# RhodesMustFall: Decolonization, Public Pedagogy & Epistemic Disobedience

A. Kayum Ahmed  
Teachers College, Columbia University

**INTRODUCTION**

On March 9, 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a black student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, took a bucket of feces and threw it against a bronze statue of Cecil John Rhodes (figure 3) located on the university’s campus (Nyamnjoh 2016, Mamdani 2016). Rhodes, who was recognized as a white British imperialist and racist, became a symbolic focal point for #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) – a radical student movement centered on decolonizing education by confronting questions of institutional racism and patriarchy, access to education, and reorganizing the Eurocentric university curriculum (figures 1 and 2) (Mebembe 2016).

While protests at universities in post-apartheid South Africa was nothing new (Booysen 2016), the defacement of the Rhodes statue was a catalyst for innovative forms of disruptive protests across South African universities and at the same time, inspired the formation of the #RMF movement at the University of Oxford (figure 4) five weeks later (Hefferman and Nieftagodien 2016, Mpufo-Walsh 2016, Jansen 2017). This research demonstrates how students involved in the #RMF movement engaged in a process of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009) to make sense of their experiences with race, gender, and patriarchy at UCT, and simultaneously influenced the formation of #RMF Oxford. Furthermore, I consider the emergent theory of Fallism developed during the #RMF movement and suggest that this emergent theory disrupts existing knowledge structures through radical protest action that embodies a form of public pedagogy thereby facilitating innovative and creative ways of generating knowledge. Lastly, the influence of the #RMF movement in Cape Town on the formation of #RMF Oxford is evaluated in the context of a theory from the South (Comaroff & Comaroff 2010).

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Why did student activists involved in the formation of #RMF adopt decolonial theories such as pan-Africanism, black consciousness, and black radical feminism, and reject human rights discourses?
2. How did the #RMFs adoption of decolonial frameworks give rise to an emergent theory of Fallism?
3. To what extent was the #RMF movement in Oxford shaped by #RMF in Cape Town?

**METHODS**

Given the differences of opinion on the methodological approaches that should be employed to study social movements, this dissertation adopts a relatively traditional approach by collecting evidence through 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews, several weeks of participant observations, and thousands of pages of document analysis.

The data for this study was collected intermittently through purposive sampling between 2016 and 2018 during which time, I visited the universities of Oxford and Cape Town for several weeks. While most interviews and all the observations took place in Cape Town and Oxford between 2016 and 2018, some interviews were conducted remotely.

My methodological approach is informed by Smith’s (1999) work on decolonizing methodologies, which centers indigenous knowledge and perspectives without totally rejecting Western approaches. Ethical approval for this study was granted by three separate ethics committees or review boards at Teachers College, Columbia University, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Oxford.

**DISCUSSION**

The students involved in the #RMF movement are sometimes referred to as “Fallists” (Modiri 2016) and their movement to decolonize education is referred to as “Fallism” (Ngcaweni 2016). The term “Fallism” is derived from the students’ demand to remove the Rhodes statue from the university; for the statue to fall. Just before the removal of the Rhodes statue on April 9, 2015 from UCT, the #RMF issued a statement which read: “Therefore when we say Rhodes Must Fall we mean that patriarchy must fall, that white supremacy must fall, that all systematic oppression based on any power relations of difference must be destroyed at all costs” (JWTC 2015, p. 12).

While the origins of the term “Fallism” are contested, students assert that the theory of Fallism is an attempt to make sense of their experiences as black bodies by employing decolonial theories centered on pan-Africanism, black consciousness, and black radical feminism. This study examines how Fallism is articulated through “public pedagogy” (O’Malley & Nelson 2013); moments of learning that involve performances and disruptive acts such as throwing faces onto statutes or occupying spaces. Furthermore, my research builds on social movements theory, by examining how #RMF employs disruptive tactics as moments of learning that simultaneously produce collective identity (McAdam et al. 1996, Escobar 2008, Sawyer 2004, Graeber 2009).

**CONCLUSIONS**

By employing epistemic disobedience as a theoretical framework for studying student movements, a more complex understanding of social movements begins to emerge. For instance, the university represents a contested space in which students and staff struggle to come to terms with questions of race, access to education, and the symbolic and structural dimensions of colonialism and racism. The uprising of UCT students could potentially be a precursor for future struggles in South Africa, and possibly the continent.

Furthermore, in our collective imaginary, Oxford is often considered as the generator, rather than the recipient, of new knowledge and ideas. Consequently, the formation of the #RMF Oxford movement, which was inspired by the #RMF Cape Town movement, provides an important contribution to the growing literature acknowledging the value of Southern theory and its influence on Euro-America.