



Decolonizing the University: A Critical Exploration of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement and the Politics of Reckoning in Higher Education

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Abstract

The longstanding and ongoing liberation struggles for a decolonized African university, a search for a modern African identity, an epistemic citizenship, and an autonomous African development raised the question of decolonization when a Black student hurled a pail filled with human excrement against the Cecil John Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, sparking the formation of the RMF movement on March 9, 2015. Grounded in both the Decolonial Critical Discourse Analysis (DCDA) and theory of Decoloniality, the objective of this study was to explore the Rhodes Must Fall movement and analyze the politics of reckoning, epistemic justice, and institutional transformation in higher education. The aim was to critically examine how the RMF movement challenged the persistent coloniality within the African university and fostered a pluriverse knowledge system, decolonized leadership, and pedagogy. Through an analysis of speeches, institutional statements, media coverage, visual and symbolic materials, and peer-reviewed journal articles, the study investigated how Black students sought to make sense of their experiences in a Western-dominated university by de-linking from UCT's Eurocentric curricula and creating their own decolonial frameworks based on Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, Black radical feminism, epistemic disobedience and Fanonism. This thesis argues that decolonization remains an ongoing yet unfinished project that requires continuous unlearning of colonial structures and the dismantling of systemic hierarchies. The RMF movement served as both an epistemic and political intervention, exposing the limitations of liberal multicultural reforms that fail to address the deeper, more profound issues of coloniality.

Keywords: *Decolonial Critical Discourse Analysis, Decolonization, Politics of Reckoning, Rhodes Must Fall, University of Cape Town*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

1.1.1. Decolonization and the University

The term 'university' originates from the Latin term '*universitas*,' meaning "a corporation, body, or community of students and scholars" (Hotson, 2018). What began in the 12th century as *studia generalia*, a centre of learning for priests and monks attended by students across Europe, soon evolved into the medieval European university model. This model, which emerged in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, was premised on a universalist vision of knowledge, a site of enlightenment and critical inquiry (Bump, n.d.). At the very core of the university's celebrated role lies a deep entanglement with the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and racial hierarchies. Institutions of higher education, particularly those in the Global South, were not simply passive recipients of colonial legacies but active instruments in the reproduction and legitimization of Eurocentric worldviews (Mbembe, 2016; Mignolo, 2011). As a colonial institution, the university was tasked with disciplining knowledge, privileging European epistemologies, and marginalizing Indigenous ways of knowing. As such, higher edu-

cation has often functioned less as a universal arena of learning and more as a gatekeeper of colonial structures.

Decolonization, in its earliest political form, emerged as a project of national liberation across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, aimed at dismantling colonial rule and securing national sovereignty. As historian David Gardinier (1967) argues, decolonization was originally premised as a political phenomenon associated with the removal and/or undoing of colonial elements. Robert Delavignette (1977) by contrast, has described decolonization more narrowly as a "rejection of the civilization of the white man" (p. 131). Over time, however, scholars have argued that political independence alone has not dismantled the deeper structures established by colonialism. As such, the focus of decolonization has increasingly shifted beyond the notion of formal political emancipation towards the transformation of institutions, knowledge systems, and cultural practices that continue to reproduce diverse forms of colonial power. This broader understanding of decolonization provides the foundation for contemporary debates revolving around decolonizing the university space, where the persistence of colonial influence is understood not only in political terms but also in relation to how knowledge is produced, taught, and legitimized. While colonialism refers to the formal system of political dom-

ination, coloniality describes the enduring structures of power, knowledge, and culture that outlive colonial rule (Quijano, 2007). Within the realm of higher education, these enduring colonial structures continue to privilege Eurocentric forms of knowledge while actively marginalizing Indigenous, African, and other Global South epistemologies (Grosfoguel, 2011).

In *The Decolonial Turn in Media Studies in Africa and the Global South*, Last Moyo (2020) offers a preliminary framework that reconceptualizes the term 'Global South' not merely as a geographical concept, but more significantly to highlight the varying decolonial perspectives of Africa, Asia, and Latin America within the Western-dominated global framework of knowledge production. The very notion of the Global South is an intellectual and interpretive frame that embodies a set of interlinked structures. These structures, as Moyo describes it, create a space for "self-re-humanization, self-re-writing, and self-emancipation against the increasingly subtle and invisible forms of colonization" (p. 8). It is a dynamic and yet transformative space where the Global South reclaim its histories, knowledge systems and epistemic authority. It is important to emphasize from the outset of this study that the persistence and endurance of coloniality reminds us that decolonization can never be fully realized. Decolonial politics on the ground require continuous reflexivity and sustained efforts to challenge the enduring hierarchies of coloniality precisely because they continue to shape power relations, knowledge production, and institutional practices in the Global South.

As Moyo (2020) has written, the Global South as a geo-cultural concept provides a useful lens for differentiating Northern and Southern ways of knowing in media and communication studies. On the one hand, it highlights how the Global South is deeply rooted in unequal power relations of marginalization and epistemic exclusion. Furthermore, it is also grounded in long-standing decolonial struggles that resist the ongoing effects of imperialism and neocolonial domination experienced by Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and other historically oppressed communities (Moyo, 2020, p. 7). As such, the concept of the Global South foregrounds the need to challenge dominant Western paradigms that have historically marginalized and excluded alternative ways of knowing within the higher education space.

On the other hand, Moyo (2020) illustrates that knowledge systems associated with the Global North remain deeply shaped by Eurocentric epistemological assumptions. From Moyo's perspective, Global South scholars have often reinterpreted key intellectual traditions such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment not simply as linear periods of progress, but as moments in the formation of modern Eurocentric knowledge systems that are entangled with processes of domination and exclusion. These critiques emphasize that what is often presented as a universal progress is historically bound up with unequal power relations that shape whose knowledge counts and whose epistemologies are marginalized.

Similarly, contemporary critiques of neoliberal globalization extend this analysis by showing how current global political and economic frameworks often operate through seemingly neutral terms such as democracy, development, and human rights, while continuing to reproduce asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. It is within this broader context of contested knowledge and power formations that calls to decolonize the university have gained renewed urgency. By so doing, this thesis adopts Moyo's conceptualization of the Global South, particularly his emphasis on the uneven power relations that shape whose knowledge is produced, recognized, and legitimized. Accordingly,

I use the term Global South throughout this thesis to refer not simply to a geographic region, but to the broader historical and structural conditions through which higher education continues to challenge colonial structures of knowledge and power.

To decolonize the university is to engage in a politics of reckoning that confronts the enduring violence of colonial histories; to decolonize the university is also to demand institutional accountability as a lever to transform curricula, culture, and symbolic landscapes in ways that are inclusive and emancipatory. In this study, higher education is understood not merely as a site of learning but also a site of struggle where the meaning of knowledge, justice, and liberation is actively contested. The 2015 Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement at the University of Cape Town represents one of the most significant contemporary expressions of institutional struggle, transforming a student-led protest calling for the removal of the statue of British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes into a broader critique of institutional racism, epistemic exclusion, and the persistence of colonial power within higher education (Chantiluke, Kwoba, & Nkopo 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2022).

1.2. South Africa: The City of Cape Town

Established in 1652 as a Dutch colonial settlement under the Dutch East India Company, Cape Town became one of the earliest centres of European colonial expansion in Southern Africa (Baer, 2022). The city's strategic position along the maritime trade routes enabled the growth of colonial administration, commerce, and settlement, making it central to successive Dutch and British imperial projects (Baer, 2022).

Today, Cape Town is internationally celebrated for its immense beauty, multiculturalism, and liberal democratic values. Yet this contemporary image often obscures the city's enduring colonial structures and foundations. In stark contrast to its current global reputation, Cape Town is marked by dispossession, racial segregation, and economic inequality, a state of affairs that continues to reflect patterns established under colonialism and apartheid. The existence of these colonial legacies makes Cape Town a significant site for examining decolonial politics.

South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994 marked a decisive political break from apartheid and ushered in a new constitutional law founded on equality, human rights, and reconciliation (SABC News, 2015). Under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, the vision of the rainbow nation sought to promote national unity across racial division and foster a shared democratic identity across South Africa (SABC News, 2015). While this project of reconciliation would come to represent a remarkable political achievement, decolonial scholars contend that reconciliation alone is inadequate for dismantling deeper structures of coloniality embedded within South African society (e.g. Ahmed 2020; Andersen & Knudsen, 2019; Wood, 2020). Although, after the end of apartheid and the promise of societal liberation did not automatically translate into an epistemic transformation, as many underlying inequalities persisted through unequal access to free and fair education, economic opportunities, land ownership, and institutional power.

These inequalities became visually present across South African universities, many of which continued to reflect colonial traditions, curricula, pedagogy, and intellectual systems, despite South Africa's post-apartheid democratic transition (Baer, 2022). As a result, South African universities would increasingly become sites where broader debates surrounding Black identity¹, representa-

¹In this thesis, the terms 'Black identity' and 'Black students' refer specifically to Black South African students at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This distinction

tion, and social justice were contested. For many Black South African students, the persistence of colonial symbols within these institutions represented not merely reminders of the past but of ongoing expressions of exclusion and unequal belonging.

Cape Town's urban landscape has functioned as an ongoing expression of colonial dominance, with UCT serving as a prestigious symbol of intellectual authority and global recognition (Baer, 2022). Across this historical land, the cultural environment has remained deeply entrenched in Western Eurocentric traditions. The dominance of Western epistemologies and the underrepresentation of the UCT community (staff, faculty, and students) have laid bare the limits of post-apartheid transformation in South Africa. Within this context, the city of Cape Town has functioned as a site of epistemic violence, where knowledge from the Global North has been embraced as universal and authoritative, while African epistemologies have been rendered trivial and marginal. Mignolo (2011), Grosfoguel (2011), and Santos (2018) have rightly asserted that such epistemic hierarchies are central to the persistence of coloniality, even in the absence of formal colonial rule.

In Cape Town, coloniality has persisted not only through economic inequality and spatial segregation but also through the ordering of knowledge, culture, and history. The city's liberal reputation has further obscured these realities. Often positioned as politically progressive and racially tolerant, Cape Town has masked its deep-seated inequalities behind narratives of multiculturalism and inclusion. This liberal veneer has made it difficult to confront the structural nature of exclusion, as inequality is frequently framed as an unfortunate residue of the past rather than an actively reproduced condition. As a result, colonial power relations persist under the guise of neutrality and tradition. It was precisely this tension, between the promise of post-apartheid transformation and the persistence of coloniality, that inspired demands for societal reckoning and transformation to materialize (Ahmed, 2020; Becker, 2025; Nielsen, 2021).

1.3. Cecil John Rhodes Must Fall

To understand the significance of the RMF movement, it is imperative to examine the historical figure whose legacy became the catalyst for one of the most prominent student-led protests in contemporary South African higher education. Born in Bishop's Stortford, England, Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902) was a British imperialist, mining magnate, and politician whose influence extended across southern Africa during the height of European colonial expansion. In 1881, Rhodes was elected to serve on the Cape Legislative Assembly, of which he became an influential member of the Cape Parliament, serving as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896 and founder of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) (Beinart, 2022). What is more, he also served as the chairperson of De Beers, joint managing director of Goldfields of South Africa, and played a central role in advancing British imperial interests through territorial conquest, economic exploitation, and systems of racial domination (Beinart, 2022). His political vision was deeply rooted in the belief that British civilization represented the pinnacle of human progress and therefore possessed both the right and the responsibility to expand its influence globally.

is important given the heterogeneous composition of UCT's Black student population, which includes both Black South African students and Black international students from other African countries (Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, etc.). The study focuses specifically on the experiences, identities, and perceptions of Black South African students and does not seek to generalise these experiences to Black students from other national or cultural contexts.

Rhodes would articulate his central worldview most clearly in his infamous book, *Confession of Faith* (1877): "Why should we not form a secret society with but one object, the furtherance of the British Empire and the bringing of the whole world under British rule?" (Rhodes, 1877, pp. 248-252). His writings reveal a profound commitment to white supremacy and imperial conquest, portraying British rule as both inevitable and desirable. These beliefs were not merely personal convictions – they informed colonial policies that facilitated the dispossession of African land, the exploitation of natural resources, and the institutionalization of racial inequality. Thus, for Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Rhodes represents more than an individual historical figure; he embodies the ideological foundations of colonialism and the enduring structures of colonial power that continue to shape Africa.

After over a century, Rhodes' legacy remains visible by way of statues, a university that bears his name (Rhodes University in Grahamstown), a prestigious scholarship at the University of Oxford, and a foundation (the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation) that ties the name of a leading African liberation icon (Mandela) to that of a colonial imperialist (Rhodes) (Maylam 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Through substantial financial donations and land bequests, Rhodes made significant contributions to the development of educational institutions in South Africa, including UCT. His philanthropic contributions, however, cannot be separated from the accumulation of political power, colonial territories, a vast fortune, and broader forms of exploitation in South Africa as the enduring presence of Rhodes within university spaces raises important questions about whose histories, knowledge and experiences were either silenced, legitimized, or celebrated.

Perhaps Rhodes' most visible presence has materialized at UCT via the magnifying bronze statue seated at the main pedestrian entrance to the university (see Figure 1). As mentioned above, the Rhodes statue has long functioned as a powerful symbol of coloniality and institutional power. Decolonial thinkers have argued that the persistence of Rhodes' memorials in South African universities do not simply serve to preserve power, they communicate a substantial narrative about power, belonging, and national identity, while simultaneously marginalizing alternative histories (e.g. Ahmed, 2020; Andersen & Knudsen, 2019; Ankomah, 2020; Becker, 2025; Chowdhury, 2021; Daniel, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Nielsen, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2022; Muraina & Xulu-Gama, 2025; Wood, 2020).



Figure 1. Cecil Rhodes Statue at the University of Cape Town
From UCT Cape Town - Statue of Rhodes, by D. van der Merwe, 2007, Flickr.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dvdmerwe/358782583/>

The statue, therefore, has remained a focal point of broader dissatisfaction from the students regarding the persistence of coloniality at UCT. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) asserts that it was this decolonial posture that sparked the RMF movement in South Africa on March 9, 2015, transforming a protest against a historical statue into an international call for the decolonization of higher education.

1.4. Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Movement

The year 2015 was undoubtedly a remarkable moment in post-apartheid South Africa. It was a year of possibility and a reminder of the persistent realities of inequality, poverty, segregation, oppression, and exclusion. Two decades into democracy, South Africa, often described as a rainbow nation (symbolizing the demise of apartheid, representing a unified and multicultural society), was still grappling with the pain of radical segregation of black and white communities. All the same, Ramaru (2017) describes this period as a time when South Africa was “alive with possibilities” that were accessible to all (p. 89). These possibilities were embodied most clearly in the aspirations of the Born Free generation – young people born after 1994 who were expected to be liberated from the intergenerational burdens of apartheid and systemic oppression. As the first generation to come of age under democratic rule, Born Free symbolized the promise of a transformed South Africa founded on equality, reconciliation, and social justice. This generational group was widely imagined as the future beneficiaries of expanded educational opportunities, constitutional freedoms, and a political order capable of dismantling the racial barriers of the past. For many, this generation represented the hope that democracy would create a more inclusive society in which race would no longer determine access to opportunity, citizenship, or belonging.

At the same time, these expectations extended beyond political emancipation to encompass the transformation of South Africa's institutions, including its universities. Higher education was envisioned as a space where previously marginalized communities would gain equitable access, where institutional cultures would reflect the country's democratic values, and where knowledge production would move beyond its colonial and apartheid foundations. Universities were therefore expected not only to broaden participation but also to undergo meaningful structural and epistemic transformation.

Yet such possibilities were quickly revealed to be fragile and contested, particularly within the sphere of higher education. At UCT, situated in the symbolic and historical landscape of Cape Town, beginning on March 9, 2015, students sparked a much broader call for the university to be decolonized. They challenged the institution's fixation on enrollment, arguing that such measures resulted in superficial progress while leaving deeper, systemic exclusions intact. These exclusions manifested in a Eurocentric curriculum, minimal staff diversification (white dominance), and the alienating cultural landscape of the university, most visibly reproduced via its statues and memorials (Ramaru, 2017; Nielsen, 2021).

It is within this context of unfulfilled democratic promises, persistent institutional inequality, and broader student dissatisfaction that the RMF movement erupted on March 9, 2015, shocking the complacency of both UCT university administration and the South African government (see Figure 2 below).

What initially appeared to be a student-led protest evolved into a national and global movement that fundamentally challenged the colonial foundations of the university. The RMF movement



Figure 2. Rhodes Must Fall protesters gather at the University of Cape Town

From Rhodes Must Fall protesters at the University of Cape Town, by M. Hammond, 2015, University of Cape Town. UCT News

began after a Black UCT student, Chumani Maxwele, flung a bucket of human excrement on the bronze statue of Cecil Rhodes (located outside the Sarah Baartman Hall on campus) (see Figure 3). Studies consistently identify this symbolic act as the catalyst for the movement, noting that Maxwele's actions were spurred by the need to expose the unfinished business associated with decolonizing the university (Ahmed, 2020; Andersen & Knudsen, 2019; Becker, 2025; Daniel, 2021; Fairbanks, 2015; Muraina & Xulu-Gama, 2025). In articulating the meaning behind this act, Maxwele declared the following during an interview: “As Black students, we are disgusted by the fact that this statue still stands here today as it is a symbol of white supremacy” (Makoni, 2015, pp. 4). Coetzer (2020) suggests that Maxwele's strategic plan to bring down the Rhodes statue had a “triple-staged meaning”:

Firstly, against the ongoing appalling living conditions of those in Cape Town's informal settlements; secondly as a protest against the overbearing glorifying monument to a man who was undeniably a racist, imperialist, colonialist, and misogynist and lastly to bring awareness to what was considered to be the ongoing lack of transformation at UCT... and the marginalization of black lived experience in the shadow of whiteness. (p. 2)

In agreement with Maxwele, Ramabina Mahapa, president of the student representative council, described the celebratory narrative surrounding Rhodes as misleading and obscure, noting that Rhodes was often praised for donating land and bringing civilization to the South African economy. Mahapa goes on to challenge this narrative as a distortion of history, pointing out that “a colonizer could never donate land that was never his in the first place” (Makoni, 2015, pp. 4). For many Black students, the statue did not symbolize progress but rather served as “a constant reminder of the position in society that black people have occupied due to hundreds of years of apartheid, racism, oppression, and colonialism” (Makoni, 2015, pp. 4). Both Mahapa and Maxwele's statements were not merely spontaneous reactions; they constituted a profound articulation of the contradictions embedded within the post-apartheid university. According to the RMF mission statement, the statue stood as a “perfect embodiment



Figure 3. Chumani Maxwele's poo protest at the University of Cape Town on March 9, 2015

Photograph by D. Richie. From *The Pasts and Presence of Art in South Africa: Technologies, Ontologies and Agents*, by C. Wingfield, J. D. Giblin, and R. King, 2020. Courtesy and copyright African News Agency (ANA). <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/protesters-throw-poo-on-rhodes-statue-1829526>

of black alienation and disempowerment at the hands of UCT's institutional culture", which would materialize as the focal point of the movement (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

Although the removal of Rhodes's statue became the movement's most visible demand, the RMF activists also revealed that the statue represented an umbrella covering a much deeper problem. The movement therefore developed a comprehensive programme for institutional transformation through its twenty-eight demands, which articulated a far-reaching vision for the decolonization of the university (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

The breadth of the 28 demands demonstrates that the movement was deeply intersectional in its understanding of injustice. Through the RMF movement, students were able to palpably demonstrate that coloniality intersected with gender, class, sexuality, disability, language, and labour to shape experiences of exclusion within the university. In doing so, the movement articulated a vision of decolonization that sought to transform not only what universities teach but also how they govern, whom they employ, whose knowledge they value, and who is able to participate fully within academic community and culture.

As the movement gained momentum, student activists and nonteaching staff involved in the protests were either referred to as 'activists' or 'hooligans' (Ahmed, 2019). Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe portrayed them as representing a "Boko Haram style of violence" (Laing, 2016). Over time they came to be characterized as 'Fallists' (Nyamnjoh, 2022; Ahmed, 2019; Mpofu-Walsh, 2016) and their movement to decolonize the university was referred to as "Fallism" and/or the Fallist movement (Ngcaweni, 2016; Ramaru, 2017). Fallism represented the students' demand to remove the Rhodes statue and decolonize the university. For Chumani and other student activists, Fallism materialized as an attempt to theorize the experiences of Black students in a university context informed by Pan-Africanism, Black consciousness, Black radical feminism and intersectionality, epistemic disobedience, and Fanonism (Ahmed, 2019).

The Rhodes statue stood as a visible and daily reminder of the persistence of colonial power relations in a democratic and transformed South Africa. By explicitly naming the statue a symbol of white supremacy, Maxwele connected his personal

Table 1. The 28 Rhodes Must Fall Student Demands

S/N	DEMANDS
1.	Remove all statues and plaques on campus celebrating white supremacists.
2.	Rename buildings and roads from names commemorating only white people, to names of either black historical figures, or to names that contribute to this university taking seriously its African positionality.
3.	Replace artworks that exoticize the black experience (by white, predominantly male artists) which are presented without context, with artworks produced by young, black artists.
4.	Recognise that the history of those who built our university - enslaved and working-class black people - has been erased through institutional culture. Pay more attention to historical sites of violence, such as the slave graves beneath the buildings in which we learn.
5.	Implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern. By this we mean treating African discourses as the point of departure - through addressing not only content, but languages and methodologies of education and learning - and only examining western traditions in so far as they are relevant to our own experience.
6.	Provide financial and research support to black academics and staff.
7.	Radically change the representation of black lecturers across faculties.
8.	Revise the limitations on access to senior positions for black academics. This includes interrogating the notion of "academic excellence" which is used to limit black academics and students' progression within the university.
9.	Increase the representation of black academics on the currently predominantly white, male decision-making bodies which perpetuate institutional racism.
10.	Re-evaluate the standards by which research areas are decided - from areas that are lucrative and centre whiteness, to areas that are relevant to the lives of black people locally and on the continent.
11.	Introduce a curriculum and research scholarship linked to social justice and the experiences of black people.
12.	Adopt an admissions policy that explicitly uses race as a proxy for disadvantage, prioritising black applicants.
13.	Remove the NBT as a requirement for admission because it systematically disadvantages all students except those who attend Model C schools and private schools.
14.	Improve academic support programmes.
15.	Meaningfully interrogate why black students are most often at the brunt of academic exclusion.
16.	Develop an improved financial aid system.
17.	Radically reduce the currently extortionate fees.
18.	Improve facilities which deal with sexual assault, as well as facilities which help black students deal with the psychological trauma as a result of racism.
19.	Implement R10 000 pm minimum basic for UCT workers as a step towards a living wage, in the spirit of Marikana.
20.	Get rid of the Supplemented Living Level, which prescribes a poverty wage.
21.	Stop using the Consumer Price Index which ensures that wages never really increase, leaving workers in poverty.
22.	End outsourcing. The companies must go; the workers must stay.
23.	There should be no capitalist companies making profits at this public sector institution. Workers must know that their job is safe, has decent working conditions and ensures comfortable lives.
24.	Education for workers and their families must be free.
25.	Stop the victimization and intimidation of workers. No worker must be penalised in any way for supporting and joining protest action, including strike action, at UCT.
26.	Workers must be able, without penalty of any kind, to refuse work that is a danger or hazard to their health and safety.
27.	Provide workers with access to services dealing with labour, family, housing issues.
28.	Provide workers with avenues through which to report and address experiences of racism, sexism and other forms of abuse. These avenues must assist in enforcing legal action against the perpetrator.

act of defiance to broader critiques of the university as a space that continues to valorize colonial figures while marginalizing Black experience, knowledge, and bodies (Ahmed, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Ramaru, 2017).

From a decolonial standpoint, Rhodes stands as a symbol of apartheid, colonization, enslavement, and conquest – one that remains a nightmare for South Africa in the present day. These symbols resonate deeply through the words of Zethu Matebeni, a researcher and activist who participated in the RMF protests, asserting that Rhodes embodied an ideology of white racial elitism (Matebeni, 2018). According to Matebeni (2018), the statue of Rhodes evokes the image of an imperialist surveying his conquests and contemplating the extent to which his colonial powers will reign through the theft/expropriation of the land.

Following the removal of the Rhodes statue on April 9, 2015, the movement inspired a series of solidarity campaigns that

questioned the persistence of colonial politics across South African universities.

At the University of Stellenbosch, the Open Stellenbosch movement was established on April 9, 2015, to challenge the hegemony of white Afrikaans culture, the slow pace of institutional transformation, and the ongoing exclusion of Black students. On October 14, 2015, students at the University of Witwatersrand expanded these demands by linking decolonization with questions of access, affordability, and social justice in higher education. Not to be outdone, between mid-2015 to 2016, students at the University of Oxford called for the removal of yet another Rhodes statue – this one housed atop Oriel College – and demanded a critical reckoning with the university's imperial legacy. Together these interconnected campaigns demonstrated that the concerns raised at UCT resonated far beyond a statue, positioning RMF as the catalyst for a wider decolonial movement that challenged the symbolic, structural, and epistemic legacies of colonialism within universities across South Africa and beyond.

1.5. Research Problem Statement

Despite decades of scholarship on diversity and inclusion in higher education, institutions with entrenched colonial legacies, particularly in South Africa, continue to reproduce Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize pluriversal ways of knowing. The RMF movement would go on to expose not only the symbolic persistence of colonial power (e.g., monuments, statues, and institutional iconography) but also the deeper structural and epistemic inequalities embedded within university curricula, leadership, and knowledge production. While institutional responses have often taken the form of diversity initiatives and symbolic reforms, these interventions frequently fall short of addressing the underlying questions of epistemic justice.

Existing scholarship has examined the student movement, curricular transformation, and decolonization in higher education; however, there remains a limited critical interrogation of how universities engage (or fail to engage) in meaningful processes of reckoning with coloniality. This creates a significant gap in understanding the politics of institutional accountability: specifically, how universities negotiate, resist, or reframe demands for decolonization beyond mere symbolic change. Consequently, this study seeks to critically examine the RMF movement as a lens through which to analyze the limits of institutional transformation and the contested politics of reckoning in higher education.

1.6. Research Question(s) and Objectives

The central research question(s) of this study are:

RQ1: What does it mean to truly decolonize the University, specifically within an African context?

RQ2: What does the Rhodes Must Fall student movement have to teach us regarding the potential viability of decolonial/anticolonial politics both within and beyond the university?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The following review of the literature on decolonizing the university examines key debates surrounding the historical development of the African university, including the broader struggles over epistemic justice, radical imagination, and voice. By critically engaging these bodies of literature, this section establishes the theoretical and conceptual foundations for understanding RMF as

a decolonial movement that challenges the colonial structures of knowledge, power, and institutional culture within the university.

2.2. Decolonizing Universities of the Global South

2.2.1. Global Perspectives and Challenges

When assessed from a global perspective, the question of what it truly means to decolonize a university was advanced by Mbembe (2016), who argues that the modern university continues to universalize European thought while simultaneously erasing Indigenous epistemologies and perpetuating coloniality under the guise of neutrality. According to Mbembe, universities present themselves as neutral and universal spaces, yet this neutrality disguises the persistence of Eurocentric dominance. For Mbembe, the university has always functioned as both a gatekeeper and producer of knowledge, reinforcing hierarchies in which Western modes of thought are positioned as superior, objective, and universal, while local knowledges are dismissed as particular, backward, and irrelevant (p. 38). Mbembe's work reveals that coloniality is not a reminder of the past but rather an active structure in modern-day higher education, research priorities, and institutional cultures. Decolonizing the university, therefore, is not merely about adding diverse perspectives to an already existing framework, but about fundamentally rethinking the epistemic foundations of the academy: who defines legitimate knowledge, what forms of inquiry are valued, and how power circulates within knowledge production.

Building on this, Subedi (2013) emphasizes that decolonizing the curriculum goes beyond the inclusion of historically marginalized groups and voices - non-Western philosophies, local community knowledge, Indigenous knowledge systems, women and racialized populations - towards restructuring knowledge hierarchies that create the conditions for achieving epistemic justice. Subedi contends that universities must dismantle the hierarchical colonial structures that privilege Eurocentric knowledge over other alternative ways of knowing. In so doing, universities across both the Global North and Global South are challenged to critically reimagine their pedagogies, curricula, and educational practices in ways that are more inclusive to the student body.

Despite Subedi's transformative vision, Wheeldon and Sahay (2025) argue that contemporary universities often co-opt decolonial language through neoliberal practices that reduce transformation to measurable indicators of diversity while preserving structural exclusion. They describe this process as a "social contract breach" (p. 9), whereby universities fail to meaningfully address coloniality and injustices within their structures, cultures, and practices, despite society's expectation that they serve as a global public good that calls for equality. Through these and other forms of cooptation, decolonization risks becoming a performative institutional exercise rather than a substantive restructuring of university cultures, governance, curricula, and knowledge production.

It is precisely in response to these institutional limitations that la paperson's (2017) concept of the third university offers an important decolonial intervention. While Subedi (2013) focuses primarily on transforming the curriculum, paperson extends this discussion by asking how the university itself can be strategically reconfigured as a decolonizing institution. His vision embraces a pluriversal worldview that mobilizes students, faculty, administrators, and staff to ensure institutions of higher learning operate as decolonizing universities. paperson elucidates that any move towards a decolonized university must first begin with a critical engagement with colonialism, particularly with what he describes as

the “colonizing machine’s desire to settle, to self-sustain, to seduce, and to school” (p. 22). These logics are securely embedded in the institutional DNA of higher education, curricula, and leadership. As such, the third university paperson posits is inherently strategic: it already exists and it is continually assembling. Rather than representing a fully decolonized institution, the third university is best understood as a decolonizing project - one that remains unfinished and constantly in motion.

To carry out this work, paperson advances the provocative notion of “hotwiring” the university (p. 32) - an insurgent and tactical approach that involves repurposing existing settler colonial technologies that have for too long dominated the daily operations of higher education. For example, this may involve redesigning curricula to centre Indigenous epistemologies, redirecting research agendas to privilege African knowledge production, or reforming the university’s administration to allow for meaningful participation in decision-making amongst marginalized communities.

For paperson, rather than awaiting a processual transformation to occur, hotwiring allows for the decolonial work to be carried out by various actors already embedded in the university system (students, faculty members, administrative and non-teaching staff) - a community experimenting with the appropriate infrastructures needed to produce a third university capable of advancing pluriversal knowledge. Importantly, paperson further links the idea of assembling decolonization to a “multiscalar endeavour” as it requires attention to interconnected levels of action. By way of the following examples, paperson elucidates on both the kinds and forms of collective engagement that are needed to sustain a decolonizing university:

- a single project with a decolonizing aspect,
- a body of decolonizing works,
- a decolonizing production studio,
- a decolonizing industry,
- a network of decolonizing organisms, or
- a decolonizing university movement (p. 49).

In this spirit, student movements have emerged as important catalysts for change, with the RMF protests at the UCT demonstrating how symbolic acts of resistance can translate into actionable structural critique. Studies of RMF further affirm its global resonance, as the movement has sparked protests/actions at other universities, including Oxford, Stellenbosch, and the University of the Witwatersrand, among others, illustrating how student activism in the Global South can actively spur global conversations on decolonization (Ahmed, 2020; Daniel, 2021). These global perspectives underscore that decolonizing the university is not a one-size-fits-all project but a transnational struggle that must be rooted in local histories while engaging in planetary solidarities (Risam, 2022; Subedi, 2013).

2.3. The African University and the Struggle for Epistemic Justice

While the previous section showcases how decolonizing the university has come to represent growing global tensions, the African university has long stood at the crossroads of aspiration and contradiction. While envisioned as a space for liberation, it remains deeply entangled in colonial legacies that privilege Western ways of knowing. As shown in the scholarly literature,

there is an urgent need to rethink whose knowledge counts, whose voices are heard, and what decolonizing the African university truly entails. Postcolonial theorist Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) posits that the task at hand is to achieve epistemic freedom in Africa, that is, to develop the ability to think, theorize, and produce indigenous African epistemologies. He situates the African university as a key battleground in the struggles over epistemic freedom, highlighting the unfinished business of decolonization decades after political independence.

The struggle for epistemic freedom in African institutions goes well beyond mere academics and pedagogy; it is about reimagining and reclaiming intellectual sovereignty, reshaping institutions, and creating space(s) for African knowledge systems, histories, and experiences. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) further argues that epistemic freedom speaks to “cognitive justice” (p. 3) as it draws attention to questions of who possesses the authority to define legitimate knowledge and whose intellectual knowledge are recognized within the university. Achieving epistemic freedom therefore requires African universities to become more responsive to the socio-cultural and economic realities of the communities they serve, thereby positioning themselves as institutions that contribute to social justice and transformation.

Building on Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2018) research on epistemic freedom, Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019) affirm that African universities continue to reproduce what they refer to as an “epistemic injustice” (p. 591), whereby Eurocentric knowledge systems continue to dominate the production of knowledge. This dominance, they contend, marginalizes African intellectual thought and creates structural imbalances that situate African epistemologies as inferior or irrelevant. To address these imbalances, Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda propose three approaches to decolonizing the African university. First, the addition approach, seeks to diversify existing curricula by incorporating African epistemologies into predominantly Eurocentric frameworks without altering the fundamental structure of knowledge. Second, the rejection approach calls for a more radical “de-Westernization” of knowledge production by challenging the dominance of Eurocentric thought which may result in narrowness and rigidity in knowledge production (p. 589). Lastly, the re-centring approach, advocates repositioning African epistemologies, worldviews, theories, and cultural traditions as the primary framework of analysis (pp. 589-590). Unlike the addition approach, which supplements existing curricula, or the rejection approach, which seeks to dismantle Eurocentric dominance, the re-centring model reconstructs the university around African intellectual traditions while remaining open to dialogue with other knowledge systems. For this reason, Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda (2019) identify the re-centring approach as the most transformative pathway for achieving epistemic justice in African universities.

The pursuit of epistemic justice, however, extends beyond curriculum transformation and/or institutional reform, encompassing broader struggles over power, knowledge production, and social transformation. The question of who possesses the authority to define and legitimize knowledge also raises questions of belonging within the university. Nyamnjoh (2022) develops the concept of epistemic citizenship to examine these questions in the context of “post-Rhodes Must Fall South African universities.” Drawing on the interrelated notions of citizenship and belonging, Nyamnjoh conceptualizes epistemic citizenship as a way of examining the boundaries of Africanity within processes of decolonization and Africanization, particularly the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that shape who can legitimately claim belonging within the university’s epistemic community. Nyamnjoh assert that in

the post-RMF context, epistemic citizenship is particularly useful because decolonization does not simply involve incorporating African knowledge into existing university structures; it also raises contested questions about identity, representation, belonging, and who has the authority to determine what African university should envision. Nyamnjoh (2022), therefore, highlights the tensions that emerge when claims to Africanity intersect with race, nation, and indigeneity. For this study, epistemic citizenship provides a useful lens for understanding RMF students not merely as protesters challenging colonial symbols, but as actors contesting the terms of epistemic and institutional belonging. The student demands can therefore be illustrated as claims to participate in determining whose histories, identities, experiences, and knowledge are recognized within the university.

In “Failures and possibilities of epistemic justice,” Walker (2018) extends Ndofirepi and Gwaravanda’s (2019) discussion of epistemic justice in African universities by examining both its shortcomings and possibilities in higher education. Drawing on the legacy of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), an anti-apartheid movement led by activist Steve Biko, Walker offers her readers a springboard to understanding how and why failures of epistemic justice matter in democratic society, and specifically within higher education. When epistemic injustice occurs, it undermines not only an individual’s dignity, but also diminishes society at large (Walker, 2020). Importantly, Walker argues that higher education can be a space of transformation if African universities intentionally cultivate inclusive knowledge environments that value multiple epistemologies, such as incorporating African epistemology in curriculum and pedagogy, and deepening recognition of students’ lived experiences and participatory learning.

More recently, Mutongoza (2025) contends that the decolonization of African academia is a vital project for social justice that is intended to create a more just, inclusive, and equitable future for African scholars, students, and communities. Understanding epistemic justice for Mutongoza is a continuous critical reflection, action, and transformation process that requires an ongoing engagement with power, knowledge, and identity configurations. He emphasizes that epistemic justice cannot simply be about adding diverse knowledge systems but must also involve a structural reconfiguration of the university itself. This includes dismantling institutional barriers that privilege Eurocentric worldviews and actively creating conditions for African epistemologies to thrive within academic spaces.

African epistemologies are comprised of a variety of knowledge systems rooted in everyday life, oral traditions, and local worldviews. Etta and Offiong (2019) identify eleven different sources of knowledge in African epistemology: wholistic, intuition, perceptual, mystical, rational, ancestral, communal, ontology, oral tradition, individual and God’s knowledge (pp. 295-302). These sources of knowledge indicate richness and context-driven ways of knowing that are routinely marginalized in Western-centric academic systems. For example, Ubuntu philosophy, which translates to *I am because we are*, dominant in Southern Africa, emphasizes relationality, interconnectedness, and the ethical responsibility towards Indigenous peoples (Ikpeh & Awi 2025, p. 2). Similarly, the Ifá divination system of the Yoruba tribe – one of the three largest ethnic groups and languages in the Southwestern part of Nigeria, represents a body of both metaphysical and ethical knowledge that is conveyed orally through historical generations, which helps to guide decision-making and moral reasoning (Enaikele & Adeleke, 2025). Indigenous agricultural knowledge, such as the use of intercropping and soil fertility management practices

among the Maasai of East Africa or the Zulu of Southern Africa, reflects context-specific ecological understandings of the world developed over centuries. These knowledge systems reflect holistic, relational, and context-driven ways of knowing that continue to be marginalized in Western-centric systems.

Heleta (2016) offers a complementary perspective by focusing on South Africa, identifying the persistence of epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in higher education. He maintains that despite institutional reforms, universities remain deeply embedded in colonial histories that normalize exclusion. Heleta argues that dismantling epistemic violence requires more than surface-level changes – it demands a fundamental rethinking of the university’s structures, practices, and values. This involves validating African intellectual traditions, dismantling inherited hierarchies of knowledge, and advancing decolonization not just as rhetoric but as an enduring practice of institutional and epistemic transformation.

2.4. RMF as a Struggle for Voice

The preceding scholarship has shown what it takes to truly decolonize the African university by way of raising questions of epistemic justice, institutional transformation, and the legitimacy of African knowledge systems. The RMF movement brought these demands into public view by transforming longstanding critiques of coloniality into actionable collective student protest. To date, a growing body of scholarship has examined the RMF movement as a broader struggle over voice, identity, representation, and validity of knowledge production within higher education (Ahmed, 2019; Ahmed, 2020; Nyamnjoh, 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The movement has also generated extensive media attention across and beyond South Africa via print media, television broadcasting, social media, documentary film, and opinion pieces documenting the student-led protests and shaping public perception of the movement’s significance.

This widespread coverage transformed RMF from a student-led campus protest into a global debate regarding coloniality, institutional racism, and the future of decolonized higher education. Against this backdrop, news media (traditionally charged with the responsibility to serve as watchdogs and defenders of the public interest) have played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of RMF by amplifying student struggles and demands. Consonant with agenda-setting theory that stipulates that news media do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about (Cohen, 1963), the prominence given to the RMF movement across South African and international newspapers – including *Daily Maverick*, *UCT News*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, and *The New York Times* – as well as television broadcasters such as *BBC News*, *Al Jazeera*, and *SABC News*, online news platforms, documentary films, institutional press releases, and social media campaigns, suggest that news media not only captured the political stakes of the protests but also the emotional perspectives, struggles and demands associated with decolonizing the university. In so doing, news media contributed to framing RMF not simply as a dispute over the Rhodes statue but as a broader struggle over voice, visibility, institutional transformation, and epistemic justice both within and beyond higher education.

Ramaru (2017) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) consistently emphasize that RMF was never solely about the removal of the Rhodes’s statue. Rather, RMF is cast as challenging who has the authority to speak, whose histories are remembered, whose knowledge is legitimized, and whose experiences continue to be marginalized within the university and society at large. Ahmed (2020) demonstrates that the movement resonated transnationally, inspiring

RMF-Oxford and extending debates about epistemic disobedience beyond South Africa. Similarly, Andersen and Knudsen (2019) illustrate how the affective politics surrounding colonial structures shaped both the silencing and marginalization of student voices at UCT and the University of Oxford, respectively.

2.5. Radical Imagination and the Future of Decolonial Pedagogy

The scholarship reviewed thus far has established that to truly decolonize the university requires dismantling colonial systems of knowledge, achieving epistemic justice, and transforming institutional structures. Thus, decoloniality is an ongoing political framework of imagining alternative futures that move beyond colonial ways of knowing, teaching, and learning in higher education. Increasingly, scholars argue that the success of decoloniality depends not only on exposing the limitations of the existing university but also on cultivating the intellectual and political capacity to envision what a genuinely decolonized university might become. Here, radical imagination emerges as an important conceptual framework because it shifts attention from resistance alone to the creation of new educational possibilities.

Ruha Benjamin (2024) argues that imagination is not merely a creative exercise but a political practice that enables individuals and communities to envision more just social futures. Rather than accepting existing institutions as fixed or inevitable, Benjamin contends that imagination allows people to question inherited structures of power and collectively construct alternative possibilities. This understanding is particularly relevant to decolonization because it positions imagination as both a method of critique and a strategy for institutional transformation. Extending Benjamin's ideas, decolonizing the university requires not only identifying the persistence of coloniality but also imagining new forms of knowledge production, governance, pedagogy, and social relations that reflect pluriversal rather than Eurocentric ways of thinking.

The relationship between radical imagination and educational transformation is further developed in "Transformative Pedagogy for a Decolonial World," in which Fujino et al. (2018) describe knowledge as the "weapons of the weak" capable of shaping struggles over life and death, justice, resistance, and affirmation (p. 69). They argue that decolonial pedagogy must move beyond exposing colonial histories to cultivating educational practices grounded in critical historical consciousness, relational learning, and collective praxis. Their emphasis on praxis (learning through collective action and critical reflection) rejects passive models of knowledge transmission in favour of participatory forms of learning that empower students to imagine and rehearse alternative social and political futures (p. 91). In this regard, education becomes not simply a space for understanding colonialism but a site for actively constructing and imagining decolonial futures.

Other scholars similarly emphasize that radical imagination must become a central objective of contemporary education. He et al. (2021) insist that classrooms should deliberately cultivate imaginative capacities that make political possibilities conceivable and actionable for students. Likewise, Houlden and Veletsianos (2024) advance the importance of proposals for a new social contract for education, noting that imagination is a civic competency that enables the collective re-visioning of public goods, including how knowledge is organized and justified. Together, these scholars suggest that imagination is not peripheral to education but constitutes an essential pedagogical resource for challenging colonial assumptions and fostering transformative social change.

Elsewhere, Gandolfi (2024) reframes the discussion towards rethinking the future of education by urging the public to consider what a decolonialized educational curriculum could entail. In "A decolonial future for education and schools," she challenges the dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies that continue to shape knowledge production and pedagogical practices. In addition to the inclusion of diverse perspectives, Gandolfi (2024) argues that decolonial education requires a fundamental transformation of how knowledge, learning, and authority are conceptualized within educational institutions. To do so involves a redesigning of the curricula, reforming teaching and assessment practices, creating more inclusive institutional cultures, and re-evaluating colonial traditions that continue to shape higher education spaces.

East (2025) explores antiracist pedagogical approaches employed in higher education in the UK. The author provides a historical and critical corrective by pondering whether the UK is yet to and/or has entered a post-decolonial moment. East (2025) interrogates the limits and unintended setbacks of radical pedagogies in higher education, showing how periods of imaginative energy can be neutralized by managerial capture or by tokenistic curricular adjustments. East concludes that antiracist pedagogical approaches serve as a subtle reminder that imagination must be institutionally integrated and protected from co-optation if it is to initiate meaningful change. Embedded across the above scholarly contributions, two recurring claims emerge: (1) pedagogy must move beyond critique towards collective world-building (practical exercises, community partnerships, curricular replacement), and (2) imagination must be institutionally resourced (teacher training, policy changes, assessment rethinking) to survive beyond episodic activism.

3. Methodology, Theoretical Foundation, and Data Collection

3.1. Introduction

My thesis relied on a decolonial approach adopted to examine the RMF movement and politics of reckoning in higher education. This study adopted a Decolonial Critical Discourse Analysis (DCDA) methodology to do so. This chapter covered the methodological approach, explaining the systematic approach of the methodology, data collection, and method of analysis.

3.2. Methodology

Given this study's focus on decolonial politics in higher education, it adopts a critical discourse analysis from a decolonial perspective as its methodological approach, otherwise known as decolonial critical discourse analysis (DCDA). When defining what critical discourse analysis from a decolonial perspective entails, DeCuir (2025) offers a clear definition that helps describe the meaning, process, and significance of critical decolonization:

Critical decolonization is a theoretical process that seeks to dismantle colonial and Western constructions of universal knowledge domain and problematize the absence of alternate epistemologies that shape knowledge production and socio-cultural discourse. (p. 466)

Maniglio and Barboza da Silva (2020) suggest that this method is about questioning the "historically determined reciprocity" of coloniality, imperialism, modernity, power structures, language, and

knowledge (p. 16). In other words, DCDA seeks to uncover how structural systems reinforce one another. For de Melo Resende (2018), DCDA is both analytical and emancipatory, as it seeks to disrupt colonial structures in the interests of fostering new decolonized ways of thinking and being.

To date, a substantial body of research has utilized the decolonial critical discourse analysis methodology. In “Political discourse analysis: a decolonial approach,” Ahmed (2021) draws attention to the significance of incorporating decolonial methodologies in analyzing political discourse in a post-colonial world, particularly in West-Africa, Nigeria. By analyzing the former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan’s electoral speech, Ahmed adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines decolonial theory, political discourse analysis, and a legitimization model to uncover how hegemonic power structures are linguistically sustained. Ahmed’s analysis illustrates how neoliberal ideas of progress constitute new expressions of coloniality in contemporary Nigerian governance and political communication.

Ferreira-Marante and Veiga-Seijo (2023) apply critical discourse analysis from a decolonial feminist perspective to examine the discourse, language, and meanings of the representation of the reduced working hours for women employed by a Galician newspaper. Their findings reveal that media narratives often reproduce gendered and colonial power structures that frame women’s labour within neoliberal ideals of productivity and care rather than as a site of social justice. By uncovering how these discourses perpetuate unequal gender relations and marginalize non-hegemonic ways of understanding work, Ferreira-Marante and Veiga-Seijo (2023) demonstrate how decolonial feminist CDA exposes the intersections of patriarchy and capitalism in the workspace.

Antiracist researcher Amaarah DeCuir (2025) applies critical decolonial discourse analysis to examine how a local school district’s secular knowledge impacts Muslim Americans, seeking to understand how the community introduces Islamic discourse as a faith-based knowledge system. DeCuir’s findings reveal that secular educational leadership practices often reproduce epistemic systems that marginalize non-Western and faith-based knowledge, thereby sustaining the coloniality of knowledge within educational spaces. Importantly, DeCuir’s (2025) analysis also highlights acts of epistemic resistance, instances where Muslim community members negotiate, reinterpret, and assert alternative epistemologies to reclaim agency and reimagine inclusive educational leadership grounded in decolonial ethics. DeCuir’s use of DCDA enables the examination of both the language used to construct/deconstruct colonial power and the lived experiences shaping the political demands for accountability and transformation within higher education.

3.3. Data Collection and Sample

The data for this research is the RMF movement, which occurred in 2015 at UCT in South Africa. The RMF movement serves as a rich empirical site because it illuminates the intersections that reunite decolonial discourse, curriculum pedagogy, student activism, and institutional transformation in postcolonial higher education. This study relies on available data generated pre- and post- RMF movement activities (March 9, 2015 – December 20, 2017), which includes:

3.3.1. Speeches and Institutional Statements:

This data set features public statements, press releases, administrators’ speeches, and responses to student demands.

These documents represent institutional discourse, revealing how power, accountability, and colonial legacies are framed, negotiated, or resisted in formal academic spaces. Examples include: The UCT RMF Mission Statement (2015), Chumani Maxwele: The Solitary Protest That Gave Birth To #RhodesMustFall (2015), and UCT Academics Union statement on #RhodesMustFall (April 1, 2015).

3.3.2. Media Coverage:

This data set features various local, national, and global media outlets, including *The Guardian*, *BBC News*, *UCT News*, *New Internationalist*, and *Al Jazeera*, among others, news media that covered the intent of the movement, reported on the campaigns and debates, provided internal perspectives from the community, and featured numerous activities related to the call for a decolonized curriculum. Representative examples include: “The birth of Rhodes Must Fall” (*The Guardian*, November 18 2015); “Rhodes statue removed in Cape Town as crowd celebrates” (*BBC News*, April 9 2015); “How Rhodes Must Fall amplified calls to decolonize” (*New Internationalist*, August 21 2023); and “Who are the activists behind the #RhodesMustFall movement?” (*Al Jazeera*, November 21 2018).

3.3.3. Visual and Symbolic Materials:

Visual elements, including banners with images, photographs of protests, and the Rhodes statue itself, are framed as texts that communicate ideas boldly to the public. These materials embody the various forms of resistance against colonialism that would materialize throughout the protests. Some of these materials are not limited to photographs of Chumani Maxwele’s symbolic protest on March 9 2015, images documenting the removal of the Rhodes statue on 9 April 2015, Sethembile Msebene’s performance *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell*, in which the artist stood on a plinth with outstretched wings as the statue was removed, protest banners bearing slogans such as “Rhodes Must Fall,” “Decolonize our Education,” and “Take it down,” as well as photographs of campus occupations and student demonstrations.

3.3.4. Peer-reviewed Journal Articles and Books:

This comprises scholarly works from decolonial thinkers across both local and global contexts. These materials draw on academic discussions surrounding the RMF movement, the broader concept of decolonization, worldviews emerging from the Global South, and the ongoing reckoning across higher education. The following sources collectively provide an engaging and critical perspective that informs and contextualizes the study’s exploration of decolonial thought and practice: Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s “Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization” (2018), Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancioğlu’s “Decolonising the University” (2018), Ahmed’s “The Rise of Fallism: #RhodesMustFall and the Movement to Decolonize the University” (2019), Daniel’s “From Black Pain to Rhodes Must Fall” (2021), Nyamnjoh’s “Decolonisation, Africanisation, and Epistemic Citizenship in Post-Rhodes Must Fall South African Universities” (2022), and Chantiluke, Kwoba, and Nkopo’s *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (2025).

3.4. Theoretical Framework

When theorizing the concepts of decolonization and decoloniality, it is imperative to distinguish between the two terms, as they are closely related but conceptually different. Decolonization refers to a continued and unfinished project of deconstructing colonial ideologies that perpetuate the status quo, Indigenous knowledge and approaches, problematize dominant discourses, and address

unbalanced power dynamics. Decolonization necessitates transforming how worldviews are understood by critically examining the assumptions, misconceptions, and prejudice that shape the knowledge we hold. While decolonization marked the formal end of coloniality across the Global South, Decolonial thinkers argue that the underlying structures of colonial domination continue to persist beyond political independence. It is within this context that decoloniality has emerged as a critical analytical framework.

Building on the foundational work of sociologist Anibal Quijano, philosopher Walter Dignolo, Ramón Grosfoguel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith, among others, decoloniality, as defined by Maldonado-Torres (2017) is a family of thought that identifies coloniality as a foundational problem affecting key players, including knowledge systems, culture, and identity in the contemporary world. Therefore, decoloniality is an ongoing process of reclaiming lost items, exposing and challenging the colonial structures embedded within universities. Although the RMF movement emerged within a post-apartheid South Africa that had formally undergone the decolonization process, the movement elucidates that these hidden colonial structures continue to shape university curricula, institutional cultures, administration, and knowledge production. Hence, this research is situated within the theoretical framework of decoloniality, drawing primarily on Dignolo (2011) and Macgilchrist (2014) to examine how institutional discourse in higher education sustains colonial hierarchies of knowing and identity.

The theory of decoloniality in this research enables a critical exploration of the RMF movement as an expression of what Dignolo (2011) calls “epistemic disobedience” (p. 45) - a conscious refusal to accept the dominance of Western knowledge systems and an insistence on the value of other ways of knowing, particularly those emerging from the Global South. The removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the UCT, and the broader debates that followed, are interpreted here as symbolic acts of epistemic and institutional decolonization. Through a decolonial lens, these actions are seen not merely as protests against historical figures but as challenges to the epistemic foundations of the university itself.

The theory of decoloniality provides a basis for understanding the politics of reckoning in higher education, the contested processes through which institutions confront their colonial legacies, negotiate accountability, and imagine alternative futures. For the purposes of this study, decoloniality serves as an essential frame for examining how RMF activists’ demands for recognition, representation, and reform constitute a broader struggle for ontological liberation and epistemic justice. This theoretical frame also meshes well with Dignolo’s (2018) vision of pluriversal knowledge production, which values multiple ways of knowing rather than focusing on a single universal standard set by Westerners. By situating the RMF movement within global decolonial thought, this study shows how student activism delivers compelling locally- and globally- informed critiques of coloniality in academia, from South Africa, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and beyond.

Lastly, the theory of decoloniality serves as an important framework for interpreting discourse, symbols, and institutional practices. The theory aligns with the study’s objectives and thesis statement, which explore how universities, shaped by colonial powers of the past, are now being reimagined through resistance movements like RMF. This theoretical foundation has enabled this study to move beyond basic analyses of protest towards engaging more deeply with the knowledge, realities, and experiences of decolonial politics in higher education.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Introduction

The data analysis herein adopts a thematic narrative approach, enabling a systematic identification and interpretation of recurring themes across the narratives associated with the RMF movement. Thematic analysis provides a structured yet flexible method for organizing these stories around conceptual categories. This flexibility is particularly important given the heterogeneity of the data, which includes interviews, press releases, press conferences, and peer-reviewed journal articles. Rather than treating these sources as discrete, the analysis approaches them as interconnected narrative spaces that collectively inform the movement’s public and internal discourses. Through close iterative reading, the analysis traces how particular themes emerge, evolve, and intersect both during and after the RMF movement.

A comprehensive familiarization process was undertaken to gain an in-depth understanding of the themes that emerged from the data (2015 – 2025) during the research’s preliminary phase. This would involve in-depth reading of peer-reviewed journal articles, editorials, books, as well as active engagement with broadcast interviews, to identify salient narrative patterns, contradictions, silences, and points of emphasis. This stage is critical for situating individual texts within the broader socio-political and historical context of post-apartheid South Africa and the global decolonial movement. In what follows, attention is paid not only to what was said about the removal of the Rhodes statue, but also to the much broader efforts to decolonize the university, staff, language, curricula, and environment.

4.2. Ideological Pillars of Rhodes Must Fall

Based on the data generated, the following themes were deductively formulated based on the broader RMF political movement - Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, Black Radical Feminism, Epistemic Disobedience, and Fanonism - as the core ideological pillars that shaped the students’ critique of UCT as a colonial institution. As these themes gained traction during the 2015 RMF movement, they served as a repetitive reminder by representing the longstanding intellectual, political, and emancipatory traditions that have historically informed anti-colonial struggles across Africa and the African diaspora. The identification of these themes was guided by sustained engagement with decolonial scholarship and empirical materials examined in this study, including media interviews (Newspapers and Broadcast TV), Op-eds, student petitions, RMF mission statement, documentaries, and visual protest materials.

Through an iterative analysis of these sources, the five themes emerged as recurring discursive frameworks (Ahmed, 2019; Cabe, 2023; Chowdhury, 2021; Kessi, 2025; Ramaru, 2017; Naicker, 2026) through which RMF activists articulated critiques of coloniality at UCT. Pan-Africanism was as a call for an African-centred university that recognized African histories, experiences, and Indigenous knowledge. Drawing from the works of Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), on the other hand, foregrounded the significance of Black identity, dignity, and psychological liberation. Fanonism reflects on Frantz Fanon’s theorization of decolonization as a two-way framework of both a political and epistemic struggle. The theme of epistemic disobedience was generated from RMF’s sustained critique of Eurocentric knowledge systems and its demands for the transformation of university curricula, research practices, and institutional knowledge production. These demands aligned with broader decolonial scholarship that challenges the

ongoing dominance of colonial epistemologies within institutions of knowledge. Finally, with the intervention of Black women activists, Black Radical Feminism was established to challenge the dominant patriarchal structures and gender exclusions, noting that decolonization must also account for intersecting forms of oppression.

Together, the five themes represent interconnected ideological pillars through which fallists challenged the colonial foundations of the university. The above five themes reveal the ways in which the student movement mobilized historical anti-colonial, Black liberation, and feminist politics to contest the persistence of colonial legacies within the university.

Deductive thematic coding has enabled the analysis to remain theoretically grounded while ensuring alignment with the study's conceptual framework. At the same time, the analytical process remains open to refinement, enabling themes to be rearticulated, expanded, or nuanced as they are tested against the scholarly materials. To conclude, this study's core themes materialized via a narrative approach that animates a broader understanding of how the RMF movement was able to construct collective identity, articulate grievances, frame institutional power, and imagine alternative futures for the university. A thorough overview of the surveyed data will assist in answering this study's primary research question(s).

4.2.1. Theme 1: Pan-Africanism

Although the RMF movement emerged as a call for the removal of the Rhodes statue, the movement expanded into a broader call for the Africanization of the university. Students challenged the Eurocentric curriculum, institutional culture, and symbolic landscape of UCT, arguing that genuine transformation required centring African histories, knowledges, and identities. These demands reflect a distinctly Pan-African orientation that connected the struggle at UCT to wider histories of colonialism, racial oppression, and Black liberation across the African continent and its diaspora.

Pan-Africanism represents more than just a shared identity among people of African descent; it embodies a collective consciousness shaped by common histories and ongoing struggles against oppression, neo-colonialism, slavery, racism, and dispossession (Falola & Essien, 2013). Pan-Africanism is perhaps best characterized as the "common destiny and processes for forming cross-cultural solidarity and unity" across political, historical, and economic spheres (Falola & Essien, 2013); it also represents a worldwide movement and ideology aimed at encouraging and strengthening bonds between Indigenous and diaspora ethnic groups of African descent (Kumssa, 2022).

The Pan-African movement is said to have its origins in the struggles of sub-Saharan Africans against enslavement and colonization, who have witnessed and encountered firsthand the kidnapping, purchase, transportation, and enslavement of Africans. The movement would eventually become the catalyst for the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), founded on May 25, 1963, in Addis Ababa, to foster liberation and unity among Africans worldwide (Ediagbonya, 2023).

The spirit of solidarity among African societies has also been powerfully demonstrated through culture, language, music, literature, and visual arts. Pan-Africanism was not just a geopolitical project and/or an ideology for liberating and uniting Africa(ns) (Adetula, RedieBeeketeab, Laakso, & Levin, 2020), it also stood as a cultural and artistic movement through which African artists mobilized resistance, consciousness, and unity. In this regard, Nigerian musician, activist, and founder of the Afrobeat music

movement, Olufela 'Fela' Anikulapo-Kuti (alias Abami Eda), the mysterious one, stands out as one of the most influential cultural proponents of Pan-Africanism in the post-colonial era (1960s - onwards). Through Afrobeat, Fela became the voice of the masses by fusing indigenous African rhythms with jazz and funk to openly criticize and confront the "anomie of different military regimes" in Nigeria (Orogun, 2024, p. 121), Western domination, and corrupt African leaders. This Pan-African vision was emblemized in "Viva Nigeria" (1969), a song in which Fela foregrounds African dignity, collective struggle, and resistance, placing Africa(ns) at the forefront as a unified entity. Despite differences in "tongue and tribe" (Kuti, 2024), Fela emphasizes that Africans share a collective identity and common struggle, declaring that "we are all Africans" (Kuti, 2024). His call for Africans to "join hands" together (Kuti, 2024) reflects a Pan-African commitment to solidarity, unity, and a collective liberation.

Fela's Pan-African consciousness was shaped by his encounters with Black Power activists in the United States. Orogun (2024) notes that it is imperative to state that Fela was a product of transgenerational influence of African philosophers including Ghanaian politician and revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah, whom he frequently referred to as a symbol of African self-determination. Beyond Fela, other notable artists across Africa similarly employed art as a vehicle for Pan-African resistance and liberation. In South Africa, civil rights activist and songwriter Miriam Makeba, also known as Mama Afrika, utilized her global platform to expose the brutality of apartheid South Africa, framing the struggle as a continental and diasporic concern rather than a national one (Pareles, 2008). In the Caribbean and the diaspora, figures such as Jamaican songwriter and guitarist Robert Nesta Marley, known as Bob Marley, popularized Pan-African thought through Rastafarian philosophy, which drew heavily on the legacy of Marcus Garvey and the symbolic significance of Ethiopia under Haile Selassie (Pereira, 2021). Marley's music emphasized African redemption, Black liberation, and transnational solidarity, resonating deeply with audiences across Africa and the diaspora.

Prior to colonialism, Africans enjoyed Pan-African unity premised on indigenous values, anticorruption, anti-exploitation, anti-racial injustice, and anti-colonialism, which sought to promote sovereignty, autonomy, independence, solidarity, liberation, cultural consciousness, and African ownership of land and resources (Kangira & Nhemachena, 2021). Kangira and Nhemachena (2021) contend that one of the biggest challenges facing African Liberation movements in promoting Pan-Africanism has been the lack of full sovereignty over land and resources, claiming that the majority of Africans (domestic and diaspora) have fallen "prey" to Eurocentrism, which has ultimately deprived Africans access and domination over their resources and land (p. 244).

Thus, the Rhodes Must Fall movement's adoption of Pan-Africanism positioned the movement beyond a mere protest against racial inequality at UCT, connecting its demands for transformation to a broader transnational struggle against coloniality. By linking decolonial politics with global Black resistance, the movement challenged Eurocentric worldviews, advocated for epistemic justice, and sought to reclaim African histories and knowledge systems within higher education. RMF can be seen as explicitly responding to the pervasive inequality at home across South African universities, all the while participating in a wider Pan-African project that connected demands for a decolonized education, the removal of colonial monuments, and a pursuit of collective liberation.

Against this backdrop lies the central question of this research project: *what does it mean to truly decolonize the university, specifically within an African context?* The term Pan-Africanism was explicitly referenced in an official RMF document, “The Bremner Occupation Statement,” published on the RMF’s official Facebook account two days prior to the release of the RMF mission statement on March 23, 2015 (Ahmed, 2019). Its inclusion is significant because it demonstrates that RMF understood decolonial politics as a struggle against institutional racism and African liberation at UCT. Although the theme of Pan-Africanism was not specified in the RMF mission statement, its principles were showcased within the movement’s long-term goals. Among the 28 demands articulated (see Table 1), the fifth goal reflected a deeper Pan-African commitment to transforming knowledge production by calling on UCT to “implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern,” where African discourses serve as the point of departure and Western traditions are examined in relation to African experiences (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015). By prioritizing African histories, languages, and methodologies, RMF envisioned a third university where African knowledge systems were treated as foundational rather than peripheral. Thus, Pan-Africanism functioned both as a critique of colonial knowledge structures and as a future-oriented trajectory for RMF’s decolonial project, seeking to transform universities into spaces grounded in African epistemologies, collective liberation, and intellectual sovereignty.

Ahmed (2019) points out that the Bremner occupation statement came after UCT students, student representative council (SRC), staff, black feminists, and queer activists/protestors fully occupied the Bremner building (effectively renaming it “Azania House”) – an administrative building that housed RMF activists, with the aim of disrupting management’s operations and pressuring them to accept their demands. Black feminist advocate Kealeboga Ramaru (2017) asserts that the occupation of the Bremner building marked an “important point for the movement”, students, Black queer, and Black feminists. In an interview conducted by Daniel (2021), a UCT student offers insight as to why the Bremner building was perceived as a strategic and decolonial space of power, prompting an urgent need to rename the building to Azania House:

Azania is an original name of South Africa, which is pan-Africanist. It comes from a pan-Africanist tradition. You can trace it from Steve Biko. Azania is a name for free liberated space for black people. We said that Bremner house must be changed to Azania because it is a place for black people to speak about their pain and to reengineer the society. And we start with the University of Cape Town. And decolonization becomes a relevant point of departure. (p. 22)

Additionally, Swinger (2018) affirms that the Bremner building is celebrated as a landmark in UCT’s history. It was the site of the 1968 UCT sit-in that involved 600 students protesting the rescinding of black scholar Archie Mafeje’s appointment as senior lecturer; in 2015, it would serve as a central location for the RMF and Fess Must Fall movements, respectively.

The Bremner occupation statement revealed that the fallists occupied the Bremner building for a period of three weeks, which set in motion their demands to decolonize the university and their plans to initiate a program of intensive political education guided by a group of Black lecturers from UCT; the latter initiative would include individuals and groups from other South African



Figure 4. UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price addresses students outside the Bremner Building during the three-week occupation in March 2015

Photograph by S. Kelly, 2016, GroundUp.

Universities, an intervention designed to examine and challenge the neo-colonial narratives about Africa (Ahmed, 2019; Ramaru, 2017). Ramaru observes that the three-week occupation of the building gave activists a sense of “what a decolonial project would be like” – how to organize a space for Black academics to share knowledge and conduct a series of seminars on subjects including “Black Consciousness, Femininities and Masculinities, Queerness, and so forth” (Ramaru, 2017, p. 92).

The latter goal is consonant with Mignolo’s (2011) theory of epistemic disobedience, of having to delink from Western Eurocentric knowledge and of privileging African indigenous ideas, language, and culture. Nyamnjoh (2022) recalls that Pan-Africanism provides an ideological basis that calls into question the Africanness of South African universities, observing that the thought of Africanity offers a baseline for reimagining institutional identity, accentuating an Africanization discourse that has long existed within South African universities. Yet, despite decades of such calls, the contemporary African university remains largely structured around Euro-Western epistemological foundations.

Rather than fundamentally transforming how knowledge is produced, validated, and taught, Africanization has often been absorbed into the broader “neoliberal imperative of internationalization,” wherein universities prioritize international recruitment, global partnerships, and institutional competitiveness without confronting the colonial foundations of knowledge production (Nyamnjoh, 2022, p. 97). As Mbembe (2016), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a), and Subedi (2013) similarly contend, African universities continue to privilege Eurocentric epistemologies over African grassroots knowledge(s), which in turn reproduces epistemic injustice under the guise of neutrality, diversity, and internationalization. It is precisely these enduring colonial conditions that the RMF movement has sought to challenge. The student-movement embrace of Pan-Africanism thus emerged not merely as an ideological commitment, but as an immediate political and epistemic response to the ongoing marginalization of African knowledge within higher education.

Indeed, the idea of internationalism led RMF students to call for decolonized education – African-centred and global Black solidarity. The RMF movement advances a more substantive Pan-African critique by rejecting Africanization that operates only at

the level of representation or institutional branding. Instead, RMF insists that African-centred education must involve a fundamental reconfiguration of how knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated within the university.

Drawing on Pan-African ideals, students, notably but not limited to Maxwele Chumani, Ramabina Mahapa, Athabile Nonxuba, to mention but a few (Makoni, 2015), challenge the persistence of Eurocentric epistemic hierarchies, arguing that genuine global Black solidarity cannot be achieved through neoliberal forms of internationalization that leave colonial curricula and pedagogies intact. This is thoroughly evident in student council president Ramabina Mahapa's insistence that "transformation should be felt in all aspects of the university, from the curriculum to the diversity of students, staff and to the symbolism it reflects" (Makoni, 2015, para. 22). Mahapa's statement demonstrates that Pan-Africanism, for RMF, extends beyond curriculum reform to encompass institutional governance, representation, and the symbolic environment of the university. This commitment to African-centred transformation was echoed by RMF activist Alax Hotz, who argued that universities in Africa must "take African academics and African knowledge systems seriously," reflecting on the movement as "a very important moment for his own political awakening and for many other young people in the country who had become disillusioned with the acceptance of the status quo" (Cabe, 2023). Hotz's reflection shows how RMF's Pan-African vision fostered a renewed political consciousness among students by encouraging them to question the ongoing dominance of Eurocentric knowledge.

Students from the University of Stellenbosch who had joined the RMF movement in solidarity were greatly inspired by the call to decolonize the university. Stellenbosch student Sikhulekile Duma recalls that the movement gave students "the courage to push for transformation" within an institution where many Black students were made to feel that they "did not belong" and where language (Afrikaans) functions as "a tool of exclusion in the residences and classrooms" (Cabe, 2023). Duma's testimony demonstrates that RMF's Pan-African ideals resonated across South African universities, inspiring students to tackle issues of racialized violence and to advocate for African-centred forms of belonging, knowledge, and transformation.

As I have argued above, RMF reframes Pan-Africanism as an epistemic and political goal that links local struggles within South African universities to broader transnational Black resistance, while demanding the centring of African intellectual traditions, histories, and ways of knowing as foundational rather than supplementary to higher education. Furthermore, Pan-Africanism within RMF exposes the limits of performative institutional reforms that adopt superficial diversity measures without addressing deeper structural inequalities. Through their activism, students demonstrate that true decolonization requires reclaiming authority over knowledge production and reshaping institutional cultures to reflect African perspectives and values. In this way, Pan-Africanism serves as a critical bridge between historical anti-colonial struggles and contemporary efforts to reimagine higher education as a space of liberation, justice, and collective empowerment for Africanity. However, the students' engagement with liberation politics reveals that struggles against coloniality extends beyond transformation. The movement's Black feminist interventions highlight the need to examine how gender, sexuality, and other intersecting forms of oppression have shaped experiences of exclusion at UCT.

4.2.2. Theme 2: Black Radical Feminism & the Politics of Intersectionality

Black Radical Feminism would also materialize as an important extension of RMF's decolonial politics by challenging the assumption that liberation could be achieved solely through an understanding of Black identity. In an opinion piece in the *Mail & Guardian Newspaper* by a fourth-year student of gender and transformation, Mbalenhle 'Mbali' Matandela (2015a) speaks of her involvement in the RMF movement in these terms: "We know how easily patriarchy can dominate any context, even protests about equal rights and we were not going to let only men lead the movement or let our voices be drowned out." In the same vein, Black African feminist and RMF spokesperson Kealeboga Ramaru (2017) affirms that the RMF movement provided a platform for Black intersectional feminists to be recognized while breaking "the cycle of history silencing their voices" (p. 91).

Ramaru (2017) adds that the community of Black feminists (women and queer activists) were instrumental in shaping the RMF movement, thereby creating a space for Black people to reimagine what a decolonized university means. Furthermore, the RMF mission statement corroborates this notion, stating that "while this movement emerged as a response to racism at UCT, we recognize that experiences of oppression on this campus are intersectional and we aim to adopt an approach that is cognizant of this going forward" (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015). Ramaru (2017) notes that although the Black feminist community was unable to reach a consensus on strategies for decolonization, they agreed that employing Crenshaw's intersectionality framework would provide much needed insight into the process of decolonizing the university, curriculum, and society.

The term 'intersectionality', as formulated by civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), first appeared in an academic journal article titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," which analyses how U.S. courts interpret and portray the stories of Black women plaintiffs in America. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework is a "Black feminist criticism" (p. 139) of treating race and gender as mutually exclusive, resulting in the erasure of black women's experiences. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates how anti-discrimination law and feminist theory depend on a "single-axis framework" (p. 139), arguing that Black American women are often theoretically invisible because the oppression they face cannot be fully understood through race and/or gender alone.

Crenshaw's groundbreaking article introduced intersectionality as a tool for analyzing how various systems of oppression, including race, gender, class, age, sexual preference, and physical ability, operate both independently and in interconnected ways. Apart from challenging patriarchal structures, intersectionality also challenges white feminism, which privileges the experiences of white, middle-class women while silencing the voices of women of colour (Black, Asian, Latina). By recognizing the experiences of "Black women as the starting point" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140), Ahmed (2019) expounds on intersectionality as an overlap of oppression that creates unique forms of discrimination that cannot be understood through either race or gender alone. In the words of Matandela (2015b):

Intersectionality is a way of understanding the experiences of people, thus becoming a tool for the people. Although it is a political tool for understanding how personal experience is shaped by institutions that give certain people privileges and exclude others; the language that we have used to express this excludes many people ... the question then becomes, how can intersectionality be for everyone without using the political language that excludes people? (p. 16)

Matandela's question highlights an important tension within intersectionality. While it provides a critical framework for understanding how systems of power shape lived experience, the political language through which intersectionality is articulated may become inaccessible. In response to Matandela's question, Daniel (2021) explains that when applying intersectionality to social movement studies, it is important to differentiate it as: 1) a movement's demand (collective action frame), 2) a tool of practice (intersectional activism), and/or 3) an analytical perspective (p. 15). In the case of RMF, intersectionality operates across all three dimensions. As a collective demand, intersectionality would provide RMF with a broader and clearer understanding that decolonizing the university begins with the people (students, staff, and SRC), before challenging and ridding the university of its "inner Cecil John Rhodes" (Ramaru, 2017, p. 91). As they would go on to argue, we must have "certain oppressions and certain privileges and this must inform our organizing so that we do not silence groups among us, and no one should have to choose between their struggles" (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

This positioning reshapes the meaning of decolonization. It unveils decolonization not as a "buzzword" (Ramaru, 2017, p. 92) but as a way of life that requires constant reflection, accountability, and the transformation of institutions to put a stop to the multiple forms of oppression and violence embedded within them. As observed by Ramaru (2017) and Ahmed (2021), students would utilize intersectionality as a collective demand to formulate, understand, and interpret their struggles in the fight for decolonization, and to lay bare the overlapping forms of their oppression. Intersectionality as a collective frame was deployed by UCT students to overcome existing oppressions and structural racism.

Intersectionality as an action framework would assist the movement in articulating its political ambition to decolonize the university and to overcome patriarchal structures. Within the RMF movement, intersectionality reinforced how solidarity was formed, organized, and practiced. The main goal of intersectional activism is to create a space where "positive experiences could be collected" (Daniel, 2021, p. 23) and where experiences of discrimination can be addressed. Daniel (2021) describes it as a healing process for students and members of the UCT community engaged in the fight for justice. The first use of intersectionality as a tool for activism occurred at the March 20th occupation of the Bremner building.

The three-week occupation of the Bremner building provided the UCT students, womxn, and queer activists a decolonial space for reflection. This moment proved foundational in the creation of the Intersectional Audit Committee (IAC). The formation of the IAC by feminist and queer activists represented a recommitment to the principles of the RMF movement by challenging patriarchy and ensuring a substantive representation of women in areas such as activism, media/press appearances, political education, and administration (Matandela, 2017; Ramaru, 2017).

Another goal of intersectional activism was to challenge the heteronormative culture within the administration and university. Rather than allowing leadership and decision-making to be solely dominated by men, Ahmed (2017) suggests that the decision to include intersectionality as the movement's second pillar represents another form of epistemic disobedience, one that is aimed directly at the RMF movement rather than at the university itself. Black radical feminists within RMF appear to have de-linked from the patriarchal roots embedded in Black Consciousness while supporting the importance of Black identity.

While Black radical feminists engaged in a process of de-linking from UCT's Eurocentric knowledge systems, they also challenged the ways in which coloniality intersected with gendered and racialized forms of oppression within the university and the broader Black liberation struggle. For Ramaru (2017), Black feminist interventions confronted the reproduction of racial harassment, intimidation, "sexual assault, sexual harassment, and Black heterosexual maleness" within BC politics (p. 95). These critiques emphasized that decolonization could not be achieved without addressing the intersecting experiences of Black women and queer individuals within the movement itself.

Sethembile Msezane's artistic intervention during the RMF protests mobilizes this intersectional approach to decolonization. As one Zulu-speaking performance artist and student recalls, Msezane stood on the plinth in front of the Rhodes statue with her face obscured by a traditional beaded veil, wearing a black leotard and stiletto heels, while carrying Chapungu, the sacred Zimbabwean bateleur eagle (Rahimi, 2024).

Through this performance, Msezane challenges the symbolic power of colonial monuments while centering Black women's visibility and agency within conversations about institutional transformation. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Msezane describes the physical and emotional struggle for a transformative university:

Stood there for four hours. My feet were blue and i had a heat stroke. It felt like a new beginning. I'm not sure that we need statues at all - it's a colonialist thing, like marking territory. My work is a response, to get people to look at the landscape with a different eye. People haven't forgiven or forgotten; they're still harbouring hatred. That's why the statue needed to fall. It fostered the kind of thinking that is dangerous to a country in healing. (Msezane, 2015)

Msezane's heroic performance serves as a reminder to the UCT community and beyond that the true ideology of decolonization as political praxis entails liberation from coloniality, racism, oppression, and discrimination. Decolonization without intersectionality is like a treasure thrown into the ocean. From an analytical perspective, intersectionality makes it possible to view how social categories of various kinds took shape during the RMF protests. Intersectionality assisted in making sense of the movement beyond what was visible on the surface – the removal of the statue. In other words, intersectionality as a lens advances the question of decolonization for whom, by whom, and at whose cost? While the RMF movement was first framed as the "beginning of the decolonisation of the university" and as the dismantling of existing power structures, conflicts such as violence, discrimination, patriarchal domination, and race-, gender-, and

class- based frictions arose throughout the movement (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

As the RMF movement expanded, disputes over leadership and voice were often played out through gender politics with feminist interventions being dismissed as hostile or overly emotional, while women and queer activists remained vulnerable to marginalization (Ramaru, 2017). RMF through an intersectional lens showcases how power operates in a decolonial movement, specifically via the social categories capable of shaping or instrumentalizing how women and queer bodies are treated, heard, and protected. Daniel (2021) notes that conflicts about gender shaped both RMF's politics and internal management and organization. In that sense, gender was a driving force that sharpened the movement's demands, awakened its understanding of oppression, and insisted that a decolonized university must be anti-patriarchal and anti-racist.

4.2.3. Theme 3: Black Consciousness (BC)

4.2.3.1. The Black Consciousness Movement: Steve Biko and Rhodes Must Fall

Having demonstrated how Black Radical Feminism expanded RMF's critique of coloniality to include gender and sexuality, the discussion now turns to Black Consciousness, another foundational intellectual framework that shaped the movement through the notion of Black identity. It is unsurprising that BC thought should figure in the discourse of institutional racism/reform, the enduring legacies of colonialism, emancipation, struggles for freedom, transformation, and systemic inequality in education and society. In portraying the post-apartheid university, specifically UCT as a backdrop that continues to marginalize black people in both lived realities and underlying beliefs, the RMF students utilize the term 'Black pain' to express the emotional exclusion and psychological trauma caused by whiteness. Thus, the influence of BC on Black people becomes evident in its emphasis on self-definition, racial solidarity, and the decolonization of high education (Nyamnjoh, 2022; Smith & Lester, 2022).

At the root of this struggle lies the dehumanization of Black people at UCT, violence targeted only against Blacks by a system that privileges Eurocentrism. For this reason, it was essential that the movement be led by Black voices and grounded in Black experiences and pain that have long been ignored and silenced. Through this, Black Consciousness aims to inspire a newfound pride in the Black community's identity, efforts, language, culture, beliefs, values, religion, and appearance.

When defining BC, South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko (1978) emphasizes key principles including self-definition, solidarity, liberation, collective resistance, and what it truly means to be Black (person, skin, and reality):

It is an attitude of mind and a way of life. It is the most positive call to emanate from the Black world for a long time. Its unadulterated quintessence is the realization by the Black man [sic] of the need to rally together with his brothers [sic] around the cause of their oppression... It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the White man they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them Black. (pp. 91-92)

Biko (1978) believed that the presence of colonialism and apartheid was not hinged on the oppression and alienation Black

people endured under White dominance, but it was more centred upon the internalization of inferiority Blacks experienced by virtue of the Whites. In addition, Biko would argue that BC seeks to dismantle the lie that "Black is an aberration from the 'normal' which is white" (p. 49). He also goes on to caution his peers, Blacks who are downgrading the knowledge and purpose behind their own creation by seeking to emulate a white man. BC, therefore, takes cognizance of the intentionality of God's plan in moulding and creating Black people to be Black.

As such, BC sought to dismantle what Biko identified as "the most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (p. 92). This categorically positioned BC as a vital precursor to meaningful structural transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

As we have already seen, when a fourth-year political science student, Chumani Maxwele, flung a bucket of human excrement at the Rhodes statue, the act was not a moment of senseless provocation, but a deep symbolic expression of accumulated frustration and political dissent long lain hidden at UCT. This action reflected Maxwele's anger at UCT's persistent failure to enact the much-awaited radical transformation of the institution, particularly in the curriculum, which continued to privilege Eurocentric epistemology over African indigenous knowledge. Maxwele's actions, however, were ultimately less significant than the powerful question he posed to a curious crowd of students gathered around the statue: "There is no collective history here...Where are our heroes and ancestors?" (Stiem, 2018). This question echoes Biko's long-standing call for transformation, particularly his insistence on the recognition and inclusion of African heroes, histories, culture, language, and traditions within curricula that have been overwhelmingly shaped by Eurocentric perspectives.

Maxwele's question functions simultaneously as a challenge, an exhortation, and a declaration of commitment to a broader decolonial struggle. In this sense, it retrieves and revitalizes Biko's deeper concerns about the structural and socio-economic injustices that continue to define the apartheid South African society, which includes the persistent poverty, inequality, and systemic exclusion that entangle students' lives and render access to education fraught with hardship (Ntloedibe, 2019).

Maxwele's question thus reframes transformation not merely as a matter of what is taught in universities by professors, but as an urgent call to confront the material conditions and societal ills (racism, systemic oppression, etc.) that make the pursuit of education itself an unequal and unjust undertaking. Building on Biko's work, an affirmative response to Maxwele's question to the UCT students and community lies in placing "a more human face" (p. 98) on South Africa by challenging colonial systems that dehumanize people through poverty, inequality, racism, and oppression, instead of building a world based on empathy, justice, and shared responsibility.

Nyamnjoh (2022) takes us through a series of reflections on how student activists at UCT appropriated the discourse of BC in different ways, illustrating that apart from the issue of Black pain, one of the enduring legacies of the Black Consciousness Movement is its "reconstitution of *black* as a category" (p. 92, emphasis in original). Nyamnjoh (2022) argues that the power of *black* lies in its capacity to capture lived, emotional, and embodied experiences of oppression, racism, and systemic injustice. Most notably, this philosophy continues to shape the Black consciousness movement by redefining *black* not merely as a skin colour but as a social identity that unites Africa(ns), and people of colour who are

affected by structural racism. In this way, the UCT students, also known as fallists, channel Black Consciousness to reclaim their voices, dignity, rights, freedom, and indigenous knowledge within the university (Nyamnjoh, 2022).

Another notable feature of BC to animate the RMF movement is its critique of white liberals in the anti-apartheid movement (Nyamnjoh 2022). Embarking on a political pathway during apartheid, tensions arose between the African National Congress (ANC) and white liberals in South Africa over whether and how white activists should participate in liberation movements. For BC thinkers, the conflicts between the two parties emanated due to unequal power relations of the white's upholding domination in voice, agenda and resources over Blacks.

This conflict deepened during periods of intense apartheid repression, when many Black leaders were imprisoned, banned, sold into slavery, or forced into exile, thereby creating a leadership vacuum within liberation movements (Nyamnjoh 2022). In response to this crisis, BC insisted on the necessity of Black self-reliance, highlighting that liberation shouldn't be tied solely to whiteness but rather be led and defined by Black people. While not rejecting solidarity outright, BC has maintained meaningful consensus that requires whites to relinquish control, confront their own privilege, and support Black-led struggles without having to seek moral authority or leadership.

The RMF mission statement reflects the influence of BC by insisting that the movement remain Black-led while recognizing a supporting role for white allies. Drawing on Steve Biko's "White Privilege Project," the statement encourages white students to participate in radical actions "as a sign of solidarity, so long as that participation takes place on their terms" (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015), thereby affirming that those most affected by colonial oppression should lead the struggle for transformation. The emphasis on Black leadership aligns with UCT's student Brian Kamanzi's argument that genuine equality and representation require challenging the Eurocentric assumptions that continue to shape universities. As Kamanzi insists, Black students must become epistemically disobedient by rejecting colonial systems of knowledge and asserting the legitimacy of African perspectives (Chowdhury, 2021).

Nyamnjoh (2022) asserts that the moral and political division of labour between Blacks and liberals gave rise to a political praxis built on 'safe spaces', where participation was respectfully regulated and followed. This safe space served not only as a site of resistance but also as a place where inclusion and exclusion were actively negotiated by reshaping the meaning of participation between both race and belonging in everyday life. Racial solidarity, anti-capitalism, black pain, and the involvement of liberals form the core elements of BC in demand for the decolonization of the university.

4.2.4. Theme 4: Epistemic Disobedience

In his widely cited article, "reflections on struggles for epistemic freedom and resurgence of decolonization in the twenty-first century," Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) poses the following question to African and Global South societies: "What has been the contribution of African intellectuals to postcolonial and decolonial scholarship?" (p. 882). Ndlovu-Gatsheni raises this question to highlight the relative marginalization of African intellectual knowledge from transnational scholars. While postcolonial scholarship has been largely shaped by South Asian scholars and decolonial scholarship by Latin American thinkers, African knowledge has often remained peripheral despite Africa's central place in the history of

colonialism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni foregrounds the complex politics of knowledge in Africa and the Global South through the systematic undervaluing of African academics' contributions, linking this phenomenon to the concepts of decolonization in knowledge, politics, education, and culture (see Laakso & Hallberg Adu, 2024). In light of this phenomenon, Argentinian scholar Walter Mignolo would call for the dismantling of Eurocentric Western knowledge production and ideology by fostering African indigenous and subaltern perspectives.

According to Mignolo (2011), "desprenderse" which means 'epistemic delinking' takes the inhabitants of the globe to a different "beginning in response to colonization and spatial sites of struggles, rather than to a new temporality within the same space" (p. 45). In the context of RMF, while epistemic disobedience means challenging coloniality, patriarchy, and institutional racism, it also means taking practical actions towards delinking from dominant structures and Western paradigms. In other words, epistemic disobedience represents the refusal of privileging Eurocentric thought as the 'point of departure' for what counts as a valid knowledge and thinking. Instead, one version of epistemic disobedience insists that the 'point of departure' should begin with the lived histories of Africans, which is precisely what the act of delinking entails.

The goal is not to completely shut down Western thought, but to outrightly reject its dominance in the realm of knowledge, engaging them only "in so far as they are relevant to the African experience" (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015). Ahmed's (2021) argument reinforces the notion that the RMF movement's demands concerning *who* produces knowledge, *how* knowledge is produced, *why* knowledge is produced, and *where* knowledge is produced are core considerations within the realm of decolonial struggle. Hence, RMF activists' and students' insistence on the idea that knowledge must be deeply grounded in African histories, lived realities, and struggles.

Delinking, however, becomes visible in how RMF students would go about challenging UCT as a backbone of ongoing colonial power, insisting that the university was not considered a neutral space for learning, thinking, and knowledge production, but was historically built upon epistemic violence, exclusion, and racial hierarchy. At the classroom level, epistemic disobedience is perhaps most evident in the struggle against Eurocentric knowledge and in the valorization of African lived experience. Indeed, RMF students saw curriculum transformation as a challenge to the institution's colonial foundations of teaching and learning by implementing "a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern" (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015). In "The Unofficial Curriculum is where the real teaching takes place: Faculty experiences of Decolonising the Curriculum in Africa," Laakso and Hallberg Adu (2024) suggest that the conceptual phase of decolonizing curriculum occurs less via course syllabi and more in what is being engaged in the classroom, whether through critical discussions, course topics, readings, group and/or individual assignments, or seminar presentations.

Epistemic disobedience, therefore, insists that the lived experiences of Black students – informed by alienation, racism, poverty, erasure, and invisibility – are not to be marginalized as mere social issues beyond the curriculum. Hence, RMF students frame curriculum transformation as inseparable from linguistic and methodological instruction via systems of education and learning. Language is an art and not just a medium for communicating and expressing knowledge. RMF students' insistence on transforming languages and methodologies clearly foregrounds that decolonizing the curriculum requires more than revising content; it also

asserts the inclusion of African indigenous language as legitimate forms of knowledge production in pedagogical practices.

In the case of RMF, the demand for curriculum transformation would extend well beyond the curriculum to include calls for broader institutional reform. In its 28 demands, RMF called for increased representation of Black academics across faculties and on “the currently predominantly white male decision-making bodies that perpetuate institutional racism” (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015). Students also demanded the removal of barriers restricting Black academics’ access to senior positions, including Professorships, Associate Professorships, Department Chairs, and Deanships, alongside a re-evaluation of research priorities “from areas that are lucrative and centre whiteness, to areas that are relevant to the lives of black people locally and on the continent” (Rhodes Must Fall, 2015).

Beyond these institutional demands, RMF activists also enacted epistemic alternatives through teach-ins, public seminars, and occupations that created spaces for Black academics, students, and activists to debate African philosophies, colonial histories, and decolonial futures outside the constraints of the formal curriculum. Ramaru (2017) argues that the three-week occupation of Azania House “opened a space for Black academics and intellectuals to come and share knowledge, conduct different types of seminars, on subjects such as Black Consciousness, Femininities and Masculinities, Queerness, and many other subjects” (p. 92). These demands and practices would reflect the movement’s conviction that those who teach, conduct research, and occupy positions of institutional authority shape what knowledge is recognized, legitimized, and reproduced within the university.

Felicitas Macgilchrist’s (2014) discussion of media discourse and de/coloniality further strengthens the notion of epistemic disobedience by demonstrating how knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized through historically unequal power relations. From this perspective, RMF challenged not only who is included within the university but, more fundamentally, whose knowledge is authorized to define the university itself. By centring Black academics, student voices, and African epistemologies, while simultaneously contesting Eurocentric research agendas and institutional governance, the movement disrupted the long-standing assumption that Western knowledge alone constitutes legitimate academic authority.

4.2.5. Theme 5: Fanonism

4.2.5.1. Psychic Effect of Colonialism

Building on the preceding analyses, I have illustrated that the call for the removal of the Rhodes statue aimed to address the persistence of institutional racism, alienation of the Blackness, sexism, and patriarchy within the university. In this section, I offer a more nuanced perspective on the psychological and social trauma experienced during coloniality. The student movement, driven by the Mandela’s Born Free generation (1994–present) – a term describing the first generation born in South Africa after the end of apartheid (1948–1994) – highlights the ties between Black trauma and colonialism, which Naicker (2026) critically refers to as a “sociogenic symptom,” meaning the return of “repressed colonial violence in a generation ostensibly liberated from it” (p. 2).

This generation of South Africans has grappled with the failed system of a rainbow nation symbolizing unity and optimism, codified via their lived experiences of exclusion, poverty, economic disparity, crime, and misrecognition (Wale, Godobo-Madikizela, & Prager, 2020). This phenomenon is tied to the ongoing trauma

of coloniality, showcasing how the formal end of apartheid did not signify an end to racial segregation, oppression, and discrimination within South African institutions. Frantz Fanon’s sociogenic principle (sociogeny) is essential for understanding this trauma, as it provides a language and cultural framework that link the psychological experiences of the activists, feminists, and queer people at UCT with political forces such as racism, colonialism, patriarchy, and oppression already deeply ingrained in the university. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1986), Fanon argues that colonial trauma manifests when a colonized subject, in the case of a Black person, perceives the impossibility of being recognized as an equal human being in the colonial system, in what Naicker (2026) elsewhere calls “misrecognition” (p. 7).

This misrecognition is strikingly illustrated in one of the primary sources examined in this study – a YouTube documentary entitled *Luister*, produced five months after the RMF protests in 2015, which features interviews with 32 students from Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute in Stellenbosch. The documentary captures students’ lived experiences informed by race, belonging, and institutional culture within a predominantly white educational environment, providing valuable insight into the psychological dimensions of coloniality beyond UCT (Corder, 2015). These first-hand accounts illustrate how racialized exclusion is experienced in everyday university life and reinforce many of the concerns articulated by the RMF movement.

Among the interviewees, a Black male student painstakingly describes the colour of his skin as a “social burden” (9:15 – 9:41) to the white community in Stellenbosch. Another student recounts being told that if he doesn’t speak or understand the Afrikaans language, he doesn’t belong at Stellenbosch (“If you don’t speak Afrikaans, you don’t belong here”) (5:48 – 5:57). These interview materials reveal how racialized exclusion functions both socially and institutionally, producing a persistent sense of alienation among Black students. More explicitly, students recount experiences of direct racial violence and humiliation, such as being on the receiving end of racial slurs and being treated as less-than-human. As one Black student admits, “they take [sic] you like you’re a dog” (4:39 – 4:48). Another student goes on to address the reality of internalizing psychological distress: “I sometimes ask myself... why did God make me Black, when a lot can happen in a good way when I am otherwise (White)?” (0:47 – 0:55).

This realization produces what Fanon (1986) describes as the lived experience of arriving “too late” (Naicker, 2026, p. 91) in history. As Fanon writes, “you come too late, much too late. There will always be a world – a white world between you and us” (p. 122). For Fanon, colonialism positions a Black person within a social order in which identity and possibilities are predetermined by colonial histories than self-definition. In this regard, the humanity of Black students at UCT continues to be questioned through institutional practices that privilege the Whites and Eurocentric norms. Although RMF activists sought meaningful institutional transformation, they encountered structures that reproduced colonial patterns of exclusion, making it appear as though their place within the university had already been defined. As Fanon (1986) observes, under coloniality “everything is anticipated, thought out, demonstrated, and made the most of” (p. 91). Echoing Fanon’s argument, Naicker (2026) reveals that the systemic trauma was reproduced in the experiences of Black students, who entered a predominantly white university expecting equality, only to encounter misjudgment, a Eurocentric curriculum, exclusion, and a racialized institutional culture.

Building on Fanon's (1986) examination of the psychological impacts of colonialism, Long (2021) contends that the lasting effects of land dispossession, racial segregation, and cultural erosion in South Africa, including the educational institutions, have produced deep economic inequality, poverty, and deprivation, which in turn produce feelings of shame tied to Black identity. From a Fanonian perspective, the emotions expressed during the RMF protests cannot be understood simply as envy or resentment; rather, they should be read as symptoms of a deeper sociogenic condition produced by the enduring structures of coloniality within South African institutions. Long's (2021) analysis contends that protesting students were fueled by a repressed desire for retaliation that emerged from the failed promises of the rainbow nation. Fanon's (1986) framework suggests that these reactions emerge when the colonized subject confronts a social order that simultaneously promises equality while continuing to reproduce racial hierarchies and exclusion.

Within the context of UCT, the persistence of colonial symbols, Eurocentric curricula, and racialized institutional cultures serve as reminders of an unresolved colonial past. Consequently, the RMF protests can be interpreted not merely as displays of anger directed towards a statue, but as attempts to rupture what Fanon describes as the historical and symbolic order that continually repositions Black subjects as outsiders within spaces they are told they supposedly belong to. In this sense, the Rhodes statue would function as a visible marker of a deeper colonial structure embedded in the university's architecture, knowledge production, and power relations.

Through a Fanonian sociogenic lens, the RMF movement represents a collective confrontation with what may be understood as the afterlife of colonial violence. The frustration, anger, and political mobilization of the Born Free generation reveal how colonial trauma persists not only through material inequalities but also through symbolic and psychological structures that shape recognition, belonging, and dignity. Rather than indicating a pathological response, these protests may be read as efforts to reclaim agency and challenge a colonial epistemic order that continues to define whose knowledge, histories, and identities are legitimized within the university.

5. Discussion of Findings

5.1. Introduction

The purpose of the following discussion is to interpret the findings presented in relation to this study's two research questions. This section situates the findings within the broader scholarship on decoloniality and politics of reckoning in higher education, examining how the RMF movement contributes to contemporary understandings of what it means to decolonize the African university and what RMF reveals about the possibilities of decolonial politics within and outside of the university. Throughout the discussion, the findings are interpreted through the theoretical lens of decoloniality, with particular attention to Mignolo's conception of epistemic disobedience and Macgilchrist's understanding of decolonial thought as an ongoing challenge to colonial systems of knowledge and power.

5.2. Decolonization as an Ongoing Project of Structural Transformation (RQ1)

5.2.1. What does it mean to truly decolonize the University, specifically within an African context?

To truly call for a decolonized African university entails fundamentally dismantling the colonial, Eurocentric, and neo-colonial frameworks that continue to dictate how knowledge is produced, taught, and valued across all levels - epistemic, institutional, symbolic, and lived experiences. A step towards a decolonized African university can be seen as part and parcel of a radical process that centralizes African epistemologies and deconstructs Western knowledge. Drawing on a thematic analysis of the RMF movement and its underpinning decolonial frameworks, the most salient finding of this study is that decolonizing the African university entails achieving epistemic justice and freedom that enables knowledge production and dissemination from the vantage points of socio-epistemic and geohistorical locations of the colonized (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

The findings strongly align with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2018) notion of epistemic freedom, revealing that students and activists conceptualize decolonization as the ability to think, theorize, and produce knowledge from African standpoints rather than through inherited (and imposed) Eurocentric ideologies. Across the analyzed themes, there is a consistent critique of the African university as a site that continues to universalize Western knowledge while marginalizing African epistemologies. For example, several of the 28 demands (see table 1) explicitly called for the decolonization of the curriculum, the inclusion of African literary texts, increased representation of Black academics, free and fair educational system, and the transformation of institutional cultures that privileged Eurocentric intellectual culture. Likewise, Chumani Maxwele would forcefully argue that the continued prominence of the Rhodes' statue symbolized a university that embodied Eurocentrism and silenced Black histories/experiences invisible (Ahmed, 2020; Andersen & Knudsen, 2019; Becker, 2025).

Student activists such as Alax Hotz, Zethu Matebeni, Ramaru Kealeboga, and Ramabina Mahapa, to mention but a few, further criticized UCT's curriculum for prioritizing Western thought and pedagogy while dismissing Black scholars, histories, and knowledge systems. Zethu Matebeni (2018, paras. 2–4) asserts the Rhodes statue represented far more than a colonial monument, in that the statue served as a constant reminder "of how and for whom the university was designed" – primarily for white interests, extending beyond the physical monument to "the medium of instruction, the privilege afforded to whiteness, and the value given to middle-class positionality." Furthermore, she notes that many Black students "felt alienated from the academic project" and were expected to assimilate into "white standards and white values of excellence," conditions that ultimately fuelled the students' demands for a decolonized curriculum and a transformed institutional culture.

Likewise, Kealeboga Ramaru (2017) contends that UCT "lacked real transformation and has never imagined decolonization as an institution" (p. 89). She indicates that Black students challenged the university's "number-obsessed transformation agenda that has yielded very little change" (p. 90), while "systematic exclusion" persisted through a Eurocentric curriculum, limited staff transformation, and an institutional culture that privileged white, middle-class students. Ramaru posits that, for RMF activists, decolonizing the university meant confronting "its racism and unapologetic exclusion," disputing "the institutional racism that

presented itself through the Eurocentric curriculum” and challenging “the undervaluing of Black academics and their knowledge” (p. 91).

Furthermore, Ramabina Mahapa highlights that for a meaningful transformation to occur, it requires fundamentally restructuring the curriculum that holds African philosophies, histories, and intellectual traditions in high esteem (see page 44) (Makoni, 2015). Mahapa criticizes UCT for silencing “the voices of black students – mixed race, Indian and African – and black history” (Makoni, 2015), while continuing to celebrate historical figures who were “undisputedly white supremacists” (Makoni, 2015). Together, each of the student statements illustrate that, decolonization extends beyond the removal of statues or monuments to transforming the curriculum, institutional culture, and epistemologies that continue to privilege colonial narratives.

Newspaper articles and broadcast news media – including *The Guardian*, *BBC News*, *Daily Maverick*, *New Internationalist*, and *UCT News* – play a significant role in amplifying UCT students’ voices in the public sphere. Across interviews, reports, and opinion pieces, students consistently emphasized their struggle extended beyond the removal of the Rhodes statue to dismantling the Eurocentric epistemologies, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures that continue to marginalize Black students and African intellectuals at UCT. For example, *The Guardian*’s feature “The Birth of Rhodes Must Fall” profiled student leaders Ramabina Mahapa, Chumani Maxwele, Kgotsi Chikane, and Malaika wa Afrika, who framed the movement as a broader struggle to decolonize the university. Reflecting on Maxwele’s faeces protest, Chikane recalls thinking Maxwele’s action as a “disgusting and immature initiative” (Fairbanks, 2015). However, three days after the poo-protest, Chikane found himself leading an anti-Rhodes demonstration after discovering how public reactions revealed enduring racial divisions between Whites and Blacks.

Similarly, *Daily Maverick*’s “Right of Response: #RhodesMustFall – Careful, Rebecca Hodes, Your Colour is Showing” clearly provides the RMF movement with a platform to clarify its objectives. In the article, RMF activists rejected portrayals of the campaign as merely a symbolic attack on the Rhodes statue, arguing instead that decolonization required “a curriculum which treats African discourses as the point of departure” through addressing not only content but languages, and methodologies of teaching and learning, “and a legitimate lens through which to view and examine the world” (Rhodes Must Fall Collective, 2015). The article reveals that the movement also called for an increase in the representation of Blacks in academia, the transformation of institutional symbols and culture, and greater solidarity with outsourced workers, demonstrating that its demands were directed solely toward restructuring the university. Together, these media interventions demonstrate the functionality of RMF as an epistemic and political intervention that transforms student grievances into a public critique of the colonial foundations of higher education and by advancing a collective vision of a decolonized African university.

Consequently, decolonization was framed not as the simple inclusion of African perspectives within an existing Eurocentric framework but as the fundamental restructuring of the university so that African epistemologies, histories, and intellectual traditions could be recognized as legitimate, foundational, and authoritative forms of knowledge. This suggests that coloniality persists not as a historical residue, but as an active and structuring force within contemporary higher education. Thus, decolonization demands the inclusion of African perspectives into existing Eurocentric

systems, and the restructuring of those systems to centre African intellectual traditions as valid, foundational, and authoritative.

In addition to seeking epistemic freedom and justice, the findings of this study further indicate that decolonization of the African university is inherently political and relational, strongly rooted in broader struggles for liberation and justice. Through the lens of Pan-Africanism, the RMF movement situates UCT within a global history of colonial domination and resistance. Decolonizing the African university, therefore, is inseparable from reclaiming African identity, history, and epistemological sovereignty. Decolonizing the African university represents a continuation of anti-colonial struggles that seek to dismantle enduring systems of racial, economic, and epistemic oppression.

Kumssa (2022) and Falola and Essien (2013) situate Pan-Africanism as a movement that builds unity, solidarity, and liberation among people of African descent – a line of inquiry that resonates strongly via the RMF mission statement (2015), which strongly demands curriculum that centralizes African and subaltern epistemologies. In the same vein, Nyamnjoh (2022) argues that such demands challenge the idea of Africanization driven by neoliberal internationalization, articulating calls for a deeper epistemic shift capable of reclaiming and/or reinstating African knowledge.

As I mention above, decolonization is inseparable from reclaiming African identity, history, and knowledge. The RMF movement centres Mignolo’s (2011) idea of delinking from dominant Western knowledge production and knowledge itself. RMF activities associated with epistemic delinking include but are not limited to the following: a three-week occupation of Azania House, with Black students and academics engaging in political discussion surrounding Black Consciousness, Femininities/Masculinities, Queerness, Black Feminism, the removal of colonial statues, and a demand for curriculum transformation. These forms of epistemic resistance reframe decolonization as both demand and action – endeavours that actively seek to dismantle epistemic struggles and colonial structures. Together these efforts can be seen as initiatives designed to reimagine the third university that paperson contends has the potential to exist within the walls of an already established colonial institution.

African universities often engage in what can be described as performative approaches, adopting the language of decolonization without addressing its structural implications. Initiatives framed around diversity, inclusion, or internationalization frequently fail to challenge the underlying epistemic hierarchies that privilege Western knowledge. This underscores a critical tension between institutional reform and transformative change. It suggests that without a genuine commitment to restructuring power and knowledge, decolonization risks being reduced to mere rhetoric.

Against this backdrop, decolonization remains an ongoing, dynamic, structural, and unfinished process of reconfiguring power, culture, language, and knowledge. As paperson (2017) suggests, decolonization in the realm of higher education is akin to an ocean in constant motion, never reaching a final or complete state. Likewise, Moyo insists that decolonization requires continuous reflexivity, arguing that coloniality persists in subtle and evolving forms, thereby demanding sustained intellectual and institutional engagement.

The RMF movement provides a concrete illustration of this processual nature of decolonizing work as described by paperson (2017) and Moyo (2020) – instead of putting a stop to the movement upon the removal of the Rhodes statue, RMF would go on to put forward broader demands like curriculum transformation,

language reform, and institutional change. An illustrative example of this intervention is the RMF in-action teach-ins and the UCT Decolonial Summer School which clearly model attempts to create alternative spaces for knowledge production beyond traditional academia (Ramaru, 2017). Interventions of this kind represent what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a) describes as the unfinished business of decolonization in postcolonial Africa. As Heleta (2016) puts it, dismantling coloniality in higher education cannot be achieved through one-off reforms but rather through a continuous restructuring of knowledge systems, institutional cultures, and power relations.

The findings of this study indicate that decolonization is shaped by histories, local realities, and global connections, making it both context-specific and transnational. The intellectual and political force of the RMF movement generated solidarity actions across Africa, the US, and the UK, with one of its most visible manifestations emerging at Oriel College, Oxford. While RMF was rooted in the conditions of post-apartheid South Africa and challenged the persistence of coloniality within a historically racialized university system, RMF-Oxford (RMFO) adapted these actions to the context of Britain's imperial and colonial history. For RMFO activists, epistemic disobedience involved challenging the continued celebration of Rhodes, confronting racial inequalities within the institution, questioning colonial memorial landscapes, and demanding the transformation of Eurocentric curricula and knowledge systems (Ahmed, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Unlike the RMF movement at UCT, the RMFO campaign failed in securing the removal of the Rhodes statue at Oriel College. During the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in May 2020, RMFO activists renewed their efforts to decolonize the university through public demonstrations, petitions, and campaigns, challenging Oxford's continued preservation and legitimization of colonial histories through its symbolic landscape, institutional cultures, and systems of knowledge production.

Students and faculty mobilized against what they viewed as Oxford's reluctance to critically engage with its imperial inheritance. As Ntokozo Qwabe argues, "the University of Oxford continues to colonize the minds of future leaders through its visual iconography, the concepts and histories in its curricula, the gross underrepresentation of people of colour and other marginalised groups in its staff..." (Qwabe, 2015, p. 12). This illustrates how RMFO expanded RMF's critique of symbolic and epistemic coloniality by demonstrating that colonial legacies remain embedded within the everyday structures, histories, and knowledge practices of elite Western institutions.

Decolonizing the university in an African context involves paying close attention to African and/or subaltern Indigenous knowledge systems – oral traditions, philosophies (Ubuntu), cultures, languages, and histories - while simultaneously engaging in broader global struggles against coloniality. As Mutongoza (2025) emphasizes, decolonizing African academia is a continuous project of social justice that requires ongoing critical reflection and structural transformation. Thus, the above findings affirm that decolonization is not a destination that can be fully completed, but a continuous, contested, and evolving process of reimagining the university and its role in society.

5.3. Rhodes Must Fall as an Epistemic and Political Intervention (RQ2)

5.3.1. *What does the Rhodes Must Fall student movement have to teach us regarding the potential viability of decolonial/anti-colonial politics both within and beyond the university?*

Africans have long had their own Indigenous systems of knowledge and knowledge production prior to colonialism - some of which include storytelling, folklore, proverbs, music, and conflict resolution. The RMF movement successfully gained momentum in shifting public and institutional discourse from symbolic concerns to deeper questions about epistemic injustice, institutional racism, and coloniality.

The protests significantly influenced institutions nationwide by highlighting key issues, such as a rise in tuition fees, the eradication of gender-based violence (GBV), financial exclusion, and the insourcing of outsourced workers (often the most vulnerable non-teaching staff). The widespread mobilization of students across the continent created immense pressure on university administrators to respond to concerns regarding access to transformative education. In Senegal, the Senegalese actively protested against the statue of 19th century French colonial governor Louis Faidherbe by demanding a critical reckoning of the country's colonial past (Ndiaye, 2020). In the same vein, the Must Fall movement inspired the Sudanese revolution to call for a radical change and break free from dictatorship (Ndiaye, 2020).

The RMF movement demonstrates that decolonial politics is viable not because it relies on a single form of protest, but because it strategically combines symbolic, spatial, digital, and intellectual forms of resistance to challenge entrenched systems of power. Rather than limiting its demands to institutional petitions, the RMF movement transformed the university itself into a contested political space. Through alternative measures such as the defacement and removal of the Rhodes statue, occupation of administrative buildings (Azania House), decolonial teach-ins, formation of IAC, and social media campaigns (e.g., #RhodesMustFall, #TakeItDown, and #DecolonizeOurEducation), students disrupted the everyday operations of the university while exposing the colonial assumptions embedded within its curriculum, institutional culture, governance structures, and public symbols. These interconnected strategies demonstrate how decolonial politics operates simultaneously across all levels, making visible forms of exclusion that had long been normalized within higher education.

These actions are best understood through Cassegård's (2014) concept of "bracketing" (p. 692), whereby participants in the public sphere temporarily suspend existing social hierarchies to create equality between the people. However, Cassegård argues that genuine democratic publicness cannot be sustained through bracketing alone; it requires "contestation" (p. 692) – actively challenging the structural inequalities that continue to exclude certain groups from meaningful participation in the university. As a result, the RMF movement created alternative democratic spaces in which students, workers, and marginalized communities could collectively articulate their experiences, contest institutional authority, and imagine new possibilities for a decolonized university. The movement, therefore, demonstrates that the viability of decolonial politics lies beyond the student movement, in its capacity to transform marginalized groups (staff and students), cultural capital, and exclusionary networks of power.

RMF stresses that symbolism within the realm of politics is an entry point for broader structural transformation. The demand to remove the Rhodes statue served as a catalyst for change, making

visible the persistence of colonial power within everyday university life. Symbols are not merely representational; they are constitutive of institutional culture and power. By directly targeting the Rhodes statue to capture the administration's attention, the RMF movement mobilized the visibility of coloniality through a political campaign that students could connect with and respond to, thereby highlighting the harm caused by colonial structures ingrained within the university environment.

Beyond symbolism, the RMF movement highlights the importance of intellectual frameworks in sustaining decolonial politics within the institution. This was clearly reflected in how the RMF students described the movement as premised on five core ideological pillars: Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, Black radical feminism, epistemic disobedience and Fanonism. The above research reveals that these decolonial pillars provided not just a structure for protest against inequality but also a strategic vision for decolonial futures. Studies have shown that students drew inspiration from diverse sources, including the Black Lives Matter protests, anti-colonial movements in Africa, the 1976 Soweto Uprising and anti-apartheid Black student movement, and the Black Radical tradition in the United States (Ahmed, 2020; Daniel, 2025), among others. In addition, the students were shown to have drawn on intellectual works from decolonial activists and local figures including Frantz Fanon, the Algerian Revolution, the Latin American Decolonial School, Steve Biko, and Robert Sobukwe (Daniel & Platzky Miller, 2025). These inspirations enabled the students to connect immediate struggles across the university to broader systems of power and resistance.

RMF demonstrates that an intersectional perspective enables the elucidation of power dynamics and processes of both inclusion and exclusion within a movement. At the height of the movement, Black heterosexual men undermined intersectionality principles by expanding the number of heteronormative leadership positions that were fully dominated by the male gender. As a result, Blackness became the focal identity marker that overshadowed gender, sexuality, and non-binary identities. While the movement sought to challenge racial oppression and colonial structures, the growing prominence of heteronormative leadership at UCT shows that other forms of intersectional theory (sexism, homophobia, transphobia) received far less attention. In turn, the experiences and concerns of Black women, queer individuals, and non-binary activists led to the establishment of a more inclusive intersectional framework through the creation of the Intersectionality Auditing Committee (IAC). Ramaru (2017) notes that the formation of IAC "was to recommit educating themselves about the depth of colonization and its impact on their understandings of gender, culture, and socialization" (p. 93).

Questions of intersectionality and decolonization are deeply entwined with debates on identity, power, knowledge production, belonging, social justice, citizenship, and the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion regarding rights and representation. These frameworks can be regarded as two sides of the same coin, as intersectionality guides the intentions and structural processes of a movement, while decolonization incorporates a power-critical lens for the movement to be understood and enacted. Consequently, situating intersectionality within a given social movement enables the public to better decipher the diverse types of power dynamics that occur in protest actions and movements. Additionally, an intersectional approach addresses questions regarding inclusiveness, mobilization, and self-reflexivity. For instance, does inclusivity refer solely to specific groups of people? How inclusive should a social movement be to legitimize its demands? Whose voices

are amplified and/or whose are marginalized? Who assumes leadership roles and who ratifies decisions? Is the movement reproducing the exclusions it first sought to challenge? Who has access to resources, platforms, and opportunities for political engagement? Are race, gender, class, language, or nationality influencing broader participation within the movement? Through mobilization, intersectionality promotes self-reflection by encouraging activists to examine their assumptions, identities, and practices critically - prompting further questions: Who exactly needs to be mobilized? What barriers hinder certain groups from participating? Does mobilization recognize the diverse experiences and needs of participants, or assume a shared experience of oppression? Thus, intersectionality can be depicted as a tool for deeper and more sustained reflection.

Nyamnjuh's (2022) concept of epistemic citizenship, which is particularly useful for examining questions of belonging, recognition, and participation within the university draws attention to the question of who is recognized as an actor in producing, re-storying, and defining knowledge in a post-colonial system. The RMF students' demands for curriculum transformation, representation of Black academics across faculty, recognition of African intellectual traditions, and changes to institutional culture can therefore be interpreted as claims to epistemic citizenship. These demands were not simply calls for inclusion within an existing university structure; they challenged the terms through which belonging, legitimacy, and authority were distributed within the institution.

Nevertheless, the RMF movement clears an important path for thinking about the viability of decolonial and anticolonial politics within and beyond the university space. Its strength lies in its ability to disrupt epistemic hierarchies, mobilize collective action, and reframe global debates on knowledge production and social justice. On the one hand, RMF demonstrates clear viability in its capacity to disrupt dominant epistemic structures. By challenging the Rhodes statue and broader colonial legacy of the university, the movement compelled universities to confront important questions regarding the validity of institutional knowledge and institutional histories.

This created a shift in public discourse, making terms like 'decolonization' and 'epistemic disobedience' part of the traditional academic vocabulary. In this regard, RMF indicates that decolonial politics can successfully reframe terms like coloniality and mobilize collective student action around shared experiences of exclusion. It reveals that when grounded in lived experiences of inequality, movements such as RMF and RMFO can generate powerful solidarity across racial, classed, and even national lines. This was made possible through shared demands for economic equality, inclusion, and cultural diversity, as students across UCT, Oxford, and Witwatersrand identified the university as a key site where colonial power, knowledge, and inequality continue to be reproduced. Despite their different contexts, these movements were united by a common vision of transforming higher education beyond colonial and imperial legacies.

At the same time, internal dynamics within movements like RMF also affect their long-term stability. As momentum builds, social movements often face fragmentation due to ideological differences, leadership struggles, or uneven participation. While intersectionality expands the movement's analytical depth and inclusivity, it can also complicate consensus-building and strategic coherence. This does not mean the movement fails, but rather that its internal diversity shapes its trajectory in ways that make sustained institutional pressure difficult to maintain over time.

Collectively, these dynamics highlight a central paradox: RMF is viable because it can disrupt, mobilize, and reframe; yet it is unstable because institutions are structurally designed to endure, adapt, and absorb protest. The RMF successes therefore should not be interpreted as either a full-blown victory or failure, but a middle ground of how decolonial politics tends to operate within a constrained environment.

The most important lesson RMF offers is that decolonial and anticolonial politics are not outcomes that can be permanently achieved and secured within institutions. Instead, they function as ongoing processes of contestation over knowledge, legitimacy, and power. Decolonization is a framework that must be repeatedly enacted, defended, and reimagined. Universities may change in response to pressure, but those changes are never final; they remain open to reversal, dilution, or reconfiguration. Ultimately, RMF teaches the public that viability should not be measured solely by permanence or institutional closure, but by sustained capacity to unsettle dominant structures and keep alternative visions of knowledge alive. Decolonial politics endure not because they are fully institutionalized, but because they continually resist being settled into stable finished forms.

Furthermore, this thesis research highlights that RMF embodies decolonial politics as a practice of imagination and world-building. The movement not only critiques existing colonial structures but also envisions what a decolonized university, and by extension, a decolonized society, could resemble. Through building occupied and alternative pedagogical spaces, epistemic actors (students, academics, activists, feminists) experimented with new forms of knowledge production and community. However, RMF's ability to sustain these alternatives beyond the university remained a significant challenge. While symbolic demands, including the removal of the Rhodes statue constitute visible gains, broader structural demands regarding the curriculum, institutional culture, and inequality remain open-ended, if unanswered. Students and activists from Stellenbosch University (Mlandu, Hotz, Valela, and Duma) identify one of RMF's key limitations as its inability to move beyond being a "typical student movement" (Cabe, 2023). They argue that if RMF had connected with working-class Black people, "it could have pushed the ruling party to confront inequality and the unresolved land question." As Valela points out, one of RMF's limitations was its inability to sufficiently address how "the gains [will] continue to stay as gains beyond one class of students," thereby questioning the sustainability of its transformative agenda.

Limitations of this kind are evident when comparing RMF's symbolic achievements with the structural demands that remain unmet. For example, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters' Youth Command at UCT, Takalani Makhwathana, states that many of the commitments made following the 2015–2016 student movement protests have yet to materialize, with students experiencing "financial exclusion, a lack of accommodation, and ongoing struggles with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)" (Tembo, 2025). For Makhwathana, the ongoing existence of these struggles indicates that while student activism remains present, the lack of national coordination has limited the ability to sustain collective pressure for broader transformation.

In the same way, Becker (2025) asserts that many institutional responses to decolonization have taken the form of top-down initiatives that have produced limited transformation. However, she reveals that more meaningful changes have emerged within academic departments that engaged seriously with the epistemological and pedagogical questions raised by RMF students. These

efforts pinpoint the importance of RMF's imaginative contribution within the university.

Therefore, RMF's significance lies not only in the demands it achieved but also in the alternative futures it made possible to imagine. The movement emphasizes that decolonial politics requires both the disruption of colonial structures and the creation of new forms of knowledge, solidarity, and institutional culture. Yet, the unfinished realization of many demands reveals that imagination alone is insufficient. Sustaining decolonial transformation requires broader social alliances, long-term organizing, and institutional commitments that extend beyond the initial movement. The alternative spaces created by RMF were largely provisional and dependent on the intensity of protest conditions, raising questions about whether such pedagogical and epistemic systems can persist once the immediate momentum of mobilization declines. In other words, the movement's imaginative capacity was strongest in moments of rupture, but less clearly translated into long-term institutional restructuring. This exposes a central paradox of decolonial politics within higher education: decolonial world-building is expected to transform the university from within, yet the institutional structures through which such transformation must occur remain embedded in the very colonial structures being challenged. As a result, decolonial practices are often forced to operate in parallel or insurgent modes, than becoming embedded in the formal architecture of leadership, curriculum design, and knowledge validation.

6. Reflection and Conclusion

Rhodes Must Fall!
Amandla!
Decolonize our education!
Black Lives Matter!
All Rhodes leads to the colonization of the mind!
Make Rhodes a history!

These slogans capture the unfinished yet unrelenting spirit of the RMF movement over a decade after its eruption. Eleven years on, the movement stands as both a poignant reminder and a provocative challenge. Although the statue of Rhodes may have fallen, the deeper structures of coloniality within the African university and beyond remain stubbornly in place. What this thesis underscores is the enduring usefulness of the movement as both a critical and an epistemic lens for assessing where things currently stand, what has shifted, what has stalled, and what still needs to be dismantled.

Just over a decade of rigorous struggle has shown that decolonization can never be reduced to any single event but rather should be cast as an ongoing collective project that continues to challenge how knowledge is produced, whose voices are heard, and what futures are imagined. Therefore, a key question arises: What has the university accomplished in the aftermath of the 2015 RMF student uprising? A considerable amount of work has been undertaken since the removal of the Rhodes statue on April 9, 2015, including the incorporation of insourced workers, curriculum changes, renamed buildings, Afrocentric artworks, gender-inclusive washrooms, and gender-nonprescriptive student cards, amongst other notable changes (e.g. Becker 2025; Kessi, 2025).

10 years on, UCT Dean of Humanities Shose Kessi (2025) writes that amid these transformations, the university has consistently hosted an annual decolonial summer school - initiated, delivered,

and facilitated by decolonial thinkers and theorists, including Nelson Maldonado-Torres (Rutgers University), Ramón Grosfoguel (University of California, Berkeley), Pumla Gqola (University of the Witwatersrand), CK Raju (Centre for Studies in Civilizations), Tendayi Sithole (Unisa), and Siphamandla Zondi (University of Pretoria). The summer school brings together local and international academics to engage critically with decolonial thought and explore how it might go about reshaping pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom praxis before the commencement of each academic year. Similarly, the adoption of UCT's *Curriculum Change Framework*² reflects the university's many efforts to institutionalize transformation in teaching and learning practices. The framework outlines the following 10 key recommendations (RMF, 2015):

1. Authentic engagement
2. Leadership with integrity
3. Blending the formal with informal
4. Reading with conscious intent
5. Addressing Institutional Racism, Ableism, Sexism and Heteronormativity
6. Addressing Knowledge Fragmentation: Encouraging Trans-disciplinarity
7. Attending to decolonial pedagogy
8. Assessment for learning
9. Disrupting Colonial Lies
10. #StudentsMustRise

Collectively, these recommendations demonstrate how decolonization involves rethinking the histories and institutional cultures that shape knowledge production within the university. Notably, academics across UCT have made significant efforts to transform curricula and pedagogical practices that have historically privileged Western-centric systems of knowledge. A very good example is the establishment of the Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa led by Shose Kessi and Floretta Boonzaier in the Department of Psychology (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). The Hub represents a critical intervention into the discipline of Psychology by foregrounding African-centred, feminist, and decolonial approaches to knowledge production. In doing so, it challenges the historical dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in Psychology and creates space for more contextually grounded and socially responsive scholarship.

In addition to curriculum and pedagogy, institutional transformation has been reflected in broader structural changes within the university. These changes are not limited to the demographic profiles of staff and students; they also include an increase in Black academics in senior roles and administration, as well as a reduction in the segregation gap among students (Kessi, 2025). All these developments indicate attempts by the institution to address long-standing patterns of racial exclusion and inequality that have been deeply entrenched within the walls of UCT.

Over the past 11 years, some South African institutions have made greater efforts to counter racist epistemological violence in research, particularly scientific studies that reproduce colonial

representations of Black identities. In an opinion piece entitled "Racist Science: The Burden of Black Bodies and Minds" (2019), a group of decolonial literary scholars addressed the editors of *Aging, Neuropsychology and Cognition* journal, objecting to and calling for the retraction of a publication by Stellenbosch University (SU) academics that portray Black women through harmful stereotypes that degrade Black knowledge (Kessi, 2025; Boswell, et.al., 2019).

In response to growing objections to the proliferation of racist scientific studies, SU held a symposium on 're-structuring science and research' with the Psychology Society of South Africa (PsySSA) and the Psychology Department, which called for the article in question to be retracted. Soon after these objections were disseminated, UCT withdrew its affiliation from a study published by two authors – an academic from UCT's Graduate School of Business (GSB) and another from Université de Kinshasa (University of Kinshasa), DRC, entitled "Intelligence and Slave Exports from Africa," on the grounds that it "claimed that there is a relationship between race, more specifically blackness and African-ness, and impaired cognitive function" (Boswell et al., 2019). In the wake of these and other controversies, Kessi (2025) raises some thought-provoking questions:

What lingering violence needs to be addressed? When and in what form do they resurface? What policies, frameworks, and spaces acknowledge 'black pain' and its embodied manifestations and provocations? What tools are available to create spaces for inclusive forms of dialogue and engagement? (p. 11).

These questions remain deeply significant because they shift the conversation beyond the statue and monuments of transformation and compel a confrontation with the more subtle, enduring, and often invisible forms of colonial violence that continue to shape the contemporary university. Although statues have fallen, buildings have been renamed, and policies have been rewritten, the emotional, psychological, epistemological, and structural legacies of colonialism do not disappear as easily.

Coloniality persists across institutional cultures via whose scholarship is legitimized, whose pain is recognized, whose histories are remembered, and whose futures are imagined. In many ways, this demonstrates that decolonization is not a destination that can be achieved through policy reform, but rather via a continual process of unsettling power, interrogating inherited assumptions, and rebuilding institutions in ways that are genuinely attentive to justice, plurality, and human dignity. Thus, Kessi (2025) argues that the duty of Africans is to "stand firm against coloniality, reflect on epicolonial existence and to keep listening to both students and staff to better confront the institutional dynamics that keep reinventing themselves in ways that exclude and marginalize" (p. 11).

Indeed, one of RMF movement's greatest contributions is its ability to expose the hidden, intricate web of race, class, language, sexuality, labour, and knowledge production within higher education. In doing so, the persistence of epistemic injustice demonstrates that decolonization cannot be confined solely to questions of representation (i.e., statues or monuments). Increasing the number of Black academics and students within institutions is undeniably important, yet representation alone does not automatically dismantle colonial modes of thinking. The deeper challenge lies in transforming the epistemological foundations upon which

²<https://www.news.uct.ac.za/media/userfiles/downloads/reports/ccwg/UCT-Curriculum-Change-Framework.pdf>

universities are built. This involves critically interrogating whose knowledge is considered universal, objective, scientific, or authoritative, and whose knowledge continues to be marginalized or dismissed.

Furthermore, the movement has given rise to expanded conversations about intersectionality within higher education. RMF and subsequent movements, including Fees Must Fall and Patriarchy Must Fall, created space for broader discourse on gendered violence, queer exclusion, disability justice, mental health, worker exploitation, and the precarious conditions under which many Black students attempt to survive within Western-centric institutions (Daniel, 2021). In this regard, decolonization became inseparable from questions of social, emotional, economic, and psychological justice, enabling the public articulation of Black pain, alienation, and historical trauma within institutions that had long demanded silence, assimilation, or respectability from marginalized communities. Future research could therefore examine more closely how inequality shapes the lived experiences of students and staff within historically colonial institutions, particularly across intersectional forms of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class.

Prior to the RMF movement, many Black students and activists struggled to articulate the various forms of coloniality they experienced at UCT. Although they encountered racism, alienation, and institutional marginalization in their everyday lives, these experiences were often more normalized than understood as manifestations of deeper colonial structures embedded within higher education. As a result, many students experienced a profound sense of displacement without possessing the conceptual language to explain why they felt excluded from an institution that ostensibly promised equality and inclusion after apartheid. Reflecting on this experience, RMF activist Alax Hotz describes the latter as alienation: “Why do we feel we don’t belong in a place where we are supposed to be belonging?... What does the decolonization conversation mean for such a university?” (Cabe, 2023). Hotz’s reaction captures Black students’ exclusion of recognition, belonging, finances, knowledge, and culture. Regardless, one of the RMF movement’s successes is that it has given Black students a language to describe what they are going through in the university, and it has served as a moment of political awakening for many young people in the country who have become “disillusioned with the acceptance of the status quo” (Cabe, 2023).

Moreover, the significance of the RMF movement extends far beyond South Africa itself. The movement has become part of a broader global resurgence of decolonial struggles that question monuments, historical legacies, racial capitalism, and colonial violence across diverse parts globally. From the removal of Confederate statues in the United States to debates surrounding colonial memorials in the United Kingdom and Europe, the RMF movement has contributed to a transnational conversation about how societies remember, honour, and legitimize histories of oppression. In this regard, the movement has demonstrated the global relevance of African student activism and challenged assumptions that intellectual and political innovation must always emerge from the Global North.

Nevertheless, the work ahead remains profoundly unfinished: economic inequality continues to shape access to higher education (Boswell, et al. 2019; RMF Collective, 2025); student debt, financial exclusion, and lack of accommodations remains a major concern (Tembo, 2025); outsourced labour and precarious employment persist in various forms (RMF Collective, 2025); and colonial epistemologies continue to dominate many institutional spaces (Boswell, et al. 2019; Kessi, 2025). Moreover, broader societal crises,

including unemployment, gender-based violence, xenophobia, and deepening economic precarity, continue to shape the conditions under which students learn and universities operate (Kessi, 2025). These realities remind us that the university cannot be separated from the wider social, political, and economic structures within which it exists. Decolonizing the university, therefore, also requires confronting the broader legacies of colonialism and apartheid that continue to shape South African society at large.

Thus, more than a decade later, the RMF movement has given new meaning to Angela Davis’ famous call: “You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time” (Davis, 2014) and the UCT students have shown that such a path is entirely within the realm of possibility. The legacy of RMF lives in its modest victories and in the ongoing work of reimagining the university as a space of epistemic justice and liberation.

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