Radical Possibilities at the Crossroads of African Feminism and Digital Activism

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Declaration

I declare that **Radical Possibilities at the Crossroads of African Feminism and Digital Activism** is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledge by complete references.

Full name: Tigist Shewarega Hussen

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Social movements

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Tunisia

Egypt

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Ethiopia

South Africa

Abstract

Studies abound that deal with digital activism and social movements worldwide. Many African scholars continue to dwell on how the effects of technological advancement and access to social media are ingrained in class and other structural inequalities. Certain scholars (Mutsvairo, 2016; Bosch, 2017; Wasserman, 2018; Okech, 2020) are also invested in unpacking the possibilities that social media platforms are offering to social movements, and the shift occurring in many African countries' social and political structures. A central political current here is the tension in the relationship between masculinist nationalist movements and feminist digital activisms in Africa. This research argues that it is within this relationship that small and often neglected pockets of feminist radicalism resist restrictive cultures and stark power relations.

In order to explore the dynamic relationship between the internet and feminist digital activism, the research pays particular attention to the articulation of African feminisms in digital spaces. While I focus on the feminist counter-movement in the #FeesMustFall student-led social movement in South Africa, I also engage with connected feminist activisms from different African countries, namely Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. Thus, the intention is to understand and analyse the complex and often contradictory politics of feminist digital activism as a form of public participation within the postcolonial setting. In pursuing this theme, the study pays attention to the impacts of different public digital platforms as alternative spaces for feminist counter-movements within broader movements that are not necessarily feminist in aim.

First-hand information was gathered through a multi-sited digital ethnographic approach, and in-depth interviews with #FeesMustFall feminist activists. The thematic data analysis served to interpret, critique and theorise the growing body of research exploring contemporary feminist movements in Africa, and the discourses of embodied feminist activism within marginalised spaces and among societally subordinate subjects. In the case of digital activism in other sites, I uncovered an archive – often drawing critically on a gender-blind body of sources – in order to highlight the standpoints and struggles of radical African women and feminists. The research methods used to explore feminism in #FeesMustFall were very different from those employed to explore digital feminism elsewhere. My abiding concern, however, was to trace vantage points and focus on archives that registered the struggles and knowledges of those who confront the multiple and entangled impacts of gendered, imperialist, racist and class injustices.

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Chapter One

Introduction

African feminisms and the digital era

African feminist activists and writers who are deeply engaged with postcolonial thinking around gendered power relations have made great strides in advancing distinct African feminisms. African feminist thinkers, such as Patricia Mcfadden (2011, 2018), Desiree Lewis (2001, 2005), Pumla Gqola (2001, 2002), Amina Mama (2011), and Sylvia Tamale (2011, 2020) established that African feminism is not a monolithic category. In their different interdisciplinary feminist views, they provide frameworks that yield complex insights on the heterogeneity of African feminisms. Mama (2011:8), for instance, offers the following brief historical account:

> Feminism in Africa is extremely heterogeneous as it bears the marks of having been forged in quite diverse colonial contexts (British, French, Portuguese, Italian, Belgian, Spanish), and influenced by a multiplicity of civilizations, Islamic, Christian and indigenous, before being further shaped by an array of anti-colonial and nationalist movements. Since independence, feminism in Africa has been diversified by the range of political regimes (from multiparty, state socialist, capitalist, civilian and military dictatorships), not to mention the influence of the Cold War, various conflicts and other forms of instability.

The aforementioned diverse historical formations of feminist knowledge-making continue to engage with different perspectives and discourses of postcoloniality, with "rigorous critique of intersecting power relations that stems from close observation or involvement in gendered African processes" (Lewis, 2001:6). Such knowledge-making draws critical attention to the

interpretation of gender inequalities, discrimination, and exploitation, using an intersectional feminist theoretical framework, and addresses both patriarchal structures and the multi-layered complexities of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion (Goredema, 2010).

African feminists also pay attention to the different ways in which "black women influence feminist spaces and discourses" (Gqola, 2001:11). To a large extent, the knowledge that is produced by African feminist activists and scholars registers the nuances of the struggle against patriarchal structures by highlighting women's subjectivity, agency and power to negotiate established traditional, cultural and religious structures (Arndt, 2002; Mama, 2011). Such feminist knowledge, therefore, allows understanding of power relations beyond the binary assumption of the oppressed and the oppressor. It also recognises subversive resistance against oppression that enables performances of subjectivity and self-expression among African women (Lewis, 2009; Mahmood, 2011).

At another level, almost simultaneously, African feminism challenges racist and western-centric ideas about African women. Lewis (2001) argues that African feminist movements are entangled with complex deep-seated racist acquisition of gendered structures that define black African women statically, as a homogeneous group and as a subject of study, while positioning "western and white feminists as all-knowing" (Atanga, 2013:303). This categorisation immediately positions white and western scholars as experts entitled to speak for and on behalf of African women's lives and experiences. In remarking on this, Gqola, (2002:2) insists that, for African feminists, the urgent task is, "decentering white and/or male sources as repositories of expert knowledge". African feminists' work is therefore invested in resisting the homogenisation of experiences and stereotypical markers that portray African women as poor,

backward, uneducated, and oppressed with no agency of their own (Goredema, 2010; Atanga, 2013; Tamale, 2020).

While focusing on resisting western ideologies, African feminists also pro-actively engage in dislodging power relations. This includes critiquing masculinist approaches to colonialism and imperialism that disregard women and foreground masculine freedoms and agendas. Such critiques have been defined as inauthentic. As Narayan (2013:20) shows in her assessment of how nationalists globally have positioned postcolonial feminists:

> Third-World feminist criticisms of practices and ways of life that are harmful and oppressive to women are depicted as mere symptoms of an antinationalist cultural disloyalty and as a form of 'cultural inauthenticity' rooted in an adoption of 'western' ways and values.

Labels such as "influenced by western ideologies" are instrumentally used to discourage feminist movements that focus on gender justice and women's rights within national structures (Hussen, 2009). As a result, this essentialising nationalist discourse continues to suppress the public impact and dissemination of feminist knowledge rooted in the local and context-specific experiences of women. Criticising this, African feminists continue to resist the oversimplification and erasure of African women's active involvement in the making of postcolonial nations and the crafting of new discourses of freedom that resist nationalism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberalism in Africa (McFadden, 2018).

These briefly synthesised reflections anchor the theoretical and methodological standpoints which I follow throughout the study. In dealing with African feminist traditions that have been marginalised by different forms of western-centric and patriarchal hegemony, I show how African feminist digital activism has conveyed epistemological and political traditions that

have a long and intersectional history, which is increasingly including neoliberal power dynamics. Although my research seeks to uncover the numerous themes and sites of struggle identified above, in the context of this research, African feminist movement-building and activism is understood as being centred around three core sites of struggle: firstly, feminist scholars' and activists' consistent resistance to masculinist and nationalist approaches of movement-building and the silencing of black women's voices and feminist agendas within ostensibly national or collective movements; secondly, African feminists' overt or implicit rejection of the homogenisation of the "black women's experience" within transnational feminist contexts, and their push for a context-specific and intersectional understanding of struggle and women's agencies; and thirdly, African feminists work against depictions of African feminism as being influenced by western feminism, and African feminists as individuals and a collective corrupted by western ideologies. This intersecting feminist political awareness enables efforts to create independent activist paradigms through digital activism, new knowledge, political strategies and discourses that transcend western-centric and nationalist ones.

The third site of struggle mentioned above is evident in the way that recent articulations of feminism in Africa have situated black women's voices and knowledge squarely within the digital public sphere. Digital activism can therefore be located within the trajectory of complex and longstanding African feminist struggles in postcolonial Africa. Central themes, tropes and symbols in African feminist work signal the disruption of power relations, and reveal how marginalised groups negotiate, assert and demonstrate power in numerous ways. I intend to develop a reading of feminist activism and protest performances that show how African feminist activists are far from silent victims of power. By focusing on their determined agencies in the context of the global "information revolution", the thesis seeks to unsettle the dominant

trend (entrenched by patriarchal and colonial knowledge archives) in male-centred nationalist movements of simplifying or ignoring African women's distinct perspectives, knowledges, autonomy, and subjectivity.

Digital Activism in the African context

Digital media and the internet have significantly transformed political struggles in Africa, as elsewhere. They have revolutionised information-sharing, often circumvented the state media's power in framing news and knowledge, and enhanced communication and mobilisation practices (Bohler-Muller & van der Merwe, 2011; Bosch, Wasserman, & Chuma, 2018). Most importantly, after the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings that gave birth to the larger Arab Spring movement, the rise of digital revolutionary activisms and the eruption of social movements are seen as inextricably entangled (Hofheinz, 2011; Castells, 2015).

Over the years, the use of phrases such as "digital revolution", "Twitter revolution", "Facebook revolution", and "hashtag activism" recognised that internet and social media platforms play a crucial role as catalysts for significant political shifts, change in political regimes, and disruption of mainstream media's control over the production and dissemination of information. The emergence of these various digital spaces, and their Silicon Valley origins, make discussion of the "invention" of alternative public spaces complex. Consequently, there has been a growing research agenda that explores possible reconceptualisation of social and political activism, shifting discourses of the public sphere, and citizenship and political participation in the digital era.

Digital media has shown "the power of the network by building communities of people who are willing to spend time participating in a public sphere" (Johannessen, 2013:26). It is inevitable that digital movement-building, protests, and activisms exist against the backdrop of this unequal power dynamic. This means that digital activism often subverts the mainstreaming of technology, which is adapted to suit specific local political agendas. The opposite of using digitisation for activism, therefore, is not lack of access, but the hegemonic, global capitalist and authoritarian uses to which the digital revolution has been put. Given its potential to function as a recrafted political medium, focusing on resisting repressive systems, various social media platforms open up opportunities for "autonomous", "unconventional" and "progressive" protests and activism (Van de Donk *et al*., 2004; Castells, 2015; Harrison, 2016). This also implies a shift in how we think about cultures of protest, where "digital communication" revolutionises "social networking", and reconfigures the structure, representation and interaction of social movements in ways that were unthinkable about five decades ago (Dahlgren, 2005; Earl, Hunt & Garrett, 2014).

Critics of optimistic views about the socially transformative potential of digitisation claim that it is naïve to equate the information revolution in the digital era with political transition to "democracy" or "freedom". Thus, the assumption that "technologies by themselves have transformative power" (Chiumbu, 2015:10) is flawed. Fotopoulou (2016), considering the issues from a feminist digital activism perspective, emphasises that feminist activists also sometimes get trapped in the same techno-centric interpretation of activism. Fotopoulou writes (2016:5):

> Accounts of digital feminism largely disregard questions of cultural specificity and do not allow an investigation of agency in the multiple sites where it develops and gets expressed. But the

> relationship between media institutions and social life is dialectic and complex rather than causal.

This is often a direct indicator of how entangled digital technology and communication can become with the disorder of social, cultural and political relations (Couldry, 2012). Limitless increase in the global "culture of connectivity" (Van Dijck, 2013) might also create different forms of hidden disconnection that have a spill-over effect on power dynamics, identity politics, knowledge-making and equal representation (Abazov & Rysymbetov, 2013). As such, Wasserman (2016: vii) emphasises that, "the challenge for scholars of activism in Africa is to remain cognisant of both the potential and the pitfalls of digital media as they seek to better understand how these various forces interact in political practice, social activism and everyday life on this diverse continent."

The aim of this research is not to praise the use of technology in Africa without scrutiny, but to unpack the complexities of technology and political resistance, with a particular focus on African feminist movement-building and activism. The research also acknowledges that, besides the pessimist or optimist technological biases, the social and political divide contributes to "the current weakness of a national women's movement specifically, and more generally, the fragility of intellectual and political activism that frames particular social struggles and challenges" (Lewis, Hussen, & Van Vuuren 2013:47). Nonetheless, there are hybridised movements in Africa that make use of digital and offline spaces; there are also communities that continue to adhere to traditional communal strategies that are not indebted to the internet and digital media (Mutsvairo, 2016). Therefore, the potential role of digital activism in social justice should be analysed in terms of whether and how it is used in a particular place, in relation to specific events or crises, in concert with struggles that appear to be "purely traditional", at a moment of particular social outburst/crisis, and in a particular political environment.

In the context of this research, there are intersecting multi-layered social and economic problems that need to be considered when analysing digital activism on the continent. The following four aspects are especially important. The first is the difficulty of accessing the internet and new technologies, and the level of familiarity with techniques to create and share information (Mutsvairo, 2016). Secondly, although the internet and social media have been instrumental in revolutionist movements, the development industry's use of digital media – ostensibly for social transformation and in the interests of marginal groups in Africa – runs counter to feminist and activist use. Thirdly, digital medias in Africa are increasingly being deployed by the state (effectively, the ruling parties in power) and global neoliberal capitalism. These duplicitously popularise authoritarian, patriarchal and misogynist values, and asymmetric representation of power through information that is presented and disseminated as "serving the public good" (Chiumbu, 2015). Fourth, and most importantly in the context of the above dynamics in Africa, the gendered struggles of women in digital activist spaces have not yet been adequately explored (Bohler-Muller & Van der Merwe, 2011).

Feminisms and digital worlds in Africa

Considering the spaces and opportunities created by digital media, Gurumurthy stresses that, "digital technologies create the in-between space in liberal democracies, where marginalised women build collective political articulations as citizens contesting the state" (2013:25). In her connected analysis, Miraftab (2004) developed a more precise conceptualisation of "in-between" spaces by distinguishing between "invited" and "invented" spaces of political participation and citizenship. Miraftab points out that spaces of *invitation* (where citizens are included in participatory governance by those in power, such as ruling parties or local government structures or even certain donor-driven NGOs) are not only exclusionary, but

permit limited opportunity and access to those who are invited. These political spaces often exhibit hierarchical political power structures and have fixed views of citizenship. Feminist theorisation of political participation challenges the way that certain individuals are effectively silenced or excluded from the public sphere (Fleming, 1995; Cornwall, 2004). Moreover, as Gurumurthy and Miraftab show, it also demonstrates how socially marginalised subjects resist assimilation or incorporation, and devise autonomous strategies and platforms for public participation. As such, for this research, the centrality of "invented spaces" should be acknowledged as it provides a radical feminist intervention to create new knowledge, and shape the archive in the present. Invented spaces are new possibilities away from reservations and boundaries that are tightly drawn and vigilantly controlled by nationalism and patriarchy (McFadden, 2018).

As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Miraftab's formulation of "invented spaces of insurgency and resistance" (2004:1) creates a framework for recognising, exploring and understanding forms of political participation among women that are often hidden or buried. Notwithstanding its ambiguities, as noted above, digital media can offer abundant scope for crafting and using "invented spaces". These invented spaces can radically disrupt the divides created by exclusionary structures and create fluid political participation. The feminist conceptualisation of "invented" spaces through digital activism is therefore crucial to my study in that it conveys how digital tools – often controlled and used by dominant groups – can be appropriated and modified. It provides a subversive understanding of creative challenges to patriarchal and masculinist systems and structures.

However, even after two decades, the question of "whether the internet and other digital technologies can become agents of transformation or will reproduce the inequalities of the

status quo" (Robins, 2002:235) remains contested. The geopolitical location of Africa, together with the speed and individualised culture of the internet, mean that digital feminist activisms often appear as short-lived, outrageous, and reactionary "moments" as opposed to "movements". As a result, small-scale feminist activisms effectively get erased from the terrain and dynamics of transnational feminist activism, as well as popular understandings of nationally or globally relevant struggles for justice. I am therefore concerned with broader theoretical questions around how forms of feminist digital activism in Africa challenge different kinds of postcolonial power relations, and their intersections with and through global relations (Sanger, 2019).

Feminism and the hidden digital archive

The advancement of technology and social media platforms has radically changed what we now understand to be "archives" of knowledge and information. Traditional archives, which include museums and libraries, as well as canonised knowledge or particular texts, were controlled by a few esteemed custodians[1], and were considered definitive sources of "the political" (Cifor & Gilliland, 2016). Digital media has often reinforced traditional patterns of exclusion and hegemonisation. For example, Google, as a knowledge-gatekeeping and dissemination tool, continues to play an enormous role in creating hierarchies within what seems to be knowledge commons. Yet, it is a privatised archive, located in the US, with unlimited power and control that works with specific algorithms and provides limited access to the digital archive.

[1] "Custodians" include responsible individuals, and more recently also constellations for gatekeeping knowledge, such as publishers, universities etc.

At another level, knowledge produced on social media platforms is often not regarded as permissible archive, and is therefore hidden from the public discourse. Contending against this attitude, Luka and Millette (2018:3) argue for "social media data—big, small, thick, or lively—as a humanly constructed artifact shaped by power relationships and crafted according to certain values and standing points". Such exclusionary arguments of "what counts as an archive" are dismissive of how archives are "sites of power and privilege that have long been implicated in acts of violence and erasure" (Dever, 2017:1). This exploration also reveals the precarious labour of feminists and queer activists who increasingly make use of the social media space, and create a digital archive for their activism (Cifor & Gilliland, 2016).

At the same time, knowledge creation and dissemination through digital media has significantly changed our understanding of archives of knowledge as rigidly curated and static bodies of seemingly "universal" truths that reflect the positionalities and agendas of historically dominant groups. Digitisation has contributed to the fluidity of archives, and to their diverse existence in multiple spaces (Tamboukou, 2013). Digitisation has also enabled the archiving of histories, memories and stories to surpass conventional disciplinary exercise, and has opened knowledge up to various fields of study, including postcolonial feminist interest in "collections and documents that are deemed unimportant or uninteresting" (Sachs, 2008:651). Most importantly, the digitisation of archives has created a space to unravel everyday resistance and seemingly ordinary performances of identity (Dever, 2017).

It is in this rapidly shifting multimodal archival structure and politics that this research locates feminist digital activism. Primarily, feminist understanding of the archive is "enmeshed in histories, politics and power structures that must be accounted for" (Dever 2017:2), in places where the history of women and other marginalised communities do not exist (Sheffield, 2014).

Thus, to engage with stories and archives that are "not deemed historically important or worthy of preservation" (Sachs, 2008:651) is a political project. From a black feminist perspective, the "hiddenness" of an archive, explored throughout the thesis, focuses on intersecting forms of marginalisation (Burin & Sowinski, 2014). This is done through an acute understanding of McFadden's (2018) cautionary argument that suggests even these counter-colonial archives constitute the new nationalist archive in Africa. She argues that recent claims to produce authentic, counter-colonial African knowledge and archive (in the academy, in politics, in seemingly new youth-led movements) "lean back" to a form of nationalism that is being consolidated covertly. This cautionary argument indicates the need for an inclusive theoretical explanation of the patriarchal nationalism that feminists are now contending with (McFadden, 2018; 2021).

Therefore, the research unveils overt and implicit exclusion of African feminist activists' knowledge-making; oversimplified curation of the digital media archive; and minimal analysis of feminist counter-movements, and activists' subjectivity, agency and resistance within broader movements. Serious consideration and interpretation of digital archives that are placed on social media platforms under specific hashtag frames is dependent upon our understanding of the circumstances in which the archive was created, the rationale behind the decision to use social media spaces for crowdsourcing stories of African feminists, and the processes through which the archive was collected. These hashtags are instrumental in curating historical evidences, and in observing intentional and subversive feminist provocations and embodied techniques of popularising feminist resistance.

Sachs states that the feminist researcher's role "involves seeking out [these] collections and documents that are deemed unimportant or uninteresting" (2008:651). From a methodological

perspective, the difficulty of archival research, particularly in the case of digital archive, is how to read "self-consciously constructed documents, or how to consider material objects as embodiments of cultural moments" (Sachs, 2008:651). The digital database, which is infused with dynamic interactions, multiple identities, and diverse political standpoints, makes the reading of its texts and their analytical interpretation uncertain. For example, in order to make sense of each selected hashtag frame, the research involves not only reading texts but also the subtexts of tweets and comments, and the unique modes of digital storytelling. To unravel the discourses that are concealed in the interactions of networked dialogues, Sachs (2008:651) states that feminist researchers should "'read against the grain' of documents to tease out hidden stories or to point out the ubiquity of things so ordinary they are rarely seen." Whilst these hashtags are archives that evoke emotional and sensory responses, the analytical task of the researcher involves resisting romanticisation of marginalised voices. At the same time, however, there should be empathetic attention to invisible and side-lined stories, and a focus on the contradictions of the feminist standpoints and knowledge-making of the archive itself (Cifor & Gilliland, 2016).

The digital space is also a site constituted by the everyday. The use of multiple digital spaces amplifies ordinary narratives in the present, such that everyday knowledge can come to constitute an archive, and part of the future in memory of the past. At another level, documentation of the embodied experiences of feminist activists using social media platforms emerges from the unreliable representation of women and queer bodies in mainstream and heteronormative hegemonic archiving of history. Certainly, feminist studies of the archive are instrumental in revisiting digital activism and embodiments, and problematising interpretations of archives that are supressed, undocumented, or misrepresented (Cifor & Gilliland, 2016).

As discussed above, digital technologies have impacted the process of archiving extensively. "[L]arge scale digitisation projects have brought about monumental changes in our understanding of what an archive is and in the 'what' and 'how' of archival research" (Dever, 2017:1). Feminist activist work has focused on creating digital archives that are open for public access, that build collective knowledge, and that resist the exclusion of women and, in many cases, queer folks as well.

At the same time, for professional archivists or feminist researchers, the production of digital resources raises another ethical question about the methods that are being used to access these archives. Most importantly, the invisible positionality of the researcher while exploring the digital archives intimately, and the power dynamic that emerges in this dynamic, is extremely relevant. Here, the reflexivity of feminists' engagement cannot escape critiques and questions around interpretations of these archival resources. Such practice also provides a space to explore methodological shifts beyond the formulaic research design to reach a more complicated understanding of digital archive (Haraway, 1997). Questions such as how do feminist researchers' "priorities concerning the acquisition, processing, conservation and digitisation of particular archival materials" (Dever, 2017:2), reflect back the heterogeneity of the archive and historical context, which in return shapes the partial feminist knowledge-making of the archive.

Throughout the study, I will draw on understandings of the archive that "problematise what an archive is and what an archive does" (Dever, 2017:2). Part of this understanding concerns the inevitability of a partial interpretation and representation of the archive and knowledge-production. Two different but related realisations have been important to my research. The first is that archives "are not innocent sites of storage [but] already texts shaped according to the

interests and needs of certain groups" (Pollock, 1993:12, cited in Dever, 2017:2). As work by Collins (2002) and Harding (2004) shows, the archives of feminist knowledge-making should not be treated as sacrosanct bodies of truth in need of retrieval. Rather, they should be unravelled as positioned ways of knowing, critiquing and envisaging futures.

Related to this is the question of why we should investigate counter-hegemonic archives. Researchers (including feminist ones) deal with a fragmented version of the archive, and, significantly, view it through specific ideological and theoretical lenses. Thus, inevitably their analytical interpretations will exclude certain stories, bodies, and narratives. In fact, "archives are neither faithful to reality nor totally representative of it; but they play their part in this reality, offering differences and alternatives to other possible statements" (Farge, 1993:5, cited in Tamboukou, 2013:3).

The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement in South Africa (2015 – 2016)

The #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement in South Africa from 2015 to 2016 was a catalyst for the resurfacing of questions that had been deeply buried in the neoliberal and capitalist post-apartheid public imaginary (Naicker, 2016; Molefe, 2016; Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). The movement articulated the paradoxical social and political realities of black students in Higher Education (HE) institutions, and challenged multiple forms of injustice within the postcolonial state – the right to free education, decolonisation of the HE system, revisiting curriculum design, feminist struggles against sexual violence, and tackling multifaceted social, economic and symbolic violence. The movement used digital media as a major platform to convey its demands to the larger public and as a platform for creating radical post-apartheid knowledges. The framing of each movement through a hashtag is obviously indicative of the integration of

digital media culture. For instance, the #EndOutSourcing movement tackled policies that are discriminatory and exploitative against workers. #Shackville was a movement that exposed the racialisation of residence, and specifically the struggle black students go through to get residence in some universities. #PatriarchyMustFall was a counter-movement that erupted to challenge the patriarchal and misogynist leadership style of male leaders of the #FMF movement; while feminist activism against violence against women – #RapeMustFall, #NakedProtest, #IAmOneInThree, #RUReferenceList – exposed and drew attention to rape culture in HE.

One aim of this research is to draw together the learnings gathered from exploring the digital archive and experiences of #FMF feminist activists, and extend the question by reflecting on how African feminist articulations of struggle, agency, identity and freedom feature in the understanding of African political struggles. To what extent does political protest and activism by African feminists in the digital space push against the boundaries of masculinist and nationalist orientations in movement-building? Here, analysis of networking, connectivity and relationship in digital activism in Africa will be read by paying attention to the diversity of African feminist political issues on the continent, while also focusing on the significant similarities among both large and small examples of digital activism since 2010.

By including situated knowledge, subjective experience and positionality on the canvas of theorisation, the research attempts to disrupt the simplistic interpretations and essentialisation of meaning often perpetuated by the digital world in the north. African feminist scholars (Lewis, 2010; McFadden, 2011; Tamale, 2011) argue that the global north often essentialises and simplifies African feminist movements, portraying African women as victims and sufferers, rather than as active agents who craft their own radical politics and revolutionary

knowledge. From a feminist standpoint theoretical perspective, against the backdrop of the asymmetrical global south-north relationship, and tech-related knowledge production that either simply applauds digital activism or focuses simplistically on women's empowerment within the prevailing status quo, the analysis of feminist activism in Africa highlights the inevitable influences of African feminisms on the making of #FMF.

It provides a framework to reimagine African feminist activism in the digital era. From this perspective, situated within the contemporary theorisation of postcolonial African feminism, the research argues that digital activism has created an opportunity for the popularisation of feminism on the continent, yet there are also challenges in articulating feminist activism in a way that does not further distort African feminisms. In relation to this, McFadden (2018) stresses that African feminist visioning and resistance should not conform to structurally repressive and dominant nationalist and heteropatriarchal systems. I therefore focus on the #FMF movement as one in which feminist voices, networking and association are entangled with broader, seemingly progressive and gender-neutral activisms.

Feminist methodological framework

As much as this research is interested in uncovering what has been marginalised, it is equally concerned with dismantling what is hegemonic and what conceals or invalidates disruptive/feminist/marginalised worlds of meaning-making. The research draws on diverse postcolonial African feminist perspectives to explore this. One theoretical strand that is offered by postcolonial feminists (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004; Wylie, 2004) is intersectionality. This theory explains how systems of domination and structural injustices are experienced in multiple and intersecting identities and power relations – class, nation, race, and ethnicity. It provides

an epistemological route to critically explore radical possibilities and challenges of the digital world in shaping the future of feminist activism in Africa. It also provides a critical lens to measure how, in nationalist digital movements, gender is constituted, and the representation or underrepresentation of African feminist experiences in movements.

Thus, exploring the active use of digital platforms for feminist struggle in Africa, such as the case of #FMF, forces us to ask, "What does it mean to be a feminist in the digital age and how do we understand being political?" (Fotopoulou, 2016:2). A further question, which considers the global network, is how do *African* feminist articulations of identity, resistance and power articulate distinct geo-political agendas? In other words, to what extent can political protest and activism among feminists within digital spaces in African contexts be seen as "African"? The study recognises that feminist struggles have been buried beneath the hegemonic public sphere discourse, and silenced by masculinist anticolonial or "popular" struggles. The intention here is not simply recognising that women have played a role, but rather to place feminist struggles at the centre of understanding political resistance in postcolonial Africa.

One model used for this is a multi-sited feminist ethnographic approach with a particular focus on digital feminist activism. This method facilitates "the selection of space and sites of investigation [that] emerge inseparably from the highly politicized way that the problem of investigation and then writing is cognized" (Marcus, 1995:99). The research attempts to stress the importance of understanding feminist standpoint knowledge-making through a retrospective exploration of the #FMF movement from digitally archived terrains of invisible feminist voices. I followed and studied #FMF feminist hashtag frames that were used as a digital activism tool. I turned to Facebook and Twitter digital platforms as field sites that I engaged with during the digital ethnographic fieldwork process, which was done over a one-

year period. After the completion of the ethnographic research, and the realisation of the gap that exists in the research, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten black and LGBTQIA+ #FMF feminist activists. The main purpose of this fieldwork was to explore the human experience of digital activism and analyse silenced feminist voices and struggles within the movement.

In addition, extensive desk research was conducted to uncover interpretations of African feminist movements in other countries – Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria and Ethiopia. Here, I sifted through a range of academic work, available digital archive work from feminist sources, and work that critiqued the gender-blind or non-feminist sources explaining social movements in these countries. Although the research insights do not emanate directly from the subjects, the various studies and theoretical work done in and about these countries serve to draw on African feminist understanding of the complexities of feminist movements in #FMF.

I used these methodological tools eclectically in the ongoing process of researching my subject as perceptively as possible. The varied methods were vital in my efforts to identify and explore feminist archives that are hidden under the nationalist and patriarchal facades of the student movement. Nagar (2014) describes the complex research paths that researchers take in the fieldwork process as "muddying the water" with an invitation to a more vulnerable mode of engagement that provides an insight to narratives that are often overlooked.

Making self-reflexivity concrete

Throughout the research process, and especially during my fieldwork, I struggled to recognise and reflect on my multiple positions and vantage points. I am a foreign and black African

woman student in South Africa – a postgraduate student, from Ethiopia, engaging with critical feminist exploration of the #FMF movement from the standpoint of African feminist digital activism. Within the #FMF movement, I have in many ways been an outsider. At the time of the protests in 2015 and 2016, I was a registered PhD student at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) – a historically black institution. Like many of students at the time of the revolution, I was involved in the movement, attended meetings, marched with students on UWC campus, supported seminar events, and was actively involved in social media activism.

During the #FMF protest, many black African foreign students at South African universities experienced a precarious condition. This was primarily exhibited through the horrific violence that was reported at historically black institutions; it was in the details of the anticipation of violence and the performance of preparedness to control the eruption of violence by any means necessary. For instance, my university, UWC, hired a security firm, Vetus Schola, to control the protest and protect the institution. Instead of engaging with #FMF leaders and activists, the hired paramilitary operation not only undermined students' right to freedom of expression and peaceful protest, but they had expansive power to control students' movements under the pretext of instituting normalcy on campus. Students were forced into a situation that positioned them as accountable for their own safety in campus public spaces that were under intensive control and occupation by these security forces. Thus, black bodies were physically intimidated and violated in ways that dehumanised them and put them in vulnerable conditions.

I remember reflecting with other foreign African students how the presence of these security forces was outrageously distressful. It invoked in me a memory and historical trauma of the violently repressed student protests in Ethiopia. To walk past them would mean to feel the intimate closeness of violence and the impossibility of dialogue with the university

management. We were outraged. A few senior feminist lecturers and postgraduate students (myself included) from UWC and CPUT circulated a petition letter via change.org[2] to speak against and challenge the institution to withdraw these forces from the campus areas. The university did not react immediately, even after heavy critiques from students and staff members, concerned parents, and the public on social media.

Interestingly, this was one of the moments where I deeply felt the extent to which all black students' experiences of such violence at a personal level did not have a space or language to be named and expressed. There was never a right time to ask these questions from a pan Africanist perspective; and it is also not the focus of this research. However, witnessing the similarities of students' experiences, especially how revolutionary protests are met with violence instructed by the state in different African countries, invited me to look at the #FMF movement from a broader perspective, not just national. Particularly, I was urged to think about how different countries in Africa make use of social media platforms for political and social activism to frame, strengthen and sustain movements for justice on the continent.

My interest is and always has been the feminist concerns of the movement. Through personal experiences, I was interrogating my outsider identity as a foreign student in South Africa, and the #FMF collective African feminist politics and solidarity that pushed for diverse identities. There were feminist gatherings where I felt included as a black African woman, and engaged with topics that were beyond the nationalist agenda. Through my shifting identities, a graduate student, foreigner, a black woman, an African feminist, and an ally, I recognise the unstable insider and outsider positionality I occupy which challenges the assumption of a clear dichotomy of unchanging and unitary identity (Uldam & McCurdy, 2013). These intersecting

[2] https://www.change.org/p/uwc-cput-letter-petition-calling-for-end-to-security-presence

encounters of positionality have shaped my research question and the significance of knowledge production, and contextualised the methods used, as well as the data collected during fieldwork and the data interpretation post fieldwork (Hussen, 2011; Kerstetter, 2012). Ergun and Erdemir (2010:18) capture this process eloquently: "the degree to which scholars manage to overcome their outsiderness, is believed to determine easy access to informants, reliability of collected data, and the success of the fieldwork". Engaging with the #FMF feminist activities helped me to identify themes that remained stable and political despite the unfolding narrative that students could not have possibly determined at the time.

At another level, I am registered in a postgraduate programme, a more senior student level, that created a distance and privilege from the everyday intensity of the protest and its impact on the physical black body and the psychological effect of trauma. The digital ethnographic approach and research design that I drew on for much of the research complicated the issue of presence even further. I selected and analysed the data in close proximity to the events unfolding at the time, and this has inherently and deeply infused my combined online and offline presence. Often interrupted ethnographic presences dictated a constant process of reflection that acknowledged and analysed the research process with a commitment to conduct ethical research and to recognise the partiality of feminist knowledge-making in the context of this research.

Chapter outline

This study starts by providing, in Chapter Two, a feminist theorisation of public participation (Fleming, 1995). The chapter argues that public participation as a form of activism and/or revolutionary movement is entangled with gender and sexual politics. Here, I am concerned

with evolving forms of power, relayed through institutions like the state, but also through the media, including the seemingly progressive media, and universities. As several critical scholars have recently pointed out, African universities have become increasingly complicit with the agendas of governments, political parties and the neoliberal capitalist economy. The chapter explores how knowledge and activism has needed to take on multiple forms of oppression in addressing the intersections of gender with postcolonial Africa. Feminists in different African contexts have therefore struggled to develop counterpublic spaces where gender and its complex entanglement with other power dynamics is foregrounded in practice and intellectual activism (Hussen, 2018).

Chapter Three engages with feminist critical reflective methodological principles to explain my choice of methods for this research. This chapter critically reflects on my positionality in relation to the research, and on the "messiness" of ethnographic digital data collection, in a space that is understood to be "publicly available". In the process, I explore ethical grey areas associated with having access to digitally archived activism work, and problematise conduct that goes beyond providing anonymity and confidentiality. The research uses thematic analysis of textual contents to explore feminist activism online and offline. I also discuss the seemingly obscure connections between my use of digital ethnography for my South African case study, and what seems like standard desktop and literature review research in my analysis of other African contexts. It was beyond the scope of this study to engage deeply with the digital activist world in Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria. However, I remain interested in how feminists from different African countries have encountered power struggles, developed similar insights into power and have used digital platforms to drive their radical thought and action. One of my key arguments is that African feminist digital activism constitutes a distinct corpus of political action and knowledge creation. In contrast to the trend to treat different cases as discrete and

sporadic “outbursts”, I make a case for exploring what could be defined as a pan-African feminist movement, with distinct political registers, insights into power, and engagement with specific intersectionalities. My methodological approach is therefore informed by efforts to discover distinct African feminist archives from within the archives that are generally believed to define social justice struggles, both within countries and across the continent.

Chapter Four reviews embedded and hybridised feminist activisms in a few selected popular African movements. The chapter looks at Tunisia and Egypt in North Africa; Ethiopia in East Africa; and Nigeria in West Africa. The purpose of this review is to think through the broader implications of #FMF as it sometimes echoes, sometimes defies the hybridised movement building and struggles of feminist activists on the continent. While this analysis can be critiqued as an abridged comparative perspective which neglects in-depth primary site research, it was pivotal to my efforts to discover hidden feminist archives, and especially digital feminist archives on the continent. Building on these country reviews, the chapter provides a rationale for focusing on the case of the #FMF movement in South Africa, and its relevance to advancing understanding of other African and continental movements. This chapter also addresses the scholarly work on African women, gender and technology to bridge the gap in feminist theoretical analysis of digital activism.

Chapter Five focuses on feminist interventions within the ideological debates and controversies that surfaced within #FMF. This chapter also attempts to understand the radical/disruptive impact and rationale of diverse genres of protest, including creative protest performances on the streets and the use and role of gendered and raced bodies in digital representation and protests. The chapter also critically looks at how online and offline movements are entangled

with each other, and how the digital platform extends and even deepens space for brewing public protest.

After my exploration of localised feminist activism within SA's student-led #FMF, in relation to other feminist digital struggles on the continent, I turn to an in-depth look at #FMF digital feminist activism. Chapter Six critically explores the articulation of distinct feminist concerns, such as violence against women, with particular reference to #RapeMustFall and #NakedProtest. Emphasis is given to the conceptualisation of gendered subjectivities, vulnerability, and agency in online social movement spaces, where the centrality of naked protest performance involving bodies and digital communication portrays African women's struggles in a deeply embodied fashion. During the protest, women's bodies – the subject of others' abuse and dominance – functioned as weapons and were mobilised to "speak back" and visibilise embedded and often repressed feminist struggles within the #FMF movement. In many ways, this protest performance is very much in sync with aspects of the digital struggles elsewhere in Africa, as discussed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Seven of this thesis draws together insights about all the movements dealt with in the rest of the study to show that each speaks not only to their local and national contexts, but to broader African contexts. While rarely documented or even identified, I suggest the existence of a distinct tradition of African feminist digital activism, in which certain movements may have influenced one another, and in which the power relations that African feminists generally confront are repeatedly turned to and subverted. This chapter therefore shows how African feminist movements travel between countries and have organically evolved into a form of transnational feminist solidarity on the continent.

The concluding chapter of the thesis critically discusses the nuances of writing with feminist archives that are governed by the intimacy of everyday experiences of African women. Based on the learning from the multi-sited ethnographic research work, I reflect on the inevitability of intersectionality and common trends of African feminist resistances against gender-blind nationalist movements, which provide an opportunity for the emergence of feminist counter movements. This chapter also makes a case for future study on feminist digital activism in Africa through the presented cases of fragmented archives. The feminist intervention in the concluding remark is the reimagination of the digital archive to create coherence and interrupt dominant knowledges.

Chapter Two

Public spheres, political participation and African feminist activism in a digital era

Definitions of the public sphere continue to envision political arenas where democracy, free speech, and inclusive political participation are possible. However, scholars who theorise the counterpublic sphere argue that the assumption that the public sphere represents all citizens' diverse voices and political standpoints is "a convenient fantasy" (Hartley & Green, 2006:347) and an "explicitly idealist concept" (Webster, 2013:25). My interest in this study is in using conceptual tools for exploring voices that are at the margins of mainstream public sphere debates in terms of geographical region, gender, social class and race. As the case studies in the next chapters show, at the heart of an exclusionary public sphere is an "impulse to reinvent power, rather than shift it" (Loehwing & Motter, 2009:229). My focus on counterpublics opens up the opportunity to curate knowledge and archives that centre marginalised others, particularly the knowledge and action of African feminisms.

In many African countries, hegemonic masculinist nationalism, tied to a neoliberal constellation of socio-economic, political and cultural relations, has constituted the public sphere (Hassim, 2009). As the case studies show, the exclusion and marginalisation of black African women and queer communities from the public sphere "undercuts the legitimacy of particularity in which concrete differences between citizens are lodged" (Meehan, 1995:12). To a large extent, these practices of exclusion dissect through gender, class, race, sexuality and other identity politics to preserve the hegemonic masculinist and sexist political configuration (Miraftab, 2004; Betlemidze, 2015). Thus, an intersectional perspective on the struggles of African women confronting exclusionary public structures shows how often movements, even the most progressive ones, operate within a system that is deeply unequal in structure and power

dynamics. In return, these analyses help to understand a sophisticated formation of the "proliferation of subaltern counter publics" (Fraser, 1990:70) that undo these violent restrictions, exclusions, and erasure.

Dahlberg (2007:836) argues that the idea of the "public sphere" needs to be reimagined from a perspective of contestation and resistance. He states, "the public sphere is expanded by expanding discursive contestation and particularly by expanding contestation of the boundary of dominant discourses" (2007:836). In other words, to advocate for counter-discourses to emerge in the public sphere means to reject the idea of uniformity and fixed representation which is associated with the idea of *the* public sphere (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2016). This push against a homogenous understanding of the public sphere enables fragmented and marginalised voices to influence dominant masculinised political ideologies. Comparably, Johannessen (2013:29) emphasises that "in a globalized, fragmented and multi-faceted world, there is a need to allow for a variety of voices and forms of communication".

Counterpublics and different standpoints

Feminist work that engages with traditional public sphere theory argues for the importance of conceptualising counterpublics situationally (Fraser, 1990). This allows for the recognition of how the dominant public operates within a distinctive structural location and hierarchical power relations. Meehan (1995:12) states that the public sphere, "favours certain abilities and interests over others and in effect, if not in intention, excludes the problematization of the gender-determined power differential in the intimate sphere, ensuring that male subjects would be its dominant inhabitants." In particular, the counterpublics that this research is dealing with

foreground women's gendered standpoints in relation to contextually shaped forms of patriarchy.

While analysis of the hegemonic public vs. counterpublic sphere is significant, the differences that exist within the counterpublic sphere are rarely explored. Sevilla-Buitrago (2015:93) argues that the pushback against the dominant public sphere "must be understood not only as a struggle in space, but also as a struggle for and with space". Sevilla-Buitrago is here defining space in terms of conceptual and political space within the so-called knowledge "commons"– sometimes geographical and geopolitical, sometimes discursive, sometimes cognitive etc. In this research, the emphasis on the different usage of spaces, which allow a political formation that identifies African feminists' struggles, are directly related to power relations, particularly where power over others is never simply relinquished by those in power (Loehwing & Motter, 2009; Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016). Even in the counterpublic spheres of marginalised groups, there is an inclination to shift debates towards a standardised standpoint and overlook differences in lived experience among feminists across class, race, and sexuality groupings (Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016).

In expanding on how varied marginalised group counterpublics can be, Squires (2002:447) asks, "does the label 'counterpublic,' in its multiple uses, help us understand the heterogeneity of marginalized groups?" In response to this, Jackson and Banaszczyk highlight "how multiple marginalized social positions yield crucial knowledge about power and inequality" (2016:394). Similarly, feminist scholars (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Palacios, 2017) argue that standpoint theory makes a compelling philosophical argument for unravelling these layered complexities and priority differences among members of the counterpublic sphere, which is ostensibly open

to diverse voices based on the situated knowledge that emerges from the marginalised position feminist activists occupy.

In this thesis, I deal concretely with the above discussion of how counterpublics are constituted in relation to hegemonic publics. For instance, as will be discussed in Chapters Five and Six, the feminist voices in #FMF were resisting masculinist politics, leadership and structures within a student movement that was itself counterpublic and "progressive". #FMF was a national movement that came into being to contest the dominant public sphere shaped by government, and the globally dominant neoliberal consensus that university students need to pay fees and study within the existing status quo. Hence, the student movement, in many universities, emerged from already small and fractured counterpublic spaces that existed mainly within Student Representative Councils (SRC). We can therefore see #FMF as a counterpublic, and then feminism within #FMF as an example of a subordinated counterpublic, in which feminists speak back to voices that are already oppositional. I shall show how the other African feminist case studies explored in Chapter Four – national uprisings in Egypt (2010), Tunisia (2010), Ethiopia (2013), and Nigeria (2014 – present) – also operate as counterpublics within counterpublics. They are situated within and resist popular and nationalist movements that protest against oppressive governments and advocate for political reformation and transformation.

However, it is worth stressing here that each feminist counterpublic can be different. While African feminist counterpublics may speak back to masculinist and patriarchal relations and structures, they may also prioritise different agendas, draw on varied strategies, and define gender justice in distinct ways. Both patterns of exclusion among counterpublics, as well as the diversity of feminist activism and discourse in Africa, reveal a multiplicity of experiences in

the counterpublic sphere, and challenge how simply "differentiating the 'dominant' public sphere from 'counterpublics' solely on the basis of group identity tends to obscure other important issues" (Squires, 2002:447). This realisation problematises a superficial engagement with political participation as involving the uniform agencies of homogenous counterpublics. Such a blunt perspective undermines the agency and autonomy of situated African feminists in resisting and dismantling context-specific repressive systems (McFadden, 2018).

Alternative digital media and counterpublic spheres

In the context of the information revolution, public and counterpublic spheres have increasingly been shaped and defined by print media, as well as new and digital media. Abazov and Rysymbetov (2013:530) state that the mainstream media plays multiple roles, "not only in delivering information and social and cultural content, but also in reshaping relations between individuals and societies at all levels of communication". In terms of this definition, the expected role of the media is to ensure that all have a voice in the public sphere; in traditional views about democracy and the public sphere, the mass media is a platform for citizens to express political opinion, for example, through reports on protest or public debate, and plays the important role of broadcasting information relevant to citizens. However, a range of interdisciplinary critical work on the mass media intersects with scholarship on counterpublics in stressing that the mass media also has the power to *influence* (and not simply "air") public knowledge-making.

Globally, the mainstream media often functions to articulate the viewpoint of the state and its allies, namely international capital, the international donor community and local elites (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2016). In relation to this, Milioni (2009:411) stresses that, "the space occupied by

the mass media has the character of a dominant or 'hegemonic' public sphere, which is associated with the production, circulation and reproduction of the dominant public opinion". In African contexts especially, leading newspapers and television channels are directly controlled and financed by governments. Even in the case of newspapers, with long traditions of criticising the state – such as the Mail and Guardian in South Africa – certain classed, racialised and gendered agendas definitely limit the stories, "voices" and vantage points that are made public (Sanger & Hadland, 2008).Thus, in undemocratic and patriarchal states, the media, state-owned or private, is constrained by the state's particular ideological framing of the dominant public sphere and the particular political agenda that those in positions of power want to perform (Tettey, 2001; Shirky, 2008; Bruns & Highfield, 2015). In fact, in many African states, due to government control, the mass media mainly concerns itself with representing the government's agenda (Ndlela, 2010; Wasserman, 2018). However, even in neoliberal democracies such as South Africa, the mass media is far from comprising a public sphere that openly airs the views of the so-called general public (Sanger & Hadland, 2008).

It is therefore within a larger context of knowledge monopolies - often directly controlled by the state – that the emergence of alternative media, driven by various counterpublics, is embraced by many to shift the power that dominant media outlets and industries exert. In transcending their gatekeeping, these benefit from far more flexible conditions for political engagement to improve information access and alternative knowledge-making. Mutsvairo (2016), writing from the perspective of digital activisms and movements in Africa, attributes the emergence of alternative digital media and radical changes to the biases and negligence of mass media itself. He argues that, by "ignoring ordinary citizen voices, especially those from counter-hegemonic movements, conventional media structures have unknowingly allowed digital activism to flourish" (2016:10).

As such, the increasing digitalisation of counterpublic spheres offers the possibility of networks of association through digital media that are significantly more democratic and open for everyone (Keller, 2012). In the case of digital feminist counterpublics, Fotopoulou (2016:8) stresses that "the very conditions of political organising, and how we understand what it means to be political as feminists, are inextricably linked to communicative practices in network digital culture". The intention is to create feminist networks that provide scope for the emergence of dissenting and anti-masculinist standpoints and political voices.

It must be stressed that the relationship between alternative digital media and the counterpublic sphere is not without its limitations. The inclusive potential of digital media is often influenced by pernicious intersecting problems that widen margins of asymmetric power relations (Dahlberg, 2007). For instance, aspirations to expand the inclusivity of the digital public sphere continue to be sabotaged by intersecting political identities and power relations across race, gender, class, and sexuality. In actual fact, alternative digital media also reproduces socio-cultural and patriarchal practices that hamper possibilities of feminist liberation. Fotopoulou's analysis provides a perspective based on the experiences of feminist activists who usually struggle to articulate the social causes that are left out of political and historical records. She writes that, "there are contradictions between inclusion and exclusion in new communicative environments; between representation and materiality; between articulations of opportunity and realisations of impossibility; and, perhaps the most important tension for activists in the digital era, between vulnerability and empowerment" (2016:1). Thus, even with the great opportunities provided by alternative digital spaces, feminist counterpublic spheres are not free from the limitations that compromise the intentionality of the movement. In short, someone somewhere will be left out of the feminist politics.

Within the geo-political contexts of this study, the following four major problems are experienced by African feminists as they seek to use digital platforms productively and fully. First, the gap that exists in access to technology is a constant reminder that, even though digital platforms provide alternative space, digital technology, access and skills are not generally available and digital communication is therefore not inclusive. Here, class differences play a crucial role in determining who can afford to engage in (digital) counterpublic discourses.[3] Consequently, "this lack of access to alternative media hampers the advocacy work and mobilization by social movements whose target group is the [unconnected] majority" (Ndlela, 2010:94).

Second, scholars problematise assumptions of non-hierarchical power relations in the alternative digital counterpublic sphere. Bosch (2016) states that the impact of technological advancement in facilitating the decentralised expansion of existing communication systems and public participation is overrated. The openness to all connected users should not be immediately assumed as inclusiveness, autonomy, agency, and empowerment of marginalised communities and activists to become agents of political change in the digital counterpublic sphere (Knappe & Lang, 2014; Yang, 2016). Here, the "politics of location" can persistently work against a decentralised and non-hierarchical structure for the digital counterpublic sphere (Lukose, 2018). This is especially witnessed in contemporary transnational digital feminist movements, in which the global north continues to be seen as the "expert" in initiating and shaping struggles, including those in the global south (Yuval-Davis 1999). As will be shown in Chapter Seven, feminist knowledge transfer from Africa to the global north is often ignored, and histories of southern-led movements get appropriated and replaced. Consequently, African

[3] Others go as far as implying that, because of the digital divide, the internet as an alternative media predominantly carries the viewpoints of the elite (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2016; Ndlela, 2010; Dahlberg, 2007).

women's struggles and knowledge can easily be erased from the available archive of everyday struggles and from our collective memory. Perhaps the critical analysis provided by SevillaBuitrago (2015:94) on counterpublic digital communication and mobilisation offers a balanced understanding of the interwoven power relations. He writes:

> This autonomous production of space is neither easy nor straightforward. It needs a previous location to come into being, so it will have to negotiate its evolution in the context of a foreign space, shaped by an antagonistic order. Therefore, the spatial dimension of the political action is subject to dialectic between the production of a new spatial regime by demonstrators and the influence of the built space …the new space is constructed against the pre-existing public space, removing its legitimating role as a civic theatre for the established order.

Third, Dahlberg argues that the internet in fact "contributes to a fragmentation of the public sphere" (2007:830). Although digital activism assumes that under the hashtag there is a "likeminded" collective conversing group, thematic analysis of the streamed hashtag frames under the #FMF, as shown in Chapters Five and Six, reveals different articulation of the same subject, polarised positionality, and (dis)identification of discourses of feminism (Leppänen *et al*., 2017). Together with the fragmentation of counterpublic spaces, "the reduction of the political to the personal and individual" (Fotopoulou, 2016:6) is another problem that needs to be closely examined, particularly in feminist digital activism.

Fourth, gendered power relations and exclusionary citizenship discourses interfere with the character and outcome of digital feminist counterpublic activisms. Political and sociological analyses of social movements in the digital era often overlook feminist political struggles, networks and spaces of association as an important part of popular and broadly transformative movements. For instance, in Africa, following the significance of finding new archives that

counter the generally respected and recognised archives of "struggle", analysis of digital activism needs to confront popular national uprisings influenced by masculinised narratives of political struggles (Castells, 2015; Mutsvairo, 2016). If there is willingness, politicising multiple voices and stories that are erased within the larger counterpublic narrative has profound political value compared to the publicity and hype around the alternative digital media mobilisation (Keane, 2013).

Most often, it demands extra effort to visibilise and include highly localised forms of feminist digital activism to expand existing analysis. These observations about feminist digital activism in practice reveal the fluctuating characteristics of the digital media that are "simultaneously empowering and restrained by hegemony" (Newsom & Lengel, 2012:33).

Alternative digital media and feminisms

Undeniably, the increasing digitisation of the counterpublic sphere, such as social media platforms for different forms of activism and networking, have widened political participation. It enables alternative discourses to emerge and a "revitaliz[ing of] the political sphere by giving access to oppositional and social movements that could not easily access the formal public sphere" (Ndlela, 2010:88). Furthermore, alternative digital media plays a significant role in providing a platform to amplify feminist activisms and marginalised communities' resistance to exclusion and erasure based on age, class, race, gender, sexuality, region and ethnicity. In the context of this research, feminist counter-narratives that challenge the politics of different kinds of knowledge production are at the centre of the alternative media that will be explored, and the central purpose of these alternative mediums (McEwan, 2005; Dahlberg, 2007; Ndlela, 2010).

Since these counterpublic platforms are not simply offered to marginalised groups, but need to be built and struggled for, they are "invented". These invented spaces are associated with self-driven, often non-partisan[4] activists that report on and often actively participate in social and political matters independently (Rentschler, 2014). This feminist research considers alternative digital media as having a three-fold function. In the first place, it intentionally visibilises the feminist interventions of pockets of feminism, such as in #FMF, #BringBackOurGirls, the Arab Uprising, and other feminist activist sites in Africa. These have been crafted to expose and change the exclusion and erasure of black women and LGBTQIA+ communities. Secondly, alternative digital media demonstrates explicitly how knowledge-creation and sharing is connected to different activisms and the struggles of diverse marginalised identities positioned at the periphery (Milioni, 2009). Lastly, especially within the context of transnational feminist solidarity and the global challenges that confront even localised feminists, it surfaces transnational feminist principles and values in which national and local movements directly engage with and draw on one another.

Feminist digital activism and movement-building that encompasses diverse intersecting political questions and concerns are usually considered part of third-wave feminism. Naples's (1998:6) description of what constitutes third-wave feminism is a useful conceptual instrument to imagine the African feminists' movement in the digital world. She characterises it as: "the construction of political identities and social networks; the relationship between women's differing communities and feminist praxis; the connections between local struggles and broader social processes; … and the challenge of organizing across race, gender, ethnicity, and class." Some feminist scholars characterise digital feminist activism as fourth-wave feminism

[4] Non-partisan here is used to indicate the political orientation of activisms that are not aligned to party politics and loyalty.

(Zimmerman, 2017; Blevins 2018), while others argue for the continuation of third-wave feminism in the digital era (Duncan, 2014). Harris (2008:6–7) writes:

> Ideas of feminist resistance to patriarchal oppression are rethought by third wavers because gender identity is not experienced by them as a monolithic, categorical, or even primary position ... A fixed dichotomy of dominant versus subordinated groups becomes harder to identify because people can occupy a shifting range of positions in a power structure owing to their multiple subject positions.

General understandings of third-wave feminism agree that it confronts diverse theoretical influences, avoids a fixed language to define women's oppression, and foregrounds constituting subjective experiences that are situated in different cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and nationalities. It continues to challenge feminist explorations of complex mechanisms of social control around gendered identities and representations, while drawing specific attention to historically marginalised and silenced voices. This political position has been offered by postcolonial feminists (Mohanty, 1991; Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004; Wylie, 2004; Narayan, 2013), who clearly explain that imperialism and neo-imperialism are important in analysing gendered dynamics, and that gender always intersects with relations of class, nation, race and ethnicity.

Although one of the strengths of third-wave feminism is sensitivity to diversity, Keller (2012:433) argues that "third wave networks imply a kind of 'messiness' that complicates the notion of a unified social movement with a clear agenda and boundaries". While locating a feminist politics within a particular context is crucial, the question is whether feminists can recognise diversities without falling prey to essentialising their different identities, and thereby essentialising their politics. In taking these concerns into account, this study foregrounds the

way that evolving feminisms, within technological advancement and social media activisms, as feminist movement-building, are becoming increasingly fluid and diverse. In the face of rapid shifts in knowledge flows and structure of oppression and co-optation, feminist activists need to rethink diverse feminisms from "multidimensional standpoint analysis [that] provides the conceptual framework through which to explore the diversity of women's activism" (Naples, 1998:21). Certainly, standpoint theory centres on the ways in which women's experiences are different as a result of structural injustices that emanate from intersectional identity politics of gender, race, and class in the world. Echoing this, Fotopoulou (2016:2) reminds us that, "feminist activism is not one thing … it is a complex set of identities and cultures, whose different investments in, and practices with, media technologies mean different organisational structures and even political priorities".

An abiding theme in my analysis is that feminist activism is comprised of fluid and hybridised strategies between the physical public and digital counterpublic spaces. Digitisation also generates enormous and multidimensional creativity that focuses on imaginative communication such as the mobilisation of hashtags, videos, film, images or hybridised and multi-genre visual and written texts. As shown in the data analysis chapters, it is in this interwoven and creative way that feminist activism challenges mainstream media representation and languages that define, write out or silence women and queer communities. Remarking on this, Baer pointed out that alternative digital media contributed to "a paradigm shift within feminist protest culture" (2016:18). In her well-executed argument, Fotopoulou (2016:9-10) fleshes out what scholars often refer to as "information" on alternative digital media spaces:

> Digital media bring activists together in shared spaces to learn and experiment not only with technologies, but also with concepts and ideas, and serve as opportunities for forming networks,

> community and political subjectivity. An exploration of activist media practices … involves both the symbolic and the material: the formation of collective identity and projects of symbolic world-making on the one hand; and on the other, all the material processes of setting up infrastructures and maintaining them in terms of technical expertise.

As Fotopoulou indicates, what has been construed as basic information is in fact often intricate knowledge and knowledge-making. For instance, the South African digital activities that focused on the performed naked body in #NakedProtest in #FMF, and the use of subversive cartoons and graffiti art in the Egyptian revolution, involve the crafting of new registers in developing a language of protest that subverts dominant narratives and seeks to explore hidden struggles, identities and freedoms. While recognising the differences among these movement-specific and regional languages, I am also interested in understanding how these facilitate women's empowerment and transcend their vulnerabilities, invisibilising and hyper-visibilising in ways that allow them to intervene into patriarchal public spheres and create counterpublic spheres (Fotopoulou, 2016). Here, my focus is the relationship between counterpublic feminist activism and alternative digital media. From a feminist perspective, I identify "what is imagined to be necessary, and possible" (Kee, 2017:2) when feminists and women's voices deploy digital resources that articulate independent agendas and platforms. The discussion also explores the "rules of play" and governance of digital technologies, and how these can constrain feminist activism even though they often seem to provide liberating spaces for knowledge production, information sharing and communication.

Between "undoing" and "redoing" feminism in the digital era: A feminist debate

Feminist scholars Angela Mcrobbie (2008), Hester Baer (2016), and Aristea Fotopoulou (2016) have interpreted the potential of technologies and access to digital counterpublic platforms

differently. Mcrobbie (2008) points out the precariously influential role media plays in modernity and popular culture. Her argument emphasises the process of "undoing" feminism, the dismantling and disarticulation of feminism – especially by the youth – to create their version of feminism. In contrast, Baer (2016) considers the interrelationship between digital activism, feminist body politics and neoliberalism. Her argument focuses on the interaction between local feminist activism and transnational feminist articulations. She stresses that feminist activism in the digital era requires a "redoing" and reimagining of feminism. Fotopoulou (2016), however, refuses to work with the "redoing" and/or "undoing" feminism concepts offered by these two feminist scholars. Instead, she proposes continuity of feminist struggle and "doing feminism" in the digital era as a possible workable idea. In her explanation, she writes, "doing feminism and being feminist involves enacting ourselves as activists – as embodied – and political subjects through media practices, technologies, the imaginaries linked to these new technologies and the internet" (Fotopoulou, 2016:5).

Fotopoulou's (2016) argument may resolve these tensions and carve a way forward by registering the messiness of "body politics" in feminist activism under the umbrella of "doing feminism". Based on my observation of the discourses that emerged from feminist activism in the #FMF movement, I argue that discourses of "redoing" and "undoing" feminism are not simply "optimistic response to a bleak diagnosis" (Fotopoulou, 2016:5). Observed rhythms of feminist activism, in no chronological order, represent fluid articulations and disarticulations of feminist activism, while simultaneously redoing feminist politics that are already crafted, at least in the embodied protest action against dominant public discourses. To label these activist tasks as "doing feminism" is a rather simplistic gesture. It limits or, worse, silences, critical reflexive work on the complex and messy encounters of feminist activism. Understanding feminist redoing and undoing political work also opens a space for individuals to become more

vulnerable when challenging the traditional conceptualisation of feminist politics (Naples, 1998).

At another level, particularly in the case of feminist activism in Africa, there is a constant labour of contextualising and defending African feminists' politics of knowledge production and meaning making against the standardised feminist knowledge emanating from the global north. As protests and feminist activism become popular globally, local struggles and knowledge productions become diluted to fit into the global understanding of gender and sexuality struggles of the south. Remarking on this, Postill (2011:5) argues that there is also activist work to be done against the "misguided idea that our 'local communities' are created by being impacted upon by a global network society and by that 'network of networks' known as the Internet". This does not mean that there is no cultural transference and influences. Rather, what Postill (2011) is arguing against is the dismissal of indigenous practices and the appropriation of local and historical tools of activism that are African. Focusing on the struggles of feminists in Egypt and Tunisia, Newsom and Lengel (2012:34) argue that "local knowledge, once it is presented to a larger audience, becomes a target for appropriation". They stressed that in the manipulation of local feminist knowledge and "bias through the various stages of mediation and gatekeeping … we can see how gendered messages are constructed, essentialized, reconstructed, and made invisible by the consumer media system" (2012:31).

Part of the feminist inquiry in this study attempts to foreground the body as the subject and focus of activism. As I argue, the experiencing body in activism is somehow erased in the fixation with "the digital," but also inevitably very present and real. As will be shown in Chapter Six, the embodied experience of digital activism involves the vulnerability and precarity of bodies "doing" activism, despite the assumption that digital activism is somehow

safer and disembodied. The inevitable presence of the body, in what is always a body-digital connection, highlights the inevitable connection between digital activism and "traditional" activism. This is obviously evident in, for example, social media posts calling for a protest or march, explicitly calling on the body's presence in activism. Both the physical body and meaning-making about it is often politically central to those whose identities have been negatively constructed in relation to perceived bodily characteristics. This is particularly true for African women, who are represented as hypersexual, others, and as victims, characteristics that are all strongly conveyed in bodily appearance and characteristics. As will be shown in Chapter Four, in some cases digital activism involves feminist engagement with hegemonic views about women's bodies in the digital world. Generally, contestations around the body, and a distinctively embodied form of digital activist politics, is therefore highly charged and pivotal in African feminism.

Understanding African feminists' embodied digital activism requires a recognition of the connections between "doing", "undoing" and "re-doing" feminism. In fact, these diverse and sometimes even conflicting political impulses create a broad spectrum of multiple feminist articulations and activism (Knappe & Lang, 2014). Hence, feminist analysis of feminist collective action and instrumental use of technology-mediated means should constantly reflect on embodied subjective experiences and geopolitically positioned articulations of feminism.

It should be stressed, however, that body politics in digital activism is a controversial and debatable issue among feminist thinkers (Pitts, 2005). Some have argued that the fixation on representing or foregrounding black and African women's bodies among feminists perpetuates the objectification of women's bodies. The debates therefore focus on the merits of the intentional recruitment of the body as a central tool for feminist protest (Baer, 2016).

Furthermore, these debates are positioned between the (re)conceptualisation of the visibility of gendered bodies in digital spaces; the empowerment of feminist activists in the embodied experiences of protest, and the vulnerability and violence that activists experience, all emanating from morality codes and cultural values. Overall, from the perspective of this research, unpacking these multi-layered complexities has become a source of feminist re-imagination of "the personal is political" in the digital era.

From my perspective, critics of the visibility of the body in black and African feminism overlook the centrality of raced and gendered bodies in the deluge of anti-feminist and racist messages in mass communication and digital media. These critics also simply ignore the fact that the body, whether used as an instrument or not, cannot be separated from the experience. Fotopoulou's articulation of the inescapability of embodied experience is therefore significant. She argues that it is "gendered bodies that sweat, move and sigh, bodies that type, click and labour in front of a screen, bodies that get angry, get disappointed and have hopes" (2016: V). Hence, regardless of the feminist political agendas of certain digital movements (digital activism, offline movement, or both), the outcome of activisms can often reinforce the patriarchal system and women's subordination that reflects how the body is governed, disciplined and objectified under misogynist and patriarchal ideologies. In demonstrating this, Chapter Six will provide an extensive analysis of "body politics" as experienced by #FMF feminist activists.

"Working with what is possible": Conceptualising African feminist digital activism

As established earlier, since the extension of the public sphere to include the digital public, alternative digital media without strong civil society organisations, such as feminist

networking, is unimaginable. Therefore, understanding the politics of African feminist politics in an alternative digital media is dependent on critical and contextual analysis. This includes measurements stemming from the overall political significance of the digital activism, the sociopolitical impacts of digital political participation, and experiences of citizens and activists. Political contexts shape how feminist voices navigate layers of masculinist dominance: complicated by oppositional struggles against overthrowing a dictatorial regime (in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia); in a feminist movement against the abduction of young girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria (#BringBackOurGirls); in a movement against violence against migrant workers in Arab countries (#SomeoneTellSaudiArabia); and in the student-led movement against higher education systems and state authoritarianism (#FeesMustFall). As will be shown in Chapter Seven, these movements have also managed to transcend local struggles and political participation, to become influential instruments that enabled other African countries to build a distinctive feminist movement for addressing similar social and political problems.

The central question for critical feminist analysis of the invented counterpublic sphere is not solely focused on the power of social media and the internet. Rather, it concerns how marginalised and othered actors, particularly African feminists, use social media effectively (Shirky, 2008). This is where the "possibility of understanding differently situated others" (Dahlberg, 2007:830) becomes significant. Building on these arguments, Wolfsfeld *et al*. (2013:132) state that "the 'real' question is not whether this or that type of media plays a major role but how that role varies over time and circumstance". It is therefore a daunting task to analyse the contribution of the internet and technology for African feminist movements only in terms of a binary framing as good or bad. Instead, "these 'impacts' must be considered as 'outcomes' that emerge from a complex interplay between existing institutions and practices

on the one hand and (the characteristics of) new technologies on the other hand" (Donk *et al*., 2004:5).

Overall, theorisation of the counterpublic sphere is useful in making an intersectional linkage between the conceptualisation of feminism, African feminisms, and African digital feminisms. The idea of an invented counterpublic space it is not simply that women/feminist voices are countering "a mainstream space". Rather, according to Fotopoulou (2016:3), it is in the conversational nature of: firstly "situated activist media practices"; secondly "the relationship between activism and communicative capitalism"; and thirdly "the cultural/historical contexts and social visions shaping … feminism and their digital media practice". The issue here is to understand and explain the range of theoretical scaffolding that allows us to explore how feminist voices are embedded within these broader democratic voices, so the discussion of public sphere theory connects to the context of a "counter-public" engagement.

Evidently, post-2011, research agendas have been redirected to focus on shifts in the culture of protest and mobilisation strategies, and the politics behind citizens' migration to digital platforms in Africa, particularly with reference to the young generation (Mutsvairo, 2016; Bosch, 2016). Thus, this research intentionally avoids what Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe describe as a "naive attitude of cyber-utopianism, where the internet equals democracy" (2011:6). Instead, to borrow again from Bohler-Muller and van der Merwe, it "illustrate[s] the developing potential of technology to influence the socio-political climate across the continent" (2011:6). The concern here is to think about how different levels of information communication practices and mobilisation techniques intersect and lead to the emergence of a particular form of feminist digital activism (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Furthermore, to move beyond these debates requires us to "critically rethink and problematise rather than accept digital media as

intrinsically exploitative or empowering technologies" (Fotopoulou, 2016:4). We also need to scrutinise power relations and expose the limits of digitised communication, as characteristically seen in how "the vagaries of public opinion, conformity to material security, the absence of intellectual freedom and the prejudices of the ignorant" (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2016:4) de-legitimise feminist activism and marginalise issues of embodied experiences of gendered power inequalities on the internet.

The following chapters will unveil the connection between the subjective experiences of feminist activists and the performative moment of the protest that was enacted in the digital platform, as well as how its relatable experience inculcates networks of voices of solidarity (Keller, 2012). Building on this understanding, the task for this research is to gain more perspective about digital feminist activism in the #FMF movement, in connection with other African feminist counter-movements in the digital counterpublic sphere.

Chapter Three

Introduction

As indicated above, the feminist counter-movement to nationalism within #FMF is situated in the context of broader power struggles and feminist energies in postcolonial Africa. In exploring this, the research transcends distinct disciplinary paradigms and methods; rather, it engages interdisciplinary viewpoints that allow for weaving together historical, political, ethnographic and textual approaches to national protest, feminist agencies, and media practices. Furthermore, African feminist movements are positioned within and against a transnationalism that has become increasingly hegemonic and oppressive. Here, "the connections between political economy, colonial and neo-colonial structures, social relations, and everyday educational experience" (Vossoughi & Gutierrez, 2014:608) often threaten to destroy the economic, political and cultural resources of the most marginalised communities, as well as many localised pockets of anti-capitalist, feminist and anti-corporatist resistance. In mapping this out, the research has taken the form of a multi-sited feminist ethnographic study, drawing on qualitative methods that enable a critical feminist standpoint. Furthermore, the research uses hybridised approaches to deal with different African country case studies and to pursue stories and knowledge (a hidden archive) within available secondary sources.

What is often defined as "feminist methodology" subscribes not to a single methodological framework, but rather to "distinctive approaches subverting the established procedures of disciplinary practices tied to the agendas of the powerful" (DeVault, 1999:96). Part of my subversion of disciplinary "established procedures" involves a distinctive feminist approach to ethnography, as one of my selected methods of inquiry. What makes my/any ethnographical

work feminist is the theoretical framing and positionality of the researcher. Huisman (2008:373) argues that ethnography becomes feminist when it registers an "explicit concern with reflexivity and the social positioning of the researcher vis-à-vis their subjects, concerns that are often overlooked". This self-referential contextualisation is necessary in situating the politics of all knowledge production: I am concerned with prioritising the experiences and vantage points of activists, but also with positioning my own activity as an embodied and socially constructed researcher in relation to this.

Feminist ethnographers are often confronted with the tensions that emerge between the feminist principles of research practices, and traditional forms of "pure" ethnographic research approaches (Enslin, 1994; Harrison, 2013). Schrock (2013:49) broadly framed these three complexities as the following: "responding productively to feminist critiques of representing 'others,' accounting for feminisms' commitment to social change while grappling with poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production, and confronting the historical and ongoing lack of recognition for significant contributions by feminist ethnographers".

While recognising these challenges, Stacey (1988:26), in her classic essay, "Can there be a feminist ethnography?", argues that feminist ethnography is "rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other." As such, partiality of representation that is directly related to the position that the researcher occupies (DeVault,1996; Abu-Lughod, 1990; Schrock, 2013), and the resulting tensions throughout my research, have been the focus of my continuous reflection about the possible limitation and biases of the study (Leavy & Harris, 2018). In light of this, the research process did not merely collect and analyse data, but was a combination of "fieldwork, textwork and headwork" (Van Maanen, 1995:4, cited in Lather, 2001:199). This entailed a constant

interrogation of concerns around representation and the potentially exploitative (however unintentional) nature of an ethnographic research approach (Davis & Craven. 2016).

Central to this interrogation is the self-reflection process that enabled critical (re)thinking of the relationship between the researcher and the research participants. This allowed for "rearticulating 'the field' simultaneously [that] changes the ethnographer's role, since the relation to space has traditionally been crucial for defining her authority and identity" (Beaulieu, 2010:459). Instead of wrestling with unattainable demands of "co-creating knowledge" that hides the power dynamics that exist in the research dynamic, such reflection allows the research to articulate situated knowledge better (Haraway, 2003).

This articulation of situated knowledge draws attention to the voices of black women and LGBTQIA+ communities that move between spaces and places to push back against oppression, erasure and the silencing of feminist voices (Davis & Craven, 2016). In addition to being in conversation with African feminist movements in other African countries, this approach allowed me to reveal the feminist energies embedded within the #FMF movement's macro construct of a national student protest.

Feminist multi-sited ethnographic approach

Before delving into the descriptions of my methodological approach, it has to be clear that the multi-sited ethnographic work (this refers to different sorts of digital sites – social media platforms, online blog essays, news outlets, and digital media) was focused specifically on #FMF feminist movements in South Africa, whereas other case studies are explored differently. Conveying this helps to include other sites as ethnographic subjects, even though my exploration of these case studies is relying on scholarly discourse, literature, media, and

"activist" texts in the public domain. The key pattern here is "observation", which is never a neutral thing, where I carefully observe sources and find the "hidden archive" of feminist digital activism embedded in nationalism.

In the design of multi-sited ethnography, "the selection of space and sites of investigation emerge inseparably from the highly politicized way that the problem of investigation and then writing is cognized" (Marcus, 1995:99). Ethnographic research that focuses on social movements also travels across spaces, time, and systemic structures. Moving between these and observing connections demands what Marcus (1995) calls "multi-sited ethnographic sensibility", which allows researchers to explore different mapping strategies that challenge the traditional guides of ethnographic approach, which explicitly require immersing oneself in one research site (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). Thus, understanding the complexity of feminist movements means "observing" the nexus between digital activisms and protests on the streets in #FMF and other selected African countries. This enables the researcher to observe protest performances between spaces, whether through following social media and actual activists' struggles, or through existing interpretations of expressions of these. I find Suarez's (2019:497) definition of multi-sited ethnographic research very useful for this particular case:

> Multi-sited research is an approach that allows researchers to track people, objects, metaphors, narratives, biographies and conflicts by tracing connections, partnerships, relationships, conjunctions, and juxtapositions through space … Each of these sites provides a new element to analyse the phenomena.

Marcus (1995:99) expands on this, claiming:

> multi-sited ethnography is an exercise in mapping terrain; its goal is not holistic representation, an ethnographic portrayal of the world system as a totality. Rather, it claims that any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the system, and therefore cannot be understood only in terms of the conventional single-site mise-en-scene of ethnographic research, assuming indeed it is the cultural formation, produced in several different locales, rather than the conditions of a particular set of subjects that is the object of study.

Multi-sited ethnography therefore offered me the possibility of engaging with a range of knowledge-making archived in different spaces and tech-systems. This fieldwork experience can be expressed as a "differently configured spatial canvas" (Marcus, 1995:56), where observation demands careful attention to acting bodies connected to digital sites and expression; the digital sites and expression themselves; and the way that both hidden digital worlds and embodied subjects are represented in local, national and global archives.

It is inevitable that researchers move in and out of the spaces and stories of individuals as the trajectory of the research questions and interests evolve and solidify. The research methods used therefore shifted in line with my intention to search for a "more complex and layered understanding of the phenomenon or cultural practice under study" (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014:605). This is particularly important in contexts where the pursuit of knowledge-making is centred around understanding the nuances of knowledge as it both contests and falls prey to dominant epistemologies – for example, nationalist discourses within countries; communities and localised movements; "global" feminism that continues to centre the north; and recuperative developmentalism and neoliberalism – as they encounter a collective setting that gatekeeps certain activities from becoming visible as part of the movement (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

Capturing these nuances of power dynamics and the struggles of feminist activists in the South African #FMF movement, as well as other digital movements in Africa, requires an ethnographic practice of bearing witness to different sites and recognising that the research is primarily situated in "human ingenuity that emerge in and through the connections/tensions/contradictions within and across various social spaces and activity systems" (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014:607).

My efforts to unpack the characteristics of the #FMF movement in special detail demand an ethnographic engagement that pays careful attention to the narratives and actions of the movement in various spaces. A multi-sited ethnographic approach in different sites within a movement provides the opportunity to explore the circulation of information and how discourses emerged that fuelled the student movement to tackle diverse political issues. However, "'being there' is no longer such a strong claim for the ethnographer" (Beaulieu, 2010:459). By building on an ethnographic approach that fixates on being there and engaging directly with research participants and their artefacts and knowledge, I also turned my observation to subjects, struggles and knowledge-making in contexts where I had not done conventional "fieldwork". Here, I sought to "expand[s] the ethnographic picture" (Marcus, 1995:102) to gain a deeper understanding of "broader connections, ecologies, and historical and structural conditions" (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014:605). I therefore read the South African #FMF movement (which I explore by using/drawing on more familiar methods of digital ethnography) in relation to movements, explored in various digital, scholarly and journalistic texts, in other postcolonial African countries.

Selected digital feminist movements in Africa

The #FMF movement involved a progressive student-led national movement, that involved black women and LGBTQIA+ collectives, becoming increasingly exclusivist in naturalising gender and heteronormative hierarchies in the context of "black" and "anti-colonial resistance to neoliberalism". These patterns of exclusionary nationalist movement-building, and the feminist critiques of this, have been a subject of ongoing discussion among feminists in different African contexts-(Makana, 2019; Gouws & Coetzee, 2019).

In my initial research into movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, I collected data through secondary data research. This included: academic literature on the specific country cases; news articles; blog essays; and social media research through Twitter and Facebook archives. The data analysis of these case studies was structured thematically, which highlighted the subversions that are not made visible under the hegemonic nationalist discourse. My methodological approach to exploring this archive did not involve detailed attention to a range of texts and communication in the way associated with my #FMF analysis and research. It was, in contrast, a fairly impressionistic approach to key moments, texts and themes. I trust that this does not mean that I have approached the examples superficially; I am also aware that my research did not deal with the Arab Spring, #BringBackOurGirls, and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia as comprehensively as it does with South African feminist struggles within #FMF. However, the reading sought to identify and theorise feminist struggles, rarely brought into conversation with one another, in new ways. Although much research and commentary has dealt separately with digital feminist struggles within certain movements, regions or countries, I was interested in mapping out and making sense of a transnational archive of feminist knowledge-making that has often been buried beneath anti-feminist popular

movements. This archive, I argue, suggests that feminist digital activism from the first decade of the new millennium is more robust, coherent and potentially subversive than is suggested by commentary that deals with feminist movements or countries separately or in isolation, or that sees them only as sporadic and short-lived responses to nationalism.

I was interested in what I define as feminist counter-movements, since the movements in Tunisia and Egypt, Ethiopia and Nigeria were embedded in broader subaltern counterpublics and countered struggles that were already oppositional in various countries. Feminist struggles in Tunisia and Egypt emerged out of gender-blind nationalist, anti-authoritarian and anti-elitist movements in the Arab Spring; in Nigeria and Ethiopia, feminist outrage about the stereotyping and symbolic use of gendered bodies and meanings (often marshalled by the state) signalled feminist efforts to foreground women's subjectivities, agencies and goals in the face of nationalist discourses that actually reinforce gender hierarchies and stereotypes. There are striking parallels among the movements in terms of their engagement with intersecting power relations. Moreover, these four movements were prominently played out in online spaces and extensively used digital activism to galvanise global attention.

At the same time, one needs to acknowledge the heterogeneity and uniqueness of the social movements in each country. Each social movement confronts nationally specific postcolonial challenges. These include Ethiopian feminists' response to the implications of large numbers of migrants (especially women, who face distinct forms of sexual exploitation as migrant workers) working in other countries because of this country's economic precarity. It also involves the opportunistic use of young women's bodies and subjectivities in party politics in Nigeria, where a seemingly secular government paternalistically defined "vulnerable women" as it launches a partisan attack on Boko Haram rebels whose nationalism is inflected by Islamic

extremism. The various case studies therefore provide country-specific examples of how women are coerced into compliance and obedience within emotionally compelling and powerful nationalist movements and myth-making, and how feminists struggle to deconstruct and challenge this.

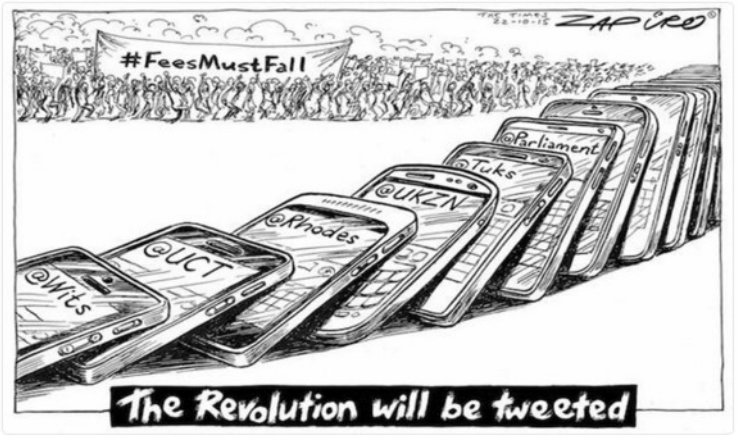
Data collection from digital archives: Purposive selection of feminist encounters in the #FMF movement

The research examines #FMF's strong feminist resistance to a deep-seated masculinist structure that constantly attacked or threatened feminist voices in the movement. In exploring feminist strategies and struggles here, I used a retrospective exploration based on digitally archived terrains of embedded feminist voices. To enhance my understanding of the struggles feminists faced, I engaged in critical conversation with ten feminist student activists in the movement.

Analytical interpretation of themes emerged from intensive observation of social media platforms. Here, I am referring to "platforms" consciously; although I read and re-read retrieved data from Twitter or Facebook archives, I realised that one often needs to make sense of social media platforms by acknowledging how they are interwoven in terms of content, references and recurring symbols. The digital ethnographer therefore navigates these spaces to gain as much context as possible. Postill and Pink argue that "these field situations are neither communities nor networks – they are hybrid forms of sociality through which the ethnographer and their research participants gain variously mediated senses of contextual fellowship" (2012:131132). Particularly in the case of #FMF, Facebook and Twitter, among others, were the main platforms that I concentrated on. Defending eclectic and unconventional research procedures, Ardévol and Gomez-Cruz insist that "digital methodologies may be fuelled by old understandings but, at the same time, they might take us to different ways of knowing and to

different types of knowledge" (2014:18). Thus, to manage the huge and diffuse volume of data archived digitally, the process of data-collection was purposive, time-bound and eclectic.

At the time of the uprising, Twitter and Facebook were the most popular sites used by students to provide real-time information. The image below, by the South African cartoonist Zapiro, captures the intensive use of the Twitter platform for information-sharing about what was happening on the ground at each of the universities.



From September 2016 to August 2017, I actively engaged with Twitter hashtags and Facebook posts framed by feminist politics. I collected relevant stories, news, contested incidents, academic reflections, blog essays, and visual illustrations from platforms that I considered to be especially significant. The feminist trajectories and key moments of resistance that I closely followed included the following: the first involved feminists confronting the misogynist and patriarchal leadership practices within the #FMF movement through #PatriarchyMustFall, and #Mbokodolead in April 2016. The second pivotal moment was the transgender and queer student collective's disruption of an exhibition at the 1st year commemoration of the #RhodesMustFall movement in March 2016. Also known as Trans Capture, this movement

angrily rejected the commemoration of student resistance with reference to exclusionary, heteronormative, hierarchical and essentialist ideas about "properly gendered" black students. The third moment focused on acts of violence against women, especially when this was perpetrated by influential student activists or respected left-leaning academics. Black women students took to the street of Rhodes University in protest against sexual assault, rape culture and the poor legal system that failed to protect women from sexual violence. This protest expanded to other universities in the country in April 2016, and drove #RapeMustFall, #RUReferenceList, #NakedProtest, #Chapter212 and #IAmOneInThree. A fourth moment was the revival of #RapeMustFall and #NakedProtest in October and November 2016, as a result of escalating violence against women in general, and women students in particular. Earlier protests against violence focused on exposing perpetrators and emphasising the extent of widespread violence, even within the context of a progressive movement. Protests in November were more determined in insisting on young women's embodied experiences and capacities to resist.

In the process of digital data collection, I did three series of manual data-collection, making use of spreadsheets to store and work through the data. In each period of data collection, I took note of the context in which the specific hashtag was created, and collected news outlets and blog essays about the specific counter-movement. The nature of digital technology made it possible for me to collect data and observe feminist debates and activisms closely while the movements were evolving, as well as to engage retrospectively with data and events after the movement. First-phase data-collection was from September to November 2016, when I collected data on #FeesMustFall and #RapeMustFall. This helped me to understand how digital activism, discourses on the politics of gender, and anti-colonial and anti-state discourses constitute one another simultaneously. In January 2017, I did the second round of data-

collection by focusing on #RapeMustFall, #RUReferenceList, #NakedProtest, and #Chapter212. This was when controversies around women's embodied protest powerfully emerged. In July and August 2017, I conducted the third phase that focused on #PatriarchyMustFall and #MboKodoLead movements. This phase was very important since it was at this stage (supposedly the last phase) that it became clear to me that the data that was collected on social media platforms would not fully allow me to explore "the complexity of individual human subjectivity and meaning-making" (Leurs, 2017:141). I explain this in greater detail in the next section.

Overall, the research explores digital data of over 400 tweets and 80 blog essays and online magazines. Most of these blog essays were collected from social media and online platforms covering these stories, including Facebook pages such as Decolonizing University, City Press, Daily Vox, Ground Up, Africa is a Country, Okay Africa, All Africa, News24, and Connections. The selection was based on my observation in a fragmented and diffuse archive. I paid attention to curated messages and comments associated with popular hashtag phrases, such as #PatriarchyMustFall, #NakedProtest, #Chapter212, #IAmOneinThree, #RapeMustFall, #RUReferenceList, and #MboKodoLead, in relation to the subject and that had a relatively high number of retweets. Here, it is worth noting Tuck and Yang's argument that, "observation itself is making an epistemological claim, rooted in the dynamics of gaze, space, and power" (2014:815). The feminist ethnographic observation in this process was situated within African feminist politics, and debates that were happening online, which are indicative of the knowledge claim of this research.

A moment of pause and revaluation: In-depth interviews with #FMF feminist activists

After one year of digital ethnographic research on Twitter and Facebook, and through attending different seminars, protests, and feminist gatherings, I came to realise that the digital archive was limited, particularly due to the absence of narratives of the embodied experiences of feminist activists who created counterpublic spaces and archives. Given that the internet often conceals the embodied human subject behind the computer, and considering that my interest as a feminist is precisely in embodied human experiences and struggles, it was extremely important for me to acknowledge the partiality of online data collection and the digitalised feminist movement in #FMF.

In summary, I identified several main challenges with my original research process for examining feminism in #FMF. First, the digital fieldwork experience showed that a complete dependence on human–machine (computer and/or phone) relationships and research findings can lead to huge gaps and even distortions in research that claims to explore the standpoint knowledge of socially marginal subjects. This is not to say that including face-to-face and indepth interviews with a few feminist activists will "fix" the problem. However, "if we as feminist researchers are unable to draw upon people's lived experiences … we miss an opportunity to develop knowledge, particularly … the ways in which social media operates as a space for social justice activism" (Cooky, Linabary & Corple, 2018:9).

Secondly, I learned that "human experience" cannot be deeply articulated without having conversations with individuals who are continually using social media and the internet as a medium of political communication and activism in the movement. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the main struggle black women and the LGBTQIA+ communities are

encountering is different forms of erasure – within the #FMF movement, in academic debates, in media reporting, seminars, and in many seemingly progressive publications. Producing feminist academic research using feminists' digital activism, without having in-person conversations with these feminist activists, risks erasing the contexts and conditions (which may include moments of strategic silence or tactical compromise) under which they act and, therefore, much of the meaning of their struggles and knowledge-making. Interviewing black women leaders was therefore an effort to resist the epistemic violence that continues to affect young African feminist voices, both in South Africa's #FMF and in other African contexts.

To select participants for the interviews, a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling methods was used to contact those who were active in the movement. The interview process began with my meeting and engaging with a few activists in a seminar on the #FMF movement and higher education. From this conversation, I was introduced to other activists who would later be research participants. Not all individuals I had conversations with are necessarily social media influencers. Some were definitely more vocal on social media and public university spaces. However, through the multi-sited digital ethnographic observation, and moving between the two campuses (UWC and UCT) to attend seminars, and through the engagement with #FMF activists at the time, I got to learn how these participants used the digital spaces regularly in mobilising protests in the physical spaces.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, allowing for an exploration of participants' lived experiences in the #FMF movement's activities and structure, and their experience of digital activism in the movement. To maintain the confidentiality of the information, pseudonyms were used in place of real names. I prepared open-ended questions to allow participants to expand on topics, and was very encouraged by the frankness of activists who provided detailed

insights into the challenges of masculinist leadership and their conflicting values and experiences as feminists and as activists in #FMF.

I consciously followed and practiced DeVault's (1990) argument, in her article, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis", that feminist fieldwork strategies of "listening" to the stories of women "does not imply that all women share a single position or perspective, but rather insists on the importance of following out the implications of women's (and others') various locations in socially organised activities" (1990:97). I found that listening allowed me to understand the extent to which activists often articulated the movement in a language that is not easily accessible to the researcher.

Here, England's (1994) analysis of listening also helped me to structure the in-depth interview to facilitate spaces for activists' voices and choices about what they found important to articulate. England argues (as would feminist standpoint theorists) that in feminist research, "the knowledge of the person being researched (at least regarding the particular questions being asked) is greater than that of the researcher" (1994:243). She also states that practicing the principles of careful listening can destabilise the "asymmetrical and potentially exploitative power relations by shifting a lot of power over to the researched" (1994:243). I believe that the in-depth interview process improved the richness of my data analysis of South African #FMF feminists, and in turn also helped me to analyse gaps, silences, contradictions or inconclusive meanings associated with the feminist activism of the other African movements. This was extremely helpful in the process of transcription of the interviews, as I was able to make connections between their stories.

Feminist thematic data analysis

The data collected using different methods, informed by digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, were analysed thematically (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Thematic analysis as a method involves reading through the collected data repeatedly and generating themes and categories to organise and interpret it (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Perhaps one of the most important features of thematic analysis is its theoretical flexibility and convenience when undertaking critical and rich data analysis; it can also be applied across different data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As the term indicates, thematic data analysis enables the researcher to discover patterns and themes that are embedded in frames and language that disclose the politics of African feminist digital activism. Thus, the method was used to present the intersectional feminist analysis of this study. As part of a feminist qualitative research inquiry, the process of analysis is as immersive and complicated as the fieldwork process (Boellstorff *et al*., 2012).

At the same time, detailed thematic analysis can be pursued by using the "standardised" data coding steps that are prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006:17-19). This involves: firstly becoming familiar with the data; secondly generating initial themes that emerged from reading of data; and thirdly, searching for additional themes. The three final steps entail reviewing all themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the analysis. In my experience, there were moments where particularly the first three steps occurred simultaneously: recognition of themes could happen as I was in the process of data collection, or while reading transcripts. There was generally considerable overlap in the "steps" I followed, and I doubt that the steps can or should be followed as a formula for a "correct" analytical process. However, being aware of the various steps encouraged me to approach my data rigorously and comprehensively (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Many revisions of themes in relation to structuring my draft data

analysis, and much reflection about provisional analysis with reference to constantly revisiting my data, left me assured that I had explored the data as carefully as possible. It should be stressed that I recognised step four as a clear moment of pause in my process, especially the feeling of "getting lost" (Lather, 2009) while searching for themes. Boellstorff *et al*. (2012:175) call these pauses a "process of distillation" to retrace the process of developing a narrative and the thematic argument that is surfacing. It is impractical to account for all the thematic issues that have emerged from the data analysis process. There were thematic threads that needed to be put aside because they were beyond the scope of the research and would lead me to territory that demands much more extensive and rigorous research.

It has to be recognised that, to a certain extent, the research question guided the process of selecting a method of data analysis; however, my strong and shifting subjective sense, based on the close interaction with the data, contributed to the meaning-making and analytical capacity of the study. Braun and Clarke (2006:7) pointed out that,

> an account of themes 'emerging' or being 'discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers.

The digital data analysis therefore demanded a bottom-up approach, where the insights from the data shaped my questions and theory. In relation to this, Braun and Clarke (2020:9) argue,

> researchers always make assumptions about what data represent (e.g. do participants' words relatively transparently communicate individual experience or do their words constitute social discourse, performing social actions?), what can be claimed on the basis of these data, and indeed what constitutes meaningful knowledge.

Thus, my experiences of the #FMF movement, as a postgraduate student on the ground at UWC, and close observation of UCT, inevitably played a role in reading interconnected contexts in the data. Ultimately, the research process was a latent thematic analysis that, "involves interpretative work, and the analysis that is produced is not just description, but is already theorized … where broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings are theorized as underpinning what is actually articulated in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006:13). It needs to be noted that, unlike traditional forms of "pure" ethnographic inquiry, the analysis that was drawn out of these learnings and reflections was more interpretive, intuitive and often selective than is the case with thick description of data.

From reflection to diffraction

Similar to physical public spaces, feminist digital activism is crafted out of experiencing intersecting structural injustice, repressive socio-cultural values and "embodied, lived, material and socially situated aspects of feminist and queer activism" (Fotopoulou, 2016:2). In the research process, what had to be considered was: the practices and principles of feminist research while engaging in digitally created archives; the process of reflecting on the power dynamics between researcher and the digital archive, which is commonly considered "publicly available" data; the justification, interpretation, and shaping of data that is not meant for research purposes; the role that the researcher's identity and positionality play in feminist sense-making of the archive; and lastly, in the context of subaltern transnational feminist movements as well as the subaltern nationalist movements such as the Arab Spring or #FMF, the complex issue of how to identify/extract knowledge, struggles and themes within African feminist digital activism from the masses of material on the other movements in Africa and globally.

While interrogating these multi-layered feminist research issues, the research relied on interpretation through a lens that many of the existing studies of social movements in Africa do not provide. It is also here that the research can challenge "norms and certainties about what can or should be researched, within real-and-imaginary spaces" (Tamboukou, 2013:4). Regardless of the methodological framework one decides to use, as feminist researchers, we are primarily expected to practice reflective thinking and writing throughout the research process. I found Haraway's forward-thinking proposal on critical reflexivity a very useful instrument for this research. In her critique of the feminist practice of reflexivity, she argues that, "reflexivity has been recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real" (1997:16).

Instead, Haraway proposes diffraction as an option to shift the formulaic and predictable procedures of reflexivity. She suggests that writing should include careful discussion of research processes and the complexity that emerges in different encounters and at various stages of the research process. In conclusion, she stresses that, "diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals" (Haraway, 1997:273).

The idea of diffraction, then, is about engaging closely with the shifts in methodological approach and differences in meaning-making, while interacting with different entities. The feminist inquiry of the counterpublic digital archive in this research refers to the social and political problems that make invisible and erase feminist struggles in social movements. Inevitably, it underlines the methodological and analytical partiality and biases of narratives,

especially when it concerns the mainstream documentation of history or what counts as "history".

Tamboukou (2013:7) writes that, "archives are not neutral sites within which researchers 'objectively' read, take notes and accumulate data". The deconstruction of the digital archive as a source or field site, and as an established ground for feminist knowledge production, required reflection on the process of ethnographic research in the digital archive, particularly its partiality, vulnerability, and messiness. How I identified which specific hashtag activism to focus on; what social media platforms I followed and recorded; the political reasons behind my receptiveness to specific types of activisms; and how I selectively excavated particular archives from the database surfaced the codification that lead to an interpretation and analysis of archival research in a particular form. As a feminist ethnographer, the primary criteria for selectively engaging with archives is to locate the ethnographic observation and follow feminist struggles in the movement through the hashtag phrases used for feminist digital activism. Making this decision means the research effectively excludes narratives that are not directly related to feminist research inquiries.

The pressing matter in digital ethnographic study, particularly for those engaging in feminist qualitative research, is how to balance content, quantity and quality. The data collection and interpretation techniques run the risk of being considered a "top-down" approach. However, irrespective of the manner in which researchers employ observation in digital ethnography, "researchers' observations already make claim about knowledge, how it is acquired and who is in the position to acquire it" (Tuck & Yang, 2014:815). As such, the challenges of systematically reviewing a movement that lasted over a one-year period shifted the gaze from conventional "data-driven" ethnographic encounter to "explicitly analyst-driven technique"

(Braun & Clarke, 2006:84) where the researcher controls the selection process of field sites. I am acutely aware of the inescapable power imbalance in this regard. It is important to bear in mind that "ultimately it is the ethnographer who controls the process of interpretation, the theoretical framework, and the accountability of the final product" (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2014:17).

Lurking vs Observation: Ethnographic participant observation in digital spaces

Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz write that, "ethnography is a *slow science* methodology" (2014:10). Accordingly, I spent over a year following the movement on Twitter and Facebook platforms by *lurking*, and reading blog essays and media outlets to gain grounding knowledge about the #FMF feminist counter-movements on social media. As mentioned earlier, this was done together with the desk research and analysis of feminist movements, both in South Africa and in other African countries, with the latter enabling me to acquire a broad canvas for exploring contexts that are politically connected to #FMF. I used the term "lurking" instead of "observing" for political reasons. In a traditional sense, ethnographic researchers need to build active relationships with participants, and spend considerable time exploring, while engaging in the task of fieldwork. Thus, ethnographic "observation" is inevitably participatory and embodies being "known" by the participants, and it implies the researcher was/is in engagement with the participants. However, "lurking" describes an invisible observer conducting research on a particular topic through various digital platforms. When explaining "lurking" as a method, Varis (2014:12) writes the following:

> One of the issues has to do with the fact that researchers can now lurk – 'participate' invisibly

> and unbeknownst to the people whose activities are being observed – while being entirely immersed in the environment and activities in question; it is as if the ethnographic 'fly on the wall' was now wearing an invisibility cloak.

The invisibility of the ethnographer in digital spaces often raises questions of authenticity and ethics in the fieldwork and knowledge production. Partly responding to these questions, Varis (2014) indicates that certain academic approaches support "lurking" as a legitimate technique, since it never disrupts the performances of individuals. Undoubtedly, the #FMF movement followers knew that they were in the spotlight and were being watched constantly. During the protest, I was actively participating in the digital sphere by sharing, commenting, re-tweeting, organising online petitions, writing reflection, and attending offline seminars on the movement on UCT and UWC campuses. Since my research interest arose in the midst of all these encounters, I did not refer to myself as a researcher to the digital community of #FMF followers; neither was I ever a total outsider with no political investments in the politics being explored. I was known to many activists and followers as a follower and feminist, and ultimately did not experience my participation in purely technical ways. Hence, it will be dishonest to label my digital ethnographic encounter as observation or even as straightforward "lurking". This raises the need for a reconceptualisation of observation and, indeed, lurking. In remarking on the dilemmas I experienced here, Crawford (2009) stresses that the advancement of technological innovations demands a reconceptualisation of ethnographic methodological encounters for digital studies.

Other scholars have raised concerns about the shrinking act of observation as "lurking" to refer to invisible observers. Crawford states that, "'[l]urking' is a common pejorative term for those who are present in public online spaces but do not prominently speak up" (2009:525). There has been an attempt to change this term and substitute non-pejorative descriptions. For instance,

Zhang and Storck (2001) refer to "peripheral participants", and Nonnecke and Preece (2003) claim that it is better to refer to this kind of observer as a "non-public participant". However, the concern with this kind of intervention, Crawford argues, reproduces the understanding that invisible observation, such as that done online, is "not public, not at the centre" (2009:525).

One of the reformations of methodological frameworks foregrounds the concept of "listening". Crawford mentions that, "listening is not a common metaphor for online activity. In fact, online participation has tended to be automatically conflated with contributing a 'voice'. 'Speaking up' has become the dominant metaphor for participation in online spaces" (2009:525). Paying attention to the dynamics of online engagement with less interruption should be considered as an act of "listening" which "offers more open and critically productive ground" (Crawford, 2009:525). This technical understanding provides an opportunity to rethink the divide between "participant observation" and "lurking" as a measurement of ethnographic authenticity and ethical flaws. Crawford (2009:527) writes:

> If we reconceptualize lurking as listening, it reframes a set of behaviours once seen as vacant and empty into receptive and reciprocal practices. Moreover, as a metaphor for attending to discussions and debates online, listening more usefully captures the experience that many Internet users have. It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and disclosing online; both are necessary and both are forms of participation.

In my experience, listening can be explained as active presence and observation online. In my experience, as debates unfolded, I struggled to be receptive to multiple messages, as well as to speakers with different location that needed to be made sense of. This made understanding the shifts occurring among the academics and #FMF activists at the two universities in Cape Town, UWC and UCT, extremely demanding. The online space was often a bridge that connected and

carried political content, as well as a charged political atmosphere that held space for multiple voices and subjective accounts. Active and careful listening in this context was instrumental to the interpretation and analysis of the data.

Human - Machine - Human: Methodological anxieties and power dynamics

For Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2014:607), multi-sited ethnographic research process and experience is marked by practices of "reflexivity; movement, change, and the interconnection of culture; representation; and a critical re-evaluation of how the field is constructed". However, in practice, based on my experience, conducting research on digital activism using multi-sited ethnography often creates what Marcus (1995:99) refers to as "methodological anxieties". These include concerns about the unmediated access to fieldwork sites on the digital platform; ethical messiness and the implications of using data extracted from social media archives directly; the difficulty of articulating critical observation through multiple platforms as a basis for grounded knowledge; and the challenge of translating the vast hashtag-associated content into non-digital local and global language and vocabulary. In situations where online and physical activism is inextricably entangled, such as where students were literally protesting on the streets of university campuses with their phones in their hands and recording events unfolding in real-time, ethnographic observation registers the different dialectics between the experiences of bodies on the frontline and their experiences using multiple digital platforms.

In some ways, I had control over the selection and focus of the stories that I considered relevant to my research, and I chose to search for a specific issue on various online spaces. Yet, this process made it difficult to conduct the research in ways that were both ethically sensitive to actual #FMF feminist activists' locations, and that reflected my feminist political position that

criticised the erasure of embodied black women's voices in the movement. On the one hand, the extensive digital research provided me with an invisible identity that gave me the autonomy to operate beyond the insider/outsider positionality. I was able to observe, screenshot, copy/paste, and tease out threads of what I considered to be important feminist political movements or engagements from different social media platforms. In a sense, there was only one human (myself) and machine relationship through the algorithm. The question of how to go about "intentionally and explicitly maintaining ethnographic sensitivities" (Chaffee *et al*., 2016:421) remained while I was in the fieldwork process, and curating data and archives between the online and physical spaces.

However, during the in-depth interview process with a group of #FMF feminist activists, my positionality as an insider and outsider became easier to theorise. Reflexive human feelings started surfacing in the dynamics between myself and research participants, and my identity as a black woman and foreign African student in the South African academy was registered, discussed and processed, both my myself and my participants. The privilege of accessing information with a click of a mouse disappeared. In contrast to digital research, in the in-depth interviews, research participants were more in control of their own story and the essence of their narratives. The participants "not only ultimately choose what they wish to remember and tell [me]; they also participate in negotiating the context of remembering" (Errante, 2000:19). Therefore, however fragmented their responses may have been, they took control of how to tell their story; some participants directly responded to the interview questions, while others made connections with the current state of affairs and made broad reflections. I believe that this was a significant shift, even though I do acknowledge the ultimate control of the researcher in the analysis of their narratives and how this impacted on what eventually came to be seen by the reader.

Despite my concerns around being a relative outsider, the experience I had during the interviews with the feminist activists was completely unexpected. The common expression that was used by participants was, "it is refreshing to be interviewed by a black African feminist"; this was often said as recognition of my Ethiopian identity, which made me think of what other interviews #FMF feminist activists would have given and how that would have felt. There was warm hospitality and willingness to be interviewed and participants generously negotiated time and place in a way that would make my travels to where they were located much easier. Two of the participants invited me to their homes; one participant offered to come to where I live so that we could do the interview while our kids played. Two participants invited me to the café they usually met with other #FMF feminist activists so that I could also meet other activists, and this helped me to get invited to regular activist readings and discussion meetings. Five of the remaining participants scheduled the meeting at UWC in the offices of the Women's and Gender Studies department and Gender Equity Unit. These generosities were offered with consciousness of black feminist solidarity and pan-Africanist intentions. Each welcoming invite that I received revealed to me the difference between how I expected to be seen (a "lurker" who was sympathetic to their struggle but not immersed in the feminist #FMF movement) and how my research participants perceived my identity and my research. All this made the interview process highly engaging and politically significant. This is not to say that I was suddenly an insider; rather, it was a reminder that the assumption of static outsiderness is invalid and prone to shift as common social and political realities naturally unfold (Kusow, 2003; Ulam & McCurdy, 2013).

In retrospect, the in-depth interviews with research participants were the moments where I clearly saw the importance of making the link between the #FMF movement and the other case studies. The need to highlight the associations among different African digital feminisms

became something I considered vital to research seeking to make sense of feminist digital activism in South Africa. To a certain extent, closely exploring #FMF for me facilitated a continental and stronger understanding of the connected struggles of African feminists.

Reflection on ethical dilemmas and research limitations

Coleman (2010:488) writes that "the diversity and pervasiveness of digital media can make them difficult to study, but also can make them compelling objects of ethnographic inquiry." As I have tried to indicate, although ethnographic research does complement digital studies, it poses methodological challenges. My transition from being experienced in feminist ethnographic research, based on human-to-human conversations, to digital archival studies, based on human-machine relations and lurking methods, often led to an "out of place" feeling, and created anxiety around the political validity, authenticity, ethics and originality of the overall research (Tamboukou, 2013).

Based on my experience, the challenge of ethical and responsible data-collection on social media, and critical analysis thereof, means not depending on a data-collection process through advanced software application that collapses context-specific realities. While sitting with 400 tweets on the spreadsheet, I was overwhelmed by the realisation that the dependence on digital data strengthened the false binary separation between human subject behind the computer and the data that is archived in the machine ready to be analysed (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). In this particular case, the temptation to focus on digital data-driven research goes against feminist intentions that seek to explore emancipatory knowledge-making that uses "an anti-oppressive, agency-centred way … [to] provide a fruitful entry point to bring out contradictions, paradoxes, meanings, beliefs, experiences and normative questions surrounding everyday life" (Leurs,

2017:150). Even after being granted ethical clearance from the institution, and regardless of how the data is disaggregated and scraped to ensure anonymity and reduce harm, there remained an ethical dilemma in the architecture of the social media research. This is still an ongoing discussion in academic institutions and among civil society actors about what appropriate ethical digital ethnography should entail.

In retrospect, establishing a relationship with research participants was easier to adjust to. The fact that the researcher can lurk without being noticed, and make her own thematic reading of the archive without getting the consent of internet users, was deeply unsettling, despite the ethics committee's approval of research ethics. In fact, Varis stated that "online communication is easily collectable, printable, and screenshotable – entire histories of activity can be made into 'data' with a couple of clicks without ever having witnessed the interactions while they actually unfolded" (2014:12). Afforded such privilege, as an invisible observer with a particular feminist research agenda, I found myself in an ambivalent position and felt the need for regular evaluation of the authenticity of the ethnographic work.

This sense of anxiety is heightened with ethnographic research on the counterpublic digital spaces involving socially marginal or vulnerable subjects. Here, Varis warns us against the temptation of reducing ethnography, digital or otherwise, to a technique. She argues that such a homogenised understanding of ethnography immediately takes away its essence of "methodological flexibility" (2014:11) which makes it applicable to strategic turns during fieldwork.

There is also a limit to what a conventional way of doing a "classic" or "pure" ethnographic study can offer to archival research. The emphasis should be on justifying how a particular

ethnographic study "creates deep, contextual and contingent understandings produced through intensive and collaborative sensory, embodied engagements, often involving digital technologies in co-producing knowledge" (Postill & Pink, 2012:125).

Thus, in order to realise the potential of the method to generate rich data and analysis, Williams (2007:8) suggests that digital researchers have to practice "re-engineering" and "reconceptualis[ing] ethnographic authenticity", and appropriate its values to be practiced in archival research inquiries. Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz emphasise that, in digital ethnography, there are no "clearcut distinction[s] between data gathering and 'being in the field'" (2014:10). For instance, as part of the ethnographic fieldwork process, the researcher is expected to be "there" observing and be immersed with the data collection. However, in digital spaces, it is not practical or realistic to assume that the researcher follows all tweet feeds, or reads all commentaries or blog essays at all times, not to mention the messiness of the online space, with retweets, shares, edits, and deletions happening alongside the act of posting (Varis, 2014; Crawford, 2009; Postill & Pink, 2012). It is impossible for the ethnographer to always be observing uninterrupted. Here, I find Mollerup's (2017:6) argument regarding the presence of the ethnographer and her interaction in the digital sphere very useful. She writes, "'being there' thus points to a distinction between 'our presence there' and 'the presence of there here' that is emphasised by the varying reciprocal affordances of media technologies". Hence, we must acknowledge that there are interruptions, which then demand that the ethnographer employ diverse techniques to catch-up with and/or complement missed information – such as retrieving archived data from certain social media platforms.

The other limitation of considering the digital space for research fieldwork is visibility. Technological and digital divides can limit how to be in the space and be seen by the observer.

Those who have the access to internet and social media are the ones who are recognisable for the ethnographic observer. It has to be flagged that even among those who manage to participate online, the ethnographer only sees very few in comparison to the big data, due to the fragmented and small data that is accessible to her. Those who are outside of this spectrum end up being invisible in the analysis. Thus, employing "observation" in digital ethnographic study, without additional methodological triangulation techniques, might lead to the collapsing of context-specific details (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The notion of collapsing context, in the case of this research, refers to neglecting the heterogeneous voices, feminist languages, and political hybridity among networked individuals involved in the digital movement.

The research focuses on feminist ideological impressions, and dominant political debates and controversies that have influenced feminism; it is therefore by no means a detailed exploration of the #FMF movement and engagement with the volume of commentary produced about this. Some of the recognised limitations of this include the following. First, Twitter or Twitter users are not representative of internet users in South Africa, nor of the population outside the digital world that were directly involved in the protest. Second, it is important to recognise that the #FMF hashtags particular to this case study – #PatriarchyMustFall, #NakedProtest, #Chapter212, #IAmOneinThree, #RapeMustFall, #NakedProtest, #RUReferenceList, #MbokodoLead, and #TransCapture – are not only used by students who were following the movement. Other actors outside the student-body, such as NGOs, feminist activist organisations, mainstream media, and bloggers, were also employing these hashtags.

Certainly, what can be known is mediated by a combination of contributing factors. The ethnographic fieldwork of the research of feminism in #FMF, and the selection of data for analysis, is dependent on muddled interactions. The expectation for digital ethnography to

provide an insight into the complex ever-growing technologies that often weave between online and offline spaces should be understood from this perspective. Such visualisation has the potential to surpass methodological barriers and provide opportunity for interpretations and analysis of digital research (William, 2007).

The following four chapters present a thematic analysis that begins with a critical analysis of four African feminist movements. Based on the grounding work from other African country cases in Chapter Four, Chapters Five and Six focus on the #FMF feminist movement and critically engage with resistance and protest around the struggles of black women and LGBTQIA+ student collectives in the #FMF movement, and how this was challenged through digital activism. Chapter Seven provides an insight into discourses of transnational African feminism on the continent by showing how the few African feminist movements that were presented as digital then expanded and transferred into feminist movements in other countries.

Chapter Four

Peeling back layers of digital feminist counter-movements in Africa

Introduction

This chapter engages with four case studies to explore diverse digitally enhanced feminist movements in postcolonial Africa. This analysis focuses on both digital and offline protests, and on feminist sensibilities that have either been suppressed, erased, censored, unevenly expressed, or sometimes actively drowned out, misconstrued or appropriated. Although feminism within #FMF constitutes a very localised and short movement relative to the examples I deal with here, I will show how similar political currents and strategies echo throughout different movements in postcolonial Africa, and how central digital activism has been to contextually distinctive feminist agendas and mobilising.

While the prevalence of feminist mobilising is also evident in other countries in the global south (Gagliardone & Pohjonen, 2016), what is presented here is how African feminisms and women's experiences are often articulated through their struggles against the predicaments of nationalist, masculinist patriarchal leadership, religious values, racialised colonial pasts, and class legacies. Therefore, the chapter is attentive to how these nuances of intersectional power dynamics, which are entangled with a wide range of norms and differences, affect feminist movements in Africa. The discussion of the case studies analyses hidden feminist struggles and the politics of digital activism as "invented" counterpublic spaces created and crafted through the internet and social media platforms (Miraftab, 2004a).

Significantly, these movements have been widespread and highly visible among feminist activists, enlisting digital communication, mobilisation and networking, and demonstrating the injection of radical political interventions into specifically postcolonial African feminists' political struggles. As stated in the previous chapter, the intention of this exploration is not to attempt any detailed comparisons, but to pursue the more theoretical thread of "[examining] how structural and micro-level factors can be mitigated through new technology to spark and maintain contentious politics in public spaces" (Carty, 2014:54). While the chapter is attentive to the significance of digitisation in the domain of political struggle, it also draws attention to the connections between the virtual and the embodied in recent articulations of African feminism. The chapter therefore highlights the use of multiple forms of digital counterpublic formations, including but not limited to digital activity.

As conveyed, women's active participation and/or feminist agenda-setting within gender-blind national protests are discernible (and, in some cases, pronounced) elements in many digitally enhanced movements throughout Africa. However, neither media nor academic interpretations of these protests have paid much attention to distinctively gendered trajectories. In what follows, I foreground feminist protest elements with two primary aims. The first aim is to help chart the history of African feminist digital activism in a global context where feminist digital activism has been associated mainly or only with digital communication in the global north. The second aim is to provide an analytical scaffold for exploring the explicit and sustained articulation of feminist voices and gendered demands in my primary case study, South Africa's #FMF movement.

The hidden archive of intersectional African feminism

African feminist narratives and symbols surface from within nationalist archives and dominant narratives of national struggle. This is a common pattern when women are involved in nationalist politics. While men and women activists strategically and collectively use technology to subvert authoritarian states, neocolonialism or class oppression, feminist activists' motivations are often quite complex and exceed male-centred or masculinist political conviction. In drawing on the conceptualisation of publics and counterpublics in Chapter 2, I read social media platforms as offering a counterpublic forum where women record their experience of resistance against power dynamics that yield multiple layers and identities. Radsch (2012:31) argues that, "new and alternative media have given women new tools for articulating their identity in the public sphere, putting issues that were of particular concern to them onto the public agenda". As such, feminist activists pursue multiple intersecting resistances and demonstrate distinct political energies (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). Embedded in such digital counter-movements are body politics and protest performances that not only resist the patriarchal status quo, but also radically shift political action and discourses that have come to be seen as rational, universal and necessary masculinist and patriarchal gender structures (Baer, 2016).

Here, the intersectional feminist theoretical framework, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), helps to analyse the intersecting power and oppression of women in Africa. The core principle of intersectionality centres around the idea that the experiences of women and marginalised communities can be better understood through critical observation of the interactions of multiple structural power dynamics (Collins 2004; Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). The framework is rooted in the politics of the identities of individuals and groups, and how categorisations such as race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity, among others,

become enmeshed at different historical moments to form identities that cannot be neatly reduced to separate parts and therefore measured for violation of a particular human right (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Building on Saba Mahmood's theorising of power helps to understand the complex ways in which digital counterpublic spheres evolved in these four countries. Mahmood (2011) challenges the linear reading of power and oppression when analysing Arab women's life struggles. She offers an alternative reading of women's agency as embodied resistance while performing patriarchal gendered roles. In her analysis, she disrupts the binary assumption of authority and power, and instead shows how women skilfully negotiate power under Islam in a way that shifts dominant ideas of agency and subjectivity. Such a feminist perspective disrupts the understanding of power, agency and oppression that permeates western readings of the lives of women in the global south (Grewal, 2013).

Landorf (2014:41) mentions that Mahmood's "work provides insight into how to study female subjects who adhere to patriarchal norms without assuming their freedom is restrained or that they can only exhibit agency by resisting these norms." The creative use of the digital counterpublic space often provides women with an opportunity to navigate repressive systems and acquire a deeper knowledge and experience of gendered structures and power dynamics. Additionally, these conceptions of agency facilitate a way to read intersecting and complex feminist struggles. Feminist attention to the examples in this chapter contests the "ICTs guarantee empowerment" narrative that links straightforward feminist liberation to women's access to digital resources and regime change. Rather, the cases display patterns of patriarchal and masculinist structures that are present even in the digital counterpublic sphere, making it difficult for feminists to centre and articulate women's agendas. Therefore, the embodied

protest performance of women online, offline or simultaneously reveals an uneven and complex engagement that is often hidden behind masculine-oriented movements.

As mentioned above, the brief analysis of four case studies provides a scaffolding for critically exploring the #FMF movement in South Africa. The rationale behind reading #FMF feminist activism together with these four feminist movements is twofold. On the one hand, since it is located on the African continent, it is inevitable that the #FMF movement is interwoven with other African feminist struggles. As the following cases show, the four feminist protests established a postcolonial African feminist digital activism that ushered in new patterns of feminist encounters with patriarchal ideologies. On the other hand, by bringing to the forefront these side-lined and quickly erased archives of African feminist movements, the chapter provides a radical feminist resistance framework that identified multiple digital counterpublic spaces in visibilising and sustaining feminist energies on the continent.

Feminist digital activism in the Arab Spring: The cases of Tunisia and Egypt

When referring to forms of social and political movements in the digital era, scholars frequently invoke the Arab Spring and political movements in North Africa, particularly Tunisia and Egypt. The revolutionary protest and digital activism in these two countries are often interpreted as success stories of the capacity of the internet to create digital counterpublic spaces for political movements, mobilisation, and political change (Chomiak, 2011; Castells, 2015; Chiumbu, 2015; Bosch, 2016; Mutsvairo, 2016). Activists creatively used the internet and social media platforms to break free from the stranglehold of state-owned media mis/under-representation (Hofheinz, 2011; Mulrine, 2011). It is revealing that the protest was commonly referred to as the "Facebook revolution".

The Tunisian uprising originated between December 2010 and January 2011 against the authoritarian and repressive government of Zine Abidine Ben Ali. The protest is generally believed to have started after a young man named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the municipality building in Sidi Bouzid, a poor and marginalised city in Tunisia. He protested against "the humiliation of repeated confiscation of his fruit and vegetable stand by the local police after he refused to pay a bribe" (Castells, 2015:22). His political protest was recorded and uploaded on YouTube and shared on Facebook and Twitter, which led to nationwide outrage and eruption of the Arab revolution. After a short but successful national protest, Tunisian people overthrew the dictatorial regime, and this historic moment is considered the "Arab world's first bottom-up revolution" (Chomiak, 2011:68).

Shortly after Tunisia's uprising unfolded, Egyptians revolted against Hosni Mubarak's 30 years of dictatorial and corrupt leadership, and successfully removed him from power. According to El Nossery (2016) and Deb (2016), the uprising in Egypt in January 2011 was sparked by state corruption and police brutality. Both scholars state that the uprising had a direct connection with the murder of a young man, Khaled Said, and the formation of a popular Facebook page, "We are all Khaled Said", with pictures of Said's brutally tortured body creating public outrage and protest. There were also a series of acts of self-immolation in protest against the social, political and economic inequalities in the country.

In both countries, there was significant use of social media and digital activism in the revolution (Hofheinz, 2011). In remarking on this, Howard and Hussain (2011:6) argue:

> what ignites popular protest is not merely an act of regime violence such as the police beating Mohamed Bouazizi or Khaled Said, but the diffusion of news about the outrage by networks of family, friends, and then strangers who step in when the state-run media ignore the story.

While this is true, it is also far more complex, particularly from the standpoint and experiences of women as gendered and sexualised subjects in relation to the nationalist agendas of the revolution. In the following section, I seek to thematise the gendered struggles embedded within popular anti-authoritarian movements that are generally not seen as being feminist in orientation at all.

Embodied disruptions: Women's roles in the Arab Spring protests

> Arab feminism in the Arab Spring illuminates several core themes – inclusivity, mobilization, equality, symbolism, and transformation – that shaped the conception of the empty signifier: Arab Spring (Maravankin, 2017:2).

It could be argued that women's involvement in the Arab revolution was inherently feminist. Their active public participation played a major role in introducing women's liberation into the national revolutionary movement (Ennaji, 2016). However, the history of feminist activism in the Arab uprising is hidden beneath the hegemonic masculine-oriented nationalist narratives of the movement. The dominant social movement's archives "do not highlight, let alone center, the role of women before, during, and after the uprisings and focus only on women's 'remarkable' and 'spectacular' presence during the uprisings" (Sadiqi, 2016:2). The ambiance of rebellion and disobedience that seemed to collapse gender roles and power relations was short lived and presumably designed to benefit men (Wahba, 2016). As a result, "women's recognition in the spaces of authority shrank and their voices were muted in the ensuing geopolitics. It is as if women made the stories of the revolution but did not own them" (Sadiqi, 2016:2). Despite these realities, Arab feminists were determined to mobilise for regime change and equal citizenship rights for women in their respective countries (Bagnall, 2011).

The uprisings "empower[ed] women to challenge the roles they serve, and create networks that heighten women's ability to recognize that gender relations are in dire need of change" (Maravankin, 2017:2). Digital activism in the Arab revolution provided women with visibility and agency to play forceful and leading roles in forging structures and organisation for protest on the streets (Zlitni & Touati, 2012). This does not mean that the occupation of both public and digital counterpublic spaces was not challenged (Radsch, 2012). Particularly, women accessing the physical public sphere meant that their bodies were transgressing the boundaries between the private and domestic feminised spheres and the public sphere of patriarchal and masculine authority, with women therefore often being seen to violate a religious injunction. In such cases, where radical conservativism sets absolute physical limits on women's mobility and bodily movement and endangers their lives, women played very transgressive roles. Even in cases where there was only a small space (symbolic or otherwise) for women's public presence in the protest, women activists were determined to occupy both digital and physical spaces, veiled or unveiled, to rebel against the regime (Wahba, 2016; Maravankin, 2017).

Scholars Radsch (2012) and Ennaji (2016) maintain that feminist activists inhabit multimodal protesting strategies in both the digital counterpublic sphere and the streets, while negotiating the patriarchal social and cultural restrictions that limit women's access to both the physical and digital public spheres. Radsch (2012:4) states that, "Arab women have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers, translating digital advocacy and organization into physical mobilization and occupation of public spaces in a dialectic of online and offline activism that is particular to this era". More importantly, the entanglement of activism within the public physical space and the digital counterpublic sphere provided an opportunity to reconfigure masculine ideas in both the virtual and physical public domains. This significantly shifted body politics and embodied protests in the region (Maravankin, 2017). As a result, the involvement

of women in the uprising was qualitatively stronger and of a larger-scale than seen before, and they were able to secure leadership roles, allowing women and feminist activists to collectively frame a common political agenda (Newsom & Lengel, 2012).

To a not inconsiderable extent, therefore, women's involvement as leaders and spokespersons reconfigured the masculinist public sphere protest mobilisation strategies in ways that transcended the mere inclusion of women in the uprisings (Radsch, 2012). For instance, in Egypt, Asmaa Mafhouz, a young woman activist, posted a video blog (vlog) on YouTube inviting Egyptians to go out to Tahrir Square on January 25 to protest against the regime (Castells, 2015). The popular quote from Mafhouz's invitation was, "if you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25th. Whoever said women shouldn't go to protests because they'll be beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th" (Radsch, 2012:3). I found Cooke's (2016:34) interpretation captures the skilful negotiation of power by women activists, saying that Mafhouz's "appeal was directed to men worn down by decades of authoritarian rule. Modestly clad but bold in speech, she seemed to offer emasculated men the opportunity to resume their masculine roles in society." The content of the vlog negotiated conservative masculinist ideas of public political participation without making it sound like woman-specific demands, yet its pushback against the masculinist orientation of the revolution reminded the nation of the political agency of women, and opened up the public space for women to protest on Tahrir Square (Johansson-Nogués, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, the vlog skilfully established women's determination to work side-by-side with men as equal citizens.

Feminist activists also played an important role in shifting the public discourse about the rationale of national protest by posting real-time and uncensored information from the streets

on multiple social media platforms (Zlitni & Touati, 2012). This created a space for diversified voices and news, beyond the monopoly of government-owned mainstream media that was feeding false propaganda and negative images of the protest and protestors, particularly women (Pedersen & Salib, 2013; Khalil, 2014a). In the Tunisian revolution, Lina Ben Mhenni's "A Tunisian Girl" blog was nationally and globally known as the most influential platform that covered and "expose[d] the corruption of the Ben-Ali regime and to demonstrate the repression that was on-going throughout the month of protests" (Mulrine, 2011:18). During the uprising, "A Tunisian Girl" had over 20,000 followers (Quinio, 2020). The blog is recognised for unveiling violations of women's rights, human rights, freedom of speech, and censorship. Mhenni frequently wrote blogs in Arabic, English, French, and German (Radsch, 2012; Pedersen & Salib, 2013), and uploaded unfiltered photographs and videos by travelling to cities across the country where riots were happening (McTighe, 2011). For instance, "A Tunisian Girl" reported extensively on the story behind Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation protest. As an independent activist journalist, Ben Mhenni travelled to the city of Sidi Bouzid to cover the story of Bouazizi on her blog. She wrote the story, and uploaded photographs and videos regularly, which provided the public with information on what was happening in that city and reminded the nation how these experiences resonated with other community's experiences and outrage. Mhenni's curation of archives and narratives of these incidents contributed to the national outrage and helped initiate the revolution in Tunisia (Mulrine, 2011).

Even though only two well-known feminist figures are mentioned here, scholars (e.g. Stephan, 2013; Sadiqi, 2016) argue that, in the Arab revolution, many activists relentlessly used the internet to report on everyday repression and police brutality during the protest. Together with public protest, the strategic use of the internet and social media helped create the bottom-up national movement that overthrew the governments of presidents Zine Abidine Ben Ali and

Hosni Mubarak. In addition, other Arab countries, and particularly the youth in the North Africa region, immediately recognised that grassroots protest can simultaneously appear on the streets and digital spaces, as many protesters were equipped with access to computers, phones, internet, social media and blogs (Ghannam, 2012).

Return to normalcy: Feminist intentionality and masculine nationalism in the Arab Spring

The comparison of Tunisia and Egypt's narratives shows how women activists' visibility on the streets consolidated Arab feminist defiance of masculinist nationalism in the region. Equally importantly, feminist activist's imagination strategically worked to dismantle practices of gendered citizenship and repression of women as second-class citizens in the region (Maravankin, 2017). In the public sphere, there were creative gender performances and acts of visibilising that rebelled against the control of women's bodies. These determined struggles also celebrated the imaginative agencies, mobility and activist ingenuity of the women who fought hard within the broader Arab Spring uprisings, while simultaneously fighting against the range of religious and traditional codes, popularised gendered beliefs and heteropatriarchal status quo that dictated women's silence, obedience, and political subordination.

Yet, as the movement progressed and the dictatorial regime came to an end, the restoration of a "post-dictatorial" normalcy unfolded in the form of repression and violence against women (Khalil, 2014a). Feminist activists came to realise that women's labour, voice, and embodied protest during the revolution had been exploited and used for a masculinist and nationalist agenda (Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Wahba, 2016). Khalil, for example, argues "[the] nationalist discourse signalled the persistence of a gender paradox where Tunisian women's social

struggles coexisted within the male-gendered politics" (2014a:186). The feminist struggles that had been embedded in the national uprisings came undone. Cooke (2016:32) describes the temporality of gender equality struggles as follows:

> … in revolutions, as in wars, norms and values are suspended "for the duration" in order to accommodate necessary breaches of what is normally considered appropriate. When the crisis is over, the cultural police try to restore traditional gender norms. In other words, they try to squeeze the genie back into the lamp.

What this reveals is that women's presence on the streets was, from the perspective of patriarchal nationalism, only a rebellious act in support of "malestream" struggles (Al-Ali, 2013; Wahba, 2016). In other words, there was a disconnect between the feminist political activism that used the moment to pursue equal citizenship rights, and the masculinist national protest that considered women's participation merely a supportive presence for advancing another gendered regime (Badran, 2016). From a masculinist perspective, the very existence of women in the protests was meant to inflict embarrassment and shame the state into accepting the demands of the revolution. According to this logic, therefore, to declare the revolution over demands a return to a gendered status quo, despite consistent feminist resistance against deepseated patriarchal values and activism (Mulrine, 2011; Hafez, 2012; Carty, 2014). Thus, the Arab feminist activism and resistance in the revolution was situated at the intersection of:

> feminist persistence in the face of cultural resistance and backlash; the ongoing creative disobedience that characterizes women's post-revolution expressions; gender as a "lived" category; and the twin paradoxical realities in women's lives, political participation and denial of authority, and how this ambivalence of inclusion is "manipulated" (Sadiqi, 2016:3).

Ultimately, women's centrality began to be seen as threatening and not supportive, and this led to extreme anti-feminist repression within the nationalist anti-authoritarian movement, often within communities. According to Cooke (2016:36), "new governments—overwhelmingly Islamist—have cracked down on women's public presence. Even worse are gangs on the prowl for female prey, who turn streets and squares into forbidding zones of sexual violence." These complexities led to counter-movements that continued to insist on feminist resistance to the oppression of women. Arab feminist voices boldly articulated "alternative narratives that were central to defying patriarchy and triggering social transformation" (Wahba, 2016:66). In spite of the threat of violence, women continued to show up on the streets and perform acts of resistance against the rebirth of secular masculinist nationalism.

In the aftermath of the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak and the subsequent military takeover, the majority of Egyptian men and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), as the state's representative, vetoed women's presence in the public sphere (Johansson-Nogués, 2013; Deb, 2016). Women who were found at Tahrir Square began to be thrown into prison, physically assaulted, and sexually harassed. This unjust treatment was worse for women who were seen in the streets protesting without being accompanied by men, either a relative or husband (Hafez, 2014a). The overwhelming violence against women that followed shows that the popularity of feminist slogans during the uprising was temporary, and feminism was ultimately precarious in the face of rigidly patriarchal nationalism (Wahba, 2016). This was especially evident in the way that "the police, security forces, and thugs harassed and assaulted women" (Radsch, 2012:23), and was seen as law enforcement and part of the establishment of order, rather than atrocious violence.

For instance, the violent attack on a young woman, referred to as "the girl in the blue bra", became a highly politically charged moment in the Egyptian revolution (Cooke, 2016). Her moniker originated from her exposed and vulnerable body lying on the ground and being dragged by military men. While her face was fully covered, she was half naked, with her bright blue bra showing. Activists who bore witness to the violent attack by the security forces shared the recorded video on social media platforms. The video shows how, as the men in military uniforms violently stomped on her with their military boots, her cover-cloth falls open as her half-naked body takes the attack. The video went viral, and the story made global news and drew attention to "Egypt's scene of its recent revolution" (Hafez, 2014b:174). The story of "the girl in the blue bra" became a powerful physical and symbolic illustration of the brutality of the military against protestors, especially women (Radsch, 2012).

According to Al-Ali (2013:312), following the incident, there was "a large-scale protest and solidarity demonstration by women in Cairo, united across class, generations, and political and religious persuasion". During the protest, women were chanting "Egypt's daughters are a red line'" (Hafez, 2014a:22). This speaks to two issues: the violent assault, shaming and humiliation of women activists in the revolution; and, as Hafez (2014a) writes, in chanting "Egypt's daughters", women activists were reclaiming the national and citizenship identity that had been stripped from them.

Another high-profile case was the Egyptian feminist activist, Samira Ibrahim, who had to endure virginity testing. She was among the women who were arrested at a sit-in protest in Tahrir Square. Ibrahim was vocal, in public and online spaces, about the government's attempt to control the revolution, especially women, through intimidation and military police violence on the streets of Tahrir Square (Hamdy, 2012). According to the SCAF, the reason for the

virginity testing procedure was that protestors were not behaving like proper Egyptian women, and the testing would confirm if they were sexually active, in which case they could not claim to have been raped and sexually harassed by the police (Amar, 2011; Khattab, 2016).

After she was released from prison, Ibrahim took the SCAF to court for the violent procedure that she and other women prisoners were forced to endure (Hafez, 2014b; Badran, 2016). During the court proceedings, many women and men held a demonstration in solidarity with Ibrahim and denounced virginity testing and violence against women by the SCAF (Badran, 2016). The case received prominent coverage on mainstream and international media and was extensively shared on social media platforms. Most importantly, it exposed the SCAF's violent attacks against protestors, the physical and sexual abuse, and the virginity testing that deeply humiliates women activists who played a crucial role in the movement (El Nossery, 2016). Al-Ali (2013:312) argues that "the remnants of the Mubarak regime, as well as the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), clearly tried to use women's bodies, gender norms, and prevailing ideas about gender relations as a way to control, govern, and intimidate protesters". Ironically, the state used these reported incidents as tools to maintain the idea of women's vulnerability (Cooke, 2016). It was also a symbol of the decision to reject Egyptian women's and feminists' struggle for freedom, and a return to what is considered normalcy under a patriarchal society. Ibrahim initially won the case, but it was a short-lived victory as the ruling was overturned by the successor government.

Subversive confrontation of state violence in the Arab uprising

Through the gruelling experiences of state violence, such as the case of Samira Ibrahim and the girl in the blue bra, women were taught that Tahrir Square is a public sphere that belongs to

men. For feminist activists, the square became a place where the everyday social construction of gender, based on patriarchal and religious values, could and should be contested and negotiated. The digital counterpublic space therefore allowed a momentary escape, and space for improvisation of feminist protest modalities that are closely attached to social scripts.

Similar to what was observed in the #FMF movement (explored in detail in a later chapter), the protest performance in Egypt showed the centrality of women's bodies in the entanglement of nationalism, Islam, and Egyptian cultural values and practices (Hazef, 2014b). A simple Google search of "the girl in the blue bra" generates extensive street artworks that represent different stories of women's embodied experiences of violence during the revolution. Such subversive artwork was initially inspired by the placards that protestors carried during public demonstrations. Beyond denouncing state violence against women, the protest interrupted the general public narrative on multiple digital media platforms that painted the young woman only as a victim of state violence. The picture below subversively redefined and transformed "the girl in the blue bra" to "tahrir women" (Brandon, 2012, n.p), from a powerless body of a victim captured and beaten to a powerful woman fighting back – driven by outrage to sustain the movement against the violation of women.

Image 4.1: Image by unknown artist, circulated as a counter-narrative on the streets of Tahrir Square, and through social media

The body in the image above conveys very different and unexpected articulations of female oppression. The dominant narrative focused on her exposed half-naked body and her blue bra, but this illustration brought to the public imagination a counter-narrative that refused a gaze associated with sympathy, pity or the women's need for support. Instead, the emphasis was on the rebellion of the woman fighting back against the military abuse that was inflicted on her body, with an implied audience being able to derive inspiration and confidence from her agency. Hafez (2014b:182) captures the sentiment of this image when she writes:

> A telling scene with the transformed body of the girl as a Ninja warrior leaping into the air and kicking back her attackers. Instead of her frail, pale, naked body, the painted caricature depicted her as a muscular figure dressed in fighting clothes with her face still covered and a fierce look in her eyes as she struck the face of the soldier who hit her.

The image also strengthened her helpless body, transforming her trembling hands into clenched fists. Even though her face was not shown in the original picture, the illustration shows part of her outraged face, the jeans she wore improvised to look like a karate outfit, and her legs are not limp; rather, she is using them to fight back with equally improvised dark blue sneakers that she wore the day she was attacked. Moreover, the military man loses his balance and power, the baton stick is knocked out of his hands, and he also loses a tooth as she kicks him, which symbolically destabilises the power of the military. The counter-image disrupts the dominant discourse of victimhood and male control and prowess, becoming a rallying call for feminist resistance against the state's intention to control women's bodies.

Alongside the digital counterpublic sphere, "graffiti has been at the forefront of Egyptian women's activism" (Cooke, 2016:40). Many artists have sketched different stencil graffiti interpretations of the girl in the blue bra, yet all images have one thing in common: the women are wearing blue bras. Reflecting on this, El Nossery states that "these illustrations also show how different representations of women and their bodies can become a (re) negotiation of their place in the public sphere" (2016:152). The blue bra stencil graffiti below, titled "No to Stripping the People", zoomed in and focused specifically on the blue bra as an iconic image of women's agency "for Egyptian protesters trying to end the country's military ruling" (El Nossery, 2016:152).

Image 4.2: "No to Stripping the People", stencil graffiti artwork created by Bahia Shehab as part of a series work, A Thousand Times No: The Visual History of Lam-Alif[5]

The above depictions focused on the centrality of the actual female body within digital activism, both in representation and in imagining narratives of oppression and resistance, and in actual performance. It signified women's resistance against systemic oppression by offering

[5] For more information on Bahia Shehab collective artwork, see https://cairoscene.com/Buzz/Egypt-s-Blue-BraGraffiti-exhibited-in-Montreal

liberating imagination and knowledge that helps re-construct repressive and violent power relations (El Nossery, 2016). The iconic import of the graffiti, "No to stripping the people" and "blue bra girl", works to resist the violent and naturalised ways in which women are routinely undressed against their will – both symbolically and physically – in various acts of patriarchal bullying and oppression. The artworks continue to unsettle the ideas of "honour" and "shame" connected to women's bodies in oppressive patriarchal and religious systems (Hafez, 2014a). Overall, the graffiti is a powerful illustration of agency and the power to strip down patriarchal and religious beliefs that have absolute control over women's bodies. It should be noted here that this is one among many other examples of icons and symbols in which dense feminist commentary is conveyed through images of women bodies in other forms of African feminist digital activism.

Transnational digital activism and the global currency/resonance of African women's bodies: #BringBackOurGirls and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia

The feminist movements #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia in Ethiopia emerged as retorts to government failures to intervene in social and political crises that directly affected the safety and wellbeing of citizens, particularly women. These two high profile cases are examples of how ingrained gendered citizenship discourses influence the framing of a "state of emergency" by governments. These cases also represent how gendered power relations are inevitably embedded in the character and outcome of social movements. Although initially both cases were "rescue-based movements" (Murphy, 2017:19), through digital activism both became more visible globally and saw different social actors with multiple different agendas step in, which left the most vulnerable subjects in a compromised position. Most importantly, the cases revealed the universalising effects of western ideas of "African

women" in the global imaginary, where African women are seen as perpetual victims of religion, culture, disease, and poverty and as having no political or material capacity to assert their rights. Significantly, a western-centric feminist framework perpetuates this stereotype, positioning African women as supplicants or mentees in the journey to learn and discover western centric norms of gender justice.

#BringBackOurGirls is a movement started due to the abduction of schoolgirls in Nigeria. On 14 April, 2014, in Chibok, north-eastern Nigeria, an armed terrorist group called Boko Haram abducted 276 young women from their school. The young girls were taking their final examination. It was reported that 57 of the kidnapped girls managed to escape immediately (BBC, 2014; Aljazeera, 2014; The Guardian, 2014). What was not reported is that, according to Olson (2016: n.p), these 276 kidnapped girls joined "at least two thousand other women and children who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram since the beginning of 2014". The Boko Haram Islamist extremist group has been known for their terrorist attacks in Nigeria and neighbouring countries such as Cameroon (Vanguard News, 2014). They are widely known for opposing western education and modernisation, particularly for women (Smith, 2015). These extremist beliefs are "the key tenets used to disempower and subjugate women and deny them their human rights" (Njoroge 2016:322). However, Nigeria, particularly the Northern region, has long experienced conflicts over religious, ethnic, and economic issues (Khoja-Moolji, 2015). Thus, it is essential to mention here that Boko Haram groups are not simply radical religious collectives, but also represent groups that are rebelling against extreme poverty and ethnic-based oppressions (Murphy, 2017).

On the streets of Abuja, outraged, scared, and devastated parents dressed in red held placards with photographs of the young girls and the words "Bring Back Our Girls" (Njoroge, 2016).

The former Nigerian Minister of Education and World Bank vice president, Onbiageli Ezekwesili, was directly involved and instrumental in the mobilisation of a public protest with the parents of the young girls in Abuja (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). Even though parents protested and petitioned the government to rescue the young girls, for more than a week, there was little media coverage from local and national mainstream media, or response from the government (Ogene, 2014; Olson, 2016; Ofori-Parku & Moscato 2018).

This was until a Nigerian lawyer, Ibrahim M. Abdullahi, tweeted on 23 April, 2014 about the kidnapping of these young girls, and used the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls (Oslon, 2015; Njoroge, 2016). Local and diaspora activists followed and upheld the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign, mobilised public conversation, and amplified everyday protests on the streets of Nigeria (Maxfield, 2016). The news of the 276 schoolgirls, unlike the thousands of other cases, managed to surpass the limitations of local and national media, and the wilfully ignorant actions of the government. As Murphy noted, "no longer relegated to the side-lines of Nigerian public discourse, the abduction had become a worldwide matter" (2017:17). #BringBackOurGirls went viral on social media and was mentioned more than four million times in less than two weeks (Olson, 2016; Maxfield, 2016; Murphy, 2017).

#BringBackOurGirls revealed important aspects of feminist discourse in the African context, particularly in relation to the position of Africa within the transnational feminist movement. African feminist thinkers were critical of the ways that the movement attracted global attention and how the agency and voice of local and diaspora citizens were appropriated by western feminist ideas of intervention. Despite the common understanding of differences in racialised colonial pasts, the framing discourse of #BringBackOurGirls was strongly affected by patriarchy, ageism and coloniality that infantilised third world young women, while repeating

a narrative of patronage in relation to black African women. For instance, Loken (2014:1101), troubled by the use of the term "our girls" by western mobilisers in digital activism, writes that:

> The enthusiastic Western adoption of #BringBackOurGirls must also be treated sceptically for its failure to consider its own imperial dynamics. The claiming of Nigerian schoolgirls as "our girls" seeks to promote women's rights in the Global South while paradoxically ignoring the intersections of race, class, and colonialism actively rooting the social media uprising.

Certainly, the phrase "our girls" was added in the hashtag frame by Nigerian activists; however, what Loken (2014) points out is the homogenising effect of the framework that ignores fundamental unequal power dynamics that are embedded in the mapping of the movement as a global phenomenon. Maxfield (2016:10) writes that, "rather than locating the Chibok abductions in a larger context of Boko Haram's violence, many activists in the Global North reverted to a more familiar imperialist timeline, which considers Africans less evolved versions of Northerners." The movement unveiled how the transnational feminist terrain positioned third world women as living under despicable "pre-modern" social, cultural and economic atrocities.

Moreover, Murphy (2017) noted two interlinked and embedded realities that obstructed the #BringBackOurGirls movement: "politics of pity" and "ironic solidarity" by feminists from the north. The global digital activism and representation of #BringBackOurGirls was entangled with the "politics of pity" that "disempowers distant others and hinders the formation of moral bonds on behalf of the spectator"; and "ironic solidarity" that centres around self-promotion of an individual's social and political status in society by appropriating the unfortunate experience of the abducted schoolgirls (Murphy, 2017:2). Therefore, the digital activism amplified already-existing "politics of pity" that strengthened distance and differences, and "ironic solidarity" that perpetuated unequal power relations that originated in a racist colonial past.

The irony of this absurdity is shown in how "the White, Northern world adopted and abandoned 'Bring Back Our Girls' with equal readiness, and both this support and its eventual expiration depended on the centring of imperial narratives about the Global South" (Maxfield, 2016:10).

What makes this dynamic even more problematic is that the young girls and their parents, as well as activists in Nigeria, have little control over this kind of representation of suffering and powerlessness. As such, "the suffering other becomes an object of judgment … with the spectator invited to decide whether their plight is worthy of recognition" (Murphy, 2017:52). The Nigerian feminist critical outrage online against these patterns highlights that digital activism experiences are not disembodied; instead, multiple and intersecting identities, such as gender, race, class, and geopolitical location, powerfully influence the interpretation and actions of feminist solidarity causes. Local activist interventions also resisted how African women are seen as "annihilated figures who have no voice of their own" (Chouliaraki, 2011:372). Here, I draw on Butler's (2011) theoretical exploration of which bodies matter, which bodies are dispensable, and which bodies are grieved. In this movement, by default, each young woman was "a person accessible (and therefore less dispensable) to the West by claiming her as ours. She becomes our girl, contextually indistinguishable and thus deserving protection from her communal struggle-in-kind" (Loken, 2014:1101).

What clearly revealed the impossibility of transnational solidarity between the global north and south was the appropriation of photos of black girls that became the face of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. It appears that Nigerian (and by extension African) culture, ethnic, racial, and religious traditions are regarded as "the problem" and the repository for all that is "bad" and horrible for women. This is particularly instrumental in laying the foundation for the continuing struggles of postcolonial African feminist movements in African women's

backwardness, their inhabiting an especially patriarchal world where post-enlightenment modernity has done little to guarantee the freedoms that women in the North are believed to have. Specifically, it shows how African feminist movements still face the notion of "white innocence" that considers western liberalist frameworks and traditions as the model of gender equality (Wekker, 2016). The stories of Nigerian girls were distanced, erased and made to portray the struggles and identities of black African women as icons of constant suffering and embodied victimisation. This puts the burden on African feminists to challenge racism, the colonial gaze, erasure, misrepresentation, and exploitation of their feminist labour and activism.

One image conveying this gaze is that of Jenabu Balde (below) from Guinea-Bissau, taken by photographer and filmmaker Ami Vitale in 2011, which was used on a poster for #BringBackOurGirls in 2014, and which instantly went viral in support of the young Nigerian girls. Balde's story was in no way related to the kidnappings.

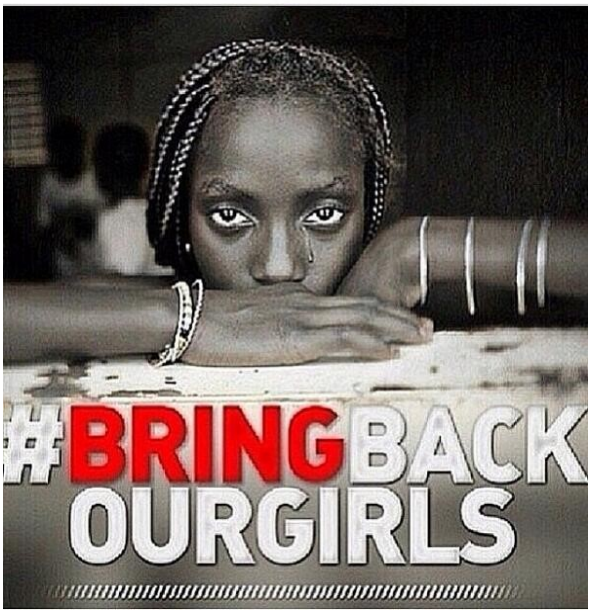


Image 4.3: one of the famous images that became the face of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign on social media

The use of Jenabu Balde's image for the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria "demonstrates the colonial gaze enabling the claiming of unidentified African women as indispensably ours while also constituting them as interchangeable others" (Loken, 2014:1101). Here, the body can be thought of as consumable, seen as an object and not as a subject. The widespread sharing and tweeting of the above image made it difficult to disrupt and undo this misrepresentation, even after the photographer tried to share the original photograph and the story behind it (Estrin, 2014).

Image 4.4: the original image of Jenabu Balde taken by Ami Vitale, 2011.

In a New York Times interview, Ami Vitale explained how the original image tells a different story of Africa, often disregarded by the global north (Estrin, 2014). Ironically, the misrepresentation of Jenabu Balde's photo shows that "their faces emblazoned with a hashtag fit the West's radicalised aesthetic of what a Boko Haram kidnapping victim might look like" (Huettner, 2014: n/a). It is important to note that for the purpose of the campaign, the original photograph of Balde was edited with a magnified focus on her face, and a prominent tear-drop to evoke emotion. Even after all these public grievances, the image continues to be used by #BringBackOurGirls campaigners. It is significant to note here, as revealed in "the girl in the blue bra" and later images, icons and tropes in #FMF, that African feminist digital activism has

worked hard to establish the power to represent and control emotionally and politically charged images that are diametrically different from representations of #BringBackOurGirls.

Extractive solidarity: Kidnapping the stories of kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria

The stories of the #BringBackOurGirls movement were appropriated to contour others' personal and organisational agendas. The movement was trapped between double threats of extractive solidarity. Firstly, the rights-based discourse that marginalises black African women through the scrutiny of "rights-deserving" justification frameworks are often gendered and embedded in patriarchal values and principles (Loken, 2014:1100). Hence, a discourse such as #BringBackOurGirls, which "demonstrates the urgent need to re-invigorate and galvanize women's movements for the purpose of safeguarding girls' right to education, self-determination and even life itself" (Njoroge, 2016:313), became part of the narrative of the campaign.

For instance, after Malala Yousafzai[6], a globally recognised icon of girl's education, showed her support for the #BringBackOurGirls campaign by posting a picture and short video, the post became a "symbol of a campaign for the rights of female children and girls to formal education" (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015:12). Unfortunately, the story of Malala shifted the focus from #BringBackOurGirls to the Boko Haram and Taliban Islamic extremists. This reinforced discourses of violence and patriarchy through northern views of other communities/ethnicities/religious traditions that are linked with islamophobia (Mahmood,

[6] Malala Yousafzai is a young internationally influential Pakistani activist for education rights for girls and women. She has received a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to raise awareness and change attitudes toward female education. https://malala.org/malalas-story

2011; Grewal, 2013). This reveals how the voices of Nigerian schoolgirls, and Nigerian feminist activists' work on girls' rights to education, have also been drowned out and used for different agendas.

Some exploited the movement for funding opportunities by riding on the narrative of helping poor, marginalised, and vulnerable communities. For instance, Hollywood movie director Ramaa Mosley[7] was accused of attempting to benefit from the #BringBackOurGirls movement and its publicity to promote her documentary movie that looks at girls' education worldwide (Loken, 2014; Maxfield, 2016). As the following tweets show, the co-founder of the #BringBackOurGirls movement, Onbiageli Ezekwesili, was very vocal against a fundraising scheme that was set up to take advantage of the movement. She specifically called out an organisation named Girl Rising that claimed to have an association with Ramaa Mosely.

[7] Ramaa Mosley claimed that she created the #BringBackOurGirls digital movement on Facebook. There was backlash against the claim that forced her to retract her statement and apologise publicly to the founders of the movement, Onbiageli Ezekwesili and Ibrahim Abdullahi.

Such ethically and morally questionable extractive solidarities are not generating outrage that provides the impetus for change in feminist transnational movements. Instead, these controversies are used as a fundamental resource to generate capital. This is revealed through a constant struggle between northern agendas needing to "save" feminised others from "their" violent communities and traditions constructed as patriarchal. Grewal (2013) argues that often these interventions arise from an outsourced idea of patriarchy from the US and Europe that is messy and demeaning to women in the global south.

Under the guise of philanthropy and humanitarianism, the neoliberal capitalist machine that exploits the struggles of marginalised groups also used #BringBackOurGirls as an opportunity to expand its empire by positioning the protest to fit into Islamophobic rhetoric under the gaze of national and international anti-Islamic extremism. In relation to this, Khoja-Moolji (2015:348) states that, "the kidnapping fits well within the all too familiar trope of the threat of

Muslim terrorists, especially towards women". There were explicit slurs against Boko Haram as "'terrorists', 'kidnappers', 'rapists' or 'murderers', which are based on the general knowledge of the Islamist group and their activities" (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015:12). Boko Haram actions invited an implicit white-supremacist ideology of what black African men are like.

Such characterisations reveal lack of historical knowledge, and ignore the longstanding political struggles in that specific area (Chiluwa & Ifukor 2015). Similarly, this places African feminist scholars between a rock and hard place, because a simplistic reading of this would appear to be a defence of the Boko Haram rebel group.

These controversies put strain on the movement and dilute the dominant narrative that focuses on rescuing the young women and addressing violence against women and gender injustice in general. Nevertheless, the #BringBackOurGirls movement created transnational solidarity offline and on the digital platform, with this influencing the mainstream media agenda and focusing attention on what was happening in Nigeria. Albeit often in troubling ways, it highlighted the issues of violence against women, the struggle for equal education for girls, African feminists' struggles around gendered political priorities of the state, and how women are often treated as second-class citizens in their own countries. However, all this was entangled with a constant struggle to occupy spaces and reclaim the voice of Nigerian women in the face of northern liberal feminists and institutions either deliberately taking advantage of or unconsciously using stereotypes in the stories of the young abducted girls (Olson, 2016).

Migration, exploitation and resistance: #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia

The digital movement #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia was significant in uncovering violence against migrant workers in the Arab world. On 4 November, 2013, Saudi Arabia began enforcing "Operation Crackdown" on illegal immigrants. Prior to this, the Saudi Arabian government had given a six-month amnesty period to migrant workers to change their migrant status or leave the country (Mariam, 2016). The operation was launched following an amendment to the country's labour law regarding undocumented workers (Human Rights Watch, 2013), which the state used to justify Operation Crackdown (Darara & Shea, 2013).

Widespread violence has increasingly become an everyday experience for African migrant workers, particularly domestic workers in countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and Lebanon (De Regt, 2007; Kuschminder, Andersson & Siegel, 2012). This is especially the case for illegal migrant workers, and those who gained their migrant status through the extremely exploitative and abusive Kafala system.[8] This system, therefore, "systematically produces a new population of readily exploitable workers – [under] the category of 'illegal workers'" (Pande, 2012:415). With their foreign workers' visa permits tied to the sponsoring employers, migrant workers find themselves trapped and absolutely at the mercy of their employers (Black, 2013; Tahir, 2019). In situations where the labour law does not protect immigrant workers, this system exposes the migrant workers, and particularly domestic workers, to abuse and exploitation by employers, including rape and physical assault, excessive work hours with minimum or no pay, no freedom of movement, and poor living conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

[8] The Kafala system is an illegal sponsorship system that was created by a network of agencies that connect domestic workers with employers seeking to hire migrant labour (Pande, 2012; Mariam, 2016). Migrant workers receive travel and visa sponsorship from employers, who in turn have absolute control over the freedom of the workers, presumably until they pay back the travel and visa expense to their employers.

In the context of the precarity experienced by women, the public disclosure by African women migrants through digital activism using #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia was extremely significant. It focused on the most affected African migrant communities (Ethiopians) in exposing the Saudi Arabian government's human rights violations, and their acceptance of the oppression of migrant workers, xenophobic attacks, racism, and gendered exploitation. At the same time, the digital activism and protest by Ethiopian local and diaspora communities also exposed the Ethiopian government's wilful negligence in protecting its citizens abroad, while unabashedly reaping the benefits of remittance (Tesfaye, 2013; Mariam, 2016).

The social media protest shaped the mobilisation in two different but interrelated ways. The first was mobilisation of national and international solidarity by curating narratives based on stories of individual migrants who were affected and displaced by the crackdown to appeal to the international media, international human rights instruments and the Ethiopian diaspora community, "compelling them to react collectively in defence of the migrant workers" (Mariam, 2016:90). The other was to visibilise the plights of those who were trapped in live-in working conditions, particularly Ethiopian women domestic workers, and use these multiple digital platforms (mainly Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) to share the vulnerable conditions, violence, extortion, and illegal displacement that they experienced in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries (Skjerdal, 2011). Overall, the digital protest enabled migrant workers to exercise their agency to digitally document and share their experiences in the Arab world with campaign supporters, and to mobilise and form collectives to demand justice.

Feminisation of migration and labour: Exploiting Ethiopian women's stories of struggles

In the national and transnational outrage among Ethiopian diaspora and local communities, issues of belonging; narratives of humiliation, violence, exploitative and unpaid labour; and the insistence on dignity and human worth were often symbolically represented through the feminisation of national experiences and stories of the gendered experiences of women migrant workers. The extreme vulnerability of migrant women was made to represent the diaspora's predicament and often-invisibilised identity. Furthermore, the feminist narrative of women's domestic subordination that was coded in the patriarchal system of the host country symbolised the status of migrant workers. The entanglement of gender and the national outcry against exploited labour, rightlessness, statelessness, and humiliation were exhibited through the iconic images that were used to represent the movement.

Ethiopians across the world changed their profile pictures on Facebook and Twitter to the protest images reproduced below to show solidarity with the vulnerable and marginalised migrant community in Saudi Arabia.[9] The images were also used to compensate for some of the experiences that textual analysis might not capture fully. To a certain extent, "visual texts seemed to liberate the constraints often associated with an exclusive focus on language and written text" (Lewis, Hussen & van Vuuren, 2013:54). The following three visuals were commonly used to represent the protest activism.

[9] To show solidarity with the persecuted migrant workers, I had changed my profile picture to one of these pictures. My identity as an Ethiopian allowed me to be part of a community of digital activists and participate in the online protest with Ethiopian diaspora community from different parts of the world. During this period, changing profile pictures to amplify the issue represented a powerful solidarity performance and advocacy strategy that fosters fast trending of the topic. Over the years, engaging with #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia movement from a feminist perspective provided me a much more in-depth insight of symbolic representation, gender based violence, and the use of women's bodies for a particular nationalist agenda.

Image 4.5: These images were used as profile pictures to represent and support #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia during the crackdown (artist unknown).

The widely used and shared profile pictures helped to promote awareness of the injustices that were enacted by the Saudi Arabian government. Overwhelmingly, it was women's faces and experiences of violence and humiliation that conveyed the central narratives, and therefore became central to the story of the collective. The images powerfully represent the pain and suffering of migrant workers, with the black colour used as the background drawing on the symbolic meaning attached to mourning, as depicted in the dark shadow over the Ethiopian map. The facial expressions of the two women are also designed to appeal to compassion and empathy. While the woman on the left cries tears of blood, conveying extreme pain and suffering, the woman on the right puts her head down in a gesture suggesting complete brutalization and despair. Since Ethiopians, like many other citizens in nation-states, refer to their country as "our motherland", the use of black, and the look of sadness and shame on the woman's face with the Ethiopian flag in the background, implies a national pain caused by the suffering of migrant women in the Arab world. These and other similar digitally shared images

created a powerful sense of national solidarity and emotional ties among a national collective in the face of shared oppression.

It has been stressed that, although the crackdown affected both migrant men and women, the collective story is told through the imagery of women migrant workers' suffering. In masculinist nationalist rhetoric, violence against women, particularly in the case of migrant workers, is often used to declare national shame and humiliation intended to produce outrage among citizens and to encourage them to fight back. It is also important to recognise that sensationalising violence against black African women is typical in efforts to create stories that resonate with transnational and global north audiences in terms of a politics of pity. Perhaps the statistical dominance of women as migrants might also have shaped the protest's focus on women's experiences as the most vulnerable group (Kuschminder *et al*., 2012; Naami, 2014). Nevertheless, foregrounding the images and experiences of women reproduced the feminisation of migration. It also reinforced masculine nationalist rhetoric that considers violence against women by other nations as a source of national shame and masculinised humiliation.

Emotionally charged digital messages and images were supplemented by physical/traditional protests. By frequently changing their profile pictures and using the store of images related to the crackdown, Ethiopian citizens stood in solidarity with the victims of the crackdown (Woldegeorgis, 2014). These became icons in allowing an Ethiopian diaspora to transcend their invisibility and stereotyping as homogenised "illegal migrants" and to reveal the individual faces of Ethiopian identities. Mariam (2016:110) states that, "the high visibility of online content empathizing with the victims and mobilizing spoke to a common stake in the Ethiopianness of both the workers and the diaspora". This was also especially important

considering the wilful ignorance of the Ethiopian government to the overwhelming gendered imagery that portrayed the repression of its citizens abroad (Skjerdal, 2011; Tesfaye, 2013).

According to Mariam (2016:90), "in at least 56 cities around the world demonstrations were held decrying the violence and abuses against the Ethiopian workers in Saudi Arabia." The videos of these protests were shared on YouTube and other social media platforms, particularly on the "Stop Violence Against Ethiopian Citizens in Saudi Arabia" Facebook page.[10] The digital activism afforded the Ethiopian diaspora an opportunity to exercise their Ethiopian identity and citizenship rights. However, in the local context, while it was possible to protest online, demonstrating against this outrage in the physical public space was difficult (Gagliardone, Stremlau & Aynekulu, 2019). Local demonstrations on the streets of Addis Ababa were met with brutal police force.[11] This incident is a further reflection of the patriarchal and authoritarian state's reluctance to recognise and own its complicity in the case of transnational problems caused by its economic dependence on other countries and failure to provide work and basic resources for its citizens. It is ironic that this was the only place where physical protests were met by forceful suppression. Perhaps the state's reluctance to intervene or openly denounce the violence reflected the geopolitical power imbalance in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia, and the continued reliance on Saudi Arabi for employment, however exploitative, for a significant number of women. The state may have chosen to let the atrocities quietly continue at the expense of the lives of Ethiopian migrant women who were at the mercy of their host employers.

[10] https://ecadforum.com/2013/11/16/global-alliance-for-the-rights-of-ethiopians-in-saudi-arabia/

[11] The police reportedly "arrested dozens of people outside the Saudi Arabia embassy [in Addis Ababa] in a crackdown on demonstrators protesting against targeted attacks on Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia" (Al Jazeera, 2013).

Regardless of the state's ignorance, the images and stories of Ethiopian women's struggles shared on social media, as well as the various protests, contributed significantly to the visibility of the movement. One high-profile story was a YouTube video[12] that showed men being tortured and women being raped and tortured by Saudi Arabian employers. Eventually, the determined protests and activism of the diaspora helped the case gain recognition as an urgent crisis needing intervention from authorities like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations. This pressure from the diaspora, coupled with IOM's intervention and support, led to the repatriation of 115,465 Ethiopians (63% men, 32% women, and 5% children) (Jobson, 2013). Nevertheless, the call for repatriation, while it served to save the lives of migrant women, did not bring justice for the injury and humiliation the women were subjected to. It actually served to embolden the perpetrators, who were hellbent on removing the migrants. Furthermore, upon their return to Ethiopia, the state took little responsibility for the suffering and precarity of the repatriated women, leaving them and their dependents to endure a life of destitution and desperation that would obviously entice them back to the Arab countries the next chance they got.

Stateless belonging: The not-here-not-there diaspora communities' identity

Beyond the romanticised ideology of "global citizenship" or "networked citizenship", a careful examination of #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia shows how Ethiopian (and, by extension, African) diaspora subjectivities are constructed or challenged through their peculiar not-here-not-there positionality that troubles the idea of belonging at a psycho-social and political level. While digital activism provides a sense of belonging and active citizenship participation, there remain complex and unique challenges that make it difficult to experience the idea of "belonging", as

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18tYgwxU0Xg

their everyday presence and reality is not located in their country of birth, or even within Africa (Lyons *et al*., 2007). Even though the diaspora community is aware of their invisibility within local and national public discourse and spaces, they participated in this activism (and many others) with the knowledge that their participation is valuable in challenging and shifting power dynamics from outside (Skjerdal, 2011). Indeed, the diaspora contributed immensely to the movement, yet also weakened its impact because of their not-here-not-there position. The challenge raised here is therefore how digital activism can allow all citizens to participate in countries' struggles wherever they are, although the legal, formal rights of these physically distant citizens may not allow their voices to be recognised within countries, or even with transnational arrangements that regulate democracy and public participation strictly within a country's borders. Thus, it is critical to understand the unique intersectionality of identity and belonging struggles, and the complexities of becoming political subjects in this networked society (Lewis & Hussen, 2014).

#SomeoneTellSaudiArabia, as a digital movement, shifts much of our thinking around contemporary conceptions of political participation and belonging. Ethiopianness as an identity among African diaspora communities is reconfigured due to "networked citizenship" (Castells, 2015) that sustains visibility and national identity, regardless of geographical distance and borders. It also reveals a fluid identity performance of the Ethiopian diaspora, unbounded by their precarious location and stateless conditions (Mariam, 2016). From an intersectional feminist perspective, this fluidity of identity is not without differences in class, ethnicity, religion, political views, and national ideologies. However, the one thread that transcends these differences was the imagined "Ethiopian national identity," and the discourses and narrative of "from one soil" that unified these diverse groups.

It is significant that Ethiopian migrant communities' shared social realities led to comradeship with migrant workers globally (Munakamwe, 2018). As such, the dialects of the oppressed few represented a common experience of migration for the larger diaspora, which created the opportunity to galvanise a broader migrant community. Indeed, as an insider, compared to the international networked solidarity mobilisation, African diaspora have a better sense of the place and historical context that shapes local and national activism, and can help advance political demands among those located in the global south. Perhaps this is also a contributing factor for the hyper-visibility of the #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia movement, and eventual repatriation of stranded migrant workers from Saudi Arabia to their home country. The movement is a significant example of how very particularised struggles have the power to mobilise broader imagined communities on the basis of connected and imagined struggles, rather than equivalent ones.

Lastly, it is important to juxtapose and read the #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia campaign with the above-mentioned Arab revolution, particularly Arab feminist activists' struggles for gender equality. #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia exposed and challenged the vulnerable positions of and violence against migrant workers in Arab countries, especially women domestic workers. At the same time, Saudi Arabian women, similar to in other Arab countries, continue to struggle against patriarchal structures and advocate for equal citizenship rights in their own country. It is in this context that the power dynamics within the domestic sphere, as exposed by the #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia movement, are enacted with oppression and violence on the bodies of African women. African women, particularly Ethiopian women in this case, are treated as inferior to Arab women. The strong Arab feminist cause for Arab women's freedom and equality is oblivious to the suffering of migrant workers, and even benefits from this precarious and exploitative labour. Perhaps, #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia is a great reminder of often-

concealed differences that erase critical engagements that focus on oppression of "othered", poor, and vulnerable migrant workers, particularly domestic workers.

Also significant in a feminist consideration of #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia are the distinct experiences and voices of Ethiopian migrant women, many of whom have limited skills and resources for public and digital participation. It is evident from the above that there has been little Ethiopian feminist activism focused on the distinct struggles, traumas and goals of Ethiopian migrant women. Embedded in multiple economically exploitative and abusive relations in their home and host countries, and given their status as non-citizens in the countries in which they work, their positions reveal stark social, political and economic vulnerability (Nisrane, Ossewaarde, & Need, 2020). Moreover, as poor women with limited agency in the context of a digitised world of mass communication, they are figures who have been made hyper visible as symbols or icons, yet remain invisible as actual subjects with distinct histories and struggles. Consequently, their standpoint struggles and knowledge – even if taken up by empathetic and well-meaning feminist activists – remain very complex and elusive. It is therefore not possible to explore the hidden archive of Ethiopian migrant women's standpoint knowledge in the same way used to explore feminists in the Arab Spring, or Nigerian feminists, or, as shown later, South African feminists in #FMF. However, the case of migrant women in #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia is revealing for this study in that it draws attention to the complex web of intersectionality in much of postcolonial Africa. In the matrix of local and global relations, the multiply marginalised position of Ethiopian migrant women makes their "gendered" experience extremely difficult to distil. And a feminist language – detailed or otherwise – would need to address multiple forms of injustice and resistance. The Ethiopian case is therefore crucial to this research to demonstrate the complexity of the intersecting power relations that women often navigate in postcolonial contexts. Feminist struggles, and indeed

feminist digital activism, cannot be effective in these contexts when these intricate intersections are not squarely confronted.

Concluding remarks

The specific focus on these four countries, however subjective, owes much to the recognition of the now well-established role of the internet and social media platforms for social movements in Africa. The case studies showed that a digital sphere allowed counterpublics to emerge in subverting the power of states, politically dominant groups within countries, hegemonic discourses that stereotype Africans and African women in particular, as well as the counterpublics of nationalist or populist anti-government or anti-elitist resistance or revolution. As subaltern activist and digital movements that grow out of the political frustrations and outrage of marginalised and multiply oppressed individuals and communities, and because of their digital circulation, they are transmitted and received locally and globally. Therefore, as active agents and producers of feminist knowledge, women often take up new positions of authority in digital counterpublics.

The four movements discussed in this chapter make it evident that stories of protests against postcolonial women's multiple forms of oppression are entangled with digital artefacts, mobile bodies, and the development of knowledge with the potential to influence ongoing or new struggles, both in individual countries and across national borders. The analysis of these movements therefore offers insights into feminist struggles, including the #FMF movement in South Africa, which are constituted through diverse forms of resistance. By paying attention to contextual struggles, the chapter demonstrated how the protests are triggered by multiple

expressions of feminist resistance, and can provide a conceptual scaffolding framework for understanding other movements in Africa.

If we consider these movements from the standpoint of popular national struggles against repression, then they can be seen as a positive impact of the information revolution in supporting postcolonial African struggles in the digital era. Yet, looking beyond the politically efficacious moments, and focusing on the processes that led to the emergence of feminist counter-movements, shows how ingrained gendered citizenship discourses influence the framing of national outrage. Thus, the role of digital activism becomes indistinct from the complex and conflicting values of the state and society that represent gendered power relations which interfere with the character and outcome of social movements. Similar realities were experienced in the #FMF movement, particularly in how feminist activists take up space as active agents and producers of feminist knowledge in digital counterpublics.

For instance, in the Arab Spring, Khalil (2014b) argued that, despite the seeming evidence of women's self-conscious action as feminist agents, they were also conflicted between prioritising women's rights and advancing a national revolutionary protest. To a certain extent, the labour of women activists was enlisted to support the collective national agenda, and because this agenda was considered crucial, women felt constrained from explicitly pursing overtly feminist goals (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). In addition, women's active involvement in the revolution itself was considered resistance against the masculinist and secularist state structure and hierarchies. Arab feminists were active agents who broke boundaries, and battled to find a voice and make their gendered locations and demands heard in the midst of the national uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2014). They resisted the postcolonial

state's neoliberal orientation that appropriated women's rights struggles while sustaining "hegemonic and patriarchal norms and political oppression" (Landorf, 2014:20).

The feminist movements during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions taught Arab countries and the world that the movement "is not just a political revolution; it is a social, sexual, and potentially religious one as well" (Radsch, 2012:40). New forms of feminist protests emerged that made use of simultaneous protest performance on the streets and online platforms, while confronting the spectacularly masculine orientation of the revolution, and carving out Arab transnational feminist networks (Khalil, 2014b; Charrad & Zarrugh, 2014).

The very presence of Tunisian and Egyptian feminists in the revolution showed different positions of visibility and power that disrupted essentialised ideas, held in both their own countries and beyond, about women from North African Islamic countries (Maravankin, 2017). This formed a distinct political energy that disrupted the static labelling by the western world of "Arab women" as oppressed (Newsom & Lengel, 2012; Landorf, 2014). The pushback against this colonial gaze was explained through the presentation of the historical context of feminist movements and activism, especially the extent to which women's bodies played a central role in "the pursuit of freedom, independence and nation-state building" (Hafez, 2014b:183). These historical incidents reminded the global north to not misrepresent and erase the richness of Arab women's historical movements and mobilisation strategies in anti-colonial struggles, and the continued women's movement in the postcolonial nationalist discourse in the present (Newsom & Lengel, 2012).

Despite the limitations of historical analysis, and perhaps even the collapsing of historical specificities here, the feminist analysis of #BringBackOurGirls and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia

shows that there is a persistent pattern of power imbalance, disengagement, lack of reciprocity, and negligence of feminist digital activism in Africa, especially in the context of transnational feminist movements. Both movements unveiled the persistent colonial gaze that portrays African women as powerless and destitute, which then demands extra labour by local and diaspora activists and feminist critics to reverse such misrepresentation and disrupt colonial power dynamics (Maxfield, 2016).

In the context of globalised digital activism around gender and feminist struggles, while Nigerian and Ethiopian movements were created and supported by local and diaspora citizens' voices, the more vocal force behind the movements was from the global north, through mainstream media narratives, humanitarian institutions, international organisations, and social media influencers. These cases uncovered the extent to which, through direct and indirect measures, the global north infiltrates and often influences the handling of local and national emergencies in the global south. Local and diaspora activists negotiated, and at times even overlooked, further victimisation, exploitation, and extraction of stories by those in power, while campaigning to draw attention to the crisis at hand. Such trade-offs knowingly or unknowingly require careful attention to understand power negotiations, as a reminder that possession of power is never straightforward. From this perspective, both #BringBackOurGirls and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia show that the trajectory of African movements is not a simple matter of the global south lagging or simply following patterns set by northern feminist digital activism. Rather, the cases reveal how a convergence of violent historical pasts on the African continent dilutes the intentions of movements.

From this perspective, multiple channels of expressions of protest performance indicate that "plurality of competing publics is always possible" (El Nossery, 2016:156). In other words,

there is only one Tahrir Square, but there are multiple versions of Tahrir Square reproduced and reflected through digital activism, stencil graffiti art, and many other forms. A similar analogy applies for the other case studies here. The chapter repeatedly showed that, while mainstream media dominates and controls narratives, and governments put restrictions on access to public spaces and limit citizens from protesting, activists have reshaped the narratives and challenged repressive systems and structures through multiple alternative social media platforms.

As mentioned earlier, the analysis from this chapter is intended to build a theoretical and analytical lens to better understand the #FMF feminist movement in the South African context. Similar to the four country cases, one of the radical movements by the #FMF activists was resistance against the erasure and the side-lining of women's and LGBTQIA+ communities' struggles. In addition, reflecting on the success and strategies of African feminist movements, as well as the setbacks, generates a critical feminist analysis that frames current African feminist movement-building in the digital era. The following two analysis chapters critically explore the feminist encounters that remained largely invisible during the student protest, and in post-revolution conversations of national memory, history, and transnational African feminist digital movements. While Chapter Five explores the genealogy of patriarchal and masculinist leadership in the #FMF movement through the #PartiarchyMustFall, #MbokodoLead, and #TransCapture movements, Chapter Six critically looks at #RapeMustFall and #NakedProtest as embodied feminist activism in the #FMF movement against rape in universities and the country at large.

Chapter Five

Entanglements of national protest, feminism and digital activism

Introduction

It is evident from Chapter Four's review that feminist protests in Africa are often intricately entangled with embodied struggles and digital sites, community-building and protests driven by outrage against multiple oppressions, triggering multi-layered resistance: in Tunisia and Egypt, individual acts of self-immolation and digital activism inspired a national uprising that paved the way for waves of protest and a change of regime, while the digitally amplified protests, #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia in Ethiopia, became internationally known sub-Saharan movements that exposed certain African governments' neglect of their citizens' rights to a global public. It is evident that African feminists have not always been the central drivers of the digital activism in the various cases explored. However, the location of African women within the networks of power exposed by these various movements (especially in the case of the #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia movement) speaks volumes about how African women can be situated in digital activism that claims to fight for their freedoms. It is noteworthy, for example, how the interventions by Nigerian feminists into international and northern-driven digital movements that construed African women as victims, sheds light on the multiple power dynamics which African feminist digital activism needs to engage in order to claim autonomous spaces for knowledge-making and activism. The analysis of these diverse movements therefore highlights often-hidden power relations that are contested by diverse forms of resistance. Among the multiple injustices that feminists face, all the movements include masculinist and patriarchal agendas and leadership.

Given the range of context-specific postcolonial challenges facing digital activism focusing on African women's freedoms, these four movements offer a critical lens for exploring the #FMF feminist struggles in the nation-wide student-led uprising. During the uprising, there were multiple and fragmented analyses of #FMF through different academic publications. To mention a few: from the humanities (Mbembe, 2015; Molefe, 2016; Naicker, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2016; Habib, 2016), public health (Doherty & McIntyre, 2015); psychology (Oliver, 2017), and theology (Urbaniak, 2017). Yet, the feminist counter-activism and struggles in #FMF remained largely invisible in analysis of the movement, except within specifically feminist conversations and discourse. This contributed to a side-lining of feminist knowledge and archives, and missed opportunities for a multidisciplinary engagement with feminist politics. This chapter focuses on the neglected feminist activism in the #FMF movement.

The South African student-led #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FMF movements were very close to each other in time and focus, particularly as feminist struggles and counter-movements were deeply embedded in both. Patriarchal and masculinist power relations, and the erasure and repression of black women, and queer and transgender people, were initially identified and challenged in #RMF. This feminist consciousness and resistance against exclusionary power structures continued in the #FMF movement. The earlier feminist resistance to patriarchy in the seemingly radical student movement steadily intensified over time, with resistance strategies and activism becoming increasingly prominent and focused (Jacobs, 2017). Furthermore, Xaba argues that #FMF was able to further strengthen black radical feminist standpoint through an active engagement with other feminist movements, which were "pro-Black, Black feminist and queer activism like the Black Stokvel, Queer Revolution, South African Young Feminist Activists and student political organisations that already existed on campuses all over the country" (2017:3).

Moreover, #FMF feminist activists argue that there is a connection between the feminist struggle in South African anti-apartheid and anti-colonial struggles, and the silencing of black women and queer non-binary people in the movement (Dlakavu, 2017a; Gouws, 2017). It has therefore been felt that the escalation of violence against women, heteronormative violence and prejudice, and hypermasculine male leadership in the movement are "necessarily entwined with confronting the silences of the past and the silences kept by older generations" (Maluleke & Moyer, 2020:874). Highlighted by #FMF feminists was the erasure of black women from South African history. They therefore explicitly noted that women's contribution to the broader anti-apartheid movement is often an add-on to masculinist national narratives, as opposed to being a foundational part of the narratives (Maluleke & Moyer, 2020). This shows a retrospective self-consciousness and awareness of women's second-class citizenship in a long legacy of activism.

In recognising the neglect of women as proper political actors in movement-building, #FMF feminist activists identified continuities of gendered experiences of violence, violent masculinist leadership, and systemic and structural violence on marginalised groups (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017). Little attention has been paid to what the feminists unearthed, and how one can clearly see the injustice. At the same time, they insisted on a different strategy from the "accommodative" activism pursued by women activists in previous struggles, especially antiapartheid resistance. While South African women were active in the national liberation movement, they "have rarely achieved visible leadership roles" (Seidman, 1993:293), and women's and feminist struggles were officially made less significant by, for example, the ANC (Hassim, 2002). Instead of accepting handmaiden roles of support, #FMF feminists emphasised these deprioritised and depoliticised feminist struggles in broader struggles for justice. #FMF feminist activists certainly perceived earlier historical dynamics as betrayals of the liberation

movement for black women. Since the limited archiving of other African feminist struggles intensified their erasure, #FMF feminists made it their political duty to confront layered patriarchal struggles as they unfolded and archived specific moments of feminist struggle through their writings (Dlakavu, 2017b).

As mentioned in Chapter One, the #FMF movement insisted on an intersectional perspective on the multiple social and political issues that contribute to the complex repressive experiences of marginalised communities. This was made public through generic catchwords and powerful emotionally charged slogans and images to raise awareness and mobilisation. Developing an understanding of how activists succinctly conveyed knowledge, raised awareness and mobilised feminist groups, this chapter explores the complexity and depth of the #FMF feminist archive. The chapter focuses on three counter-movements enhanced and popularised through digital platforms. These are (1) #PatriarchyMustFall, a movement against masculinist structures in the #FMF movement; (2) #MbokodoLead, feminist activism that focused on making female leaders visible in the movement; and (3) #TransCcapture, against the erasure of queer, transgender and non-binary people from the archives of student movement at the #RMF exhibition.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, this chapter makes use of the data that I collected through various mediums and spaces. The main source of data for this chapter was digital ethnographic fieldwork under specific hashtags; interviews with #FMF feminist activists; and feminist writings by #FMF feminist activists in Publica[C]tion Collective (2017), *Agenda* issue 3 (2017), and other academic platforms; and online news articles that I found relevant. The objective in using these diverse datasets was to observe and analyse the messages, ideas, symbols and statements that often collapsed the divide between digital and print media and the

digital and the spoken or printed written word. The fusion of these forms of expression revealed feminists' determination to make gendered power relations as visible to the wider public as possible. Underpinning my analysis, therefore, is how various invented counterpublic spaces continue to disrupt dominant archives. It will also be stressed that digital communication does not exist outside of the bodies, gendered identities, and social fabric that shapes individual and collective experiences. In addition to digital activism itself, the in-depth interviews with feminist activists provided further insights into moments of feminist resistance. In particular, the conversations helped unmask the experiences of "the human" behind the computer.

My most significant learning experience as a feminist researcher was that I needed to be selective and eclectic in tracing coherent themes within African feminist digital activism, even though feminist self-reflexivity often insists on the researcher being inclusive in data-gathering and not drawing on her vantage point to be selective. Digital ethnography often involves extensive and exhaustive exploration of data that includes, for example, examining a huge volume of tweets over a short period (Pink, 2016). This can generate complex analysis, but it can also mean side-lining the political analysis that I sought to draw out of. From a feminist standpoint perspective, my selective approach to digital data is therefore connected to my emphasis on human bodies located in real social and physical contexts and power relations.

Visibilising women in national struggles: continuities and shifts within #FMF

In the #FMF movement, students were collectively united against the mainstream media's discrediting and distortion of their fights for justice. Based on my observation and research into media reporting at the time, students were actively making sure that their story was represented and publicly known. Their digital media usage and information sharing was so influential that,

in some contexts, it shaped and influenced mainstream media content production (Bosch, 2016). For instance, in the in-depth interview, Xoliswa, a research participant from UWC, highlights her personal experience of distorted representation by mainstream media, and how students put forward their side of the story:

> I remember, we went to court because some of our leaders and members were arrested. I remember there was what is called media briefing. The media people wanted to interview a panel of students and parents. I remember being there and students telling their part of stories without [university] management's presence and without anyone else, but students and parents. And, to my surprise when I saw the televised story, they actually posted only our pictures and us singing in the court and during media briefing. So, to me it felt odd. Where is the whole interview and where is the whole briefing? The reporters suppressed some part of the briefing … luckily people who videoed the interview on their phone uploaded it on social media. We don't need these reporters, if they are going record us [only] singing, dancing and chanting but that isn't going to help us get anywhere. They spoke over our voices and contradicted what we actually were saying. We, ourselves tell our own story. If they can record us, we can record ourselves too.

The above response demonstrates the largely antagonistic relationship students had with the mainstream media on the one hand, and their absolute confidence in and reliance on social media platforms on the other. While challenging content produced and circulated by mainstream media, students were constantly producing their own narratives about the protest. There also seemed to be an acute understanding of how public sphere mainstream media power operates, and the agency that digital counterpublic spaces offer for students. Taking control over how narratives were shaped facilitated an opportunity to create and build a community

among an audience who followed stories through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter pages created by the student activists.

Meanwhile, from a specifically feminist standpoint, #FMF feminist activists bore a double burden. While they were strongly vocal against police brutality, state violence, media representation, and the university management, they also struggled against multiple forms of injustice inside the movement and by many of the movements' members (Chengeta, 2017; Gouws, 2017). Based on the in-depth interviews I had with #FMF feminist activists, black women's and the LGBTQIA+ collective's visibility were contested and negotiated. One key outcome of the friction between feminists and masculinist leadership, according to the research participants, was the instrumentalisation of Black Radical Feminism (BRF) as one of the pillars of the student movement.

In both the #RMF and #FMF movements, decolonisation and BRF were embraced as additional ideologies to Black Consciousness (BC) and Pan-Africanism (PA) (Naidoo, 2016). The intention here was to make the movement more inclusive and to address multiple systems of oppression in post-apartheid South Africa. Intersectionality and decolonisation were taken up rapidly in rallies and protests, and on diverse digital media platforms. Thus, decolonial and BRF ideologies entered into a general public discourse where BC and PA have a long historical and political significance, particularly during the mobilisation of students against the apartheid government (Biko, 1978). Annika, one of my research participants, argued that bringing back BC and PA was necessary not only because these schools of thought are rooted in the South African liberation struggle and were readily embraced, but also because of failed post-apartheid systems and structures. She states that,

> when the student movement in RMF and then FMF [agreed to] bring back BC and PA, what they are also doing through that is recognising the ANC's transition and what was sold in the transition have become demythologize and rainbow nation is gone, post-racialism is gone, post-apartheid is gone, post-colonialism is gone. Students are talking about neo-colonialism, neo-apartheid, they are really challenging the transition and they are searching for more radical frameworks that's how PA and BC come into the picture. These frames are developed not simply out of resistance to universities' institutional racism, it is also speaking back to South Africa transition and it also speaking back to anti-apartheid and resistance movements.

Similar to Annika's argument, Mabaso (2017) argues that it is mainly humanities scholarship that has been engaging with and producing knowledge about BC and PA in apartheid and postapartheid South Africa. However, away from the intellectual academic-focused work, the #FMF movement began to galvanise BC and PA as serious political movements again. Invoking these anti-apartheid movement-building pillars in the student movement was therefore a decolonising moment. As Annika indicates, the idea of a post-apartheid nation that has accomplished the promises of a just and equal society was questioned in the movement. Equally, the student movement equated the long-established neoliberalist system in higher education institutions with the failed post-apartheid systems and structures in South Africa (Naidoo, 2016). One of the famous placards that circulated on Facebook and Twitter during the #FMF riot in October 2015 was, "Our parents were sold dreams in 1994, we are just here for the refund".

Image 5.1: This image of black women carrying this placard can be found online (photographer unknown)

This specific placard expresses the radicalism of #FMF in class and racial terms, and critiques the "rainbow nation" by exposing the social divide and inequalities that continue to be the reality in South Africa. From an intersectional feminist perspective, the fact that the placard was held by a young black woman, among many black women, added a feminist layer that foregrounded race and class. The historical linkage that is being evoked here unsettles the idea of post-racialism, post-apartheid, and post-colonialism. Instead, it invites a critical rethinking of neoliberal post-apartheid South African narratives.

Although feminism seemed to filter into the intersectional perspective shaped by critiquing neoliberalism and embracing BC and PA, feminists remained frustrated by the absence of sustained feminist critique in student politics, and by the tendency to invoke feminism as a purely symbolic marker to "radicalism". Here, it is important to recognise that feminist intersectional critiques of BC and PA have long been addressed by South Africa feminist

scholars (De la Rey, 1997; Gqola, 2001; Magaziner, 2011). These scholars point out similar problems affecting women in past struggles and worked to counter this. Similarly, #FMF feminists recounted that while BC and PA helped the student movement to think through class and racial inequalities, neither paid significant attention to black women's struggles and the impact of gendered power relations and patriarchal values on women and LGBTQIA+ communities (Matandela, 2017, Maluleke & Moyer, 2020). Below, Annika explains how the critique came about and how #FMF feminists brought BRF to the table:

> You have a number of women and queer students, because there has been so much writing on queerness and BRF, you get a small number of people who have been reading the literatures and been learning in gender study department[s], who have read these texts. And they have recognised the ways in which BRF have pushed PA and BC. And so, they insisted it must be part of the framework. They said these [BC and PA] have been misogynistic and problematic because they only understood race and class to be the primary lenses or framework.

Similar to the above recognition, Lewis and Hendricks (2017) argue that feminist scholars, black radical feminist theorising, and the role of gender studies departments in South Africa, together with women's activism and organisations, enabled #FMF feminist activists to gain more understanding of patriarchal and neoliberalism power structures. Hence, to a certain extent, #FMF feminists and non-binary people were able to articulate the limitations of BC and PA through their engagement with the work and activism of earlier traditions of feminism in South Africa.

Equipped with an understanding of how activism, women and feminism were instrumentalist in past anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa, #FMF feminists were also able to recognise and critique the apparent inclusion of feminism in #FMF as being short-lived and appropriated

for political gains (Xaba, 2017). In the in-depth interviews, all ten feminist activists mentioned that, across the movements, the adoption of BRF was at best a symbolic gesture and a strategy to galvanise a mass student population, and to attract international attention. This is in fact very similar to the situations in Egypt and Tunisia, where women were welcomed into nationalist and anti-government struggles to swell the opposition. This inclusion did not automatically mean that their perspectives and unique struggles were being respected. In the case of #FMF, participants agree that, in practice, BRF thinking was not welcomed; instead, the movement articulated paradoxical and contradictory values and principles about feminism. The response from an interview with Kholwa, a #FMF feminist activist, indicates this understanding:

> There were a lot of contradictions in our politics … But I do think that as feminists we really challenged the status quo and we challenge the norms and we challenge what is happening in the movements in ways that I think visibilised these issues. I think it was not the first time they existed. They existed in 80s; they existed in 60s; they existed in the 90s. But the problem that was "we will deal with that issues later". At this point, we said no! no! We have said however many generations it is stopping here.

The realisation that patriarchal systems existed in the liberation movements of the 60s, 80s, and 90s made #FMF feminists vigilant about challenging politics that have "an apartheid hangover" (Shange, 2017:2). As they were protesting on the streets for #FMF, activists were also resisting the common patterns of deprioritising women's and queer folks' struggles in the movement to advance the #FMF protest. The phrase, *"We have said however many generations it is stopping here,"* indicates the historical distinctiveness of the resistance and feminist struggle formation, especially when movements are entangled with national demands. Below are more examples of responses to the silencing of BRF by my research participants.

Thozama's observation and critique below shows that, while feminism was strongly rejected by the movement's leadership, BRF was brazenly exploited to appeal to diverse student groups. This opportunistic use of BRF as a buzzword, she argued, also silenced critical feminist voices from within, since many of these spoke out against the tokenistic use of the ideology.

> No! BRF was never accepted at any point … There were universities who are like "what is this thing?", "no we don't want it!". They entertained it for a while, but it was never part of the movement. And to be honest majority of the people in the movement do not want it. And the only people who were pushing were black radical feminists and LGBTI activists in the movement. There was always like constant opposition. Ya! People just didn't want it. But, to show face and to kind of appease people, it [BRF] became a buzzword in such spaces because they just want to shut you the fuck up.

According to Thandi, another research participant, there was a lack of deeper understanding of what BRF actually is, with its political convictions to prioritise *"poor black women"* as they are the most marginalised individuals in South African society. Instead, black male leaders in the movement used BRF without being politically invested in applying it in activism or taking it on board in informing their political philosophy. Thandi said:

> No, it was definitely not accepted. Certainly not to be honest. It played out in many ways … you have black men within the movements saying, "what is this feminism thing"; "what are you talking about". The fact that so many people push back against black feminism shows that they really didn't understand what BRF actually is trying to do, which is trying to liberate everyone but with the sharp focus on black bodies particularly poor black women more than anyone else.

Akhona mentioned that the marginalisation of BRF often emerged from the belief that feminism and feminist ideologies are foreign or un-African, and it was a highly contested. This has often been the core of African feminist struggles, with feminist causes being labelled as influenced by the west and therefore running counter to decolonisation or anti-colonial resistance. Akhona said:

> BRF definitely was the most foreign. It was marginalised … I remember at a national meeting we had, people were asking "what is LGBTIAQ, like what is intersectionality and what are you talking about?" … It was quite clear that in certain places the conversation around feminism was not even in the room. If any, you never reach to a particular agreement.

It is noteworthy that both men and women activists were sceptical about feminism in #FMF. A frequently held assumption was that feminism is more divisive than other schools of thought. Embedded in this assumption is a desire to maintain the status quo and frame efforts at democratisation as disruptive and damaging to social justice movements focused on class and race. The subtext is of course the desire to retain the gendered status quo. Xoliswa stated that:

> people didn't understand what BRF means because there was always fight about why it should be included as a pillar because some women didn't see themselves as feminist and some men did not see feminism as important. So, it really caused a friction with us within the movement. And people deem BRF not as necessary to the movement. They deem feminists as men haters, that you are breaking the black family and the black home.

Similarly, Thabisa mentioned that:

> BRF as pillar was rejected mostly. Feminism was bashed … it was bashed by the same people that we thought were our brothers and understands our struggles … I don't think people had realised that it [feminism] was a good thing that benefited everyone … It is not just benefitting us only but everyone. People lack understanding.

Thus, the backlash against BRF was linked to the normalisation of masculinist struggles, which is tied to a strong belief in patriarchal values and power structures. This insistence results in hostility, suspicion, charges of being counter-revolutionary or treacherous, all of which destabilise feminist energies and weaken feminist voices in the movement (Matandela, 2017). #FMF's patriarchal structure reflected the social capital and privileged political positions held by male leaders and maintained within the masculinist structure of the organisation as a whole. This dominance allowed them to pursue the political agenda of #FMF while exploiting black women's struggles (Dlakavu, 2016), tokenising the LGBTQIA+ collective (Jacobs, 2017) and disregarding not only women and queers, but also differently abled persons in the movement (Xaba, 2017).

The main thematic threads that emerged from research participants' responses include the way that feminism is distorted; a lack of familiarity or knowledge about feminism; prejudice against feminism; and homophobia. The narratives indicated that feminists were often considered *"men haters"*, causing tension in the movement and *"breaking the black family"*. It created insecurity among male leaders, as they assumed feminists are only interested in the *"women agenda"*, which they saw as deviating from other important political priorities and often also as undermining their power within the movement. Here it is ironic that, similar to the case of Tunisia in North Africa, South Africa is a country that has codified legal equal rights for women and LGBTQIA+ communities, unlike most other sub-Saharan states. The actual suspicion towards, and even contempt for, feminism among left-leaning and radical citizens – especially

students – reveals the purely theoretical status of gender and LGBTQIA+ equality in South African legislation and policy. In reality, feminist and anti-homophobic discourses in the second decade of the new millennium continue to be muffled and even silenced in public debate.

In fact, civil society organisations and various feminist activists have been vocal about the gap between the progressive laws of the country on paper, and the realities and lived experiences on the ground. Black feminist scholarship especially has critiqued the instrumentalisation of black women and LGBTQIA+ community (Hames, 2006; Hassim, 2019; Gouws & Coetzee, 2019). Thus, the limited BRF representation in the movement, and its eventual marginalisation, are logical continuations of a long tradition of actively rejecting feminism – often by cynically tokenising it – in "progressive" and "pro-justice" struggles in South Africa.

The active mockery and disrespect for gender justice within #FMF – like other South African feminist struggles – is also important to note. Implicit in the question, *"what is this feminism you are talking about,"* is an attack on BRF and its perceived epistemological inferiority to other activist schools of thought. This is often reinforced by crude *"no we don't want it"* responses. The idea that feminism is western is invoked again and again in these responses, although an additional prejudice stems from seeing feminism as soft, not concerned with justice in general, and of relevance only to women, who are often perceived to simply want what men have. As mentioned above, *"BRF definitely was the most foreign"* reflects a very essentialised notion of African resistance. This is a familiar experience that many African feminists encounter. While this is often used to bully feminists, who experience a sense of loyalty to activist national groups, or broader student activist groups, it is important to speculate about the different reactionary views that this charge can embed. The idea of feminism being "not

really political" (in the way that class or anti-colonial struggles are), or not really being intellectually rigorous (unlike Marxist analysis), surfaces again and again in responses to the BRF, and in responses to many other African feminist movements. By attacking feminists' dignity or existential sense of self and belonging, these charges can severely erode the confidence, sense of purpose, commitment and solidarity of feminist organising and activism.

#PatriarchyMustFall: Taking Intersectionality Seriously

> Not interested in phased liberation … we were fooled about this two & three stage liberation model - NO MORE #PatriarchyMustFall

The above tweet captures the essence of #FMF feminist activists' revolt against the insistence on "phased liberation" strategies in the #FMF movement that excluded and deprioritised gendered and feminist struggles (Dlakavu 2017; Matandela, 2017; Jacobs, 2019). It was a central argument within nationalist and anti-racist struggles from the 1960s to the early 1990s in SA, and within new millennium movements such as the Arab Spring, that "one struggle should be concluded before patriarchy and its bedfellow's sexism and misogyny are addressed" (Malebye, 2020:76). In the four African country case studies, it has been revealed that in national uprisings, African women are often made to experience and negotiate multiple forms of masculinist and patriarchal repressions, and "their demands and their safety are expected to take a back seat to the concerns of the male leadership" (Maluleke & Moyer, 2020:885).

The hashtag #PatriarchyMustFall explicitly challenged this traditional African nationalist argument, and was used to underline the contradictions between the promise of the movement to liberate all unjustly treated citizens, and the practical experiences of many who remained marginalised in the movement. While all participants clearly indicate that a feminist counter-

movement was initiated in #RMF, many agree that the spill-over effect of patriarchal power struggles continued in #FMF (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2016). It was important for #FMF feminist collectives to employ an explicit strategy of calling out misogyny and patriarchy, while at the same time actively contributing to the national student movement's struggle for free and decolonial education (Khan, 2017). The tone of explicit and confrontational messages, as conveyed in the above tweet, intentionally create a specific feminist politics that promotes the visibility of feminist causes and activism in the movement. The interview I had with Thozama clearly shows the complexity of this counter-movement:

> It [#PatriarchyMustFall] was a combination trans, black women, and queer folks you know! in the broadest spectrum, it was a critique and talking back against patriarchy and rape culture and erasure in the movement. I was kind of involved to create conversation and expose this on my social media and creating things to go viral. So that people know this is what is happening in the movement, because there were a lot of people who wanted the narrative not to go out … because it will ruin the image of the movement or it would create like division in movement. We were saying no, it has to come out because throughout history, any political moment has completely erased the fact that there was sexual assault; that there was erasure of black women; that there was erasure of queer people in the movement. And so, queer visibility and black women's visibility was very important … there was a very purposeful erasure of those bodies, and of course the violence. For me I didn't want any young black women or any young nonbinary black person to come into a space not knowing that this is a potential threat.

From the above response, one can observe that #PatriarchyMustFall insisted on addressing multi-layered and intersecting repressions in the face of the silencing of feminism and, especially the strategic marginalisation or selective use of BRF. Interestingly, as Thozama pointed out, exposing "internal issues" to the public were considered by many male and anti-feminist activists as a threat to the political coherence and success of the movement. Yet

feminist activists found it important to publicly air these "issues" as sites of struggle within the movement; airing these struggles had the potential to create wider and shifting awareness of what a meaningful intersectional decolonial struggle could be. Far from being irresponsible, they demonstrated accountability to the project of an intersectional struggle involving gender, racism, colonialism and neoliberalism.

As revealed above, the historical understanding of feminist struggles in the South African liberation movement assisted #FMF feminists with being extremely alert to and vocal about the power and privilege black men have in the movement. This vocality often took the form of explicit provocation through digital texts and images. It was also with the knowledge of how previous women's struggles had been betrayed and hidden that #FMF feminists insisted on their messages: "if not now, when?" (Malebye, 2020:76).

The visibilising of feminist struggles through digital platforms was a strategy that made the movements to counter patriarchal politics extremely compelling in mobilising and inspiring feminist activists. The tweets below engage with the gendered and exclusionary structure within the movement. TW1 and TW2 indicate the rationale behind the #PatriarchyMustFall counter-movement. Both draw attention to the deliberate silencing of black women and LGBTQIA+ feminist activists in the movement.

> TW1: #PatriarchyMustFall started because Queers and Womxn have been systematically excluded from FMF &RMF

> TW2: I'm so disappointed in #FeesMustFall. If your politics don't include feminists and Queers then Fuck Off!!!!

Another tweet, TW3, stating "*Feminists and queer bodies or no movement at all,*" reveals the determination of the marginalised collective in the movement to fight the patriarchal structure. Embedded in this tweet is a refusal to cover up for masculinist leadership, and for feminists and queer folks to refuse to become complicit as handmaidens or silenced followers in antifeminist and homophobic structures. Additionally, TW4's *"The system must go first #Patriarchymustfall"* shows a determination to dismantle the system that is threatening the movement and diverse bodies in the collective. It also challenges the normalised assumption and expectation of "*phased liberation*" by prioritising the national protest demands of black women and queer folks.

It is therefore clear that the succinct messages and slogans used by feminists conveyed astute analysis of patriarchal power in a particular context, as well as a deft way of communicating with and inspiring other feminists. Consequently, these tweets functioned not only to criticise and resist, but also to underscore the erasure of feminist activists. Reflecting on #PatriarchyMustFall, Lindiwe, a research participant, said:

> #PatriarchyMustFall emerges because of erasure … it emerges because of the patriarchy, because of 'rape cultural', because of erasure that was happening in the space on black women and queer people … black women and queer people became bolder...

#PatriarchyMustFall posed an outspoken and effective feminist provocation to male entitlement and that of activists who found it politically necessary to use feminism instrumentally and to ignore its fundamental principles. The determination of #PatriarchyMustFall may well have led to a backlash of digital and activist activity, since it was at this time that cases of violence against women, particularly #FMF feminist activists, increased and were made public. Such violence reveals the desperate efforts to discipline unruly

and disobedient female bodies in the movement. Feminist activists who challenged the status quo were "seen as a distraction to Black liberation when they challenge violent, cisnormative Black masculinities that want to maintain power within the movement" (Xaba, 2017:7). Yet, Pilane (2015: n/a) argues that, "black women calling out that patriarchy and misogyny within the movement is not an attack, it is a protection of their humanity – including their blackness and womanhood – in its entirety". In fact, the real distraction in the movement and for black liberation is the reactionary patriarchal belief that "we won't be told by women." One of the infamous incidents that exposed the patriarchal backlash against feminists was the attack on black feminist and queer activist Thenjiwe Mswane by Chumani Maxwele – a renowned activist in the #RMF and #FMF movement.

Image 5.2: an attack on black feminist and queer activist Thenjiwe Mswane. (Photo credit: Candice Wagener / Wits Vuvuzela, 5 April 2016.)

I include this image after deliberating on the dangers of reproducing images depicting violence against women. In the context of this particular study, I am trying to show how the use of

images depicting violence against women can also function to disrupt what is "normalised", to generate a sense of shock and outrage. I reproduce the image in the same way that images such as these were used within the digital expression of the feminist movement to remind activists (not only women) of the impunity of patriarchal entitlement to physically controlling women's bodies and, therefore, also controlling their political energies.

The photo captured a violent moment as Thenjiwe Mswane was "surrounded by men, kicked, punched and dragged away from the protest" (Shange, 2017:5). Thenjiwe Mswane was attacked for raising "the issue of sexual violence in the movement, as well as the side-lining of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) members of the movement and their issues" (Bashonga & Khuzwayo, 2017:8). Mswane's experience solidified the feminist voices and embodied the vulnerability of feminists in public rallies as they are often physically intimidated by men. This was also discussed on Radio 702, "What Is going on at WITS,"[13] where journalist and writer Redi Thlabi had an interview with feminist activists, including Thenjiwe Mswane. In going viral, the above photo and the interview on Radio 702 revealed the impact of digital activism and public relaying of the incident, how digitisation can work with radio broadcasting, and how the voices of feminists were amplified.

#MbokodoLead: Embodying Black feminist leadership

In addition to #PatriarchyMustFall, on 17 October, 2015, #FMF feminist collectives created #MbokodoLead with the intention "to create safer spaces where Black women's ideas, political agency are being valued" (Dlakavu, 2017a:111). The emergence of #MbokodoLead was necessary to insert black feminist leadership into normalised masculinist leadership structures.

[13] https://soundcloud.com/primediabroadcasting/what-is-going-on-at-wits?

Ironically, male members of the #FMF movement were considered strong and visionary because "they fit into the existing narrative of political jargon, tone, and linguistic, which on its own is hypermasculine" (Pilane, 2015: n.p). Consequently, the leadership of black women, LGBTQIA+ folk, and persons with disability was often undermined as "they are depicted as naturally inferior and subordinate, as eternal victims of male oppression" (Zeleza 2005:207).

Thus, the #MbokodoLead protest deliberately centred women's leadership and voice in the movement. Although highly pronounced at Wits university, the misogyny and side-lining of black women and queer folks was also experienced at other universities, such as UCT, UWC, and Stellenbosch University. Recording why this movement was a necessity, Dlakavu (2017b:1) states that, "black women said 'No' to their invisibilisation within the narration of the #FeesMustFall movement by rendering their struggles, voices, labour and impact visible in our public discourse". Online resources indicated that the origin of this movement was through the digital conversations that were the core of what became a digital movement. The movement started from a WhatsApp group conversation among black women from Wits to "brainstorm how to dismantle the tyranny of patriarchy in the movement while affirming each other" (Dlakavu, 2017a:111). This conversation grew and shaped the creation of the hashtag #MbokodoLead on social media, and the campaign for the visibility of black women leaders. Many started posting black women leaders at Wits University; Dlakavu (2017a:111) writes, "#MbokodoLead began trending nationwide on Twitter; Black women from other universities also joined in the conversation and profiled Black women at their university." The tweets below also conveyed the substance of the movement:

> TW1: This is no surprise. No good revolution happens without women. #FeesMustFall #MbokodoLead

TW2: #Mbokodolead because the patriarchy & violent masculinities are so live in these movements #FeesMustFall

TW3: The revolution will be demasculanised. #MbokodoLead #Womandla #NationalShutDown #FeesMustFall

TW4: The movement is self-correcting. Hence #Mbokodolead had to happen to correct patriarchy.

TW5: Challenging norms. Challenging balances of power. Challenging hierarchies. Creating safe spaces for everyone. #MbokodoLead

These tweets drew attention to the way that the movement created a concerted political response that focused on retaliation against the threats that patriarchy exerted on the movement. As the above quote suggests, since "*the movement is self-correcting*" (TW4), feminists considered the movement to be open for critique and change. Hence, #MbokodoLead focused on "*demasculinisation*" (TW3) of the leadership and was a call for universities to create a safer space for marginalised and othered bodies. In contrast to #PatriarchyMustFall, the strategy here was to *"challenge norms"* (TW5) by visibilising female leaders in different universities, advocating for their voices on digital platforms, and sharing images of female leaders who were considered strong and tenacious.

For instance, below are two pictures of Nompendulo Mkhatshwa that went viral on Twitter, with captions such as "Leadership! #MbokodoLead". The pictures themselves conveyed a sense of the invincibility and strength of black women, as well as an obviously emotionally charged crowd, singing revolutionary songs, and readily following their leader. In the first image, both her fists are raised. In the second, she stands in a pose that conveys power,

leadership and also some distance, which allows her to observe the political and emotional effect of that moment within the movement, as well as in the institutions and in society.

Image 5.3: Left – students march through the campus of Wits University. Right – students marching to the Union Buildings, Pretoria, October 2015. (Photo credit Marco Longari and Getty image)

The outgoing Student Representative Council president at Wits University, Shaeera Kalla, and the incoming leader, Nompendulo Mkhatshwa, were two of the few black women who became popular and held highly sensationalised positions as leaders. In the beginning stages, photographs such as those above were celebrated because they spoke back to the hostile space that the #FMF leadership had created for black women and queer bodies. These kinds of images and stories celebrated and affirmed women's rise to leadership, and forced the normalisation of black women leadership in the movement (Dlakavu, 2017b). It could also be argued that the new visibility of confident and uncompromising feminist leaders inspired courage and solidarity among women in #FMF who'd been bruised by the misogynistic backlash – including gender violence or threats of violence, bullying, charges of betrayal and political incompetence, and had been deeply demoralising, especially since the patriarchal attacks were made by their peers, their allies, those whom they had worked with intimately and had come to trust.

However, as was the case with certain women in Egypt's uprising, the individualisation of female figures in #MbokodoLead, and the promotion of a few charismatic women leaders, eventually did harm to the feminist cause in the movement. While this is evidence of how serious a threat this leadership posed to the masculinist leadership, the selective promotion of a few black women leaders unintentionally re-inscribed a masculinist leadership style. This undesired dynamic undermined the feminist intervention that hoped to promote feminist leadership in non-hierarchical ways. Mainstream media and digital advocacy contributed to this, and often turned these few individuals into public icons and the "face of the movement".

In these representations of women icons, it is notable that women leaders were often overtly feminised, as though their prominence could not be imagined *without* their being objectivised from the perspective of the male gaze. It would be misleading to insist that individual women were responsible for their being made into individual role models who seemed more like magazine cover girls than like feminist activists. What needs attention is the complex role of the mainstream media in appropriating feminist students' stories, images and icons and *seeming* to strengthen activist stories while using their conservative framing of women's bodies and individual achievement. For instance, Nompendulo Mkhatshwa's appearance on Destiny Magazine cover as a powerful and influential young woman created a controversy among #FMF student activists (Whittles, 2016). As much as there were those who considered it crucial for the recognition of the feminist counter-movement (Valela, 2015), others were concerned with idolising and overtly feminising an individual as the focal point of a nation-wide student-led movement (Kanyane, 2015).

Image 5.4: In 2015 Nompendulo Mkhatshwa appeared on Destiny Magazine cover - "#FreeEducation year of the student: Wits SRC president"

As the #MbokodoLead digital activism became highly visible and noticeable, the next strategy that was employed by #FMF feminists in rallying against patriarchal leadership was to ensure that black women presented themselves in ways that defied their commercial feminisation, or their identities as black. Black women as a collective therefore decided on a dress code, with these instructions posted on social media:

> The #MbokodoLead Wits WhatsApp group agrees on: 1. African print doeks 2. Plain white tees 3. Blue/black pants

Image 5.5: Women came out the next day wearing different colour doeks, plain white t-shirts and blue/black jeans.

Here, it is worth paying attention to the performed rebellious femininity, and reminiscent of femininities that the doek came to represent – also known as iqhiya in isiXhosa. In black South African culture, doek-wearing is considered a sign of a "good" woman that is respectful of her culture and tradition. It is particularly encouraged for married women, as it symbolises and dignifies her social status in the community. Since the world of most students is often far-removed from these cultural settings, the meaning of the doek might be rejected. However, many young women appropriated the headscarf in signifying identities that were not obedient to patriarchy. It should be noted here that both in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, as well as in the United States (especially in the #BlackLivesMatter movement), many black African women reclaimed the doek and wore it as fashion, or to reaffirm their African identity and as a symbol of anti-colonial sentiment.[14]

[14] Here it has to be recognised that older feminists form the 80s in Africa have done this for a while, and that the trend was fairly new to South Africa.

In her essay, "How South African women are reclaiming the headscarf", Fihlani (2016: n.p) argued that since a range of headwraps with African prints and texture can be found in different parts of Africa, doek-wearing is also "an expression of what it is to be African". Thus, doek-wearing could have different meanings in different contexts. Building on these diverse meanings, the call for black #FMF feminists to wear the doeks with a plain white t-shirt and blue/black pants in a #MbokodoLead rally is not a simple act of performed femininity; rather, it is a subversive gender performance that reclaimed women's power and leadership in the movement. The following tweets also suggest this:

> TW1: How gorgeous are the women in this movement? Doing the damn thing in these headwraps. How are we not magic. #MbokodoLead #NationalShutDown

> TW2: Black woman carry on slaying and refuse to be silenced by men that are intimidated by you. #Womandla #MbokodoLead

These two tweets refer to the rally where #FMF feminist activists wore the agreed-upon outfit. It marked the intricate balance between a subversive performance of compliance while rebelling against repressive power against black women. TW1 – "*doing this damn thing in these headwraps*" – is indicative of how black women negotiated power in #FMF, despite deeply ingrained social constructions of heteronormative and patriarchal society. TW2 portrayed the rebellious intentions of #MbokodoLead – "*slaying and refuse to be silenced by men*" – by asserting women's power to equally lead with men through #Womandla.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of this public protest, and the symbolic meaning of the doek, it is necessary to focus on the power dynamics that tried to enforce social constructions of gender through disciplining women's bodies. Mabaso (2017:102), through her intersectional analysis of "black condition" and "black female condition", problematised black women's interactions in the movement and the power dynamics that conditioned black women's agency through a performed femininity that resonated with the deep-seated patriarchal belief that women should know their place. Mabaso (2017:102&103) shared her personal experience of being a #FMF feminist activist as follows:

> Prior to the rise of #MbokodoLead, (that is, the moment when the women of #WitsFeesMustFall came to the forefront by asserting the legitimacy of femininity within the movement) I felt the oppression and discipline of patriarchy within the movement itself. I had to discipline my body by dressing as "unfeminine" as possible in order to assimilate and to avoid exposing my body while we were moving around. I also had to discipline my tongue, and to teach it the proper grammatical rules of "comrade speak", which is basically a variant of tsotsi taal predominantly used by working class black males in the township. Thirdly, I had to discipline my movement, to forbid my feet from ever carrying me to the front or to the centre where I could lead a song or an address because as many said, that is a man's job. So as a Black woman, in that moment and time, I was subject to double jeopardy.

Mabaso's reflection shows how black women's bodies experience oppressive and disciplinary norms to preserve the patriarchal structure. Firstly, it was expected that in these public occupied spaces, black women should wear "unfeminine" clothing to hide their sexuality and avoid exposing their bodies. This put the responsibility for sexual assault on women, and disciplined women's bodies through a preventive measure, which in turn relieved rapist men from taking responsibility for the violence they had inflicted on women. Secondly, in order to play the

supportive role in the movement, black women had to learn a few key languages, such as "comrade speak", that sustained the power held by the male leaders, while silencing their own voice. Thirdly, black women had to discipline their bodies to become obedient to the idea that black women were expected to follow, not lead. The body was forbidden from occupying the centre, but was meant to hold the movement together from the margins, "faceless and nameless" (Dlakavu, 2017a:118), with unrecognised gendered labour. Here, it has to be recognised that these intersections of power struggles get more complicated when it came to self-identified black queer feminist and transgendered activists (Xaba, 2017).

Similarly, Kamohelo Mabogwane's (2019:8) argument, in a collective piece titled "What is Blackwom?nhood: An intersectional dialogue with the Young Wom?n's Leadership Project", is powerfully expressive of the power dynamics at that time. She writes:

> Against the backdrop of the recent surges of student activism in South Africa, we find ourselves living in a world of cishet Fanonian patriarchs who have somehow decided that they form the discourse on activism, (activist) academia, and sometimes even feminism. These are men who see and treat Black women as decoration – necessary figures who can stand in front of a crowd, preferably in a doek (head wrap), but only for a few seconds. To these men, Black women are leaders, yes – but the power they hold is, to them, fragile, laughable, and will never amount to the kind of serious leadership that they are invested in: 'questions of national importance'.

Mabogwane's shows the deeply entrenched gendered power dynamics and performances that required women to play the symbolic part of inclusivity, and possibly leadership, without confusing the "real" leadership figures – the men. Mabogwane here used the "doek" to show the irony and flawed assumptions of patriarchal structures that are often deceived by a symbolic form of submissive gendered performance and femininity. Black women, even when they step

up to leadership roles, are expected to adhere to social and cultural power structures. They should be seen, but not for long; they should challenge the status quo, but in a way that supports the male leaders. They should be heard, but not really use their own voice.

Overall, it was effective in foregrounding the bodies of women as symbols of black leadership. It provided a space for black women to resist systematic antagonisation and intimidation in the movement. For many Black women who participated in #MbokodoLead, it would have been easier to keep quiet, to be in the shadows giving power to the patriarchs, and avoid being labelled as "a feminist that derails the movement" – an accusation frequently used to demoralise and confuse feminists by male leaders (Xaba, 2017). Yet, as expressed in the above protest actions, black women made their own statements, refused to take a back seat, and refused to be erased. #MbokodoLead protests were also influential in reimaging equal leadership. The tendency to individualise exoticised women leaders and lose a sense of the collective, in a sense playing into neoliberalism and countering the broader movements' commitment to flattened structures, was an unfortunate, although an unsurprising effect of how black women are represented in the public sphere, especially the mass media. #MbokodoLead therefore drew attention to the way black women's bodies are compulsively reconstructed to take on meanings that suit hegemonic scripts. Thus, being an exotic beauty, or the #SomeoneTellSaudiArabai's tearful victim of local religious belief and feudalistic patriarchy, are some of the controlling images that distort actual women's subjectivity and voices. African feminists have long needed to contend with these controlling images, and digital feminism, which often makes women's faces and bodies very prominent in the public domain, can lead to their being misrepresented, decontextualised and associated with agendas which African feminists may strongly oppose.

#TransCapture at UCT: Disrupting tokenistic representation of queer and trans bodies

> We are done with the arrogant cis hetero patriarchy of black men …We are fed up with RMF being 'intersectional' being used as public persuasion rhetoric. We are saying down with faux inclusivity – RMF make it clear, to the world, that we are not welcome here.

The above statement was posted on Facebook by the Trans Collective group titled: "Tokenistic Objectifying, Voyeuristic Inclusion is at least as Disempowering as Complete Exclusion".[15] The Trans Collective was a student-led organisation of trans, non-binary and intersex students, staff and workers at UCT. #TransCapture arose out of and was connected to the #FMF feminist movement focusing on patriarchal domination of women and the LGBTQIA+ community. #FMF feminist debates, such as in the above-mentioned #PatriarchyMustFall and #MbokodoLead movements, opened up space for exploring identity struggles around gender and sexuality. While #TransCapture remains a hugely contentious issue, due to the nature of the protest, which I will discuss later, the protest provided an opportunity for a deeper intersectional feminist analysis of difference. It raised a critical question about gender and power, particularly the othering of individuals and collectives on the basis of gender binaries. The movement also exposed the danger of normalising heteropatriarchal gender hierarchies, which labelled certain individuals' bodies and identities as deviant, to represent the history of #RMF. More importantly, the movement showed the role of (de)constructive anger in protest involving images and digital activism to speak back against the enormous tensions at play, and the multilayered repression of LGBTQIA+ people in the student movement.

[15] Here is the statement: https://www.facebook.com/HolaAfrica/posts/745161412287899
In solidarity with the Trans Collective, many individuals and collectives shared it, among these are the HOLA Africa Facebook page. Since the Trans Collective page has been erased or is unreachable from my port, I accessed the digital archive through the HOLA Africa page. Later on, this critical essay was published in the PUBLICA[C]TION (2017) issue as part to of the student movement archive.

This section's analysis is partial due to a list of shortcomings that start from the fact that I am a cisgender black woman with a limited knowledge of trans activism in Africa and globally. However, my intention is to show the complex ways in which patriarchal structures were challenged, and how feminists created fragmented counter-movements, and mobilised and crafted and held spaces for marginalised bodies and voices. Although #TransCapture represents a historical moment that is linked to the erasure of bodies and archive, the voices of LGBTQIA+ collectives at white universities are highly visible, but not necessarily representative of the situation at historically marginalised and black universities. Perhaps this has much to do with the fact that the #RMF movement was centred at UCT.

On 9 March, 2016, UCT's Centre for African Studies, in collaboration with the #RMF movement, launched an exhibition titled "Echoing Violence from Within," as part of archiving the historic moments of the #RMF student movement (Omar, 2016; Petersen, 2016). The event also marked a year since the famously radical protest performance by Chumani Maxwele of throwing human faeces at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes. Right after the opening of the exhibition, the Trans Collective disrupted it. This protest on digital platforms was framed as #TransCapture. On social media, LGBTQIA+ communities and queer allies used this frame to amplify the protest, and advocate against discrimination and anti-queer sentiments.

In their official statement, shared on different social media platforms, the Trans Collective stated that the exclusion of queer, transgender and non-binary people in the curation process led to their "demand that the organising committee remove all the images, videos and texts of and by trans people" (UCT Trans Collective, 2016). Out of over 75 images presented in the exhibition, there were only three images that featured trans people (Jacobs, 2017). The protest was meant to expose the violence of the exclusionary nature of the exhibition and the tokenistic

inclusion of trans people. The Trans Collective called out the selection committee for excluding them during the process, even though the collective sought active participation of the LGBTQIA+ community in the curation of the exhibition, which was declined. The following quote demonstrates this sentiment:

> It is disingenuous to include trans people in a public gallery when you have made no effort to include them in the private. It is a lie to include trans people when the world is watching, but to erase and antagonise them when the world no longer cares.

Instead, it seems that the selection committee felt that inviting cisgender[16] black female feminist activists was an intersectional move. The aim of intersectionality is highlighted in the mission statement of #RMF, including "'black intersectional feminist' cis womxn who sat on it for the purpose of ensuring due representation" (UCT Rhodes Must Fall, 2015; UCT Trans Collective, 2016), which is indicative of the attempt to employ an intersectional perspective. The expectation, and the disappointment thereafter, showed that the interest in equal representation of diverse individuals and collectives was not met. Instead, cis black women were used to show that the curation process was inclusive, but the Trans Collective challenged the curators on their superficial intersectionality by simply adding the "faces of 4 or 5 black cis womxn repeated in a spectacular show of false inclusivity" (UCT Trans Collective, 2016).

The Trans Collective intentionally disrupted the exhibition opening by stripping naked and occupying the space as an act of protest. Many of the activists had red drawings on their bodies, which portrayed their rage. Some of the activists lay on the ground at the entrance of the

[16] Cisgender/cis refers to people whose gender identity aligns with the gender assigned to them according to their biological sex. E.g. a male who identifies as a man (Publica[c]tion, 2017).

exhibition with placards on their bodies stating, “go on, jump over us one more time”. Others grappled for the microphone (held by cisgender men), which was seen to symbolise power, authority, voice, and representation. Others walked around the room and placed the same red colour that they used on their bodies over the photographs and on the walls. In addition, as the images below show, a few of the photographs were covered with a pink placard that stated the exclusion of trans people and the erasure of their history from #RMF.

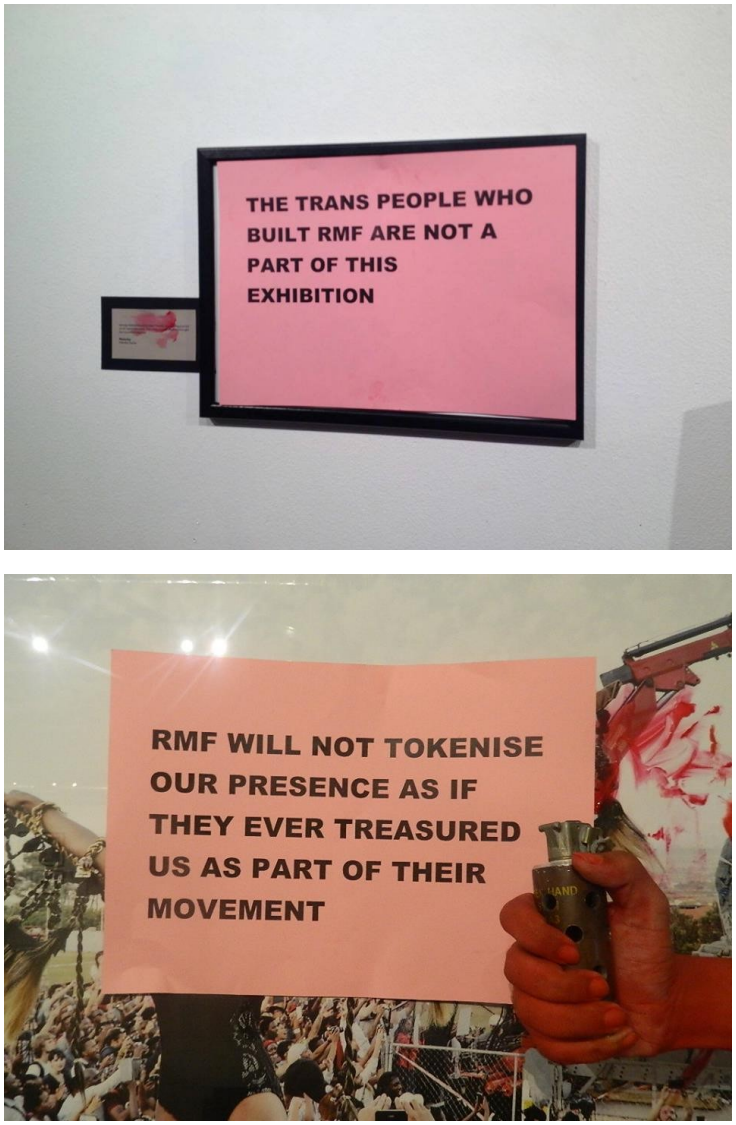


Image 5.5: Photo taken from The Journalist online essay titled "Disrupting the silencing of voices"

For instance, in the second picture above, the pink placard with the words "RMF will not tokenise our presence as if they ever treasured us as part of their movement" was pasted on the famous photograph of artist Sethembile Msezane and her art performance during the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes at UCT. This act of disfiguring the photographs and the curation design was a retaliation against the violence that was experienced by the Trans Collective and feminist activists at large. Covering Msezane's photograph exposed the irony of invoking

instrumental black women's and non-binary people's activism only when it benefited the hegemonic narrative of the student movement.

In some ways, the method employed for the #TransCapture protest can be regarded as a disruptive act that disparaged and contradicted the core feminist beliefs in finding non-violent ways of protesting. However, at times these kinds of disruptions are necessitated by contextual circumstances which make other options (actually initially pursued by the collective) impossible. The pictures below, for example, show that the photographs are covered by red paint and words such as "erasure" and "Trans" written over them; some faces are totally covered in red and other faces have been circled. Such intentional disfiguring of the photographs denounced malestream scholarship and curation of archives from a masculinist perspective (Duriesmith, 2020). At the same time, the words written over the images were meant to show erased parts of the story, and to insist that "we were here".

Image 5.6: Photo taken from The Journalist online essay titled "Disrupting the silencing of voices"

#TransCapture was clearly controversial, as it was seen as destructive by the exhibition curators, the university, and spectators at the exhibition. Obviously, not all spectators were

heteropatriarchal. Many felt that the politically important moment of archiving the student protest through powerful artworks should have been respected by all who believed that the student movement for decolonising the university and rejecting neoliberal education was worth commemorating. It is sobering, however, to see how activist struggles or acts of commemoration can exclude certain views and present only partial historical records and archives. This is what #TransCapture believed; in their explanation, the collective reflected on what could be considered a violently destructive protest and political recklessness as follows:

> A story of trans erasure, trans antagonism, unabated sexual assault and complicity. We left other images with marks of red paint as a display of our presence. We may not have been included in the exhibition role in a meaningful way, but it must be clear to all viewers of the exhibition that raging trans people had been in that space …We maintain that decolonisation is necessary for a reclamation of our humanity as black queer trans people. Our intervention is an act of black love. It is a commitment towards making RMF the FMF space of our dreams. It forms part of the journey towards the 'logical conclusion' of the decolonisation project. There will be no Azania if black men simply fall into the throne of the white man without any comprehensive reorganisation of power along all axis of the white supremacist, imperialist, ableist, capitalist *cisheteropatriarchy*.

Despite eye-rolling and public dismissal of the protest, from the standpoint of the Trans Collective, the disruption was "an act of black love" that reclaimed black queer and trans people's feminist activist history, voice and agency as part of these narratives. Similar to the #MbokodoLead and #PathriarchyMustFall protest, the #TranCapture protestors believed that the student movement and its commemoration should be reconfigured to equally represent all student activists. The disruption, therefore, calls into question the "if and but" attitudes of feminist actions. This sense of entitlement came from the knowledge that #FMF feminist

activists and the black LGBTQIA+ collective had provided exhaustive labour that was not duly recognised, and instead was discarded and hidden from the public consciousness. Moreover, the collective knew that "the inclusion of black radical feminism as one of the three pillars of the movement, alongside Pan Africanism and Black Consciousness" (UCT Trans Collective, 2016) was precisely in order to hold accountable the heterosexist men who continued to assume patriarchal leadership as the norm.

Incomplete intersectional feminist intentions

The #TransCapture moment also visibilised the shortcomings of the intersectional feminist movement. It was a political moment where LGBTQIA+ struggles (often overlooked in the struggles of cisgender black women) were made public in visually and performatively dramatic ways. Jacobs (2017) argues that the protest revealed that the LGBTQIA+ collectives' struggle and plight was a silence that sat within the very feminist movement that was against the silencing and erasure of women who were implicitly defined as cis-women. Since the purpose of the #RMF exhibition was to archive some of the history for the future, the minimal engagement with queer, transgender and non-binary individuals disregarded queer activists in the movement. Jacobs (2017:116) asks:

> How do we begin to rationalise the need for a Queer revolution to take place within a protest which suggests that this is not its place, despite such protest being centred on various forms of oppression? How do we begin to learn from the past, hallucinating all the while a new future?

#TransCapture spoke out against these complex silences and persistent unwillingness to change the patriarchal understandings of the gender binary and heteronormative understandings of

gender and sexuality. Thus, it appears that feminist queer politics were seen as an add-on to the decolonisation movement, instead of interwoven into the core politic of intersectional feminism. The collective's statement also pointed to these in-between realities: "in our reflection we have found that as black, poor, queer, womxn and non-binary trans people our position in the decolonial theory and practice is unchanged" (UCT Trans Collective, 2016).

These claims are not the first of their kind. Feminist movements are increasingly becoming intersectional in ways that earlier intersectionality thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw did not imagine. More and more feminist movements are criticised (McLean, 2018; Jacobs, 2019) for prioritising the voices of heterosexual women while using the labour and situated knowledge of the LGBTQIA+ community. For instance, one of the pink placards that was posted on an exhibition photograph read, *"we will no longer tolerate the complicity of black cis womxn in our erasure"*. Although it is hard to conclusively determine if these experienced exclusions are intentional, or if the feminist collective is to be blamed, the impact of the decisions around the curation of the exhibition contributed to the violence experienced by the LGBTQIA+ community. Perhaps this incident provides an opportunity to pay more attention to the complexity of how trans activism is related to feminism, in the context of the global mistrust of feminism that excludes queer, transgender, and non-binary people in its thinking and organising.

Here, Collins' (1990) perspective on the "matrix of domination" is a useful tool to understand the stack of violences that reproduce precarious conditions among the Trans Collective. The following quote clearly states this sentiment:

> There was an outright refusal to acknowledge that the condition of being a womxn, queer, trans, disabled and so forth is not incidental to blackness but that these conditions are collateral to blackness.

The above quote is in conversation with the idea of blackness and black consciousness that emphasises those who are collateral damage in the black identity conceived by heteropatriarchal black men, and a few black women. The weight of this sentence in many ways unravels the invisible stigma that alienates black and queer individuals as "deviants" in the black identity. From the standpoint of a heteronormative structure that is in a constant clash with white supremacy, being black and queer is a threat. As such, the Trans Collective experienced these multi-levelled exclusions that debilitated and constantly challenged the agency of black queer people in the #FMF movement.

Consequently, the #TransCapture collective argued that "We are black, queer and trans simultaneously. These are not severable and we deserve to be freed from their colonial baggage simultaneously too" (UCT Trans Collective, 2016). This not only shows the selective preference of political grounds, but also how blackness is read by ignoring the fact that the colonial and apartheid struggle is not only based on racial identity. The categorisation of identities in the colonial era and structures also included gender and sexual identities. In relation to these experiences, #FMF queer feminist activist Xaba (2017) argues that the hypermasculine energy that is targeted to dismantle white supremacist systems and structures often fails to balance and check its moral code when it comes to the replication of the same oppressive power over black women, and queer, transgender and non-binary individuals. The persistent dismissal of diverse intersecting identities, and the undermining of LGBTQIA+ bodies, forced individual

activists to form a collective that sought to resist the silencing, erasure and the deprioritisation of the liberation of the marginalised.

Concluding remarks

Black radical feminism and intersectionality were instrumental in providing the agency and autonomy needed for #FMF feminists to challenge and hold accountable patriarchal leadership structures. Across different spaces and political orientations, feminist activists were able to reconfigure the movement's politics, and subvert oppressive and silencing power dynamics. The feminist movements by black women and LGBTQIA+ communities provided an opportunity to unpack different uses and forms of feminist digital activism (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). The analysis showed the complexity of how digital activism meshes with embodied presence in the digital and the physical world. The political is enacted through controversial rioting strategies (Sevilla-Buiwtrago, 2015), while the discourse generated from these protests portrayed how bodies are used as strategic protesting tools.

The #PatriarchyMustFall, #MbokodoLead, and #TransCapture feminist counter-movements not only challenged masculinist structures, but also revealed complex conceptualisations of intersectionality, gendered subjectivities, vulnerability, and agency. These movements involved exploration of how the social locations of various subjects provided a particular form of agency that challenged exclusionary heterosexist discourse. The use of digital spaces in addition to the physical, and the collapsing of the two, made it possible for these voices to enter into the public domain. Thus, they were able to engage with discourses that contributed towards

a growing body of knowledge on how feminist digital activism can empower marginalised individuals and reimagine struggles against colonial, gendered and neoliberal worlds.

One significant thread that comes through these three South African counter-movements is the rejection of what is mistakenly conceived of as black consciousness thinking, which assumes that "liberation" means replacing white power with black. #FMF feminists across the movement argued that the radical feminist call in the movement was not to destroy violent white supremacist power and systemic structures without reconfiguring the damage they have caused and without reclaiming equal space for marginalised others. The surfacing of trans-activism in relation to the silences of the pockets of feminism in #FMF also underlined how attentiveness to intersectional power can generate struggles that are necessarily incomplete and multi-layered. Apart from foregrounding women and drawing attention to gender oppression, therefore, feminist politics in #FMF led to questioning broader ideas about freedom and liberation in the South African public domain.

The next chapter extends this discussion of feminist unravelling of layers of power by focusing on "body politics", the complex meanings of embodied protest and the use of the body in protest. By critically looking at the #NakedProtest as part of the #RapeMustFall movement, and the strategic use of the body in public and virtual spaces, I reflect on the centrality of the acted on, performed, socially constructed and agential body in both #FMF and African feminist digital activism generally to resist rape culture and policing of women's bodies.

Chapter Six

#NakedProtest: Bodies on the frontline and bodies online

Introduction

> Thinking technologically might once have been, but is no longer a disembodied concept. Rather, bodies are now, it seems, irreversibly linked to technology and technology's acceleration (Pitts, 2005:230).

The argument put forward by Pitts represents the characteristics of the feminist activism and protest in the #RapeMustFall movement in the broader #FMF movement. As established earlier, the student movement involved the simultaneous use of physical and digital spaces. Spectators who witnessed half-naked students marching in the streets of Rhodes University (RU) campus, standing on the side of the road or at the corners of campus buildings, and those who followed the protest on the digital platform on their computer and/or phone, almost co-existed and contributed to the spectatorship or participation in the protest. The blurring of these multiple spaces, though experienced differently, is useful to understand digital feminist protest, particularly in the context of #FMF and the other four African feminist movements discussed in previous chapters. It is clear that "bodies on the frontline" experience direct recognition, humiliation, sexualisation, racism, and police brutality in very direct and personally threatening ways.

In contrast, "bodies online" are arguably less vulnerable to direct physical, sexual and political attack. These bodies are publicly visible, mainly through providing narratives of their own and others' experiences through videos, selfies, photographs, personal testimonies, and opinions.

Similarly, they experience violence through these digital mediums in the form of internet trolling and malicious acts of online violence against women. Despite these challenges, at different stages, the #RapeMustFall public protest performance was almost synchronised with the digital and physical body protest, but primarily the protest was digital. Thus, the digital platform often played the role of amplification (Toyama, 2017), which created lively national and even international public opinion, perceptions, discourses, debates, and observations about the politics of #RapeMustFall, #NakedProtest, and #RUReferenceList.

The data analysis in this chapter considers features of Twitter and Facebook social media platforms, blog essays, and media coverage, and the interviews with #FMF feminists regarding the #RapeMustFall movement. These digital platforms unveil the complex political, social, and cultural interpretation of the protest activities. Most importantly, this chapter focuses on the public debates that surrounded young women's #NakedProtest performance to challenge higher education institutions' passivity around rape culture, as this reflected entrenched and violent power structures rooted in gender hierarchies (Charter, 2016; News24, 2016; Mdaka, 2016; Mbalimz, 2016). The analysis engages with young women's strategic vocalisation and condemnation of rape culture by using their bodies. Rather than seeking to take sides in the discussion of how and whether the protest performance led to "distancing" or "intimacy" of the body, the focus is on what the embodied nature of feminist digital activism involves – especially when that activism foregrounds images of and discourses about the body. This has been a central theoretical foundation of feminist thought and explanation of the agency of the body as a political apparatus.

As discussed in Chapter Three, research into the embodied nature of feminist digital activism requires careful consideration of the politics of representation and ethics. Firstly, it should be

stressed that the scope of the retrieved tweets by no means represents the complex threads of the #RapeMustFall movement in their entirety. In line with my qualitative research, I have selected texts extracted from Twitter that do not fully represent the "big data" available on the social media platform. However, the selected texts can be used to guide interpretation of the pivotal moments and political themes in the naked performance. Secondly, social media users are not representatives of the population outside the digital world that were directly or indirectly involved in the protest. Instead, the intention is to show the complexity of the naked protest (for example, many debates regarding "the female body" emerged out of the performance) and ultimately to contribute to the conversation on feminist, and especially African feminist, understanding of "naked protest" performances as strategies for disrupting patriarchal systemic structures. Finally, it is important to recognise that #RapeMustFall, #NakedProtest, and #RUReferenceList were not only used by students who were following the movement. Other sectors outside the student-body, such as NGOs, academia, feminist activist organisations, mainstream media, and bloggers, energetically participated in debates or acts of solidarity.

As will be shown in Chapter Seven, it is important to flag that these wider engagements prefaced the national and global growth of feminist movements, such as #MeToo, which emerged out of a prior political and digital consolidation of feminist-inflected consciousness and strategising around violence against women. As such, this chapter purposefully attempts to focus on dominant political and ideological impressions and controversies that have influenced the movement in multiple ways (Hussen, 2018).

Although I am working with publicly available data extracted from Twitter, I am aware of the feminist concerns around how black women's bodies have been represented. Black African feminists (Gqola, 2007; 2015; Lewis, 2009; Tamale, 2016) point out that the objectification,

hypersexualisation, and hypervisibility of black women's bodies is rooted in a racist and colonial heritage. In postcolonial states, the historical meanings of nakedness and the body convey an even more complex "context of patriarchal, pornographic, racialised, sexualisation" (Sutton, 2007:142). The violent gaze directed at black women's bodies can range from an obsession with particular features of their bodies to fetishization of their bodies and their sexuality. I have therefore decided not to include the pictures of half-naked young female students that went viral on different digital platforms. At the same time, I seek to demonstrate how the high visibility of naked performance conveys the political agencies of certain feminists, and also seeks to interrupt dominant knowledges about the meanings of black female embodied subjectivity.

Brief background to #RapeMustFall in South Africa

In early 2016, there were a series of campaigns against rape culture at several universities in South Africa. Initially, a collective called "Unashamed," at Stellenbosch University, started a campaign called Chapter 2.12 (named after the section of the South African Constitution that guarantees the right to safety) to work against sexual violence on campus and institutional failure to put the necessary legal and policy frameworks in place to help tackle the rape crisis on campuses. In collaboration with Unashamed, students at Rhodes and UCT then joined the #Chapter212 campaign. The activism consisted of creating posters that were based on the lived realities and experiences of survivors of sexual violence at RU (Vetten, 2016; Wazar, 2016; The Daily Vox Team, 2016). This campaign also challenged RU's policies and its shortcomings regarding rape and sexual violence on campus (Chengeta, 2016). For instance, there were posters such as "60% of RU students surveyed in 2015 don't know how and where

to report sexual assault at university"[17] and "Chapter 2.12"[18] (Rhodes University Chapter 2.12 Facebook group, 2016).

The legal rights code was framed into a hashtag, #Chapter212, for the digital activism campaign. It was instrumental in expanding the advocacy and activism work into other universities in the country and South African society in general. The official public page states that the #Chapter212 campaign is "a collective effort by students who no longer can tolerate the oppressive rape culture present on campus nor the current systems and policies in place to deal with assault which make it extremely difficult to hold perpetrators accountable" (Rhodes University Chapter 2.12, 2016). However, the university management appeared more concerned with protecting and restoring the reputation of the institution, and responded with silence or with statements which outlined the procedures that were already in place. For instance, it was reported that the Campus Protection Unit (CPU) removed #Chapter212 posters, but since this movement was endorsed by the SRC, the posters were reinstated (Sobahle, 2016). The removal of the posters added to student outrage and mistrust of university management's desire to take the anti-rape culture movement seriously.

[17] This poster refer to the research findings of a survey that was conducted by the Rhodes University Gender Action Project (GAP) (Chengeta, 2016).

[18] #Chapter212 refers to Chapter 2, Article 12 of the Bill of Rights, which focuses on "freedom and security of the person":
(1) Everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, which includes the right—
(a) not to be deprived of freedom arbitrarily or without just cause;
(b) not to be detained without trial;
(c) to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources;
(d) not to be tortured in any way;
and (e) not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way.
(2) Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity, which includes the right—
(a) to make decisions concerning reproduction;
(b) to security in and control over their body; and
(c) not to be subjected to medical or scientific experiments without their informed consent.

The movement intensified when a list of 11 male students, alleged rapists, was leaked on Twitter and Facebook platforms. There were "no descriptions offered and no allegations were made" (Seddon, 2016: n.p) but a screenshot of a list of male students' names with the label "rapists" circulated widely. This was then followed by much more widespread student mobilisations on campus, under the banner of #RUReferenceList. The movement became the subject of heavy police surveillance and brutality, and a clampdown by management. In her opinion piece, Pilane (2016) argued that the #RUReferenceList was "a violent response to a violent act" but it was necessary, considering the scale of the rape crisis in South Africa. While feminist activists showed their support on social media by using the hashtag, there were few activists who came forward and shared their stories in support of the movement. An example of one who did share her story was Dlakavu (2016), who wrote a piece, "Why I support the Rhodes rape list", and shared her personal experience of sexual violence in university while also drawing on other black women's experience of sexual assault in South Africa.

The creation of #RUReferenceList "highlight[s] that victim-survivors have justice needs and/or interests that are not currently being served by the formal criminal justice system" (Powell, 2015:10). Using diverse social media platforms, ideologies and activist work, young women students took the responsibility of re-framing the justice system and applying it to their advantage (Powell, 2015; Rentschler, 2014). This "naming and shaming" was intended to expose male rapists on campus. Since "'justice' continues to elude the vast majority of rape victim survivors" (Powell, 2015:3), this political intervention was considered "informal justice".

However, not everyone was in support of the protest action. It was condemned by university management and contested by individuals who suggested that legal solutions must run their

course before labelling individuals as rapists (Haith, 2016; Pilane, 2016). The university was also accused of using a procedure that favours the alleged perpetrators over victims of rape (Chengeta, 2016; Pilane, 2016). In response to the blatant disregard for female students' concerns about violence on campus, there were various forms of demonstration as part of #RUReferenceList protests. The main ones were class boycotts, disrupting lectures, and shutting down academic activity by protesters (Chengeta, 2016). This was met by police violence and brutality. The police shut down campus and used barricades to block the university entrances and disrupt academic activity (Chengeta, 2016). Outraged by repeated rejection and management's violent attempts to silence their voices, RU protestors embarked on another form of demonstration – #NakedProtest. Half-naked young and mostly black women students took to the streets of RU in protest against sexual assault, rape culture and the poor legal system that failed to protect women from sexual violence (Hussen, 2018).

Image 6.1: this image conveys the presence of police on university campuses, Wits[19] and UWC[20], and the brutalities students experience at the hands of the police.

In solidarity with the students at RU, the protest expanded to other universities, such as UCT, Wits, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), and UWC. The solidarity movement was

[19] https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/students-police-teargas-rubber-bullets-wits/
[20] https://www.groundup.org.za/article/uwc-students-clash-police_3496/

under the hashtags #RapeMustFall and #IAmOneInThree, extending the call to all black women activists for urgent political action by flagging statistical evidence of the magnitude of rape and sexual violence in the country (Tshwane & Mpanza, 2016). Since the body was used as the centre of protest, the #NakedProtest hashtag frame was organically added.

One needs to recognise that, although these hashtag frames were created as different complex pushbacks unfolded, they were regarded as add-ons to existing frames. This means that one is able to use #RapeMustFall, #Chapter212, #RUReferenceList, #IAMOneInThree, and #NakedProtest in a Tweet or Facebook post – it is not only indicative of interconnected and intersecting protest, but also an archival series that tells a history of the shift of the feminist advocacy against sexual violence.

Overall, these radical protests, together with the release of an important book by Pumla Dineo Gqola (2015), *Rape: A South African Nightmare,* strengthened the collective energy of the protest. The convergence of multiple voices being raised against South Africa's rape culture also powerfully condemned the attitudes of higher education managers and government figures around sexual violence. Coinciding with the public protests and demonstrations, students used different digital platforms and social media to expose the complicity of higher education leaders and, in some cases, university staff who opposed the protest, to publicise their causes and reach out to potential audiences and allies from other universities in South Africa and globally.

Women's naked protest and embodied digital activism

Women protesting naked is not a new phenomenon, and certainly not "un-African" or a feature of "modernized western" culture (Hussen, 2018). In fact, Turner and Brownhill (2003) and Tamale (2016) claim that naked protest originated in Africa. Throughout history, in Africa and other continents, women have deployed naked protest when other attempts at communication failed to get political attention and solutions. Due to the scope of this chapter, I will briefly mention a few historical naked protests in Africa. In 1929, Nigerian women protested against white colonisers, colonial power, racism and political injustice (Kezeem, 2013; Matera, Bastian, & Kent, 2012; Murori, 2016). A few decades after, in 1990, black South African women in Soweto protested about the struggle for housing and demolition of shacks in Dobsonville (Meintjes, 1994); two years later, a naked protest by Kenyan women was held for an immediate release of political prisoners. The Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai played an important role in this protest (Callamard, 2013; Murori, 2016; Kezeem, 2013). Kenyan women also protested against "male scientists studying a nature reserve with the intent of driving them away" (Turner & Brownhill, 2003:71, as cited in Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014:256).

At the start of the millennium, about 600 naked Nigerian women protested against an oil company (Turner & Brownhill 2004; Veneracion-Rallonza 2014); later, during the Egyptian uprising, activist Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, also known as the "nude Egyptian blogger," protested by posting her naked picture on Facebook (Eileraas: 2014; Hafez, 2014b). In 2016, the year of the #FMF naked protests, Dr. Stella Nyanzi was at the centre of a controversial academic conflict and staged a naked protest at Makerere University in Uganda. Also significant is that #FMF naked protests involved not only ciswomen, but also the UCT Trans Collective, when

they disrupted the #RhodesMustFall exhibition in March, 2016. These and other naked protests in Africa show that women have been using their bodies as political tools for many years, in various contexts. These indicate that "nakedness is saturated with multiple, context bound, historically specific meanings" (Sultana, 2013:5), and that naked protests have increasingly become a site for feminist political activism globally.

As mentioned earlier, this chapter focuses on unravelling the #NakedProtest and its focus on the cultural and structural violence inscribed on women's bodies and their sexualities. Although highly controversial, even among feminist thinkers, the protests disrupted the notion that women carry the burden of responsibility for violent masculine behaviour (Bennett, 2009; Gqola, 2015; Rentschler, 2014). It particularly unsettled the normalised patriarchal code of safety for women against rape. Their public nakedness resisted the "fear factory" (Gqola, 2007, 2015), the shaming of black women's bodies, the victim-blaming when reporting rape, and young women's right to and control over their bodies. #NakedProtest can thus be considered as "'protesting naked bodies' that became words, places, and imagined alternatives" (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014:255).

Theorising #NakedProtest: Transforming the personal into the political

Performances of political protest require a "space of appearance" (Butler, 2011). Butler's conceptualisation draws attention to the ways in which physical spaces have symbolic boundaries that categorise people based on class, race, gender and other social and institutional categories. Echoing this, McEwan argues that "sensitivity to space is central to understanding concepts of citizenship and the abilities of different people to exercise their rights as citizens" (2005:628). Thus, differences in identity and social status create unequal power relations

among social actors in the public sphere. Butler argues that, "the square and the street are not only the material supports for action, but they themselves are part of any theory of public and corporeal action" (2011: para.1). Here, McEwan seems to be referring to how women are often "alien" in public spaces, while Butler is showing how important it is to "read" bodies' political action in relation to space. Taking this conversation further, Lewis provides insight into how physical space, embodied subjects and their political action are connected to construct different forms of political identities and agency through "public spectacle" (2009:127):

> Everyday performances of self-acquire public prominence through spectacle … signal[s] a form of "politics" beyond the formal political sphere. At the same time, political struggles seem likely to take on new forms as groups and individuals enlist their bodies as powerful signifiers of resistance to oppression.

This emphasises the connectedness of physical spaces and the bodies acting within these spaces. In Chapter Two, it was established that the public sphere is an exclusionary and masculinist space that is designed to exclude and prohibit mobility for certain individuals and bodies, based on their gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Feminists' concern, therefore, is how public spectacle and patriarchal moral codes "are enacted through the public performance and representation of gendered bodies" (Lewis, 2009:127), and how "masculinist spectacle" celebrates "hypervisible, and self-authorising performance of patriarchal masculinity in public spaces" (Gqola, 2009:64). These theories are useful instruments to clearly understand the violent obstructive nature of spectacles where black women's bodies are often disciplined and controlled by men to maintain, normalise and reproduce the patriarchal order and nationhood (Strauss, 2014; Gassiep, 2021).

Despite such intersectional gendered power oppressions, public power dynamics and the potential restrictiveness of the space, McEwan (2005:977) argues, "these are always already sites of resistance and contain the productive possibilities for subversion, appropriation and reconstitution". In other words, the constraints of public discourse and boundaries, institutional power, and police presence provided the impetus for student activists to creatively shift the dynamics of the #RapeMustFall protest. #FMF feminist activists subversively used their gendered subjectivities beyond the "impasse" that was created by the institution (McEwan, 2005).

Thus, the mode and strategic method of public protest taken by the #NakedProtest movement, by placing "the body" at the centre of the conversation, is a political action. According to Kulynych (1997:337–338, cited in Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014: 253):

> Political action … does not have to be intentional, rational, and planned; it may be accidental, impulsive, and spontaneous. It is the disruptive potential, the surprising effect, rather than the intent of an action that determines its status as participation … [thus] performative participation is manifest in any action, conscious or unconscious, spontaneous or organized, that resists the normalizing, regularizing, and subjectifying confines of contemporary disciplinary regimes.

It is in this context that #FMF feminist activists (and later also the #TransCapture movement) put their bodies on the front line and intentionally "made a scene" as a strategy, employing #NakedProtest to fight against rape culture and violence against women in universities and South African society at large (Waheed, 2017). The #NakedProtest took over the public space, and contested the normalised structure of public spectacle and the university's "code of conduct" (especially in the case of #RUReferenceList). Such disruption includes performing

acts of "play, care, creativity, conservation, and recovery" (Strauss, 2014:481) that signal the complexities of feminist activism and protest performance. For instance, the #NakedProtest digital archives show images and videos of half-naked black women taking selfies together and playfully pausing for the camera, images and videos that show black women comforting triggered individuals during the protest, and many pictures and videos of black women sharing their stories and holding each other as they wept. All this was happening in the face of the charge of their protest being violent. In many ways, they created a separatist space where women, deliberately made vulnerable and in a sense stripped of their egos by their nakedness, were able to demonstrate care, supportiveness, emotion, uncensored pain, and physical comfort in ways that most masculinist forms of struggle (which feminist organising also often demands) totally ignore.

The #NakedProtest flattened interpretations of power relations and unsettled the ways in which black women's autonomy and subjectivity have been depicted. Most importantly, the digital platforms collapsed the separation of surroundings from individualised bodies, which amplified the public spectacle. These combined efforts linked the embodied outrage of black women and the images and/or videos of naked protest with much-needed conversation about the rape crisis in South Africa. The spectacle of half-naked black women marching, with slogans inscribed on their bodies such as "this is mine", "still not asking for it", "revolt", "stop killing us", and "nix mapha" (isiZulu, loosely translates as "not for your consumption"), played an important role in changing "the particular ways in which black female bodies are charged with meanings in others' scripting" (Lewis, 2009:130). The political act of inscribing these words on their bodies ironically subverted a masculinist public spectacle, while also "subverting the meaning that is imposed on a humiliated body and investing newer meanings in the same body which renders it more powerful" (Sultana, 2013:5).

The #NakedProtest not only brings "the material urgencies of the body into the square but makes those needs central to the demands of politics" (Butler, 2011: para. 31). The protest disrupted how sexual harassment and rape culture were discussed in narrowly legalistic, cold and largely misogynistic ways in higher education. In addition, the young women occupied the place, challenged the fear and vulnerability of women in public spaces, countered sexualisation of their bodies, destabilised the "victim-blaming" discourse, and firmly articulated ownership of their bodies (Gqola, 2007, 2015).

#NakedProtest and power: Let's talk about the body

Many scholars have argued that the body, naked or clothed, is the central part of the political action in any public protest (Pitts, 2005; Sutton, 2007; Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014; Baer, 2016). Many also pointed out that it is the body that performs civil disobedience, and resists and strikes back against certain political ideologies (Lewis, 2009; Butler, 2011; Tamale, 2016). In this regard, O'Keefe (2011) draws an important political distinction between action and performance of the body while protesting in public. She states that there are "protesting bodies," where the standpoint of the body's presence is a catalyst for the publicisation of the protest for envisioned change. The other type is "body protests," where the body is the centre of the narrative. In this sense "the body is the focal point of the protest because the body itself is where the inscribed script of the protest lies" (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014:254). As described in Chapter Five and in the section above, #FMF feminist activists employed "protesting bodies" against masculinist leadership, erasure, and rape culture on campuses in several protest events. However, in the #NakedProtest, young black women students used "body protest" as a decisive measure to politicise institutional (and, by extension, national) failure to address rape culture on its campuses and in the country. This spectacularisation of "body protest" in #FMF

amplified the feminist-led protests that called out rape culture in universities while at the same time resignifying the humiliated body and asserting its power (Sultana, 2013).

Despite the fact that "body protest" took place within the confines of university campuses, its effects extended to commentary in other public spaces. The protest re-engineered the longstanding feminist critique of university policies against sexual assault, criminal law against sexual violence and the general everyday discussions about the persistence of rape culture in South Africa (Gqola, 2007; Bennett, 2009; Dosekun, 2007; Gordon & Collins, 2013). The naked protest shifted "the body" to the centre, particularly black women's bodies. This political act interchanged "gender politics" with "body politics". As controversial as it was, the topic became the body talking back to the gendered power relations that exist in the academic institution and South African society. Schlyter (2009:13) eloquently argues that,

> The benefit of talking about body politics instead of gender politics and of bodies instead of people is that it leads us to think concretely about what is happening, not to abstract subjects, but to real bodies of flesh and blood that experience hunger and cold, that work and become tired, that live and move around in homes, cities and physical landscapes.

Indeed, the naked body protest and digital activism created a space to develop a provocative dialogue nationally (Baer, 2016). Posted photos of naked young women holding a banner that read "#IAmOneInThree" shocked the public and challenged the dismissal by higher education. This marked feminists' deep-seated outrage in "refus[ing] to see sexual violence simply as a case of criminality that needs reasonable structures for prosecution. Instead, it foregrounds the systemic injustices within which women's bodies are objectified, denigrated and abused" (Macleod & Barker, 2016: n.p.). In addition, these non-conforming bodies occupied the spaces of different social media platforms, creating a national argument about the naked bodies and

the rationale behind the transgression. On social media, then, young women continued to put forward political statements that reclaimed the body:

> TW1: Because my body is not here for you to explore, my body is my own. #RUReferenceList

> TW2: Stop the war against our bodies #fmffeminists #RUReferenceList

> TW3: I am a woman I am strong I am fearless I am intelligent I am diligent Stop the war against my body #RUReferenceList #IAmOneInThree #Wits

These politically provocative tweets and the collective half-naked march on the streets of the campus disputed the usual rationalisation of rape (Lewis, 2009; Gqola, 2015). While TW2, "*stop the war against our bodies,*" speaks to the epidemic rate of violence against women and femicide, particularly targeting black women's bodies, words such as "*my body is my own,*" "*I am a woman,*" "*I am strong*" in TW1 and TW2 refused discourse that further victimises black women and reclaimed the power of the black body. In addition, the body was also used "as a symbol, a text that conveys political meanings" (Sutton, 2007:143). Moreover, images of naked women's painted bodies with words such as, "Niks Mapha" (not for your consumption), "Revolt," "my body my choice," and "still not asking for it," fuelled feminist activism work to concentrate on and voice the everyday lived experiences of the fear, vulnerability, pain, and anger held by the physical body (Schlyter, 2009; Hussen, 2018). These images stressed that, because of its vulnerability, repression and oppression, the body is a powerful political instrument to mediate the national indifference to the crime of rape on black women (Lewis, 2009).

Between nakedness and nudity

My ethnographic observation of Facebook and Twitter indicated that the nakedness of young black women became more important in public debate than the outrage and political resistance against rape culture. For instance, Kaya FM Talk hosted a discussion titled "#Naked Protest: Necessary or Inappropriate?",[21] where individuals debated whether the naked protests were distracting the movement from university fees. Some regarded them as "attention seekers," and others claimed it was "inappropriate". Dlakavu (2017b) and Bashonga and Khuzwayo (2017) present similar arguments, that during and after the #NakedProtest performance, the black half-naked young women were the centre of public scrutiny in the public sphere and on digital platforms. Individual and institutional spectators commented and shared their naked pictures, tweeted, hosted debates on FM radio, and wrote blog essays and academic analyses. These commentaries, directly or indirectly, were made with a sense of entitlement to either assert patriarchal "discipline and authoritarianism" (Lewis, 2009:41), or to defend the protest and provide a feminist reasoning for the naked protest performance (Dlakavu, 2016; Bashonga & Khuzwayo, 2017; Lewis & Hendricks, 2017).

Engaging with the discussions on social media is important to understand the contradictions and complexities of asserting political nakedness versus nudity for women activists. The collected data shows how the naked body as a subject of protest or for protest is always troubled by how the body is interpreted or understood in terms of dominant discourses about the female body. Beyond simply asserting or rejecting politicised and agential nakedness, it can encourage more nuanced feminist analysis that transcends blunt dictums. It is therefore noteworthy that

[21] #**NakedProtest**: Necessary or Inappropriate? @Raphata discusses this tonight at 6PM #KayaFMTalk; https://www.kaya959.co.za/.

even among many feminist and radical young women, the naked protests were seen to take political action "too far", or to miss the opportunity for "real" political action. For instance, the following tweets extracted from #NakedProtest conveyed a sense of shock and bewilderment in relation to half-naked protest performance:

> TW1: Why are they taking off their tops? #Wits #NakedProtest #Fees2017
>
> TW2: Someone please explain to me why #NakedProtest please! I cannot for the life of me comprehend...
>
> TW3: Somebody needs to sit me down and explain to me in detail what a #NakedProtest hopes to achieve …
>
> TW4: undress to redress what exactly? who promised free education? the uni's?.. read up i did..#stilldontmakesense

These tweets, while expressing concern and disapproval of the naked protest, asked a fundamental question directed towards the subversive performative act of the protest. Why a naked protest? In many ways, the questions and confusions echo dominant rape myths that are embedded in the fabric of patriarchal society, which constantly monitors, interrogates and disciplines black women's bodies. Feminist scholars have shown that the bodies of victims of rape and sexual assault are often shamed, made to feel responsible, and discriminated against on the basis of, "what was she wearing?" This reflects a dominant idea and practice that a society, the police, the criminal courts, and the justice system in general use to judge "unrapable

bodies"[22]: she asked for it. Therefore, it is not surprising that the biggest shock experienced by the public concerned the nakedness of young black feminists. Most importantly, TW1 *"Why they are taking off their tops?"* and TW4 *"undress to redress what?"* are directed to the nakedness of the body that is "private" and that is supposed to be kept hidden from public scrutiny. For these spectators, the protest should have happened with the young black women's bodies adhering to social and cultural codes of "a decent body," which is essentially connected to the gendered representation of the female body in a public area within a patriarchal society (Sultana, 2013). Hence, "hiding" women's bodies, under the guise of decency, indirectly and symbolically rationalises the hiding of black women's subjectivities, standpoint knowledge and voice.

To a certain extent, these tweets are representative of the dominant perceptions and values of South African society, which often range between anxieties about black women's nakedness and overt misogyny. Indeed, "[c]ontroversies fuel activism with the forces of ambiguity, desire, and connection" (Betlemidze, 2015:376). #NakedProtest represented and disrupted the margin between "public decency" and "victim-blaming". While the platform provided by the digital activism enabled a broader reach, the space also permitted individuals to post comments that were misogynistic and patriarchal in nature. This in some ways created a disconnect from the intended goal and affected the "economy of recognizability" (Reestorff, 2014:478). Many might find it difficult to understand the subversive nature of protesting stripped naked in public. Ultimately, for #NakedProtest activists, the desire appeared to be to resist and write a different kind of script, a different political voice (Scott, 1990; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015).

[22] Pumla Gqola, in her book "Rape: A South African nightmare," provides a historical analysis of how black women slaves were seen as unrapable bodies. Gqola identifies two main reasons: (1) because they were slaves, they were not considered as human; (2) black women's bodies were hypersexualised and hence not rapable. Her analysis here, even it creates a connection with the history of slavery, highlights how the consciousness of the public is steeped in decency measure, which want to consider the victim as victim and the rape as a rape.

In deepening my argument here, it is useful to note that, in a heteronormative patriarchal society, nakedness is often treasured only when it sexualises women in a way that suits the sexual fantasies of men (Baer, 2016). These tweets also reveal the terror of the translation of the halfnakedness of the young women to the "nudity" of their bodies in public spaces. As such, "nudity" is tied to the gaze of others and often involves aestheticising or objectifying women's bodies, while nakedness is something else. In this regard, Sutton argues that the immediate reaction of the public in relation to naked protest by women (regardless of whether they are half-clothed or totally naked) is primarily related to the imposition of "'nudity' on their 'nakedness'" (2007:145). Hence, the presumption of nakedness for many spectator's, regardless of the context in which it was being performed, or even acted upon with autonomous choice, seemed to be directly translated to "nudity" and highly sexualised bodies that needed to be covered, protected and hidden (Polinska, 2000).

Explaining the valence of "nakedness" for women who are often objectified as nude bodies, Tamale argues that, "naked female protesting bodies are quite different from lewd nude bodies as the former represent defiance and agency while the latter represent sexual objectification" (2016:30). Similarly, Sultana argues, "while a nude body is to fulfil desires of consumption of a male gaze, a naked body asserts its agency in the shedding of clothes" (2013:6). As such, the feminist activists in #FMF who protested half-naked in the #NakedProtest disrupted the margin between public decency, nudity, nakedness, and victim-blaming. Although many might find it difficult to understand the nature of the #NakedProtest as a political act, there were many tweet responses to the question "why naked protest?" by individuals explaining why the young women considered the body to be the centre of the protest and demonstration. The following texts convey some of the responses to those who had difficulty accepting the naked protest:

TW1: #NakedProtest draws attention to the way Students are stripped of political power

TW2: The naked body represents vulnerability & strength, and being disarmed yet empowered #NakedProtest

TW3: #NakedProtest are more than just spectacle. It's a confrontation of restrictions placed upon the female body.

TW4: In #RUReferenceList women exposed breasts in order to reverse the 'normal' and patriarchal way women's bodies are represented @****

These tweets resonate with feminists' longstanding critical work on body politics and the complexity of naked protest. TW3 and TW4 draw attention to the fact that the protest was not simply a performance to shock; rather, #NakedProtest pushed back against and reversed the cultural norms that normalise policing, control over and restrictions placed on women's bodies. TW4 pointed out that *"... women exposed breasts in order to reverse the 'normal' and patriarchal way women's bodies are represented;"* the tweet referred not only to the way that the respectability politics of the public sphere prescribes black women's demeanours. It also challenged the normalised social construction of gendered power relations that restrict women's bodies and sexuality, often under the guise of paternalistic narratives of their needing protection from rape and sexual assault. In conveying this, Dlakavu (2016:104), one of the public faces of #FMF feminist activists, explained why the #NakedProtest that she took part in was a necessary and radical intervention:

I believe in the importance of black feminist revolt in a country where black women are the main victims of poverty, exploitation and violence. A revolt is necessary because we simply cannot continue living life in fear of rape and abuse. A revolt is necessary to show that violence

> against black women and their bodies will no longer be tolerated. The revolt of young black women in institutions of higher learning carries momentous political and cultural implications because of the broader context in which we are located, moments when society attempted to depoliticise our actions by making comments on social media such as: "Why were they naked?", and concluding that our actions were to seek attention, irrational and vindictive.

In developing this reasoning, TW1 and TW2 explained how subversive protest, and reclaiming power through the naked protest by young black women, challenged the idea of vulnerability and powerlessness. The tweets addressed two levels of successful deployment of #NakedProtest. TW1 states that the protest *"draws attention to the way [s]tudents are stripped of political power"*. From a feminist intersectional perspective, this highlights the powerlessness, oppression and resistance of students through the act of stripping half-naked. #FMF feminist activists' rage and anger in the #RapeMustFall protest addressed two major feminist agendas. Firstly, it drew attention to "the precarious place of women's bodies in the public sphere and especially their on-going subjugation to sexual violence" (Baer, 2016:24). The movement showed the vulnerability to sexual assault and rape of young women in campus spaces, the inadequate responses to the rape crisis by higher education institutions and, at a country level, the normalisation of victim-blaming tendencies that infiltrate the policy and legal discourses (Bennett, 2009). Thus, the protest highlighted how women's bodies and sexualities were controlled and silenced, in order to expose rape and sexual assault.

Secondly, the naked performance conveyed the agency, courage and power of young women to resist and refuse the violence that is instituted on their bodies (Lewis, 2009). This discourse was clearly expressed in TW2, which described the naked protest in similar ways to O'Keefe (2006:547), as the "ultimate act of disruption and empowerment". The text, *"The naked body represents vulnerability & strength, and being disarmed yet empowered,"* captured the

subversive power of a vulnerable and feminised body protesting naked and unarmed on the street, while simultaneously defying conservative patriarchal society by rewriting the disempowering "dominant sexual script associated with their nude bodies" (Tamale, 2016:23).

In my interviews with research participants, some of them explained the impact of the #NakedProtest among conservatives. For instance, Thandi mentioned how the naked protest was used to disarm the police and paramilitary that were commissioned to protect the university.

> … the naked protest has a very long history in the continent and all over the global south. It allowed people to express themselves in a way that also don't always make them vulnerable to state violence, because when the women at Wits decided to put up their hands and shirt off the police were confused and paralysed because they didn't know what to do and they felt ashamed … it made them felt ashamed of what they were doing … it gave the movement a lot of political and moral legitimacy, and it painted the picture of what the students are doing in a very different way and made it more meaningful.

However, in most cases, it did not disarm the police successfully. In fact, Halkon (2016) reported that at RU, where the #NakedProtest initially began, the police used pepper spray and stun guns to disperse the protest. Since the public domain, as a "space of appearance," is a manifestation of strict patriarchal cultural norms and values, there were strong objections from all quarters about how the feminist activists occupied the streets (Butler, 2011). In relation to this, Veneracion-Rallonza writes, "naked protest allows its practitioners to achieve a sense of autonomy and empowerment in the face of political realities over which they have little control" (2014:255). It would be inaccurate to think that the naked performance was simply an act of rebellion, or was disproportionate to the crisis of entrenched rape culture and violence

against women in South Africa. The naked protest, as has been the case historically in naked performances by women in Africa, was the last resort of young women students in gaining the attention of universities and the nation. In this sense, it was a unique and available weapon allowing women to reclaim ownership and control over their bodies (Turner & Brownhill, 2004; Lewis, 2009; O'Keefe, 2011; Tamale, 2016).

Denouncing the body as a protest tool: "Is a woman's voice her body?"

In every society, expressions of empowerment, liberation, or outrage in public spaces are dependent on restrictive gendered divisions, moral codes and cultural values. Feminists have stated that gender performance is rehearsed through constantly changing social constructions of gendered body regulations embedded within the fabrics of social and cultural values (Sutton, 2007; Lewis, 2009; Butler, 2011; Tamale, 2016; Sultana, 2013). In relation to this, VeneracionRallonza argues, "the body – literally and metaphorically – commands a lineage of myth and control that either celebrate or demonize it" (2014:264). These social controls and disciplining of the body are enforced on women's bodies, particularly on black women's bodies (Lewis, 2009). Eventually, such repression of the body leads to the eruption of resistance against the patriarchal establishment (Wolff, 1997). Significantly, these political actions, from a feminist perspective, can be seen to legitimise the political cause that demanded the disruption in the first place. At the same time, they have been seen by some to reinforce and reinscribe women's socially ascribed bodiliness and incapacity for truly human agency. The following few tweets extracted from the #NakedProtest streamline show individuals' critique, concern, and disapproval of the instrumentalisation of naked protest to unsettle higher education institutions and the general public's conventional understanding of rape culture:

TW1: The "naked protest " has once again highlighted the preconceived notion that women can only be taken seriously without their clothes

TW2: I fail to understand the "naked protest". do the words and action of a woman only carry substance when she is bare breasted?

TW3: I think it highlights that the world only pays attention to a woman when she is naked

TW4: Does showing your $&@?: private parts to the world really get people to sympathize and listen to you ?

TW5: is a woman's voice her body?

The denunciation of women actively using their bodies as a protest tool can be seen in these rhetorical questions. Unsurprisingly, men wrote all these tweets quoted above. The subtext of all these tweets shows how certain left-leaning people (including feminists) have had misgivings about naked protests, expressed through the imposition of nudity on the young women's nakedness. These texts portray an insensitivity to the subversive nature of the performance itself, and merely recite patriarchal social constructionist views of "boundaries of gender and identity, between art and obscenity, the permissible and the forbidden" (Sutton, 2007:107). TW1, TW2, TW3, and TW4 criticised the naked protest strategy, slipping into preconceived ideas about women "seducing" men (or a patriarchal system) to get what they want. Embedded in these questions is the undermining and policing of black women's agency to pursue justice by whichever means they see fit. In addition to this, the tweets are meant to prescribe "how to pursue justice" while maintaining the social code of respectable conduct of bodies. Hence, these tweets seem to suggest that young women's protest against rape can and

should "*be taken seriously*", "*carry substance*", "*get attention*", and "*get sympathy*" without the use of the naked protest. This view fails to recognise the patriarchal structure that led to the birth of the #NakedProtest in the first place. These tweets therefore repeat the sexist and misogynist eroticisation of women's bodies, particularly black women's bodies (Sultana, 2013).

It is not unusual to see women's nakedness interpreted through discourses of hyper-sexuality (Baer, 2016). The contradiction here, as pointed out in the tweets above, is that it has become conventional to use the female body, and especially the black female body, for advertising and commodification (O'Keefe, 2006). Yet, when the naked body is used deliberately for political resistance, naked protest performance is vociferously contested. The same spectators who, both online and offline, indulge in the sexualisation and exploitation of women's naked bodies, immediately become guardians, authoritative figures, and discipliners of cultural values in patriarchal societies (Lewis, 2009).

These discourses and encounters serve as a reminder that a woman's body does not totally belong to her (Baer, 2016). In this vein, Tamale argues that to sexualise and objectify women's naked protest is to diminish the body as an active agent and to inscribe it as a passive sexual object (2016:23):

> When women strip in protest, at best they rewrite and overwrite the dominant sexual script associated with their nude bodies. At worst they render it illegible. It is an insult to undermine their mobilizing potential and their ability to rally against oppression. Naked protesting women are stretching the personal to relate it to the political in a dramatic fashion. Society must therefore "read" their naked bodies as powerful icons of defiance and not as the objects of sexual display.

While the above five tweets question the protest method that was used to communicate rape culture, the tweets below portray a moral judgment against the naked protest, with the intention to correct what they deem to be the inappropriate behaviour of young black women. The gaze and interpretation imply protestors' insensitivity to or disrespect for cultural and religious belief and practices.

> TW6: I know that woman body is temple not object to protest pls #NakedProtestMustFall #RapeMustFall
>
> TW7: … the #nakedproter was public indecency #FeedMustFall
>
> TW8: …how can they expose themselves in public and not expect the public to react. #NakedProtest
>
> TW9: #nakedprotest they should have worn bras or a vest
>
> TW10: a grade 8 girl was able to challenge the schooling hair code of conduct with her blazer on. why you taking your clothes off for varisty (sic)?

Other spectators, as represented in TW6, TW7, TW8, and TW9, bluntly rejected the troubling of established social and cultural values created by the protest. Some of the comments, "*body is a temple*", "*public indecency*", "*how can they expose themselves*", "*should have worn bras and vest*", are direct indicators of how women's bodies are seen as private, and how the "respectability" of the body must be maintained at all times. In doing so, these moral codes strengthen the idea that a woman's body is not hers to govern. These humiliations and scrutiny are also direct indicators of "how power relations – at deep unconscious levels – are enacted through the public performance and representation of gendered bodies." (Lewis, 2009:127). At

another level, these tweets also indirectly reapply unsolicited convenient patriarchal explanations that emerge from what Gqola (2015) refers to as the "fear factory", which persistently preaches a relationship between clothing and sexual assault. These tweets dictate that women's bodies must conform to a particular set of gendered moralities in which femininity is supposed to be hidden from the male gaze (Hussen, 2018).

Interestingly, TW10 made a comparison between #NakedProtest and #StopRacismAtPretoriaGirlsHigh. To give context, in August, 2016, black teenage schoolgirls from Pretoria High School for Girls protested against the school's policy on hairstyles. The school was allegedly accused of racism for putting pressure on "black girls to straighten their hair and not wear Afro" (Nicholson, 2016: n.p.). Black teenage schoolgirls protested against the system by wearing their Afro hair and claiming their right to wear natural hair. The protest occurred at the same time as university students were driving #FMF, a movement that focused largely on the violent control and misrepresentation of black women's and men's bodies.

The schoolgirls protested in public because they were outraged by the policing and regulation of their hair at school. The comparison made in TW10 seeks to purposely humiliate #NakedProtest activists by claiming that effective protest about bodies need not involve nakedness. Perhaps protesting with natural Afro hair, because it does not involve bared bodies, might seem still to fall within the boundaries of the "social norm". Furthermore, in terms of labelling which parts of women's bodies are "private", the text in TW10 strongly echoes TW4's rejection of "*showing private parts*" of women's bodies. I argue that, regardless of which body part is being exposed, the #NakedProtest and #StopRacismAtPretoriaGirlsHigh protests were similar as both protest performances focusing on bodies were politically employed to disrupt a racist, patriarchal and misogynist social order. In South Africa, where black schoolgirls

historically have been expected to conform to white hair conventions at the expense of their own identity, the act of wearing hair in a natural Afro serves a similar purpose to protesting naked. To borrow from Wolff (1997:83), "What is repressed, though, may threaten to erupt and challenge the established order." Hence, the tweets presented earlier were unable to see how these two protests were actually interwoven.

Although most of the attacks on black women's naked protests were from the right-wing, the protests, as raised above, also raised controversy among feminists. In various naked protests, feminist struggle continues to be stretched between rejection of "auto-sexualisation" of women's bodies (O'Keefe, 2011) and the reluctance to strongly argue nakedness as "de-sexualised" performance (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014). Baer argues that "the status of the body for feminism has been transformed in overlapping ways by the contexts of neoliberalism and digital culture" (2016:23). The debates among feminists continue to be about the possibility of naked protest performance with "the consciousness to sexualized nakedness as power" (Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014:263). The question remains: how do women use their bodies for protest and yet celebrate their sexualities? And how do feminists disentangle the deception of "sexual freedom" that serves the eroticising needs of the patriarchal and misogynist male gaze? Echoing this perplexity, Wolff argues it is becoming increasingly difficult to write women's "experience of the body and sexuality, and experience [that] is not mediated by men and by patriarchy" (1997:91).

Concluding remarks

The protest by young women students on campus streets had a significant symbolic and political impact by revealing the rampant sexual assault and rape in the higher education sector and at national level. Individuals participating in #NakedProtest took over public spaces, contested the university's normalised code of conduct, and remade "a history in the midst of its most concrete and sedimented artifices" (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015:95). The #NakedProtest, I argue, addressed two major feminist agendas. Firstly, it drew attention to "the precarious place of women's bodies in the public sphere and especially their on-going subjugation to sexual violence" (Baer, 2016:24). The movement showed the vulnerability of young women in campus spaces to sexual assault and rape. Secondly, and simultaneously, the naked performance conveyed the agency and power of young women to courageously resist and refuse the violence that is instituted on their bodies (Lewis, 2009).

The protests disrupted the legalistic and disembodied manner in which sexual harassment and rape culture had been discussed and dealt with in higher education, including feminist activists', advocates', and policymakers' longstanding critical engagement in relation to the rape crisis in South Africa. The young women occupied spaces for creating discourses for defining and challenging "the problem". In so doing, they covered the tricky and expansive ground around violence against women that older and conventional instruments (including university task teams, institutions' managerial committees, university lawyers, and even feminist and civil society organisations) failed to address consistently or effectively. The discourse emerging out of the naked protest – both in the form of the embodied acts and the social media posts around it – challenged the fear and vulnerability of women in public spaces, countered sexualisation of their bodies, destabilised the "victim-blaming" discourse, and firmly

articulated women's ownership of their bodies. The online spaces transcend the political struggle by creating "a countervailing pressure that cannot be contained indefinitely" (Scott, 1990:9). Certainly, the ungovernability of social media culture and #NakedProtest made the young women's protest visible nationally and globally.

Today, notwithstanding the ongoing challenges of violence against women and rape in South Africa and elsewhere, the naked protest gave "rise to changed modes of communication, different kinds of conversations, and new configurations of activism across the globe, both online and offline" (Baer, 2016:18). Using digital technology side-by-side with public protest presented a possibility to deepen resistance against violence against women among the youth through a decentralised participatory process. The naked protest revealed the everyday embodied experiences of young women on campus (Pitts, 2005), and their determination to use "invented sites" for articulating these experiences. The use of digital platforms and strategies revealed the extent to which mainstream platforms (news media, organisations' websites, academic scholarship) have restricted scope for the articulation of how black women's experiences form their points of view, as well as the interconnectedness of online and offline spaces in tackling the effects of rape culture (Betlemidze, 2015). The popularisation of this protest online, on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms, demonstrated the demand for an urgent course of action from the higher education sector and the state. It also validated women's individual experiences of sexual violence within the larger narrative of rape culture and sexual assault in South Africa and globally (Reestorff, 2014).

Chapter Seven

African feminist digital politics: Transnational and Global Circuits and Struggles

Introduction

Analysing the politics of movement-building in the digital era from the vantage point of African feminists' struggles helps to explain the political complexity and digital intricacy of locally driven feminism in contemporary Africa. At the same time, it can provide a critical understanding of the appropriation, distortion and erasure of feminist digital activisms in Africa. The previous three chapters established that African feminist struggles that are embedded in national movements are usually either left out of national political discourses or singled out as standalone struggles. The analysis also showed that radical black African women and LGBTQIA+ activists have been pushing these struggles from the margins to the centre.

In this chapter, I will attempt to extend this argument and show how the erasure of African feminist digital activism is perpetuated, not only nationally or within organisations, but also in global circuits of activism and knowledge about activism. Feminists have established that the dynamics of transnational movement-building tend to reflect and reinstate global power inequalities, resulting in diminishing knowledge transfer from the south to the north so that histories of southern-led movements become erased (Milevska, 2011; Gouws, 2017; Hearn, 2018). Consequently, African women's, and global southern women's, struggles and knowledges are erased from the local and global public imaginary and from African feminists' collective memory (Hussen & Shefer, forthcoming). This chapter looks at both the context of "erasing" African feminist knowledge and archives, as well as the resilience of feminist

movements in overcoming efforts to mute them. In doing so, it provides an insight into how the western world continues to benefit from knowledge produced in the continent and monopolises "the effects of discursive colonization on the lives and struggles of marginalized women" (Mohanty, 2003:509).

A prominent thread in the feminist movements explored in this thesis is the precarity of African feminist movements in transnational global feminist movements. In each country case, feminist scholars and activists carried the burden of undoing essentialised assumptions in the global north that persistently represent African women as powerless, undeveloped, and without agency. In the case of the Arab revolutions, feminists were well aware of the ways in which the west considers Arab and Muslim women (Newsom & Lengel, 2012); in Nigeria, feminists in the diaspora community resisted the western colonial gaze and distorted narrative of islamophobia as well as assumptions about black African girls and women as perpetual victims of black African men, seen as innately and excessively violent and hyper-patriarchal.(Maxfield, 2016); in Ethiopia, although not strongly stated, local activists and the diaspora community also resisted the assumption of black African migrant communities as voiceless (Mariam, 2016); and in the #FMF movement in South Africa, feminist activists were purposefully "writing and rioting" against recurring discourses that erased the African feminist archive (Dlakavu, Ndelu & Matandela, 2017; Lewis & Hendricks, 2017) and stereotyped African women. Such feminist activisms and knowledge-making tend to find audiences mainly within gender-related disciplines and among black and queer feminist activist scholars, often in Africa; they are rarely fully recognised in the conversations and knowledge consolidation of transnational feminism.

Swarr and Nagar (2012) argue that feminist understandings and critiques of the global process are extremely important in articulating the complexities of social movements and activism, particularly from the global south. Here, intersectionality is instrumental in exploring the longstanding tensions and power dynamics of historical differences between the global north and south (Collins, 2004). Feminist politicisation of differences, therefore, highlights how the homogenisation of the experiences of African women and LGBTQIA+ collectives in transnational relations deeply damage movement-building and politics of coalitions (Beoku-Betts, 2021). Echoing this, African feminists and gender activists have developed a critical knowledge of African feminist identity, representation and political engagement within the transnational feminist praxis (Lewis, 2010; McFadden, 2011; Tamale, 2020). This scholarship and activism further complicates intersectionality by factoring in the inevitability of north-south power dynamics which persist even among many northern feminists who are, theoretically, well-versed in arguments about, for example, decoloniality, northern dominance in definitions of transnational and multicultural feminism or the book and journal publishing industry which foregrounds knowledge from and about the north for readers and activists in both the north and the south.

At another level, globalisation and transnational relations in the digital era have contributed to the political needs and strategies of "African imaginations of the self" which opened a way to define African identities in their diverse historical, political and cultural diversities (Petty, 2011:28); and challenge colonialist perceptions of Africa as "monolithic" and "frozen in the form of a spectacle" (Mohanty, 1991:6). For instance, the ironic "Africa is a country" has become a well-known African response to the global media that thrives on a narrative that intentionally ignores and misrepresents diverse African histories, cultures and politics. At the same time, "Africa is a country" unveils the absurdity of the colonial gaze that considers the

entire continent of Africa as a single country, and particularly the developmental models that homogenise Africa's image as helpless victims in transnational relations. Such creative self-styling shows that, "Africans are not only cognizant of Africa as a continent, but also constitute African identity within the wider flows of world histories" (Petty, 2011:35). Thus, digital resistance against hegemonic western feminist knowledge production, multi-layered explorations of African feminist social and political concerns, and "self-styling" an African identity in transnational feminist movements all determine the autonomy and agency of African women and the LGBTQIA+ community.

One also needs to recognise that, in the digital era, western developmentalist scripts and discursive languages of power continue to entrench neoliberal capitalist models through a technological industry driven by the global north (Lewis, 2010). These models characterise African women as poor, uneducated, backward, oppressed, and thus dependent on the developmentalist interventions of digital technology (Heugh 2011). For instance, the ICT For Development (ICT4D) sector has been heavily criticised for reinstituting the authority of the global north over the global south through technological development discourses and practices in the global south (Robins, 2002). In particular, the hierarchical power dynamics that are exercised through projects such as "ICTs and women empowerment" and "gendered digital divide in Africa," where African women are only considered as beneficiaries of the west's digital development agenda, is a view that works to suppress the value of African women's agency, both political and socio-economic. As a result, African feminists' digital work and knowledge production is "unseen, undertheorised, and left out" (Mohanty, 2003:511).

One aim of this chapter is to bring together some of the African feminist movements already discussed, to demonstrate their force within transnational feminist digital activism in Africa.

The chapter argues from two standpoints. First, it takes up the challenge of mapping the expansion of particular national movements into other African countries. This is done to demonstrate that there has been a significant, yet side-lined, African-centred momentum behind African feminist digital activism; it has most definitely not drawn only on external digital activist models. There remains very little recognition of digital feminist activism that makes use of complex expression styles of protest action and performance from the African continent. Second, the chapter argues that, while African movements certainly benefited from diverse online mobilisation techniques and strategies (due to the strong visibility and long-established authority of northern feminism), acknowledgement of reciprocity and transfer of feminist knowledge from the global south is underdeveloped. This involves undertheorised and neglected topic areas that focus on how feminist movement-building in one African country grows and transfers into another African country; and if/how the global north is ever willing to use (but not acknowledge) the global south on strategies of feminist movement-building. Here, #MeToo is a great example. For instance, it would be interesting to ask to what extent the #RapeMustFall movement in #FMF contributed to the #MeToo campaign, or whether the global northern #MeToo strategies had picked up forms of feminist innovative strategies from #FMF.

African feminist digital activism, transnational knowledge sharing and pan-African visions

When addressing the politics of location within transnational feminism, it is very important to look for deep-seated politics, and aesthetic formations of regional feminist movements and organisations in order to avoid repeating historical and current geopolitical privileges and power relations. That said, it is undeniable that there remain tensions between African

feminists' transnational politics and the authority of the global north. While local movements certainly benefit from global trends and models of online mobilisations through the internet and mobile technologies, it is not clear whether there is a relationship of causality or determination between them. In this regard, Gill and Orgad (2018:1314) argue that transnational solidarity "does not simply 'add in' new countries or cultures, but, more critically, offers ex-centric or decolonial perspectives that displace the hegemony of white, urban western theorizing". Such a feminist interpretation is also necessarily a decolonial one, since it seeks to acknowledge how certain knowledges, especially those in geopolitical spaces that have historically been subjugated over centuries of colonisation, and that still remain peripheral, have been marginalised and devalued (Tamale, 2020).

These decolonial and situated pan-African feminist projects may enable feminists to identify different vantage points in understanding the predicaments of transnational feminist movements (McFadden, 2011). Remarking on this, Milevska (2011:53) argues that, "even though it is clear that regions cannot function as the only relevant cultural identity concept, the regional context is relevant exactly because of the danger of essentialisation and the overburdening complexities and exclusions that prevail in the national context." Thus, feminist digital activism provides a voice for African feminist "issue-based networks to coalesce, giving young radical feminists in particular a platform to push dialogue forward" (Nyabola, 2018:262). This dialogue includes the potential overriding effect of technological innovations that reinforce heteropatriarchy, as well as the potential for erasure, and how these affect feminist movement structures.

While feminists may resist the universalising definition of "third world feminisms" or "global south feminisms", they also recognise it as an "analytical and political category" to make

connections between historical and political struggles (Mohanty, 1991:6). For instance, African feminist scholars and activists use "African women" not as a homogeneous category but as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006), with the intention to critically link the repression of black African women in the social, cultural, and political spheres. It also provides an opportunity for coalition, collaboration and interweaving of knowledge across the continent (McFadden, 2011).

The significance of pan-African and transnational feminist movements is the potential for reciprocity of mobilisation strategies, ideological similarities, and knowledge-production that prioritise African feminist politics over neoliberalism and globalisation. In addition, these transnational feminist movements facilitate a "critical engagement with the power relations in which 'the empirical' and 'the affective' are embedded at this current socio-political conjuncture" (Pedwell, 2012:165). As such, digital feminist activism enlarges the influence of feminist thinking and resistance against patriarchy, violence against women, homophobia, capitalism, and neoliberal political structures in Africa (Dosekun, 2007). Yet, little attention is given to the transferability of feminist movements or protest culture across countries. As a result, big or small-scale feminist activism in Africa gets invisibilised within transnational digital feminist activism (Lukose, 2018; Shefer & Hussen, 2019; Maluleke & Moyer, 2020). Despite these challenges, the transferability of feminist digital activisms across African countries shows how digital movement-building enabled pan-African feminist discourse to reclaim a political space in transnational feminist politics.

Certainly, there has been a strong presence of online mobilisation accompanying and strengthening embodied activism, and, indeed, some campaigns have relied on the internet not only for advocacy but also for communicating with and recruiting participants in planned

activist events. Interestingly, this transnational solidarity and transfer of movements between countries has not yet been deeply analysed. Specifically, African feminist digital activists and scholars have not taken stock of the significance of this transferability of movements in shaping African feminisms on the continent. The main contributing factor to the transfer/move-in/out/between is the preoccupation of African feminists with internationally recognised digital movements, such as #MeToo. To a certain extent, the interest in making sense of the influence of these movements in Africa dominates the attention to feminist politics and political activism among local movements and their possibilities for configuring a larger tradition of feminism.

National movements and African transnational politics

As part of my digital ethnographic process, I observed how effectively digitally enhanced movement-building can be diffused across countries in Africa through the #hashtag frame. By foregrounding the theme that has been raised throughout this study, the discussions below will provide a more nuanced understanding of the production of feminist knowledge through a pan-African lens. My basic archival mapping focuses on the three digital movements that were analysed in the previous chapters: #BringBackOurGirls, #SomeOneTellSaudiArabia, and #FMF/ #RMF/ #TotalShutdown. Obviously, these digital movements are not representative of those who do not have access to technology, and these hashtags are undoubtedly more accessible to a small group of relatively privileged African women. Yet, these movements have also managed to mobilise allies across the continent, as well as street performances, on university campuses or among community-based organisations. The movements were therefore able to combine digital activism with embodied activism across intersecting levels of class, geopolitics, culture, religion, age and other locations.

Image 7.2: The Gender Equity unit at UWC, South Africa, held a silent protest in solidarity with the #Bringbackourgirls activism[23]

Image 7.1: Gender Links and the SADC Gender Protocol Alliance joined millions of others on April 14, which marked the third anniversary since the abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls by Boko Haram.[24]

This mapping does not assume the homogeneity of feminist struggles or experiences of violence against women in Africa. Rather, the focus is on the politics of African feminist knowledge-making in the face of digitisation, and the global and digital diffusion of knowledge, activism, and neo-colonialism protest and discourse alongside patriarchal hegemony. This presents a complex interpretation of feminist politics without losing the particularities of local and national narratives. The intention is to outline a neglected or

[23] https://www.uwc.ac.za/about/alumni/news-events/bring-back-our-girls-1276
[24] https://genderlinks.org.za/pressreleases/bring-back-girls-three-years/

"hidden" digital archive and show how politically influential African-centred and -driven digital activism has been, despite its lack of recognition in transnational feminist scholarship or politics.

Although the #BringBackOurGirls movement started in Nigeria, many African countries have used the hashtag frame for similar kidnapping issues, as well as violence against girls, and occasionally boys, in different communities since it started in 2014. At the beginning of 2015, South Sudan digital activists created the hashtag #BringBackOurBoys after armed men had abducted 89 young boys, some as young as 13, who were reportedly taking their exams in the town of Wau Shilluk (Al Jazeera News, 2015). The fear and public outrage that led to the digital activism emerged from knowledge about the use of child soldiers in conflicts in the region. It is worth noting that the campaign may not have been driven by a feminist or even girl- or woman-focused concern; however, it was motivated by the dread of a form of postcolonial militarism which ruthlessly uses violence and gendered conditioning to brutalise children to participate in war. Later that same year, in Kenya, the #BringBack130KenyanGirls movement called on the government to intervene and rescue young Kenyan women who were detained in Saudi Arabia. #BringBack130KenyanGirls exposed the horrible conditions of domestic work in Saudi Arabia, including physical abuse and sexual violence against Kenyan domestic workers (Kulundu. 2015). In December 2018, Ghanaian digital activists launched #BringBackOurTaadiGirls to put pressure on the police to investigate and act on the reported kidnapping of three young women, who were later confirmed to have been killed, in the city of Takoradi (Shaban, 2019). Towards the end of 2019, in Ethiopia, 18 students were kidnapped by an unidentified armed group. The abducted individuals were fleeing to their families from the Dembi Dolo University as threats of violence escalated in that region. Shortly thereafter, #BringBackOurStudents and #BringBackOurGirls social media campaigns were created by

Ethiopian activists. A similar campaign was also launched in Western Sahara in November 2020; the Saharawi community used #BringBackOurSaharawi to appeal for the free return of their community members from refugee camps in Algeria (El Kanabi, 2020). Lastly, in December 2020, Nigerian citizens also launched a #BringBackOurBoys campaign after armed men abducted 300 boys from a secondary school in Kankara Katsina state (Okunola, 2020). Once again, the response to children who could face brutalisation and dehumanisation within the hyper-masculinist military groups and actions that currently plague many postcolonial countries is noteworthy.

The expansion of #BringBackOurGirls or #BringBackOurBoys movements across different African countries since 2014 indicates the transferability and reciprocity of African feminists' activism and transnational network engagement on the continent. It can be argued that the recognition of the movement from Nigeria in the global context encouraged other countries to use the hashtag frame in their local movements (Nwoye & Okafor, 2014). While this is true, to ascribe the uptake of #BringBackOurGirls/Boys simply to the hypervisibility of the Nigerian movement misses the opportunity to explore the pan-African vision, growing out of shared struggles around militarism, the role of children in wars, and the rise of ethnic and political conflicts resulting – as Mamdani (2020) shows – from distinct histories of colonialism. In assessing the various campaigns, therefore, we should avoid the idea of Africans requiring the approval or support of the global north in crafting their future feminist and digital activist movements or campaigns.

The hashtag frame captures the language of outrage and fear that fits into the interconnected regional and national contexts of Africa. It appears that the movements in each African country generated collective action even though the actual manifestation and political moments

emerged in quite distinct ways. This demonstrates how African feminist discourses have protested against abductions and violence in countries in Africa, as well as tried to change the impression of local feminist movements as emerging from western influence.

Since the 2013 #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia campaign against the crackdown operation against Ethiopian migrants in Saudi Arabia, many African countries have used this hashtag frame to protest against brutality, such as police violence and abuse by employers that migrant workers experience in Arabian countries. For instance, in 2015, Kenyan activists used the hashtag #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia to highlight the violence experienced by Kenyan migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, and to try hold the Saudi Arabian state accountable. Interestingly, the hashtag frame #SomeoneTell was co-opted by other African countries to fight against misrepresentation by the global north, particularly through well-known international media. The nuance embedded in the #SomeoneTell digital movements focused on powerful countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and asserted that they are no longer untouchable. Since then, it has been used to speak against powerful countries across various political issues. For instance, using the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN, Kenyans on Twitter problematised US media representations of Kenya. This hashtag movement was provoked by the comments made by the CNN analysts during the first visit of former US president Barack Obama, which labelled Kenya as a "hotbed of terror". In order to protest against this narrative, Kenyan Twitter users created political humour under the title "The Real Nairobi vs how CNN sees Nairobi"[25] and called CNN out on their racism and stigmatising perceptions of Africa. Two years later, Somalian activists used the hashtag #SomeoneTellUAE to invalidate the agreement signed between Ethiopia, Somaliland, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to grant access to the port of Berbera, which is located in Somaliland. Since this agreement undermined the sovereignty of Somalia as a

[25] https://twitter.com/masaku_/status/624238535843938304

state, Somalian activists used #SomeoneTellUAE to speak against this foreign-led exclusionary business deal that undermined existing mutual amicable relationships between nations (Mumbere, 2018).

While #SomeoneTell was initially created to expose human rights violations and mistreatment of African migrant workers in the Arab world, its repurposing highlights how national and continental power dynamics have deliberately compromised those in marginal geopolitical spaces. It also shows that the localisation of transnational movements creates framings that are relevant to existing local movements. In the context of #SomeoneTell, the pan-African vision and transnational politics are grounded in discursive languages that subversively talk back against unequal power dynamics.

The digital blueprints of #FeesMustFall in South Africa, as shown in Chapters Five and Six, have been popularised and co-opted by many, both inside and outside of Africa. For instance, #FeesMustFall has been used to protest higher education fees in countries such as Namibia (New Era Newspaper, 2016), Zimbabwe (Pindula News, 2017), Zambia (Zambian Teachers Corner, 2016), and Uganda (Otieno, 2019). The #RhodesMustFall movement was also adopted in Zambia (Lusaka Times, 2015), at Oxford University (Chaudhuri, 2016), and at the University of Colour (UoC) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands (Omarjee, 2019), and provoked a critical decolonial historical reflection in Zimbabwe (Fleming, 2020). Similarly, Ghanaians have used #GhandiMustFall, calling for the removal of the statue of Mahatma Gandhi at the University of Ghana (BBC News, 2018).

While some of these movements still exist and move between countries and continents, it is noticeable that #TotalShutDown feminist digital activism, which was popularised by #FMF

feminist activists, seems to have had an especially significant and long-lasting impact in the continent. #TotalShutDown, or #NationalShutDown, was a widely used hashtag frame in #FMF. The digital ethnography also shows that #TotalShutDown was used by #FMF feminist activists together with other hashtags, such as #PatriarchyMustFall and #RapeMustFall. However, #TotalShutDown's significance was evident in its sustained use in the aftermath of the #FMF student movement, in South Africa and other African countries. For instance, in August, 2018, South African women nationwide protested against the alarming rates of violence against women and rape in the country (Ebrahim, 2018) by using #TotalShutdown for their digital awareness-raising, mobilisation and protest. The rally took place in eight provinces in South Africa, with solidarity marches also occurring in Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe (Oduduwa, 2018). Later that same year, a group of feminists in Malawi created @ShutItDownMW on Twitter, also a response to violence against women and girls, and mobilised using #ShutdownMalawi and #ShutItDownMW (ShutItDownMW, 2018).

In January, 2019, Zimbabwean activists launched #ShutdownZimbabwe and #ShutdownAtrocities digital activism, to protest the rape of women by the Zimbabwean army and security forces. All protestors were dressed in black to show solidarity with victims of sexual violence (Selby & Singer, 2019). Three months later, a feminist organisation called Feminists in Kenya (FIK) mobilised a protest under the hashtag #TotalShutdownKe against femicide and violence against women in Kenya. The demonstrations were held in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu cities. FIK demanded that the Kenyan government and all women representatives in parliament consider violence against women a national emergency (Feminist Collective, 2019).

Furthermore, in February and October, 2020, a rally was organised in Namibia by a collective of feminist networks in the country. Feminist digital activists used #ShutItAllDownNamibia and #ShutItAllDown to organise and hold a demonstration against rape, kidnapping and murder of women. The movement particularly focused on intimate partner violence against women. It was reported that the rally started following the discovery of the body of Shannon Wasserfall, six months after her disappearance (Ossenbrink, 2020).

The adoption of South African student-led movements like #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, and #TotalShutDown into other countries shows the instrumental impact of African feminist movement-building in shaping conversations about violence against women in Africa and beyond. Most importantly, the hypervisibility of #TotalShutDown in many African countries underscores the value of digital activism in mobilising transnational feminist collectives and networks. These diverse feminist movements, each with their own particularities, have used #TotalShutDown to show public outrage against patriarchal practices and the systemic structures that fail to recognise and address violence against women and rape culture. From a pan-African perspective, these movements show how interconnected feminist issues are on the continent, particularly when challenging legal frameworks to try to protect women from various forms of violence including harassment, verbal abuse, marital rape, abduction and rape.

From an intersectional critical feminist perspective, these movements have the potential to build strategies of reciprocal knowledge-transfer about movement-building. However, the ongoing challenge in post-colonial Africa is how to create archives of feminist legacies while resisting global power relations (Baer, Smith-Prei, & Stehle, 2016). Since global structures usually perpetuate and maintain unequal power dynamics, a movement's politics of location can threaten "transversal politics," that "encompassment of difference by equality," and

emphasise aspects of struggles located in different geopolitical locations (Yuval-Davis, 1999:95).

Apart from the industry of work on #MeToo campaigns in various parts of the world (Kunst, Bailey, Prendergast, & Gundersen 2019; Ghadery, 2019; Lindgren, 2019; Shefer & Hussen, 2020; Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2020; Naik, 2020), these transnational solidarities and transfers of movements between countries have not yet been deeply analysed (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021). Specifically, African feminist digital activists and scholars have not taken stock of the significance of the transferability of movements in shaping African feminisms in the continent. A primary contributing factor is the preoccupation of African feminists with internationally recognised digital movements, such as #MeToo, which limits analysis of local movements and their possibilities for a larger body of feminist work.

For instance, in the world of internet and digital activism, #BringBackOurGirls, #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia, and #TotalShutDown are unique feminist movements, especially because they maintained their momentum for a relatively long time. Feminists are actively intervening in issues of national concern, and pan-African politics, despite the fact that they are still dismissed as dealing only with "women's issues" and not national or continental issues. This creates deep-seated anxieties that are reinforced by a lack of political recognition, exclusion, erasure and condemnation for being western and not African. This is important because movements from the global south are often regarded as "moments" of outrage and reactive protest that gradually disappear from the memory of the public, and it is significant that many are described as "campaigns" and not, like #MeToo, as "movements".

Most importantly, the digital archive is scattered, unrecognised, and hidden in transnational feminist praxis. This reality sustains the belligerent resistance of the global north to acknowledge knowledge-transfer and reciprocity from Africa, while at the same time tactically appropriating that feminist knowledge and archive for its own advantage. These and other connected digital archives should be used to interrogate and make sense of the deep-seated cultural and structural ideologies that perpetuate violence against black African women. Ideally, however, knowledge transfer and reciprocity among feminists globally should not be governed by the logic of ownership, unacknowledged use and appropriation, arrogant claims to knowledge authority, or deferential syndromes of dependency on others' knowledge.

Northern hegemony in feminist digital activism

The above-mentioned contemporary digital movements and the trend created across many African countries opens up possibilities for alternative understandings of transnational feminist praxis. For instance, #TotalShutdown, the more-recent feminist mobilisation against sexual violence in Africa, has been deployed across multiple sites through multiple events, marches, online and media-based interventions. Furthermore, these protests have taken place throughout South Africa, and in various other African countries. Like many feminist activisms in the global south, the movements also incorporated feminist politics that influenced the trajectories of digital feminist activism against sexual violence in transnational feminist movements (Baer, et.al., 2016). Yet, #TotalShutdown continues to be erased by international movements such as #MeToo.

#MeToo offers a space to critically interrogate the current politics of transnational feminist activism and scholarship across temporal and spatial inequalities, and "the dynamic interactions

between fields of power such as the production of knowledge, geopolitical relations and intellectual, disciplinary and political locations" (Lukose, 2018:43). Particularly in the global south, it provides a valuable optic for assessing how contemporary transnational feminist meaning-making might repeat colonial logics of knowledge-making, and how the power embedded in the movement might threaten to erase the histories of local contemporary activist movements against sexual violence (Baer *et al*., 2016).While it is commonly understood that the #MeToo movement built its feminist politics on pre-existing feminist activism and scholarly work, its hyper-visibility in the global arena makes it appear to be exceptional and novel (Lukose, 2018; Maluleke & Moyer, 2020). Thus, it remains rooted in, and arguably productive of, irreconcilable power relations (Shefer & Hussen, 2020).

Yet, in academia, where feminist movements are explored, #MeToo is portrayed as one of the authoritative, definitive and world-changing frameworks for activism against sexual violence, particularly in digital activism. Not surprisingly, "it has become commonplace to hear feminists in South Africa use phrases such as 'in the era of #MeToo', or 'in the wake of the #MeToo moment' as a clear demarcation of an historical period" (Hussen & Shefer, forthcoming). Such emphasis on #MeToo serves to propagate further erasure, and undermines and weakens local grassroots feminist movements against sexual violence in the global south.

In this context, engaging with questions of privilege is enormously important. What needs urgent (re)consideration is being located in Africa in a critical transnational, pan-African feminist vision, that centres localised knowledges and "transversal dialogues, mutual learning practices and volatile but effective feminist coalitions" (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert & Koobak, 2016: 211) that do not repeat the privilege of particular knowledges and locations. Specifically, even where there is an acknowledged reciprocal knowledge exchange between

movements in the global north and the global south, there is still little attention given to the influential fact that movements from the global north such as #MeToo, are often entwined with authoritative political and knowledge positions and relationships with the global south as we have indicated here.

In return, this legitimises #MeToo as the quintessential and authoritative definition of protest against sexual violence. As Milevska (2011:52) articulates, "positioned between local and global feminist tendencies, regional feminist knowledge is very often neglected, and its potentialities remain unrecognized within the wider picture of transnationalism". One cannot help but ask, what about existing African feminist movements? How is #MeToo more applicable to the local context, particularly in challenging the status quo? How do we make sense of the temporality of feminist digital movements and the recalcitrant replacement of movements by the next "new" digital trend? How is it possible for us to rethink and destabilise the hegemonic power of western/northern feminism if we are not paying attention to diverse forms of feminist knowledge and activism in other contexts?

For example, our own action of supplanting what we know and work hard for, such as #TotalShutDown, with #MeToo shows the normative impulse, particularly in digital activism, that leads to the destruction of such activism by effectively excluding other similar movements, erasing historical struggles of feminist activists, and weakening local feminist movement organisations. In this way, rather than representing a global and intersectional challenge against sexual violence, the already "ever present entanglements of race, geopolitical imbalances, poverty, and so on within the campaign, may serve to re/entrench and re/produce the privileging and centering of some and the dispensability and subalternity of others" (Hussen & Shefer, forthcoming). These power dynamics thus serve to directly or indirectly reinforce the erasure

of local movements while appropriating the aesthetics of protest performances. This in turn generates stereotypical perceptions of local or regional feminist activism, that places the burden on African feminists to resist these persistent discourses.

Concluding remarks: Returning to national archives

The discourses embedded in the movements described here sought to reinstitute both the visibility and political force of movements that were carried by black women in different countries. Also highlighted here is a postcolonial and decolonial feminist critique that tries to disrupt the colonial gaze and authority within movements that appear to be transnational. African feminist digital activism as a political subject should not be reduced to resistance and reactionary movements by the global north. Focusing on the transfer of movements between countries calls attention to modes of articulation that are often overlooked due to perceptions of limited technological and internet access in Africa. Although these movements do not necessarily represent the struggles of digital-access-deprived societies, comparing how the above-mentioned movements began and expanded might provide a nuanced perspective on how African feminist digital activism has been deployed across multiple spaces for social change. As far as African feminist digital movements are concerned, the missed opportunities here are a critical analysis of the transferability of movements between countries on the continent, and making sense of the trajectories of digital movements in Africa.

At another level, the power differences between the global north and south, along with mastery of sophisticated techniques of technological amplification of movements by global north feminist movements, places pressure on global south feminists to rearticulate local movements to fit into the language that is trending globally. This impulse to replicate movements such as

#MeToo, and to participate in recording the hegemonic archives, limits the power of global south movements. As a result, histories of southern-led movements become obscured under the hegemonic global north imagery of the powerless African women. Consequently, locally formulated feminist expressions of protest and activism get erased, further accentuating the influence of these expressions from the north, which are entrenched, directly or indirectly, in colonial power hierarchies (Hussen & Shefer, forthcoming).

Finally, addressing the politics of location within transnational feminism, the push to look for deep-seated politics and aesthetic formations of African feminist movements and organisations is important to avoid repeating historical and current geopolitical privileges and power relations. Consequently, digital archiving is a necessarily decolonial project that seeks to acknowledge how certain knowledges, especially those in geopolitical spaces that have historically been subjugated over centuries of colonisation and neo-imperialism, and that still remain peripheral, have been marginalised and devalued, such as local South African efforts to challenge sexual violence. Such decolonial and situated projects may open up possibilities for feminists to identify the different vantage points that can contribute to an understanding of the predicaments of transnational feminist movements (Milevska, 2011).

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Although African feminist interventions have become more visible in national, continental and global academic and activist sites, there has been limited attention paid to the way that African feminists' discourses and practices are actually in conversation with one another. This thesis has tried to move away from seeing these interventions as site-specific responses to localised challenges and colonial or neo-colonial hegemony. Instead, I have identified a pan-African constellation of political energies and knowledge-creation which indicate an autonomous movement-building in which African-centred feminists speak to, encourage and fuel one another's energies.

This thesis sought to further African feminist discourses on movement-building in the digital age. To this end, it has examined feminist movements in five African countries that made use of digital activism as one of a range of mobilisation approaches. The research illustrates complex practices of movement-building to provide insight into the ways in which activists opt to work with the digital counterpublic spaces. The #FMF feminist activists, for instance, very quickly understood the limitations of nationalist and patriarchal public spheres, and chose to diversify modes of engagement to enable freedom of self-expression and performances of gender subjectivities, and also to confront patriarchy within nationalism head-on.

I have purposefully avoided techno-centric analyses that characterise revolutionary movements as mere outcomes of technological advancements. The research demonstrated the reductionist nature of such simplistic arguments, which prevent feminist tech researchers from exploring structural and political predicaments that enable the emergence of alternative structures of

engagement. At the same time, it is evident from the multisite ethnographic analyses that, despite the constraints posed by the digital divide, a dynamic feminist digital activism has prevailed in Africa beyond the instrumentalist constructions of tech-enhanced movements.

Furthermore, techno-centric arguments often promote the idea of western-originated technology as a panacea for social and political problems in Africa. Such notions are oblivious to the dynamic imagination, creativity, and resistance of feminist activists against social and political injustice on the continent. That said, it is undeniable that technological advancement and digital activism has facilitated an alternative way of engagement, enabled access to the public sphere, and shifted the androcentric political structure.

While all the preceding chapters have a concluding section, in this concluding chapter, I present broad insights about selected feminist themes and topics that need further critical exploration towards in-depth understanding and knowledge-making in relation to feminist digital movements in Africa, which will unleash capacity to imagine, rupture, and open up possibilities and feminist visions.

Recentring nationalism as a threat to feminist struggle

Nationalist ideologies are articulated mobilisation strategies that coerce individuals across class, gender, racial, and age divisions. These are very powerful and deliberate instruments that lure and mobilise many to endorse and rally behind nationalist agendas. According to McFadden (2018), a typical ideological formation of nationalism is accentuating hegemonic narratives that hide social and political inequalities and sustain the underlying systemic structures. She argues that the crafts of hegemonic nationalism – whether for fascism or anti-colonialism – are suppressing other discourses, side-lining the most marginalised, censoring

voices, erasing narratives, silencing different voices, and manipulating large popular platforms in a sophisticated manner. Feminists also fall into this hegemonic entrapment and find themselves working with nationalist ideologies (Hassim, 2019).

This notion of hegemony provides us with a conceptual tool to better understand and explore the extent to which nationalism suppresses and erases the radical agencies of women (McFadden, 2018). The narratives of movements that are presented in this paper show creative feminist resistance against nationalist strategies that systematically exclude women from participating in movements. The #FMF movement was a moment of rupture of the neoliberalist and capitalist status quo (Lewis and Hendricks, 2017). The feminist struggle that came out of the #FMF movement depicts the ways in which nationalism and masculinist leadership stifle women's autonomy and agency to equally contribute to the movement. For instance, as shown in Chapter Five, the #TransCapture and #MbokodoLead movements were critical sites where public memory and narratives of movements and visibility were interrogated, and which questioned lineages and inheritance of heteropatriarchal power that fundamentally gave permission for men to claim leadership and heroism. Meanwhile, stories of feminist activists who led the movement and contributed their labour in multifaceted ways often got marginalised and forgotten. #FMF feminist activists clearly exposed and pushed back against the hegemonic masculinist narratives that were used to manipulate, deploy and recentre particular images of who was important in the student-led movement.

The thesis focused on the ways in which nationalism is central to the material and political situation that we are facing right now, and why our feminism has to be rethought and reimagined. Perhaps, recentring and interrogating nationalism from a critical African feminist perspective provides us with the grounding to understand the diverse forms of resistance that

have migrated from the streets to social media platforms as spaces of women's participation in resistance, and how they mobilised to push against anecdotal moments of visibility while their labour for the movement was exploited by many (McFadden, 2018).

Equally, recentring nationalism in feminist critiques provides us with knowledge to understand the extent to which feminist movements run the risk of becoming complicit with nationalist and masculinist ideologies that eventually compromise feminist goals (Hassim, 2019). Thus, attention must be paid to understand the extent to which relationships between feminists and the state lead to power negotiation. African feminists should explore how men use nationalism to sustain patriarchal power and exclusionary masculinist leadership in movements, and the sophisticated ways that feminist demands are suppressed.

On digital activism and counterpublic space

Another important theorisation emerging out of this study concerns the way that formal public spaces in many African "democracies" are accessible only by invitation, which determines the ways in which individuals engage with the state. Most importantly, I have argued that public spaces are often not accessible for feminism and feminist individuals and collectives. Thus, the use of digital spaces was a way to conceptualise an alternative means for feminists to hack these exclusionary structures through digital activism and create counterpublic spaces. Segments of the thesis highlight how feminists create counterpublic spaces against these nationalist contexts. In order to make sense of these complex power negotiations, the research explored the journey of diverse African feminist movements that used hybridised mobilisation, with an enduring presence on digital platforms in Tunisia, Egypt, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa.

The findings show that since the public sphere hardly considers women as political subjects, feminist movements are often forced to migrate to social media spaces. Thus, women's voices and women's struggles were strongly featured on social media.

The thesis has shown that the common interest when using the internet is its flexibility as a medium to reach the public beyond local, communal and even national territories. Digital space allows for a wider dissemination of protest than mainstream media reporting, which is often constrained by its particular ideological framing and the specific political role it performs. In some ways, then, as the overview of the social movements shows, the virtual space instantly expands beyond the territorial limitations of the physical public spaces. It reinforces and amplifies already existing social movements, strengthening the offline and online political spaces by creating alternative spaces and opportunities for diffusion of social movements from marginalised communities. Hence, this complex dissemination of information enables access to the public sphere and political participation beyond the citizenry-imagined struggle for democratic participation.

Furthermore, feminists have to interrogate discourses of technology beyond developmentalist thinking. Gqola writes, "many of the ways in which Black women imagine feminisms and postcoloniality are through creative media, not traditionally subsumed under the terrain of theory-building" (2001:11). As such, contemporary feminist digital activism, located in the context of postcolonial Africa, have taken discourses of political participation in counterpublic spaces as part of anti-nationalist movements. Part and parcel of this discourse is understanding dynamic and multifaceted uses of digital media for feminist activism. This research attempted to show the extent to which feminist work is peculiar and more disruptive. However, there need to be further explorations of creative feminist invented spaces. Emphasis should be put on the

ways in which diverse digital platforms reveal deep-seated tensions and conflicts that limit feminist voices and contradict aspects of progressive movements' intention, such as the #FMF movement where masculinist and patriarchal leadership structures served the ongoing movement at the expense of giving women and queer communities the space and recognition to influence the movement.

Digital Archive

Digital counterpublic spaces are also used as a digital archive where the hashtag frames are used as an identifier of a movement. This research has explored how masculinist and nationalist rhetoric hide feminist struggles in movements, which results in the erasure of history and archives of women's involvement and voices. It has to be recognised that social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others, are owned by private companies that are situated in the US. This means that, by extension, the archives that are created by African feminists are owned by these companies. Perhaps the issue that needs further unravelling here is data heritage and sovereignty. So far, the critique around digital archives, particularly on social media platforms, is the issue of "access to big data" by researchers and academics. To the best of my knowledge, issues of archival documentation, heritage and sovereignty have not been part of the conversation. However, African feminists should expand this knowledge-making and reflect on how "'feminist', 'queer', 'decolonial' and 'diasporic' … experiment with archival materials, be in and outside the archive, construct archives and speculate archival futures" (Nydia, Swaby & Chandra, 2020:6). Why do archives matter in the age of hashtag-catalogued digital archives? Who has access to what? Twitter and Facebook own the digital archives that are South Africans' history and heritage, and these private companies charge fees to grant access to the archives that have been built by African black women and men, their allies, the international community, etc. Why are we, as post-colonial

thinkers, not alarmed by this troubling fact, which resembles colonial systems of wealth accumulation and mining of heritage and artefacts, in the form of information and data. One of the reasons behind this negligence is the mis/recognition of #FMF as a national historical movement to be preserved, made even more difficult in the case of the feminist and queer movements within #FMF. Although the thesis did not answer these questions, it created the possibility for further feminist knowledge-making towards the subject of archive in the digital era.

Transnational African feminist movements

The title, "radical possibilities," invites an imagination of a feminist future with radical sensibility that is cynical of power structures imprinted in technological mediums, transnationalism, and the geopolitical context of the global south. As presented across the case studies, and especially in the #FMF movement, digital feminist movements have shown radical possibilities that emerge from applying counterpublic spaces and alternative ideologies as feminists resist the status quo of nationalist ideologies. Feminists manage to skip the cycle of inevitability and rearticulate a feminist future that embraces subjectivity, freedom, and autonomy of black women and marginalised communities.

The common thread of the thesis is resistance, agency, non-conformity, and feminist notions of justice. Such contextualisation anchors resistance in the digital space and provides a connection with the lived historical feminist resistance of people against nationalism and patriarchy. African feminists have been resisting in a particular way, such as the naked protests which were deployed by African women in different African countries, to protest against colonialism, nationalism and violence against women. Such interconnections remind us of the

characteristics of nationalism and its hegemonic narratives' persistence in silencing and erasing women's radical agency, whether it is in the streets, in trade unions, or in digital spaces.

The thesis also sought to "visibilise" relatively new discourses in transnational feminist movements in Africa – where feminist struggles in one country became a steppingstone for women's struggles for freedom in multiple contexts. In relation to this, the thesis showed how #BringBackOurGirls, #TotalShutDown, and #SomeoneTellSaudiArabia have been instrumental for mobilisation and resistance by similar struggles in other African countries. Perhaps the most urgent work in relation to digitally enhanced movements is a further engagement with the radical possibility that transnational feminist movements on the continent demonstrate the interconnections of women's struggle. Clearly, there is a transnational feminist conversation happening organically at the grassroots level; thus, African feminists should pay more attention to feminist movements and the exchange of feminist knowledge in the global south. Such investment will provide the energy to reshape power and reimagine the structure of the relationship between the global south and global north.

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