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Perspective

# Challenging Fanon: A Black radical feminist perspective on violence and the Fees Must Fall movement

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## abstract

FeesMustFall (FMF) as a radical and uncompromising movement has undoubtedly shaken the foundations of South Africa (SA). Utilising social media and other forms of protest, the students of SA formed a radical movement that not only challenged university policies, but also the State. Under the ideological banners of Pan-Africanism, Black Consciousness, Black radical feminism, queer theories and decolonisation, students aligned with outsourced, exploited workers to challenge universities to end the outsourcing of workers, and demand free education and the decolonisation of a Eurocentric higher education system. A fierce struggle between an under-resourced movement, highly resourced universities and a militarised State ensued. In response to the resilience and protest action of the FMF movement, different universities and the

State inflicted violence upon students and workers. Most protests across the country started out peaceful; however, because of the brutality of the State and universities, students soon retaliated. When students responded to the violence, the dominant South African discourse (including discourses produced and replicated by the media) labelled them as violent and unruly.

This perspective discusses the history of higher education and how this history was an essential tool in consolidating colonialism. Using Fanon as reference, I argue that SA is a colonial State that inflicts structural violence on poor Black South Africans daily. However, because State violence and structural racism is normalised, when the poor respond to structural violence they are problematised and criminalised. Therefore, I argue that when FMF students responded to the brutality of the State, violent police and militarised campuses during the protest, their actions were a response to structural violence.

I also explore the marginalisation and erasure of queer students, students living with disabilities and Black radical feminists who were instrumental in the building of the FMF movement. This perspective problematises how patriarchy, sexual violence, ableism and queer-antagonism were either normalised or ignored as negative elements of the movement. Using intersectionality as a radical Black feminist praxis, I critique the militarised masculine responses to institutionalised (State and university) violence embodied within FMF, and how this affected the movement internally. Intersectionality states that an individual experiences oppression on multiple levels. Oppression is not a single-axis issue; however, it is layered depending on one's race, class, gender and other forms of political and social structures (Crenshaw, 1991). Lastly, I will introduce the concept of what I call 'reflective responses to violence' as an alternative means of resistance.

keywords:

intersectionality

radical Black feminism

reflective responses to violence

militarised masculinities

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## Notes

1 This student has been kept anonymous for fear of victimization.

# Additional information

## Notes on contributors



Wanelisa Xaba

WANELISA XABA is a Black radical feminist activist, decolonial writer and thinker. She started her activism aged 15 as a children's rights activist, engaging policy makers from the Department of Social Development regarding interventions for orphaned and vulnerable children. In her undergraduate career at the University of Cape Town she was part of a collective called Conscious Conversation, which partnered with the Vice Chancellor's office and Transformation office to facilitate discussion about race, justice and restitution. She is the founding member of the South African Young Feminist Activists. Wanelisa is currently finishing her Master's in Social Development, which focuses on undergraduate students' experiences of Blackness and how Black students navigate institutions of higher learning. She has been involved in the #FeesMustFall protests, and has also worked on documenting LGBTIQ hate crimes in SA with Iranti-org. She presents workshops on decolonisation and is interested in using decolonisation for intervention in violence against women, girls and the LGBTIQ community. Email: [wanelisa.sayf@gmail.com](mailto:wanelisa.sayf@gmail.com)

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