

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF *RHODES MUST FALL*: STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE EXPERIENCE OF ALIENATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

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Abstract

Social movements often face the danger of becoming the very thing they are fighting against. This tension is evident within the student movement, *Rhodes Must Fall*, at the University of Cape Town. This dialectic is explored through the notion of 'alienation' as a concept of social philosophy. I argue that while the movement emerges from the experience of alienation, certain behaviours internal to the movement can also proceed to cause alienation. The lesson to be learnt from this contradiction is that we are all simultaneously oppressors and oppressed. From this emerges a positive understanding of alienation, as the experience of alienation is not only a negative one. One such positive lesson in this case is the alteration of our understandings of ourselves and others toward an all-inclusive liberation agenda. Failure to heed this could see the transformation potential of such movements like *Rhodes Must Fall* hijacked by hypocrisy.

1. Introduction

In 2015, South Africa was engulfed by a wave of student protests. At the crest of this wave, student activism rode triumphantly. This activism has ushered into an unstable socio-political landscape various movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF) and *Fees Must Fall* (FMF),

which among other things, have forcefully asserted the importance of concrete transformation and decolonisation in South African universities. This essay uses one possible understanding of the concept of alienation to explain the genesis of the movement, as well as the dialectic of its development through internal divisions.

Within the context of student activism, alienation as a tool in social philosophy, "... can be used to diagnose social pathologies — that is, deficiencies in the social conditions of individual self-realisation" (Jaeggi 2014: xxii). The task at hand is a critical engagement with the RMF movement — its ambitions, rhetoric and critics through the lens of alienation. This is precisely because RMF has increased our attention (and rightfully so) to the predicament of institutional racism as one of the social pathologies plaguing contemporary South Africa.

This analysis involves an engagement with three main authors — Rahel Jaeggi, G W F Hegel and Achille Mbembe. In addition, it is guided by two key questions: (a) In what ways can we describe the genesis of a movement like RMF through the idea of alienation? (b) What commentary can we subsequently make of its liberation attempts which seek to escape the predicament of alienation through the curative endeavour of activism? In engaging with these authors, I aim to defend three claims: (a) the RMF movement can be seen as the consequence of alienation because 'relations of appropriation' within the 'role of the student' are disturbed by a reality of institutional racism; (b) building on this, I compare RMF to the Consciousness in Hegel prior to the life and death struggle. In dealing with its alienation, the RMF consciousness proceeds to impose itself too strongly upon the world and others. Although it can be said to achieve a degree of subjectivity, this is not complete subjecthood as it consistently seeks recognition without wanting to grant it to others. Furthermore, I make the claim that in imposing subjectivity too strongly, some behaviours within the movement proceed in dialectical fashion to become the very thing it is fighting against. That is, while alienation births the movement, it can also proceed to be an alienating force. I illustrate this point in three ways: alienation of black students, self-alienation, and alienation of white students; (c) alienation has a positive dimension that is rarely acknowledged. Confronted with the negativity of the experience of alienation, the RMF consciousness is presented with an opportunity for self-discovery. It is important to recognise this positive dimension of alienation (Gavin 2012). The idea of a positive thesis of alienation (that is, progress through struggle) is a

lesson borrowed from the dialectical development presented in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. This positive component makes possible and necessary questions about what constitutes a proper alteration of our understandings of self, others and the world in the face of alienating experiences. In response, I make the case for 'total liberation' — a horizontal program of action that sees freedom as incomplete if not freedom of all. This is fashioned on an intersectional understanding of privilege and oppression. It is particularly relevant because of the relation between RMF's alienating potential and an improper reading of intersectionality.

2. Alienation and the role of student

This section of the essay provides a possible conceptualisation of alienation. I introduce Jaeggi's (2014) account of alienation, and proceed to describe RMF through the lens of this particular understanding of alienation. This helps us establish a normative framework within which we can evaluate experiences as alienated. Furthermore, it provides a vocabulary to frame the causes of alienation, as well as possible sites of alienation.

For Jaeggi (2014: 1), alienation is a "relation of relationlessness". This is to be understood not as the absence of a relation, but a deficient relation. When one has a deficient relation to oneself, the world and others, this can properly be described as 'alienation'. At this juncture, one is right to inquire into the normative grounding of alienated relationships. In other words, what normative framework does Jaeggi subscribe to in judging a particular relation as alienated?

In response to this question, she takes great care to avoid the essentialism that historically has often accompanied diagnoses of alienation. According to the essentialist logic, alienation involves a deficient relation to/departure from an essential self which is ontologically prior to one's social context (Jaeggi 2014: 78). An example of this understanding of alienation is present in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work, when he romanticises the self-sufficiency and oneness with nature of the "noble savage". Herein, socialisation initiates alienation seen as a movement away from this pre-social ideal self (Rousseau 2002: 81-113).

In rejecting this essentialism, Jaeggi sees the self as formed within social relations. The appeal of this rejection is its emphasis on the fluid and constructed character of relations involving subjects. As such, there is no 'true self' prior to social interactions upon which diagnoses of

authenticity *versus* inauthenticity can be predicated on. Authenticity is not an essential substance, but a way of actively relating to oneself, the world and others (Jaeggi 2014: 78). Jaeggi, therefore, substitutes the essentialist logic with one that sees the constitution of the self as relational. An implication of this is that in order to make sense of diagnoses such as 'self-alienation' or 'alienation from others', they need to be located within the various fields within which a subject is formed. The various roles we play in our social interactions are examples of such domains, meaning that these roles can be sites of alienation.

The mere fact that roles — like that of a student — are formative sites for selfhood means that roles are productive. Because they are a medium through which we interact with others, they inevitably play a part in constituting one's relationship to oneself (Jaeggi 2014: 76-7). Yet at the same time, a significant degree of ambivalence is characteristic of the myriad roles we play in our social interactions both public and private. Inasmuch as roles are productive in that they encompass possibilities for self-expression, they can also be alienating (Jaeggi 2014: 80). This is unsurprising as modern understandings of the ideal of authenticity have often been predicated on a critique of roles as alienating, to the extent that they stifle individuality in the face of conformist pressures (Jaeggi 2014: 73). Such critiques have often been based on the idea of an essential self. Alienation as experienced in roles makes inaccessible one's essential and authentic self. However, since Jaeggi rejects this essentialism, alienation in roles — that is, what amounts to a deficient relation to oneself and the world — refers to 'disturbances in the formative process of the self within a role'. More specifically, the 'appropriation' of a role is crucial to this formative process. 'Therefore, deficient/alienated relations are those within which relations of appropriation are disturbed'. Appropriation here denotes of the idea of 'making one's own'. Such ownership is enmeshed in the desire for individual self-realisation. Alienation is, therefore, problematic because it undermines self-realisation (Jaeggi 2014: 82).

Relations of appropriation are not necessarily disturbed 'by' a role. Rather we are alienated 'within' a role. This simply means that sometimes, "roles fall short of what they can be ... when the possibilities of expression and action are constrained in them rather than by them" (Jaeggi 2014: 80). Unalienated relations within roles are those wherein relations of appropriation are undisturbed.

In this way, Jaeggi's contribution to this analysis herein is a way

of framing the issue. Participants of *Rhodes Must Fall* are largely students. That is the relevant role. More importantly, they are black students, which is important given that relations of appropriation in this role are argued to be disturbed by institutional racism. The task of illustrating claim (1) above becomes much clearer now — in what ways does RMF show the role of a black student to be a site prone to alienation? How does institutional racism disturb the ability of a black student to appropriate their role at the University of Cape Town (UCT)? Why is a black student unable to make that role their own at UCT?

3. *Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF)

In its inception, RMF described itself as a "...collective movement of students and staff members mobilising for direct action against the reality of institutional racism at the University of Cape Town" (RMF 2015). Its agenda is not exhausted by what its name calls for. The fall of the Rhodes statue is only a symbolic moment in the "... inevitable fall of white supremacy and privilege on campus" (RMF, 2015). Since its inception, the movement has transitioned from calling for transformation and has put its efforts into the 'decolonisation' of the university. The rationale behind this is the perception that 'transformation' has been captured by the vestiges of liberalism and its 'pacifying logic'. Transformation only amounts to meaningless surface level change, ultimately consolidating a neo-liberal *status quo* of structural oppression. The emphasis on decolonisation identifies a subtle colonial culture of domination as a threat to flourishing/self-realisation in a particular role (that is, student) and responsible for the marginalisation of black experiences. RMF and by extension black students therefore seek to interrupt the normalisation of colonial and *apartheid* symbols and practices, anchored in racism and manifest as injustice and oppression (Laband, 2015).

4. RMF and alienation

The RMF movement could be seen as the consequence of alienation because relations of appropriation within the role of the student are disturbed by a reality of institutional racism. But what would it mean to appropriate one's role as a student? What does it mean to make one's role as a student one's own? All roles by definition entail a sort of conventionality in that they imply standards of appropriate behaviour (Jaeggi

2014: 85). There is a degree of standardisation/conformism in terms of what it means to be a good student — diligence, good behaviour, respect, tolerance, critical thinking, etc. Although conformism is usually a suspicious term often signalling alienation (as a loss of authenticity), we need not reach this hasty conclusion. This is because these norms and standards of appropriate behaviour must be interpreted, allowing for the possibility of realising this 'pre-existing script' in one's own way. In this sense, appropriating one's role as a student entails a level of agency that makes it possible to take control of one's education (Jaeggi 2014: 86-87).

The claim made by RMF is that the experience of a black student is one in which he/she operates within institutionalised forms of oppression. A characteristic feature of RMF is that feelings of alienation/disturbed relations of appropriation are expressed as black pain — pain which is the aggregation of experiences of institutional racism. Black pain, therefore, which in this context has its origins in institutional racism, disturbs relations of appropriation. One cannot appropriate their role as a student because the university (and broader social context of South Africa) is a force working against them, undermining their existence as subjects.

It is particularly salient that RMF perceives the university to celebrate white supremacy and white privilege. As a black student, one cannot make one's role their own, precisely because the university does not value black bodies. Statues like that of Rhodes are a constant reminder of a historical legacy (very much alive today) that saw and treated black bodies as objects. In other words, a historical legacy that negates the subjective existence of black people. When RMF says "Our existence as black people is defined by a violent system of power" (RMF 2015), we are reminded that objects often have a purely determinate existence — always determined by forces without. Objects never act of their own accord for they have no agency. Since to appropriate one's role requires agency, the problem of alienation is that this requisite agency is never affirmed and often undermined.

Another issue that disturbs appropriation is the inability to relate to one's role. Black students relate to the university as 'other' to them. Disengagement and a lack of identification with or interest in one's role are often key markers of alienation. In this regard, the inability to relate to one's role as a black student stems from the fact that black bodies are significantly under represented within the university's academic staff

(and its senior positions). Furthermore, it is often felt that the curriculum (particularly in the humanities) is overtly Eurocentric, in celebration of white supremacy and privilege. One RMF activist (Matandela 2015) notes that:

In South Africa, educational institutions were built to cultivate European ideologies and to create an 'enlightened' Africa. But this idea of an 'enlightened' Africa was implemented using European ideas of modernity: patriarchy, capitalism and racism. These systems oppress and silence some populations and have made themselves painfully clear to black students by controlling their knowledge, their expression of art and the way they behave. At UCT black students feel this oppression in the way black identity is not shown in the university's buildings, statues, lecturers and curriculum. What this shows them is that their history, culture and language is inferior. How this makes students feel about themselves is at the core of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement.

The formative nature of roles like that of a student are supposed to be possibilities for expression and action (Jaeggi, 2014: 80). However, RMF laments that black students often find themselves performing their roles within rigidified forms of expression (often in reference to neoliberal epistemologies) where they are expected to conform. This rigidity stifles appropriation, meaning that the possibilities for shaping and reshaping one's role as a student is constrained. Subsequently for RMF, decolonisation entails the 'Africanisation' of the university, both in its representation and curriculum because many African students find university teaching to be far removed from their reality.

On this issue of representation, Matandela (2015) writes:

One student said in one of the debates that the university is 'built on white success' because its institutional culture does not celebrate being black or being a woman. I know what this feels like. I have felt it in the Political Science department. There is only one black woman lecturer in the department this year who can channel the politics of being a black woman in her discipline.

In conclusion, social institutions (like those that consolidate racism) can alienate people and effectively force them into relations of relationlessness. Therefore, overcoming alienation would entail the decolonisation of social institutions. At the centre of this process of decolonisation lies

critical questions such as 'what is taught', 'who teaches it', and 'how it is taught'.

5. Framing criticisms of RMF through the lens of alienation

One's experience of alienation, though negative, presents one with an opportunity for self-discovery and the rehabilitation of selfhood. The mere act of calling into question and resisting UCT's complacency toward institutional racism is an assertion of one's subjectivity. Resistance to domination is an assertion of self-mastery.

Race is the main medium within which black subjectivity is asserted in the RMF movement. In resisting structures of oppression, one's own individuality and sense of selfhood is expressed through the logic of black pain, a notion with which we shall soon engage. What I wish to point out is some of the issues that emerge in discussions of identity and authenticity. We can observe with the RMF movement that though race allows one to assert their subjectivity through resistance as a black body, it has also been entangled in processes of reification. As such, certain behaviours internal to the movement can be alienating, despite the goal of fighting alienation. This is significant with reference to broader difficulties within social movements, where there is often the lingering danger of becoming the thing one is fighting against.

When one claims that black lecturers will channel the 'politics of being black' in their disciplines, the expectation is that this will solve the problem of relatability (or lack thereof). This brings to the fore assumptions regarding the universality of a black experience. It seems to suggest an experience particular to an identity that all others who identify with said identity possess. It gives the impression that more black representation in the academic staff is sufficient for the decolonisation of an otherwise alienating curriculum. Yet such transformation or decolonisation is equally a matter of expertise as well as unwavering commitment. Problematically therefore, such reification of identity can come at the expense of real decolonisation. One could reasonably end up with their worst nightmare — a prospective black lecturer whose neurotic obsession with Kant precludes possibilities of Africanisation. As such, such representation, crudely speaking, can be said to be necessary but insufficient for the long term goals of decolonisation.

This is also a problem because having claimed some degree of subjectivity in its resistance, some members of the movement proceed to negate the subjecthood of other black bodies. It denies them the particularities of their experience which are neither exhausted by race nor display the sort of universal understandings of race often assumed. Take myself for example. I am a black body that does not intuitively identify with the language of black pain. This means that at the very least, I am not looking for a lecturer to communicate to me the 'politics of being black'. This might be because of the range of other things that I am — I am not just a black, but a black middle class student, whose class mitigates the negative reality of institutional racism. What can be drawn from this intersectional description is that an analysis exhausted by race reifies the subjects, fixing them in a racial-historical schema that denies for others the range of possibilities that they are and could be.

For the most part, students in RMF did demonstrate an awareness of intersectionality, especially with strong assertions about the role of women. However, it could be argued that even on an intersectional understanding of privilege and oppression, there are still dangers of reification, dangers which some voices in RMF sometimes exemplify.

In fact, we see the dynamics of such essentialisation in the experiences of some black students who initially identified with the movement. It is not uncommon to hear testimonies of students positing that they do not feel black enough, given that a singular dominant narrative of what constitutes blackness is rigorously defended often at the cost of free expression. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the politics of blackness has often described these students as caught in a 'race to the bottom' (that is, who is the most oppressed). In many ways, this trend does emerge from a somewhat intersectional understanding of privilege and oppression. It arises with the universalisation of a particular concept of blackness (and its intersection with class) in relation to oppression. The universalised narratives of authentic blackness play out in issues of legitimacy and the rendering of certain voices (un)credible. Consider this example by a disenchanted member, who has chosen to remain anonymous:

What seems to have started off as a space of inclusivity, where the voices of the burdened were not muffled or drowned by the powerful, but were actually the core of a movements existence, turned quickly on its head. As we waited for the statue of Rhodes to fall,

when Bremmer became Azania, the rooms of that building became a teaching ground about ideas in African Renaissance, black consciousness, black empowerment and what a decolonized space would constitute. It is however behind the very same walls, in a majority black space, discussing 'black' literature that there was no agreement among 'blacks' about the best trajectory to take in the decolonisation project. Agreement is perhaps the incorrect word because it implies that there was a discussion. Agreement among 'blacks' about the best trajectory to take in the decolonisation project was not for the privileged blacks nor those who envisioned a collaborative effort with white South Africans. It is these ideals that made me feel 'not black enough' for that space. When my white friends were asked to leave, I left too because as much as I support the cause, its spirit was distorted. How it was communicated (the either you are with us or against language) did not make for conducive debate and the guilt placed on the black 'haves' may have excluded many.

The reference to 'privileged blacks' suggests that black middle class students cannot really be considered blacks in relation to the struggle for decolonisation. Together with an inability to tolerate diverging views on the progression of the movement, we see that essentialism is the logic through which alienation occurs internal to the RMF movement. Therefore, describing this state of affairs as dialectical simply means that although the movement opens for possibilities for free expression and resistance, this is not a benefit that is accessible to all blacks. It simultaneously creates and stifles spaces for expression and resistance oriented towards decolonisation. In fact, in 2016 calls for decolonisation were increasingly adopting a xenophobic disposition, with black South Africans often seen as the sole beneficiaries of such transformation. This appears very ironic, since the boundaries upon which xenophobia is premised are colonial.

This essentialisation of a black identity occurs possibly because 'intersectionality', a grounding concept in this social movement, has been interpreted as a hierarchy, rather than a matrix. This point requires delicate attention. Intersectionality of course refers to the overlapping/intersection of socially constructed hierarchies to impact one's lived experiences in unique ways (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000). In describing intersectionality, Nathan Heller (2016) of the *New Yorker* notes:

[it is] a theory, originating in black feminism, that sees identity-based

oppression operating in crosshatching ways. Encountering sexism as a white, Ivy-educated, middle-class woman in a law office, for example, calls for different solutions than encountering sexism as a black woman working a minimum-wage job. The theory is often used to support experiential authority, because, well, who knows what it means to live at an intersection better than the person there?

In postulating a hierarchy *versus* matrix debate, I am not suggesting that identities are not hierarchical (for example, male/female). However, the question of whether intersectionality is a hierarchical notion pertains to whether some intersections are more authentic forms of oppression in relation to others. This gradation of varying authenticities of oppression has been entangled with what it means to be black, hence the perception of a race to the bottom. Identities may, therefore, intersect, but certain combinations of intersection are accorded more authenticity in terms of oppression than others.

In response to this, we could say that while identities are experienced as social hierarchies, their intersections do not necessarily convey the idea of certain experiences being more authentic instances of oppression than others. Rather than intersections being interpreted as indicating the uniqueness of experiences of oppression and privilege, they are accorded values of inferiority and superiority, often in continuation of oppression. The tendency to treat intersectionality as hierarchical (as described above) is crucial to the illustration of the dialectics of RMF's internal divisions. In dialectical fashion, RMF is the product of experiences of alienation. At the same time, it can proceed to be alienating, as seen in contestations of what constitutes a proper black subjectivity. The race to the bottom leaves many black voices marginalised and alienated.

6. Examining black pain: A discussion on Mbembe and Hegel

Mbembe argues that RMF's decolonisation rhetoric is more of a psychic state than a political project. This psychic state can be called 'black pain', which constitutes the basis for political inter-subjectivity among RMF activists. A key feature which Mbembe (2015) notes is its exclusivity:

Psychic bonds — in particular bonds of pain and bonds of suffering — more than lived material contradictions are becoming the real stuff of political inter-subjectivity. "I am my pain" — how many times have I heard this statement in the months since #RhodesMustFall emerged? "I am my suffering" and this subjective experience is so incommensurable that "unless you have gone through the same trial, you will never understand my condition" — the fusion of self and suffering in this astonishing age of solipsism and narcissism.

It is unclear why Mbembe sees the fusion of self and suffering as necessarily anchored in narcissism. Perhaps it is an appeal to Fanon, who in *Black Skins White Masks*, posits that both black and white identities are self-absorbed. But self-absorption need not necessarily source from innate narcissism. For example, Nomalanga Mkhize (2015), considers a humanities tradition of 'particularism' as responsible — a tradition latently passed on to students. Within this tradition, the importance of a particular subject matter is its particularity.

6.1 The appeal of black pain

The notion of 'black pain' has some appeal from the perspective of what it means to be free. If one is familiar with positive accounts of freedom (as articulated by Isaiah Berlin), we recall the tendency of philosophers in this camp to dismiss emotions as obstacles to freedom and indicators of a determinate existence. What self-mastery entails is that one's rational self must dominate over one's emotional disposition. For Kant, this meant that freedom resided in obedience to self-imposed laws. However, within a context of institutional racism where blacks argue that their emotions are controlled by others in the sense of being told how to feel, one's emotions, in their particularity, are a site of freedom. The realm of emotions is one that witnesses resistance to external domination. This is a site where the subject pursues mastery of himself and his emotions, by feeling/submitting *to* certain emotions — such as pain and rage.

6.2 Hegel and the exclusivity of black pain

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel like Jaeggi also takes alienation to be a deficient relation. Despite his epistemic focus (that is, how we come to know the world), the analysis is still useful. For Hegel, the fundamental

relationship that needs expression is "the self knowing itself knowing the world". Knowledge presupposes a distinction between knower and known — object and subject. As such, an 'unalienated' relationship is a spiritual synthesis between object and subject (Hegel 1997). Alienation as a deficient relation occurs when one side of this equation is over-emphasised. A characteristic, therefore, of alienation is one-sidedness (for example, white supremacy). When we adopt an object-centred view, subjectivity is sacrificed and we fail to see ourselves in the world. When we impose ourselves too strongly on the world, we fail to know the world and recognise others. One-sidedness is typical of alienation, as the manifold contradictions in such positions attest to (Stern 2002). Hegel's *Phenomenology* becomes the unravelling of a dialectic of the individual and the universal, where the contradictions and experience of alienation sourcing from 'one-sided viewpoints' force consciousness to alter its relation to itself, the world and others.

With this context in mind, one could argue that RMF, despite motioning toward liberation, remains alienated because it imposes itself too strongly on the world. As such, it overemphasises the subject part of the equation. The exclusivity of black pain takes itself out of a relation with white people. Like the consciousness that initiates the life and death struggle in the *Phenomenology*, it seeks recognition from the other, but is not ready to grant the other recognition. It pursues one-sided recognition. This is problematic, as Mbembe (2015) points out that "[t]he self is made at the point of encounter with an Other. There is no self that is limited to itself". For Hegel, an unalienated relation between subjects entails mutual recognition.

Of interest here is the problematic presence of white students in black-led student movements. As RMF grew, it was increasingly becoming policy to maintain experiential authority and request the silence of white students. White students were thus seen as illegitimate voices on racial inequality and decolonisation, since they did not have the experiences that grounded the movement. This can be seen as the withholding of recognition from whites in these debates because of their complicity in institutions of oppression.

The pursuit of one-sided recognition excludes the other. As such, it alienates oneself from the other as well entails self-alienation. After all, the world and others are a medium through which we understand ourselves. Estrangement from others and the world is, therefore, tantamount to self-alienation (Jaeggi 2014: 152). The pursuit of one-sided

recognition is not concerned with securing mutual recognition. For example, we observe with the logic of black pain that sometimes —

Personal feelings now suffice. There is no need to mount a proper argument. Not only wounds and injuries can't be shared, their interpretation cannot be challenged by any known rational discourse. Why? Because, it is alleged, black experience transcends human vocabulary to the point where it cannot be named (Mbembe 2015).

It is the potential that black pain has to stifle argumentation through dialogue that precludes a relation with the other. It renders the other passive, establishing him/her as incapable of having a relation with the victim of black pain: "Recognise my pain, and be quiet". At this juncture, an advocate of this decision might retort that there was good reason for silencing white voices. Often white participants are unaware of how their privilege affects the space they find themselves in. This claim appeals to the symbolism of white bodies. They may thus adopt dispositions (like white-saviour complexes) that undermine the aspirations of subjecthood which the movement strives for. Furthermore, this move can be considered as redress for the historical marginalisation of black voices.

While all these reasons are more than agreeable, they do not justify the permanence of this strategy. This is because rectification for past and contemporary injustice, through restitution for example, involves a dialogue between oppressors and the oppressed around what is possible and what is not (Swartz 2016). Underpinning the importance of dialogue is the belief that conversation, together with other efforts like protest, and even strategic violence, can produce change in the form of a mutual understanding concerning desirable goals like decolonisation. Furthermore, dialogue between the oppressed and oppressor is meant to be a check against those who are privileged, in order to ensure that their 'allyship' does not amount to charity or perpetuation relations of power (Swartz 2016).

In this regard, one response available to RMF is to suggest that the black pain rhetoric is only preparing the ground work for mutual recognition. The reaction of some white students to this silencing is perhaps illustrative of this. Some white students began a movement which interrogated white privilege and the role of white students in the call for decolonisation. It was called 'Disrupting Whiteness'. White students seemed to accept the exclusivity black pain entailed. They established

its corollary, which checked white privilege. Both racial groups recognised that their current relationship was compromised, and took themselves out of it (momentarily one would hope), to prepare themselves for a new future together. Of course there are those students, who have sunk so deep into the psychic abyss of black pain that their newfound radicalism has no interest in re-entering this relationship. Nonetheless, the response being offered here is that the exclusivity of black pain provides an opportunity for both whites and blacks to re-evaluate and alter their understandings of themselves, others and the world. It can only be hoped that this alteration produces agents who see the moral necessity of granting each other mutual recognition.

In fact, on this issue of exclusivity, it is important to note that historically, we have been here before. A frequent charge against the Black Consciousness movement is its exclusivity. However, this could not be further from the truth. Swartz (2016: 49) speculates that if you compare the views between white South Africans and black South Africans on the effects of *apartheid*, both will tell you about these effects in relation to black South Africans. There is thus a failure to recognise that acts of injustice damage the humanity of the oppressed **and** the oppressor. Both groups are compromised by injustice, hence the need to re-evaluate both relationships. As such, she summarises Biko's main premise as follows:

... in order to deal with racism, Black people need to reflect on "the cause of their oppression — the Blackness of their skin — and to operate as a group to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude". White people, on the other hand, should reflect on their acts of racism (individual and institutional), and on the privileges that racism confers on them, and come up with ways to cease their practices and relinquish these privileges in order to build an equal society. Only when that has happened can Black and White meet together and build a non-racial society, and "a true humanity"⁹ on equal terms "without encroaching on or being thwarted by another" (Swartz 2016: 49).

A third illustration of the claim that RMF can be a force of alienation resides in the possibility of self-alienation. Mbembe implores us to consider the limitations of imposing one's subjectivity too strongly as seen in the language of black pain. We are more than our suffering and so one's subjecthood ultimately transcends their suffering (Mbembe, 2015). "I

am my pain" is thus a self-imposed limit that denies to the subject the range of other things that they are or could be. What is the beginning of a reclaimed subjectivity at the same time dialectically manifests as one's objectification as a suffering thing. Of course the RMF protagonist could respond by suggesting that this assertion only stresses pain as a major experience, without necessarily negating the range of possibilities that one is or one could be. After all, these ranges of possibilities are often presupposed in how one feels about their pain and oppression. Given the fact that [as one would hope] the subject asserting the fusion of pain and self-hood seeks a future existence in which they are not a suffering thing, they surely recognise that the possibilities of self-hood go beyond suffering.

7. Possible criticisms of the argument thus far

7.1 What gives you the right to speak about RMF? You're too far away from the movement

On the whole, there is a lingering criticism which at times, in my personal experience, has been difficult to shake off. It is especially relevant in my claims about RMF alienating others in relation to the necessity of mutual recognition. Given that I was never an RMF insider, the argument made in this article represent the views of someone 'too far away' from the movement to see the subtleties and nuances of 'where' and 'when' mutual recognition might take place. RMF relations with the 'other' might thus subscribe more to the mechanics of Hegelian mutual recognition than I have given it credit for. This may very well be the case. But in the context of impartiality, therefore, advocates of this position must themselves acknowledge the possibility of being too close to the movement to recognise the absence of mutual recognition and the alienating potential of the movement. This leaves one at a potential stalemate, especially if there are uncertainties about what constitutes the right balance between involvement and observation from the margins.

7.2 Homogenising RMF

In describing RMF as the product of the experience of alienation, it has

been pointed out that it can also proceed to be a force of alienation. One might say that this evaluation describes only the loudest voices within the movement. Subsequently, one might say that this essay is in danger of treating RMF as a monolithic structure. In so doing, it is oblivious to the multiplicities of interests and dispositions within the movement. The critique of RMF as an alienating force therefore becomes weak, because it ignores voices of a more democratic orientation that are interested in and disposed toward inclusivity. In this sense, I am guilty of homogenising the movement.

While the danger of essentialism is always something to be wary about, it is not clear that this essay flirts with this danger. It could be the case that the loudest voices actually make claims silently supported by many. At the same time, I have made an effort to direct criticism at 'certain' behaviours, in recognition that there are those within the movement that do not identify with the alienating behaviour described. More broadly, whether or not these are the loudest voices should not matter. If such voices are shown to have damaging effects, they are still worthy of engagement and criticism.

7.3 I like what you're saying, but why do you have to use Hegel?

In light of recent debates in South Africa, there has been a recent publication titled *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at resilient colonialism* (Nyamnjoh 2016). A friend of mine brought my attention to the fact that in a Facebook group privy to some members of RMF, they were already launching criticisms without having read the book. Most of their lamentations involved the fact that they were never consulted in the writing of such a book. My friend joked to me saying, "unless something is written by a queer, black, trans, South African woman, they won't be happy".

While this may appear humorous, a rendition of this problematique was levied against the first presentation of this essay at a public forum. I was criticised for using Hegel to support my analysis. This was problematic because it falls within the tendency to (consciously or unconsciously) privilege the white male voice at the expense of more marginalised voices. More broadly, this is symbolic of an epistemic injustice, wherein Western knowledge holds power and enforces the marginality of non-Western epistemology. In advancing these claims, it was quite clear what the criticism was — my account was Eurocentric

because Hegel was not an African scholar.

What could be said in response? It is possible to feign ignorance and claim to not fully understand what is meant by Eurocentric or even what it means to be African. These concepts often have the ever present quality of 'you know the thing but to say the thing is the thing'.

The criticism could be founded on default logic of difference between Western and non-Western epistemologies. Let us in fact assume that this is the foundation of the judgement. However, if we can show this foundation to be problematic, we are inclined to accommodate two possibilities (a) we cannot make judgements about Eurocentrism or (b) we can, but have been doing so all wrong. In criticising the tendency toward a default assumption of difference when investigating non-Western paradigms for international relations, Pinar Bilgin (2008) calls us to actually question the 'Westernness' of ostensibly Western theories and 'non-Westernness' of non-Western theories. Such a claim makes the case that the assumption of difference ignores the historical interaction that presumably Western and non-Western epistemologies have had. Such interactions mean that there have been non-Western influences in Western knowledge and *vice versa* (call this claim X). This exchange, be it in the form of clashes or fusions, means we must entertain three distinct possibilities/outcomes: (1) similarity, (2) difference and (3) different-yet-similar (for example, mimicry) (Bilgin 2008: 5). I don't think that these possibilities preclude judgements such as Eurocentrism. Rather, what Eurocentrism would capture is the fact that this interaction, was not one between equals.

The account of alienation herein could very well be Eurocentric, if we take Eurocentrism to mean the hegemony of values, beliefs, viewpoints, and paradigms that are the product of this unequal interaction. However, merely pointing to my use of Hegel seems insufficient to ground a Eurocentric judgement. Moreover, in reference to claim X above, Hegel reflects this history of mutual exchange. Simply dismissing my use of Hegel as Eurocentric because he is a white European male ignores this history of interaction. A possible response would thus lie in the fact that it is this history of exchange and influence that grounds Hegel's relevance.

For example, although a speculative historical account, Susan Buck-Morss (2009) makes the argument that Hegel's master-slave dialectic — a key component of the dialectical development of the different shapes of consciousness in his *Phenomenology* — could have

been inspired by the Haitian revolution. Furthermore, consider some of the theorists given God-like status within RMF, like Biko and Fanon. Their Hegelian influence is easy to discern, despite subsequent appropriation toward different arguments. In fact, the master-slave dialectic is a key influence on contemporary African humanism. Given this possibility and actuality of mutual exchange, alas, we observe that to dismiss Hegel is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath water.

8. Positive alienation: Altering our understandings of ourselves and others

I have repeatedly stressed the importance of recognising that while there is a negative component of alienation, it is also characterised by a positive element. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a major lesson we learn from Hegel's analysis of 'consciousness' development is this duality of alienation. The experience of alienation entails both self-loss and self-discovery. After all, it is only in recognition of our alienation that we see the necessity of altering our relation to ourselves and others. This positive thesis is evident in the centrality that 'struggle' plays in the development of 'consciousness'. Struggle, seen as confronting and overcoming alienation is the making of 'consciousness'. Having preceded from the premises of alienation, in particular its positive thesis, a very important question rises to the fore. In the experience of alienation, how should we alter our understandings of ourselves, and others? So far, we have seen the case for mutual recognition. Now, let us entertain the obligations of 'total liberation'.

The suggestion I wish to posit relies on an intersectional understanding of identity-based privileges and oppression. According to intersectionality, one's identity in relation to privilege and oppression is not additive. For example, I don't experience privilege just as a man, then a middle class individual. In any given scenario, I am a range of different identity possibilities which intersect. In this manner, the reality is not one of singular privileges and oppressions, but a matrix of oppression and privilege. I experience privilege as a middle class man (gender and class). At the same time, other men in relation to my class are oppressed, despite the similitude of our gender privilege. And you will find that we are together oppressed, when whiteness is brought into the mix. Crucial to intersectionality is the notion of a matrix of domination.

An intersectional understanding of privilege and oppression reveals the discomfoting realisation that we are all on a stage where we simultaneously play the roles of oppressor and oppressed. For example, black male students of movements like RMF resist the oppression of white supremacy. At the same time for example, they must realise their complicity in patriarchy as another system of domination. Please read this carefully. Nowhere have I said that patriarchy is a black phenomenon.

Hypocrisy can and should shame us all into an all-inclusive liberation agenda. There is no worse oppression than the oppression of the oppressed, hence the necessity of 'total liberation' — a horizontal approach to liberation in which liberation is incomplete and farcical if it is not liberation for all. Any gains made, if not made for all, can be hijacked by charges of hypocrisy. We must give credit where it is due. The desire to preclude hypocrisy has seen student activism tackle class based oppressions in movements to preclude fee rises and end the oppression attendant to outsourcing. Hopefully, this is treated as only the first step toward total liberation.

The focus on a positive thesis of liberation is defended by the important questions it causes us to pose. "How should we subsequently change our understandings of ourselves and others when confronted with the experience of alienation?". This alteration involves the cultivation of an intersectional understanding of injustice. Failure to do so will see the social transformation agenda stifled by hypocrisy — trapped in a whirlpool of double standards in which it can neither sink to the bottom nor swim to the top (to borrow from Descartes on the paralysis of scepticism).

9. Conclusion

Alienation is a useful tool of social philosophy very much relevant to the on-going socio-political transformation of the South African landscape. Using a dialectical philosophical methodology that follows the movement of contradictions, I have argued that student movements like Rhodes Must Fall emerge from the contradictions of racial inequality embodied in the experience of alienation. At the same time, they can also proceed and behave in ways that foster alienation. However, alienation has a positive component in that experiences of alienation are opportunities for self-discovery. Therefore, although RMF can alienate,

this can change by embracing this positive understanding of alienation. Seeing the contradictions internal to alienation should cause one to alter their understandings of themselves, the world and others. After all it is in struggle that progress is forged.

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