

The African University as a site of protest: decolonisation, praxis, and the Black Student Movement at the University Currently Known as Rhodes¹

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Abstract

During 2015, students at South African universities raised the question of 'decolonisation' of higher education. Their struggles against race-, class-, and gender-based oppressions and against scheduled national tuition increases have been considered by some to be 'a moment of possibilities' for South African universities. This paper focuses on the case of the Black Student Movement at The University Currently Known as Rhodes, in Grahamstown. It builds on Naicker (2016), who considers how the student movements brought what she calls 'subaltern' politics and practices into the 'civil society' space of universities. Two questions form the core of this paper: What is the significance of a student political praxis that resembles 'subaltern' political praxis? What does this mean for decolonisation of South African universities and for the idea of an 'African university'? The argument imagines, through the praxis of students, the possibility of constituting the university—an African university—as a site of protest. These questions are considered through the politics practiced, contested, and contradicted in the Black Student Movement Commons, a site of occupation from 26 August to 2 October 2015. Through successes and failures of this politics, some direction is proposed in regard to the 'possibilities' that emerged through the student movements.

Keywords: Black Student Movement; South Africa; decolonisation; student movements; praxis; African university

Decolonisation and popular politics in the university

In late October of 2015, student protests at South African universities culminated in a countrywide revolt, 'FeesMustFall' (FMF), which succeeded in preventing a scheduled tuition increase for 2016. Student movements around the country had organised and mobilised during the year with the project of 'decolonising' their universities: exposing and challenging exclusionary and oppressive institutional structures and cultures reflecting colonial traditions and logics. In March, seven months before the FMF revolt, students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) threw buckets of shit onto a statue of Cecil

¹ This name for Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa is widely used by students, and has some currency among academics and the public. It indicates support for name change and for necessary practical and political changes to the institution that could signify 'decolonisation'.

Rhodes, and 'the Rhodes Must Fall movement (RMF) was born', bringing 'thousands of students' from UCT into 'a conversation to decolonize the university' (Naicker 2015, np). Protest quickly spread from UCT to South Africa's other elite, historically white universities. Unlike frequent student protests (including during 2015 and 2016), at historically black and currently under-resourced institutions, these protests at elite universities garnered extensive media attention. Writing on the student revolt on 21 October 2015, a day of South Africa-wide student protest action, Richard Pithouse, a senior researcher at the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR), observed, 'There is now a national movement, a movement with critical mass, a movement with all kinds of connections outside universities, a movement that has come to voice and power at a time when the ANC [African National Congress] no longer enjoys the hegemony it once did [...]'. It was, in the face of corporatisation and neo-liberalisation of universities that 'militates against the imperative to deracialize and decolonise', 'a moment of possibilities' (2016a, 193-194).

In the context of a movement for 'decolonisation', what are the possibilities? Decolonisation is itself a contested concept, and under its wide conceptual arch are found proponents of reactionary as well as revolutionary discourses and politics, all staking claim to and making great use of the word 'decolonisation'. In the context of university struggles, Achille Mbembe argues that decolonisation of 'knowledge and the university as an institution' means contesting Western epistemology that has 'not only become hegemonic', but 'also actively represses anything that actually is articulated, thought and envisioned from outside of these frames' (2015, 10). According to Mbembe, decolonisation is a matter of 'de-privatization and rehabilitation of the public space' in relation to the idea of 'the common'; it is, crucially, a matter of 'reshaping' without necessary reference to 'pre-existing models' (2015, 5; 12-13).

During the student political activity in 2015, discussions of what it meant to be a 'university in Africa' or an 'African university' were common. Students were critical of institutional cultures, racial compositions of academic staff and students, and curriculums 'that did not reflect the locality of the university or its place within the African continent' (Naicker 2015, 54). Some have been critical of the idea of 'Africanisation', including Mamdani, who argues that it amounts to politically limited deracialisation of power (1996, 20), and Mbembe, who similarly argues, via Fanon, that Africanisation and decolonisation are different processes, the former a product of nationalism (2015, np). However, while certain strains of nationalism possibly existed among the politically active students of 2015, the South African student revolt was fundamentally a critique of the African National Congress (ANC) government and its political choices since 'national liberation' in 1994. Perhaps more significantly, the currency of the idea of an 'African university' in the midst of a moment of popular struggle suggests that the concept of 'Africanisation' may be evolving, and that, in post-apartheid South Africa, certain forms of 'Africanisation' may extend deeper than deracialisation or African nationalism and present political junctures of real significance. The purpose here is not to suggest that only one understanding of decolonisation was articulated and acted upon by students, for many were and

are current in student political circles. This is a discussion of how decolonisation can be argued to have been articulated and acted upon in specific political circumstances, by one movement, for a short period of time. We will turn to that account, shortly.

In a theoretical treatment of the student movements of 2015, Nigel Gibson reflects on Frantz Fanon's critique of political elites and intellectuals as incapable of 'rationaliz[ing] popular praxis'. Gibson suggests a 'meaning of decolonization as a real substitution (that is not mediated by a leader, or organization) but grounded by a critical engagement with the rationality of popular praxis' (2016, 15). The 'liberal intelligentsia', Gibson continues, 'could not make sense of the student movements', their rationality, and their unique contribution to various processes of decolonisation, because the students' politics and actions 'betrayed' the 'values' of 'civil society' (2016, 15). Indeed, the student movements of 2015—which have continued in more localised fashion into 2016—were not only critical of their universities (bastions of civil society), but actively disrupted them in various ways. The concept of 'disruption' was understood differently by different student activists. For some it was symbolic or performative, for others a matter of ensuring that no university activities could take place without their demands being addressed, for many a combination of these; likewise, the actions that students chose—graffiti, interrupting examinations, mass mobilisation—were motivated by different ideas of disruption. The greatest difference was between students who saw disruption as their objective and those who considered it tactically necessary to fostering a different politics in their universities. These two ideologies were not always at odds with one another, as student movement politics was a combination of many ways of thinking.

Complexities of this sort were ingrained in the 'rationale' of the student movements, and, from this complexity, students developed their politics locally and linked them to the politics of the broader student movement and to the contemporary moment of popular politics in South Africa. Significantly for this discussion of praxis, Camalita Naicker has written on the idea of popular politics in the university space in South Africa. She observes,

[W]hat happened at South African Universities culminating in the #feesmustfall movement, can be seen as a proliferation of the kinds of political praxis that is often used, and seen as, outside of the institutional space. Mainly black students, who felt marginalised and excluded from institutional culture and practices of the liberal university, adopted political practices that are closer to urban social movements and independent strike committees than traditional unions and political parties (2016, 57).

Indeed, at both historically white and historically black institutions of higher education, student protest activity included practices, such as road blockades and collective decision making, which have frequently been employed by both urban and rural popular movements in South Africa. Furthermore, Naicker

argues that students were able to create alliances with workers and with community struggles, as at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, where students fought to end outsourcing of workers, and UCKAR in Grahamstown, where students had connections with the local Unemployed People's Movement (2016).

Naicker's argument raises some important questions: What is the significance of a student political praxis that resembles what she refers to as 'subaltern'² political praxis? What does this mean in regard to the students' professed project of decolonisation of South African universities? These two questions form the core of this paper. In brief, the argument imagines, through the praxis of students, the possibility of constituting the university—an African university—as a site of protest. There are important South African comparisons for this idea that build upon Naicker's demonstration of the links between student and popular politics, which will be discussed. This is not an argument for permanent marches, demonstrations, and clashes with university management and police, but for a reconstituting of the university as decolonised and decolonising, as a contestation of a colonial and colonising institution. This, at least in contemporary circumstances, does suggest that some form of active militancy will be ongoing, whether this involves protest action or other political acts. Knowledge production can itself be a form of protest, significantly, as philosopher Lewis Gordon argues, against the colonial 'geography of reason', which presumes 'the global situation of the center and its concomitant organization of knowledges into knowledge' (2011, 95). Ultimately, this shift lies at the heart of the African university as a site of protest—the acts of learning and knowledge production as forms of (decolonising) political protest. This paper primarily deals with overt modes of protest, but modes that envisioned a project of learning as protest that, at least conceptually, went beyond local contestation of structures and logics that obtained in one institution. This discussion of student praxis also provides an opportunity to begin to interrogate some of the political problems that arose in the course of the student protests of 2015, and ways in which these problems for praxis suggest a way forward for the university as a site of protest. This interrogation forms the conclusion of the paper.

Although the student movements of 2015 achieved successful semi-coordination in October in the FMF campaign, and there were ongoing interactions among student activists from different universities throughout the year, their experiences were also local, with politics, actions, and problems arising from specific circumstances at each university. This inquiry focuses on the Black Student Movement (BSM), which organised at UCKAR in Grahamstown in the

² This work has no intention of loyalty to subaltern theories or theorists. Attending to the many strains and critiques of 'subaltern studies' can be more distracting than fruitful. Defining 'the subaltern' or 'subalterneity', arguing whether these are fixed or flexible concepts—or not concepts at all but specific types or groups of people—are some of the debates which I seek to avoid here. Compellingly simply, Cox and Nilsen define 'subaltern groups' as 'social movements from below' seeking to change the status quo and 'develop alternative social orders' (2014, 2). This will be the definition employed here.

Eastern Cape Province. The information about the movement is drawn from the BSM's public statements, from articles published by BSM members, from the author's experience of participation, and, most importantly, from the experiences of other student activists who were members of BSM or activists who participated in BSM activities. The conclusions drawn from this one example of student politics are, of course, only partially applicable to other experiences of student politics in South Africa in 2015. Likewise, this is necessarily a partial narrative and analysis of the BSM, focused around the specific questions asked in this paper. Complete histories of the BSM and other student movements at South African universities in 2015 would be important additions to the record.

The Black Student Movement

The BSM first mobilised in the rain on Tuesday, 17 March 2015, during an outdoor public meeting organised in solidarity with the Rhodes Must Fall protests that had begun on 9 March 2015 in Cape Town. The Rhodes Must Fall campaign had resonance with students at a university named after the same Rhodes whose statue and legacy were being contested at UCT. At the 17 March meeting, students took turns speaking through a loudhailer, voicing their experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and a generally exclusionary institutional culture. The students called for a name change as an important step in 'transformation' or 'decolonisation' of the university, as well as for practical changes to improve the experiences of, especially, black and working-class students in the university, who felt neither at home nor able to cope. Jonis Ghedi Alasow, a student activist at UCKAR, explained this link between symbolic and practical decolonisation, 'The name must change and it will change [...]. But the more fundamental change, which is even more urgently necessary, is a shift away from the colonial logic that this University continues to embody and propagate,' so that, even with a name change, 'Rhodes University does not become, say, Stephen Bantu Biko University, whilst continuing to be an institution of which Cecil John Rhodes would be proud' (Ghedi Alasow, 2015, np).

After an hour, recognising that students had classes to attend, the organisers of the meeting suggested that the meeting conclude with a march into and through the university's main administration building, nearby. Many of the gathered students began a slow-moving march towards the building, singing, but the doors were shut and locked against them, and the Campus Protection Unit quickly arrived. One student organiser announced, with some humour, the arrival of the 'repressive apparatuses', and the meeting disbanded. The students had been openly political and also managed to draw a section of the student body into their political conversation about oppressive institutional culture and the growing conversation on decolonisation. However, they also elicited a demonstration that their form of politics was not welcome at the university.

The experience of speaking openly their critique of the university combined with the lockout and news of growing protest in Cape Town imparted a sense of urgency to the new movement. Over the next several days, the BSM organised meetings to plan further mobilisations. The movement also released a manifesto explicating its position, motivation, and purpose. The first paragraph of the BSM Manifesto³ reads:

The Black Student Movement is a group of students concerned about the institutional culture of Rhodes University. This institution is exclusionary to the disadvantaged and marginalised students who are just as much a part of the university but do not receive any support. This movement came out of conversations about our personal experiences as marginalised students who are not able to cope because of the structural, class-based, and intellectual oppression of the Rhodes environment. There are students suffering due to the inequalities and injustices they face daily. We formed the Black Student Movement to take the responsibility of eradicating this structural, class-based, and intellectual oppression.

Beyond this statement of purpose, three significant ideas are articulated in the BSM Manifesto: the project of decolonisation; the centrality of the university, students and study to the movement; and a democratic political praxis.

The BSM professed a duty 'to challenge the colonial legacy and symbols that confront us every day', including the colonial name of the institution. 'It is twenty-one years after democracy in South Africa,' the Manifesto reads, 'and we are still battling for transformation'. The first three items in the Manifesto's second section, 'Our Objectives', can be read as relating directly to this project of decolonisation. These are: the name change, the eradication of racism, and the re-politicization of the student body at UCKAR. However, other objectives are also important in regard to decolonisation. These include: supporting international students, many of whom come from other African countries and face similar problems of access to and exclusion within the university; changing the university's exclusionary culture; ending hunger and financial exclusion at the university, and changing the curriculum. There is a *specific* conception of decolonisation that can be defined in the BSM Manifesto and which was attempted in action; it was, crucially, political, practical, and intellectual.

In regard to the university, the BSM announced their 'duty to work with students who are struggling academically', and their commitment to multi-lingualism and 'intellectual diversity'. The BSM committed to 'provide a platform where we can work together in our academics', to tutor students, to 'fight for assistance' for students without access to computers or internet at home, and to fight for curriculum changes that would 'include important

³ First public on 19 March 2015

thinkers like Stephen Bantu Biko, Angela Davis, Frantz Fanon, and other African scholars in the Rhodes curriculum’.

Several points in the BSM Manifesto relate to praxis, both internally and in relation to society. Among the objectives is ‘remain[ing] a participatory, democratic movement’ that will ‘constantly engage with students in order to identify their concerns and struggles, and to take these seriously’. The link between forms of politics and struggle that Naicker has identified were explicitly part of the founding principles and plan that the BSM set out in its manifesto, as the BSM extended its solidarity to ‘the wider community of Grahamstown in their struggles against continued colonial oppression’ and to ‘academic[s] and staff in their battles for transformation’ (Black Student Movement, 2015a).⁴

It is important to note that the movement did not work towards all twenty of the objectives listed in its Manifesto, although they were all (and are still) important. These objectives were largely inspired by and compiled from the issues students had raised publically at the first meeting on 17 March. It was an ambitious list that assumed a long-lived movement, but it was also a way of communicating the movement’s purpose and thinking through its future actions. Although issues identified in the Manifesto are not resolved, or addressed, or, for some, even thoroughly discussed, the objectives in the BSM Manifesto could still function to communicate and to think through a course of action to change the university currently known as Rhodes.

One objective listed in the Manifesto came to underpin the single most important mobilisation organised by the BSM: ‘To stand for those who are being vacated from the Rhodes University residences during holidays’. On Monday, 23 March, less than a week after it first mobilised, the BSM began its first campaign, ‘We Are Not Leaving’, which challenged the university policy that required students to leave during the two short vacations each year or to pay a fee in order to remain in residences (ZAR3900 and ZAR2080 for March and September, respectively). The compulsory costs of either travel or the residence fees caused financial hardship for some students and their families: just one way in which the university was exclusionary of poor or working-class students, the majority of whom are black. The protest action, which threatened occupation of university buildings if students were not allowed to remain in residences free of charge during the March vacation, achieved negotiated resolutions with the university administration, but no long term resolutions. Some students receiving assistance from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) were assisted with travel funds by the university, but these were ad hoc arrangements. The university’s failure to announce a long term plan led the BSM to remobilise the ‘We Are Not Leaving’ campaign beginning Monday, 24 August 2015, before the short vacation in September. A Vice-Chancellor’s

⁴ More than one revision process of the BSM Manifesto was begun but never completed. By the end of 2015, the manifesto had become largely irrelevant to the BSM after a breakdown and shift in focus away from many of its early commitments—the result of personal power struggles. However, when the movement first mobilised, the document was widely accepted by active students.

circular of the same day announced a plan regarding accommodation for the vacation. The BSM 'discussed the circular with students and identified several problems. These were presented to the VC, and a second meeting was set for 26 August to hear the VC's response' (Black Student Movement, 2015b). Among the problems identified were that the plan required students to 'perform poverty', and, perhaps more cogently, that their performance *did not guarantee* accommodation, as the university could still deny them assistance (Black Student Movement, 2015b). Failure to reach an agreement with the university led the BSM to begin an occupation of the university's Council Chambers beginning on Wednesday, 26 August 2015. The Chambers were renamed the Black Student Movement Commons.⁵

It is important that the BSM did not see their action regarding short vacation accommodation as simply a practical matter of access, but a political matter of access. In a statement of 1 September 2015, the movement affirmed, 'The BSM, as part of an undertaking to *decolonise the University*, has made it clear that it seeks a sustainable solution to the exclusionary arrangements for short vacations' (Black Student Movement, 2015c; emphasis added). The occupation was also intended to provide a place to eat and to sleep for students who actually could not afford the fees; this did not exclude other students from staying in the Commons during the week of the vacation. It is the politics and praxis that developed during what became a month-long occupation of the Commons which form the core of the argument here. Internal struggles within the movement during the occupation disrupted this politics and praxis (see below), and provide opportunity for further discussion of the comparison and connection Naicker makes between student and community struggles.

The 'BSM Commons'

During the occupation of the BSM Commons, which lasted from 26 August until 2 October 2015, what were usually the empty Council Chambers became a thriving space of politics, study, engagement, and protest. Nathan Kabingesi, an Economics student and member of BSM in 2015 says, 'What came to be known as the Commons during the occupation was transformed into a space that no longer celebrated the elitism that had become synonymous with the university'.⁶ In direct contrast to the décor throughout the rest of the main Administration building—dreary portraits of bygone Vice-Chancellors—the walls of the BSM

⁵ There was also a major occupation at UCT, where Bremner House was dubbed 'Azania House', in the tradition of Black Consciousness. This occupation lasted from 20 March until 12 April 2015. There was also an occupation at Wits, where Senate House was renamed 'Solomon Mahlangu House', after a member of uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) executed by the apartheid state in 1979. It is important to note that RMF and the BSM were distinct movements, and student politics varied across universities. This study and narrative should not be understood to apply to other occupations. Another study that considers together the different student occupations of 2015 would be valuable.

⁶ Personal correspondence, 20 September 2016

Commons were decorated with photographs of dozens of black intellectuals, artists, and revolutionaries. The photos were diverse: African, global, from different struggles and different times. Among the many people honoured there were Angela Davis, Steve Biko, Albertina and Walter Sisulu, Bob Marley, Frantz Fanon, Ellen Kuzwayo, Frederick Douglass, Maya Angelou, Robert Sobukwe, Harriet Tubman, Miriam Makeba, Patrice Lumumba, and Malcolm X. The many faces arrayed around the Commons contradicted the pomp, tradition, patriarchy, whiteness, and hierarchy of the Vice-Chancellors' portraits. What had been a sanctuary of solemnised, unimaginative bureaucracy had become a democratic, multilingual, and politicised commons where different practices, inspired by 'decolonisation', had replaced the procedural status quo as the mode of operation.

'The fact', says Kabingsesi, 'that so many marginalised students felt alienated at the university currently known as Rhodes [...], makes the occupation of the [C]ouncil [C]hambers, a room that for most students was remote and inaccessible, a powerful act in itself.'⁷ The Chambers were 'remote and inaccessible' in a political sense: This is where important university decisions are made, without student involvement except for the all-but-token inclusion of the Student Representative Council (SRC) President on a Council of twenty-nine unelected members with all senior university administrators in attendance. Students also questioned the role and legitimacy of the SRC as representatives of the student body during the year. Generally, in 2015, the BSM considered the SRC to be a part of the institutional structure and culture and not a real or potential driver of change. Relationships between SRCs and student movements have differed across universities, and sometimes been erratic. At UCKAR, in March 2015, the SRC President called for government intervention to stop protests (Koyana, 2015). In July 2015, after the resignation of several SRC members, including the President, the SRC came out in support of a name change (Sokana, 2015). Support from the SRC for protesters' objectives and from protesters for the SRC has continued to be unstable in 2016.⁸ In organising and occupying, students no longer accepted "the whims and will" of management⁹ and institutional structures like Council and the SRC to decide their future. It did not mean a capture of power, but a contestation.

In the Commons, student occupiers held frequent meetings to strategise, to respond to changing circumstances and to the actions of the university management, and to collectively discuss the content of movement statements. This was practical and political work. Kabingsesi explains that 'the context of the occupation, the demands for the equitable treatment of students who could neither afford to stay in residences during vacation or go home, [...] went

⁷ Personal correspondence, 20 September 2016

⁸ The relationships between student movements and SRCs at South African universities is another topic that would be valuable to the study of recent student protest.

⁹ Kabingsesi, personal correspondence, 20 September 2016

beyond any merely symbolic gesture'.¹⁰ There were other times when everyone in the room sang—borrowing songs from the anti-apartheid struggle, and revising some of the lyrics for the student struggle—and the singing, clapping, and stamping of feet echoed throughout the administration building. In this regard, the occupation was a sustained escalation of similar brief disruptions that had happened throughout the year, when the BSM staged marches to meet with the university management or to deliver memoranda.

The Commons was not, however, chaotic. There were times when it had the unmistakable character and activity of a university, carried on alongside the work of political activism and protest. Protesters studied, read, and wrote for their courses. To complement the symbolic inspiration of the photographs, the BSM established a library; many of the authors to be found there were also among the faces on the walls. Siviwe Mhlana, who participated in the occupation as a third-year Commerce student, recalls, 'A lot of people thought we were just these delinquents', but 'while we were protesting, we were protesting as students, so while the protest action and things were happening, people were constantly working. [...] We tried to make the space suitable for both political objectives and academic objectives'.¹¹ Similarly, Kabingesi explains, 'The mantra of "protest and pass" put paid to the notion that protesting and studying were somehow mutually exclusive' and also challenged the perception of the occupiers as 'hooligans' because 'disruption was not necessarily destructive'.¹²

Achieving this balance was a matter of praxis: of working together, discussing, debating, and arriving at decisions. As Mhlana puts it, expressing the fundamental challenge of popular politics: 'We had to figure out what to do'. The occupiers decided that the room next to the main Council Chamber was designated for sleeping and for working in silence, while the main room was for daily large meetings, conversation, as well as work. Mhlana continues, 'You [were] responsible for the space you [were] sharing with other people. It was a completely different world than existed outside of that space. Everyone had a responsibility to that place, and that wasn't gendered'.¹³ Tasks such as arranging and attending meetings with university representatives or community members, or writing statements, were managed by 'task teams' chosen by nomination and volunteering, or by individuals chosen in the same way. It was common for a BSM member to suggest a different person for a task than had volunteered, so that work might be shared more evenly, different people would have opportunities to be involved, the university would have less opportunity to single out individuals as leaders, and to make sure that female and LGBTQ students were not overlooked. The work of living in and working in the place was meant to be equally shared, although some students came to feel they were

¹⁰ Personal correspondence, 20 September 2016

¹¹ Author interview, 5 August 2016.

¹² Personal correspondence, 20 September 2016

¹³ Author interview, 5 August 2016

acting more responsibly than others. This was not a repudiation of the communal project, but a difficulty these particular students faced in managing it.

The engagements in the Commons were rich. Jonis Ghedi Alasow, an MA student in the Humanities faculty and participant in the Commons, explains, 'There were interesting debates and discussions, articles were being written inside the commons, and every night the meeting was intense and productive. One came to understand the conditions that led the different members into that room and ideas about "where to from here" were imaginative'.¹⁴ This was both an educational and political process, and it helped expand individual students' experience beyond specific disciplines. As Mhlana explains, students' learning expanded outside the boundaries of their respective faculties; in particular 'there was a lot of political education happening in the conversations we were having with each other'. These conversations, which were 'always educational', also went beyond the 'main objectives' of the occupation. For instance, although the occupation was motivated by the vacation accommodation issue, 'We'd have conversations about the oppression of women in political spaces', or about 'economics and commerce, but not necessarily the colonial versions that occurred in class'. 'We had a meeting about language,' she remembers, 'about what language we were prioritizing, about people using the language they were comfortable in, which is something missing in South African universities'. These were 'tools to critique the colonial space'.¹⁵

Gender was considered carefully in the Commons. At most meetings, women were selected (through nomination) as chairpersons. Women and LGBTQ members were also often selected to represent the movement in public demonstrations or meetings. This was a self-conscious practice intended to disrupt the sexist cultures of politics as well as of the university. Many participants understood and discussed this practice in terms of 'intersectionality': the student struggle for a decolonised university must (or did) take into account the struggles of women and LGBTQ people in a patriarchal society as linked to the struggles of black people in a racist and society.¹⁶ The position of class in this discourse proved contentious, as will be discussed below. It was not always a straightforward politics or practice, and disagreements, some constructive and some harmful, arose from the discussions and practices around gender.

There are other instances in South Africa of the joining of study and protest, or protest and knowledge production—perhaps, 'protest universities'—which are useful to thinking about the BSM Commons. These are not the only examples of

¹⁴ Personal correspondence, 7 August 2016.

¹⁵ Author interview, 5 August 2016.

¹⁶ One of the failings of the BSM Manifesto was that it did not explicitly take a stand against gender-based oppressions. Nevertheless, sexism and patriarchy were frequently addressed in BSM meetings, and as the movement evolved it took on this politics seriously.

'protest universities', either in South Africa or in global struggles, but they illustrate the concepts under discussion here.

On Robben Island during apartheid, the political prisoners formed themselves into a university. 'We became', Nelson Mandela writes in his autobiography, 'our own faculty, our own professors, our own curriculum, our own courses' (1995: 556). Crucially, this was an act of protest: it was done outside of the prison regulations; banned subjects such as politics were taught; and it was informed by the anti-colonial struggle in which the prisoners were involved. It was a university dedicated to learning, but also constituted through and in protest. Important to this discussion is Aaron Bady's critical observation that 'in fetishizing the prison as university, we risk the suggestion that revolutionaries had to be disciplined by incarceration before they—and the masses they represented—were prepared for the burdens of self-governance' (2014, 109). The university on Robben Island was not a matter of successful institutionalisation, but rather a successful anti-institutional project that helped sustain anti-colonial consciousness. Anti-institutional politics and knowledge are important to the argument here. While political imprisonment is not a requirement either of political struggle or of an African university, historical moments such as this are important in considering a future for universities that are decolonized and African.

In the post-apartheid period, the ANC is no longer engaged in organising but in repressing protest and other forms of popular political praxis that Naicker observes moving into elite university spaces (2016). An important, contemporary example of a 'protest university' is the 'University of Abahlali baseMjondolo'. Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) is a Durban-based 'organisation of the militant poor' (abahlali.org, 2006), who have faced violent (and illegal) eviction and repression from the state, especially the local ANC, when they assert their right to urban land for housing: actions of lived necessity that are termed 'land invasions' by the state. AbM are engaged in the forms of popular political praxis that Naicker characterises as subaltern. AbM explains on their website: 'Abahlali [baseMjondolo] has been an intellectually serious project from the beginning. Among the banners painted in Kennedy Road while people were singing against the army who were occupying the settlement back in 2005 was a key slogan – the "University of Kennedy Road". After that a "University of Foreman Road" was declared [...] and then a "University of Abahlali baseMjondolo" (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2016). According to the former president of AbM, S'bu Zikode, 'We have often said that struggle is a school. The first point of learning is the thinking that people do about their situation, their struggle and how their struggle is received. But there is also learning that comes from the solidarity that a struggle experiences once it is in motion' (in Gibson, 2011, vi). This is theorised and organised in opposition to the brand of intellectualism, of 'the state and the institutionalised left' that is premised on the idea that 'the poor should not think their own politics' and that such thinking constitutes a criminal breach of order (Abahlali baseMjondolo, 2016). As Anna Selmeczi has shown, AbM's invocation of the 'university' is an appeal to 'people higher up in the social hierarchy to directly experience life in the

informal settlements', as well as a declaration of equality of knowledge, based on experience and suffering as a form of knowledge (2012, 510).

A similar critique through popular political logic of both word and action appeared in the thinking of BSM. The institutional approach was opposed by a very different politics. We can first recall the statements made in the BSM Manifesto that are critical of an exclusionary institutional culture. The changed name of the rooms that the BSM occupied is also significant, first as it modelled the name change that they sought for the university and secondly because of the political idea of a 'commons'. In accord with student practices, Mbembe writes, 'The decolonization of buildings and of public spaces is inseparable from the democratization of access.' This, he writes, 'starts with a redefinition of what is public, i.e., what pertains to the realm of the common and as such, does not belong to anyone in particular because it must be equally shared between equals' (2015, np). Returning to the similarity in practices between students and community struggles that Naicker identifies, we can make a further comparison or juxtaposition of BSM with AbM. In an article on 'Decolonising the Commune', Pithouse describes AbM's 'homemade' politics, in which 'autonomy was taken seriously' not 'as an exodus from sites of constituted power', but as 'a political commitment that would enable effective collective engagement on other terrains', like in the media or university space (2016c, np). AbM's politics includes actual occupation of urban land. BSM's came to involve actual occupation of university spaces, similar in many respects to what Pithouse identifies in AbM: a 'political form of the commune [...] understood as the self-management of a spatially delimited community under popular democratic authority' (2016c, np). Significantly, in the context of comparison to community struggles, the BSM Commons was organised around living as well as protesting. Ghedi Alasow comments that, in the Commons, 'There was also time for eating, doing homework, laughing, joking and just being normal and not intensely political. Perhaps what I found best about it is that this was all happening organically and *at the same time*'.¹⁷ While students argued that they could not be comfortable in the institution of the university, there was a sense that, despite the pressures of the protests, the BSM Commons was different. There was 'a level of respect among people as comrades' that Mhlana found unique.¹⁸

Connections to community struggles were not only theoretical. As Naicker notes, there was a relationship between the BSM and the local Unemployed People's Movement (UPM). UPM organised in Grahamstown in 2009, as organiser Ayanda Kota explains it, to offer 'a dissenting voice' in the absence of actual democracy and a corrupt municipality.¹⁹ Their first action was against the 'bucket [toilet] system' in Grahamstown, demanding the dignity of proper toilets for all residents. They demonstrated the urgency of the matter by dumping the

¹⁷ Personal correspondence, 7 August 2016.

¹⁸ Author interview, 5 August 2016.

¹⁹ Author interview, 9 March 2015.

bucket toilets in the foyer of City Hall. Today, UPM continues to contest issues including housing, land, water, education, sexual violence, and corruption.

From the time that UCKAR students began sustained organisation in March 2015, UPM was involved and offered support, which usually took the form of UPM's participation in marches, attendance at student political meetings, and of informal discussions with student activists. BSM and UPM planned a joint march from the township to the university on 28 May 2015 under the banner 'Decolonise this Institution', in order to highlight the colonial character of Grahamstown and the university's position in it. The university's site at the extreme western end of Grahamstown, opposite the eastern townships and shack settlements, emphasises its elite-ness, its inaccessibility, and its distance from the black and poor residents of the city. Although miscommunications resulted in only a small number of UPM members participating in this march, the BSM, joined en route by some members of the community, undertook the march. A few members of UPM were also members of the BSM, for much of the year. UPM, and, to a somewhat lesser degree, BSM, viewed collaboration as a necessary part of their programs, explained through a discourse of uniting student and community struggles. Partly because the BSM was relatively short-lived as a potent force, it did not fully commit to actions of solidarity with community and workers' struggles, although it articulated solidarity clearly (for example, see the BSM Manifesto, quoted above).

Members of UPM also participated in the occupation in September. The participation of UPM brought a different dimension to the occupation and its decolonising project, in which community members accessed the elite space named after a British imperialist and mass exploiter of southern African people. The student struggle's objectives of improving the experience and access of working-class, black students at UCKAR is an important one in Grahamstown, where high school matriculation rates (except at the expensive, elite high schools) are extremely low (Westaway, 2015), and very few local students attend the university within walking distance of their homes. Although durable links were not maintained between the BSM and UPM as movements, there were opportunities, the occupation included, for linking the two struggles. Mziyanda Bulani, a member of UPM, observes that UPM's participation in the occupation had two dimensions: sharing of ideas and solidarity. Remarking on the occupation, Bulani says, 'we didn't have all the answers', which meant that sharing of ideas was necessary inside the BSM Commons. As participants, and because UPM members were affected by the student struggle, they 'had to share [their] ideas with the students'. Bulani notes that students could 'take or not' from these ideas, but opportunities were present in the BSM Commons for developing praxis jointly with a community-based social movement from outside the university, not only for adopting their practices within the university. On solidarity, Bulani says, 'We learn[ed] more about sharing the pain with students, black lecturers, and workers of the university who were affected directly by some of the things that were happening inside the boundaries of the university'. With this knowledge, and, I would add, from their experience as activists, UPM members were able to lend what Bulani calls

'moral support' to some students when they were discouraged.²⁰ Through UPM's small but significant presence in the BSM Commons, sharing, learning, and solidarity form a praxis within the broad moment of the occupation.

A certain political logic emerges through these aspects of the BSM Commons. Ghedi Alasow writes of the BSM, 'the movement positions itself as diametrically opposed to the passively liberal politics which is rife in historically white universities across the country' which has two key assumptions: first, that 'those who exist in the peripheries of this institution – and our society – can simply get together, sign a petition and have their grievances addressed', and, second, that 'those who are protesting are asking to be integrated into the system that currently excludes them'. In this imposed 'methodology of participation', the status quo is protected 'via appeals to the right way of doing things'; but, 'the BSM is not interested in the "right" way of doing things' (2015, np).

The African university as a site of protest

Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor and Rector of the University of the Free State (UFS),²¹ one of the many sites of student protest in South Africa, was one critic of the student protests and protesters who had a clear idea of the 'right way of doing things'. He claims that the protests would ruin South African tertiary education by scaring away 'external investments' and 'top scholars', until 'what we will be left with is our low-level training colleges rather than leading universities' (2016, np). His argument is based in neo-liberal assumptions of the university as a market (which were rejected by protesting students), and turns to essentially charging the students with conspiracy against these assumptions:

There is a reason this new brand of protests has identified our leading universities. The idea for some of the most dangerous protesters is to raze to the ground these prized institutions of higher learning until all 26 public universities are indistinguishable in their academic capacities or ambitions (2016, np).

Jansen is writing in 2016, when confrontations between student protesters and police had become more frequently violent during a serious pushback through securitisation of campuses and repression of protest. These circumstances had hardened some strains of student politics and factored in discussions of 'cleansing violence' heard in the complex world of student activism.²² However, it was at Jansen's own UFS that reactionary students and other spectators at a

²⁰ Personal correspondence, 29 August 2016.

²¹ Jansen will be taking up a new post at Stanford University in the United States after 2016.

²² See Pithouse, 2016b.

rugby match violently attacked peaceful protesters that had interrupted the match on 22 February 2016 (News24, 2016).²³

Jansen's reaction to students is a defense of universities as certain kinds of institutions, not of universities as places of learning, per se. Institutional status quo lies at the heart of Jansen's argument: the 'top universities' were 'built up steadily over a century' and 'the threat to safety and stability' has led 'big donors' to begin to 'withdraw their money' and allowed less time for the recruitment of scholars (2016, np). The same logic is expressed in an article that links UCKAR financial difficulties to the student protests, and in the university's implementation of 'austerity measures' (Phakathi, 2016, np). The argument works through the two assumptions that Ghedi Alasow identifies in 'liberal politics' (see above); Johnson claims that the protests 'were never about "transformation"', and the 'violent protesters'—the great majority of whom he perceives as violent for disrupting institutions, not committing violence—'could not have chosen more vulnerable institutions than universities to cause lasting damage to sites of learning that could lift millions out of poverty with a first degree in the family' (2016, np)

This argument for indebtedness to donors and institutions inflects with neo-liberalism an apartheid logic that led to student protests in South Africa in 1976: "In urban areas, the education of a Black child is being paid for by the White population, that is English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking groups. Therefore the Secretary for Bantu Education has a responsibility towards English- and Afrikaans-speaking groups" (in Nieftagodien, 2014, 54). The universities have responsibilities to their donors, which Jansen shifts onto the students. For their part, students advanced opposing arguments that their universities were neither improving the lives of most South Africans, nor were they designed to do so.

Writing in Uganda, in an essay that invokes the student movements in South Africa, Bwesigye Bwa Mwesigire critiques a donor-driven model of the university like Jansen's. A 'reliance on Western donor funding is not an issue on its own', he writes, 'but when this funding is used as a tool to control the affairs of the university, then the relationship replicates colonialism'. He is critical of standards of excellence that are determined by these Western donors and by Western institutions of learning (2016, np). In contrast, as an example of a 'decolonial' university, he describes Marcus Garvey Pan Afrikan University (MPAU), in Mbale, Uganda: a university with closer ties to its surrounding communities, where students can work in their first languages, that privileges local knowledge production, and which he calls 'relevant to the Uganda post-colonial situation' (2016, np). This type of university, Mwesigire argues, reflects real decolonisation.

One can be critical of Mwesigire's argument. For one thing, it is published on a website operated by the Royal African Society (London), which limits some of the anti-imperial ideas in the essay. Further, his focus on 'indigenous' knowledge could potentially reflect forms of colonial logic around 'the native'

²³ Jansen condemned the violence, while calling the protests illegal (Chabalala, 2016).

and 'indigeneity'. Mbembe takes a different route than the focus on 'indigenous knowledge' arguing that decolonisation entails 'a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions' aimed at 'a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism' (2015, np). The two routes are decidedly different, and the objective here is not to decide between them, but to situate the BSM Commons moment into ideas and debates around what a university should or could be. Of the two arguments, Mbembe's is perhaps the more valuable in that it presents decolonisation as more clearly politically related to decolonisation and democracy outside of institutions. Mbembe, influenced by Fanon, writes, 'Black students and staff have to invent a set of creative practices' that 'make it impossible for official structures to ignore them [...], to pretend that they are not there'; and, furthermore, decolonisation moves with 'an expansive sense of citizenship itself indispensable for the project of democracy' (2015, np).

Far from attempting to implement a version of Mwesigire's or Mbembe's conception of decolonisation, however useful they might be, the BSM was engaged in its own version, which was developed in discussion and argument over the course of months. The principle of decolonisation was protected through the obstacles and urgency of daily events and politics, and the changing shapes of the movement throughout 2015. The first two weeks of the occupation, from 26 August until 9 September, were the peak of BSM's engagement with decolonial praxis. This period of political activity makes an important contribution to debates around decolonised, African universities.

The BSM understood that decolonisation requires change: not only the changing of policies and calendars, budgets and staff, but also the reinventing of university spaces, rhythms and procedures. BSM offered a glimpse into such a transformation. Significantly, it came during the longest and most fraught protest action that the BSM engaged in during 2015. The version of decolonisation practiced in the BSM Commons demonstrated a different version of the 'African university' than the one which has been discussed and debated: the African university as a site of protest. The pictures displayed on the walls of the BSM Commons served as a reminder that decolonisation could only be practiced through acts of protest.

The BSM Commons was an African university constituted as a revolt. The Commons was always imagined not as confined by the walls of the room but as a project for the entire university. The revolt rejected 'transformation' as a process of new policies decided upon and implemented in the usual manner. The BSM sought to impress upon the administration of their university that the 'usual way of doing doings' was not only unsatisfactory, but colonial. Their action demanded genuine and fundamental shifts in the political imaginations of university administrators and staff, in addition to students.

The BSM Commons was a critique of the colonial university, of the conception of the university as institution, and of the increasing corporatisation of the university. It was decolonising not only in its outlook and its objectives, but in its form and modes of operation. It was open revolt against modes of operating

that conserve traditions that are variously oppressive, anti-transformational, and reformist—all of which have been read by student protesters as colonial. In the BSM's combination of protest, politics, and study, a different idea of 'Africanisation' than the narrow and nationalistic versions discussed above is visible. This is not to say that protest is exclusively or essentially African, nor that Africa is or must be fixed in permanent protest; it is to say, however, that decolonisation of universities, in an African context, is a matter of protest, and that the experiences moving and motivating those protests will be distinctly African, in all of the variation that implies. This is not fixed either, and debates that occurred within the student movements of 2015 around the ideas of 'Black' and 'African' continue today.²⁴ However, the BSM Commons understood itself as 'African' and decolonising, and through this understanding and accompanying practices, it had fundamentally changed the space in which it occurred. As the BSM stated on the second day of its occupation of the Commons, 'The university currently known as Rhodes should aspire to be an Afrikan University, and not simply a University in Afrika' (2015b, np). As Mhlana puts it, referring to the pictures of black and African thinkers, revolutionaries, and artists decorating the Commons, 'The things we say are missing from our curriculum [were] on the wall. It was international and shared the idea of what we feel is an African or Africanised university'.²⁵

In the BSM Commons, one possible direction for such a university was attempted. Through the Commons' constitution as protest, oppressive tradition was rejected, institutional authority was held accountable, and opportunity for change was intensely present. Complete with its limitations, the BSM Commons was one moment of real significance among the many important moments that students created during 2015. We will now turn to a discussion of some limitations for praxis, as an important aspect of what it meant to bring popular political practices into the university, and what this means for the idea of an African university.

Problems in praxis for (and as) a way forward

The politics of the student movements across South African during 2015, and continuing into 2016, have never been internally uniform or uncontested. While critics and detractors have often simplistically latched onto specific voices of student politics precisely in order to critique or detract, the fact remains that those voices and many others less often heard were part of the complex period of political movement (in many directions) that signified the student protests of 2015. As are all political impulses, the praxis that emerged in and sustained the BSM Commons as an alternative to the institutional university was marked by contradictions. Asavela, a second year Science student at the time of the

²⁴ These debates and their significance to student politics, to South Africa, and to ideas around decolonisation remain to be recorded.

²⁵ Author interview, 5 August 2016.

occupation, takes a more critical view of the Commons. She says, 'We tried by all means to create a decolonized space', but 'the colonial society reflected itself within our interactions amongst us, as the BSM members'.²⁶ After two weeks of occupation, long-developing internal conflicts reached a point that led to the breakdown of consensus-based decision making and greatly decreased the number of students participating in the occupation. From over seventy students at its peak, numbers dwindled at times in the second half of the occupation to a handful. This does not immediately mean that the occupation was a failure, either politically or practically. The BSM still won a victory, negotiated with university management, in regard to short vacation accommodation; and, for two weeks, under great strain, the BSM Commons had been successfully organised as an alternative political and educational space that was at least premised on decolonising practices. This should not gloss over the fact that problems and failures did exist and occur. Just as the experiences of the BSM are important to demonstrating possibilities for praxis, so too are the BSM's problems valuable to an analysis that seeks to show the significance of such praxis.

Naicker asks, 'will students be able to see the difference in access to resources or class divides in order to bridge them [...]?' (2016, 60), and the question alludes to some problems for student politics that are not fully developed in her article. Despite the optimism of Kabingesi, who emphasises the 'openness' and 'freedom' of the Commons²⁷, Mhlana remembers, for example, 'There were some people saying that the Black middle class does not exist, and others saying it did. That conversation on class did not take place'. Regarding the eventual breakdown of the Commons, she continued, 'People had their ideas, and their ideas were the "right" ideas, and that was imposed in a space where it should have been decided together. People were silenced in different ways'.²⁸ Class and gender, and discourses around 'intersectionality', in particular, were sometimes mobilised in an attempt to 'silence', to delegitimize, or to control other members. Class privilege was sometimes denied through 'intersectional' arguments that highlighted race and gender. Female members' arguments were sometimes dismissed as 'patriarchal' if they did not take a certain line. Working class and poor students were sometimes accused of limiting the definition of blackness or of the legitimate subject of struggle for simply expressing feelings of alienation within the movement. These exclusionary refrains were made by a tiny minority who nonetheless exercised a degree of power by claiming they were themselves victims of silencing. This is not to say that they *never* were. In general, though, a few students, relatively privileged compared with their peers and comrades, defended a position of power within the movement through such discourses. Involvement of white students (always few), raised other issues of privilege.

²⁶ Personal correspondence, 4 September 2016.

²⁷ Personal correspondence, 20 September 2016

²⁸ Author interview, 5 August 2016.

An early debate in the BSM, carried on over several meetings in April 2015, was about reading. Some members argued that basic political texts were requirements for active participation in the movement, citing most often Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon, while other members argued for the opposite position, that commitment to the principles of the struggle was the only requirement, pointing out that many members coming, for instance, from the Science or Commerce Faculties, did not have a background in this type of reading material. Such requirements privileged students in the Politics Department as well as those students most comfortable with English. The two groups (not exhaustive of members' positions) accused each other of exclusionary vanguardism and of anti-intellectualism, respectively. While the works of Biko and Fanon were both included in the BSM Commons library and widely discussed there, the practices surrounding reading them in that context was decidedly different, as we have seen, than the limiting of vocal participation and engagement and the discrediting of positions based on whether they had been read. It is worth considering the affirmation by Zikode, 'If very *gogo* (grandmother) does not understand your politics then you are on the road to another top-down system' (in Gibson, 2011, v). The basic problem of a hierarchy, intentional or not, was not solved in the Commons, however. As Asavela recalls, 'The people who had voices, were people who were more articulate in terms of their English and choice of words', those with 'cultural capital' such as 'Postgrads in Humanities or people who [...] went to [a former] Model C school. If a point was raised by someone who wasn't articulate enough, no one will take it seriously'.²⁹ The BSM, as an intentionally 'leaderless' movement, sought to prevent a 'top-down system' from developing, but these examples of internal disagreements and privilege show that it was not always straightforward.

The occupation of the BSM Commons reached its highpoint after two weeks, on 9 September 2015, when the BSM was joined in a demonstration by members of the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), some academics, and some Grahamstown residents and members of UPM under the banner 'Students Workers Academics Unite! 2015'. Despite the public solidarity of these groups, and the great potential therein, the BSM was embroiled, almost immediately after the march, in internal quarrels that severely limited its ability to strengthen links with workers and community activists. Conflict at the time hinged on an alliance with a particular group of academic staff. Some students argued that the character of the alliance was sidelining the students and threatening the movement's autonomy in a dangerous way, while other students saw it as a necessary alliance. A primary argument from this group of academics was that the BSM was unclear in its objectives and politics. Given the sheer volume of public statements and restatements of the movement's objectives and positions from March 17 through September, the critique was unjustified; it amounted to a *difference* in objectives and politics. This 'lack of clarity' critique was a line which, coming during an exhausting period of political action, bred argument in the BSM. This external influence intensified internal divisions and

²⁹ Personal correspondence, 4 September 2016.

personality conflicts. A minority of students in the Commons took up the 'lack of clarity' line—once again signaling a *difference* rather than actual lack. Some resorted to manipulation, accusations, bullying, and fearmongering. This created distrust and the breakdown of consensus as a mode of decision making, and ultimately a drastic shrinking of the movement in terms of numbers and of political dynamism. The alliance with staff occurred, but it cost the movement's strength. Although Naicker is correct that the student movements of 2015 often rejected civil society 'representational structures' for alliances 'outside of the elite space of the university' (2016, 57), this was not a consistent practice and, in the BSM's case, one alliance within the elite space of the university did shift the politics of the movement significantly, at the expense of strong political relationships outside the university that were most possible on 9 September.

Internal struggles and breakdown are not unique to student politics, but are part of popular politics, which is an important aspect of the link Naicker has made between student practices in 2015 and struggle practices outside the university. The repression, attempted co-optations, and criminalisation of popular struggles—all of which the BSM and other student movements experienced in 2015—can significantly contribute to creating and widening internal divisions, as well. In the forward to Gibson's book, *Fanonian Practices in South Africa*, S'bu Zikode of AbM discusses both the internal and external political problems that face popular struggles. He writes, 'It is an illusion to think that we can distance ourselves from the collectivities that made us [...] the same walls that divide the rich and poor' also divide those engaged in popular political struggle. He continues:

These walls do not only divide us physically, they are also there to teach us that liberation has been privatised and that success is about getting yourself and your family on the right side of the walls. It is these walls which breed individualism and make it difficult for activists to organise collectively (2011, viii).

This is related to the external pressures that a movement faces, often from a 'regressive left', as 'the tendency to treat our insistence on the autonomy of our movement as criminal', 'the tendency to co-opt individuals', and 'the desire to ruin what they cannot rule', which directly impact upon 'the risk of co-optation, individuals detaching from the rest of the group as they become popular and the possibility of corruption' inside the movement (Zikode, in Gibson, 2011, vi). To protect against this, both AbM and the BSM limited their leadership by collectively choosing delegates or assigning work, rotating chairpersons, and, in BSM's case, intentionally operating without a leadership structure. This choice was ultimately not successful for BSM, as personalities clashed and power struggles developed.

This reflection on difficulties and conflicts faced by and within the BSM illuminates a crucial aspect of the 'university as a site of protest': that, like all struggles and, especially those premised on democracy, it requires ongoing

work. We must consider the African university not as something to be implemented, but rather as something to be practiced—not instituted, which is the mode of the university at present, but constituted in political activity. The African university is not a decolonised institution but a university that is engaged in the process of decolonising. To be engaged in such protest, in the process of decolonising, does not mean that the African university will cease to be a place of learning, nor that all of its times and spaces will be taken up with sit-ins, marches, singing, graffiti and the other methods of protest that marked the student protests of 2015. Intensified repression against students in 2016 suggests these actions will remain necessary (and difficult), but they do not signal the entirety of what it means to be a university in protest. Fulfilling its mandate as a place of learning can become itself an act of protest in the African university. The study, learning, and engagement that occurred in the BSM Commons, was, briefly, just such a form of protest, which had consequences outside of the Commons, as explained by Mhlana:

‘At some point, [lecturers] couldn’t ignore that this was happening. The BSM Commons [was] in the Commerce Faculty, so whether you hear[d] people singing, these people [were] occupying a space that’s in that faculty. It would come out why people were doing these things. We had to take time out of [some] classes to discuss what was actually happening.’³⁰

The ‘moment of possibilities’ that characterised the protests at South African universities in 2015 has become increasingly complicated during 2016. Some directions that were possible at the outset of 2015 have likely been limited, while other directions have emerged. Increased securitisation of universities and repression of protest in 2016 make organising more difficult. The BSM has not been a viable force at UCKAR in 2016. Nevertheless, in April 2016, protests at UCKAR against rape culture and the university’s response to instances of rape and sexual assault moved the university administration to take out a court interdict against students. The interdict, which still stands as of November 2016, is worded so vaguely that it renders almost any form of protest illegal at UCKAR. Since late September 2016, FMF protests have reemerged at many universities, with students opposing another scheduled fee increase for 2017 and voicing an argument for free education. Sixteen universities have experienced temporary shut downs. However, violent—and often illegal—repression from the South African Police Service (SAPS) has increased. In addition to stun grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets, this has meant harassment and arbitrary arrest (including of non-protesters), violent arrests, intimidation (including tailing known activists), alleged sexual abuse of students, and what can only be described as drive-by shootings at Wits (15 October) and similar events at UCKAR (17 October). This has meant that some students have also sometimes taken more violent approaches. On 10 October, a

³⁰ Author interview, 5 August 2016.

pitched battle broke out at Wits between rock throwing students and private security and police with stun grenades, tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons. Jane Duncan (2016) discusses the trend towards actual violence by protesters, and the central role that security forces have played in that trend. Nevertheless, critics' claims that all student protesters are engaged in destructive or violent acts are baseless. Most students operate under a logic of active disruption that does not include, but is increasingly sympathetic to, acts of destruction. While a library was partially burnt at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Westville campus, a bus was burnt in Braamfontein near Wits, and some buildings have been set alight at UCKAR, student protesters often do not know who is responsible. Whether founded or not, many students suspect agents provocateurs.

This confusion could support other critics' point that there is a lack of strategy in this year's FMF protests. Certainly, long-term and politicised occupations like the BSM Commons have not happened this year, including at UCKAR. Current activists are not contributing their positions as consistently to the public debate as was sometimes the case in 2015, leaving room for a range of critics—reasonable and not—to comment in comfort. However, at UCKAR, FMF activists did manage to bring the university to negotiations and reach agreement on a number of their demands over a weekend in early October. This does not suggest incoherence or lack of effectiveness. However, the university withdrew all of its commitments when students said the university should remain closed for a week in solidarity with FMF movements across the country (Carlisle, 2016). Most student activists see this as another example of bad faith by university administrators.

Whether the current situation can be described as 'mass revolt', like the FMF protests of October 2015, is up for debate. Certainly, a large number of students are protesting, but against greater challenges to claiming legitimacy (given the attention on increased violence) and with greater challenges to organising effectively, as universities and the state respond with force. It is also clear that participation in 2015's protests has succeeded in politicising student bodies across South Africa in new ways, particularly at the elite institutions. Naicker's argument around practices from the 'informal sphere' of politics entering elite institutions is one of the most significant ways, and has important implications for what the possibilities might be, as we have seen. It is not clear what form student revolt will take and what politics will be practiced, moving forward. Recent events and the ensuing debate around relative values of lives and libraries, around acts of destruction and political acts, make the question of 'possibilities' especially significant. As new modes of student politics emerge, as the collective memory of the student movements in South Africa grows more complex, as internal contradictions appear in sharper relief than collective strengths, and as external forces identify and seek to widen divisions, the work of thinking about moments when solidarity and collectivity were practiced (even imperfectly) becomes crucial.

It is important to reflect on the events of 2015 and take stock of the potential that existed in the many and diverse political successes and failures that movements created and experienced. The BSM Commons is one such set of experiences. As Ghedi Alasow says of the Commons, 'There were moments that were truly productive – both in terms of the *mode* of politics and the *outcome* of our actions [...]. I do think that the commons was one such moment'.³¹ Asavela observes, poignantly, that 'there are so many contradictions amongst ourselves even though we are all in the struggle and conscious', and 'there are some errors we become blind to but notice only later', but '[t]he beauty is that we learn from them and move forward as a block'.³² She reminds us that neither the ways in which the politics of the BSM Commons were limited or contradicted, nor the formal end of the occupation, means an expiration of the politics that were practiced there for a time. These can be relearned and reclaimed as students continue to be the important thinkers of what South African universities should and can become.

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