/NGOs?

#### *FeesMustFall and Beyond*

1. Describe your experience as a fallist? (if applicable)
2. What do you make of the fact that activism at different campuses received(s) different responses (i.e. Wits vs TUT FMF protest)?
3. How did the FMF movement change after the 0% fee increase announcement?
4. What impact do you feel the #FMF movement had on student activism broadly?
5. How did FMF change your personal activism?

#### *Transformation*

1. What would your ideal transformation of South African institutions and society look like? What type of future would you like to see?
2. What do you make of the tension between reform and revolution?
3. What are the challenges to transformation in "new" SA?
4. Is South Africa capable of the deep transformation that students desire?
5. What is the role that youth play in this process?

#### **Wrap Up**

1. Anything you would like to add?
2. Describe your activism in a single word.
3. THANK YOU!