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## Freedom Dreams Occur at the University: A Comparative Study of Black Student Activism in the United States and South Africa

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# Freedom Dreams<sup>1</sup> Occur at the University: A Comparative Study of Black Student Activism in the United States and South Africa

Ayaan Natala

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## Acknowledgements

This project is a testament to my Beloved community, who held my hand throughout this journey. I am grateful for my family, friends, and mentors for your blessings. *twaalumba*: mom, dad, william, michael, kenya, jade, ty, senah, dua, the babies, my local community, elders, ancestors, and the rest of my village.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom Dreams is a term coined by Robin D. G. Kelly's "Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination."

fatima, charmaine, lutfе, pieter, chawa, my therapist, okakeng, lillian, pippin, mike, lynne, and nadia who made this study abroad and return migration experience possible.

Most importantly, I must thank my inspiration and my focus for this study - Black students, especially Black student activists. This project is an act of love: for myself, community, and diaspora. These institutions were not created for us and cannot love us. Thank you for your bravery to fight for us. It inspires me to do the same and I am excited to continue building with you all. We got a lot of work to do, but when I see you (diaspora) it reminds me that *we gon' be alright*. In love, blackness, and solidarity.

#wakandaforever

**Prologue: Survival is a Pedagogy<sup>2</sup>**

*to not be safe on the earth.*

*simply*

*because*

*of the color of your skin*

*how does a being survive this*

*-trayvon martin, nanyirah waheed, “Salt”*



Where were you when Trayvon Martin was lynched<sup>3</sup>? I only remember where I was when I received the news George Zimmerman had been acquitted. My friends and I were on our way to the Eddie Conway Liberation Institute (ECLI) in Baltimore, Maryland. The camp honored Eddie Conway, a leading member of the 1971 Baltimore Black Panther Party and a political prisoner. We read his autobiography and wrote him letters while at camp. ECLI, hosted at a HBCU,<sup>4</sup> was a national debate camp training inner city kids on identity development and social justice.

Our mentor, at the time, was escorting us to camp. She cursed at the White people on the television as if they could hear her. The White people at the airport were staring at us—mostly at her. Little ole’ me was embarrassed, already feeling out of place at the airport. At that age, I was too scared to comprehend my mentor’s emotions surrounding the case. Instead, I wanted to daydream about connecting with other students at camp. Somewhere in my mind, I processed that kids of color learn political education so a case like Martin’s does not happen again. It made sense why my mentor, an alumna of the University of Pittsburgh, taught my friends and I advocacy and public policy. I never mourned Trayvon’s death; I was preparing myself to go to college (with my new and improved advocacy skills) and major in political science at a liberal arts school, and somehow that would resolve anti-blackness.<sup>5</sup> I invested in a romanticized view of college to stay hopeful. Then in the year I entered college, Mike Brown was lynched.

*before classes started  
u died*

<sup>2</sup> Alexis Gumbs coined the term “Survival is a Pedagogy” in “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996”

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, I omit using the term police shootings and instead describe them as lynchings. Lynchings are a form of extrajudicial killings

<sup>4</sup> Historically Black Colleges or Universities

<sup>5</sup> A unique form of subtle, overt, and systematic racism that is unique to Black people

*dey ordered me to go to my klan leader  
and sit with my klan family  
i ran away to the undercommons  
but it was only me  
at first  
dats the first day we started talkin*

I thought “education was the surest route to freedom” (hooks, 2010:2). Even W.E.B. Dubois reasoned:

*we hold the possible future in our hands but not by wish and will, only by thought, plan, knowledge, and organization. If the college can pour into the coming age an American Negro who knows himself and his plight and how to protect himself and fight race prejudice, then the world of our dream will come and not otherwise (hooks, 2010:2).*

Black scholars, like Dubois, assumed college granted access to self-development and self-actualization, which made me eagerly seek a liberal education. hooks admitted she was simultaneously exhilarated and frightened to enter integrated schools. She wrestled with her educational “double consciousness”<sup>6</sup>—the freedom to study and think juxtaposed with knowing her Blackness was out of place. Maybe other students felt encouraged and nurtured in higher education, but my first week in college confirmed the school was uninterested in my dedicated pursuit for racial liberation.

At the time, I did not comprehend the advocacy training that I received at a HBCU was unlike any education I would receive in

another institution. I took the opportunity for granted. I quickly lost interest in academics, especially political science, when I realized faculty had almost zero interest in addressing the state of Black America.

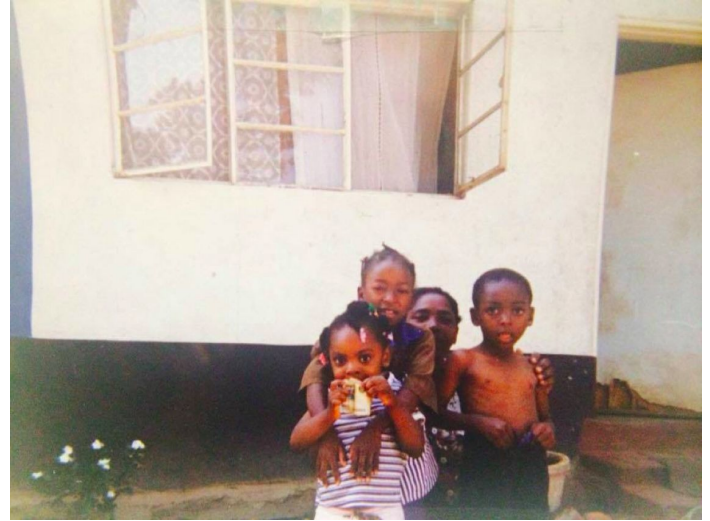
I wanted to transfer, but realized I would face the same problem at almost any school and I was unwilling to go to a HBCU. They would not give me enough financial aid.

I felt very isolated and alone during my first years in college, which resulted in a debater connecting me to a national Black student network. The collective scheduled monthly calls to voice our trauma from school. The calls informed me that my Black experience in college was very similar to other students across the country and even in other places like Canada, Brazil, China, and South Africa. This information sparked my interests to connect with those students abroad. During my junior year, the opportunity arose to attend the University of Cape Town. As a Black American college student, I was eager to attend the program—even if the course was not within my field of study.

*dear god.  
dear allah.  
dear ancestors.  
dear color purple.  
dear congo square.  
dear azania house.  
dear trayvon martin.  
dear renisha mcbride.  
dear draylen mason.  
dear marielle franco.  
dear stephon clark.  
dear black students.  
can you hear me?*

<sup>6</sup> WEB Dubois coined the phrase in “The Souls of Black Folk” describing the internal conflict of Black Americans being American and Black (subordinated) in an oppressive society

Black Americans embarking on return migration<sup>7</sup> to the motherland for answers, a sense of belonging, and community is not new. Hartman (2006) recounts her complicated journey to Ghana as an African American woman. I read the book so fast, it was as if I too had visited the slave routes. The last page revealed she felt a sense of connection when young girls started singing and jumping. The girls were singing about Africans who were stolen to the Americas; Hartman (2006: 235) recounts, “here it was—my song, the song of the lost tribe. I closed my eyes and listened.” I was excited for Hartman and envied her at the same time. I wanted to experience that type of moment, but I was also somewhat underwhelmed. Surely, return migration could not be just that. I expected her to have at least one moment where she felt at home. Instead, most of her experience consisted of feeling ostracized. I closed the book, wanting so much more.



I thought my personal journey to South Africa and Zambia would be different from Hartman. My mom tried to warn me to not get my hopes up. She reminded me of her first time visiting my family on the farm. They saw me as American, she said. I wasn’t really paying attention. How could they see me as an American when I am their relative? I reasoned that in the era of the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, international solidarity would occur. I intended on going with specific objectives. The first week I arrived indicated the universe had other intentions. Similar feelings of displacement like my mother’s and Hartman’s unfolded. The trip was complicated.

*zambia,  
my long lost twin  
the sister who escaped the middle passage  
she waited twelve years for me  
den moved on with her new family  
no longer recognizin the name ayaan  
she didn't see my grandfather in my eyes  
when i walked past her on the farm  
i reminded her of my ancestor name, twaambo  
too bad other blacks don't know dey ancestor  
name*

*xigga, i told ya*

I needed more time to reflect about my experience abroad and remember all the epiphanies, connections, and warmth. I searched for my personal journals throughout the years in college and decided to share some of my poetry, pictures, and energy with

<sup>7</sup> Return of migrants to an imagined or real place of origin

the audience so we could experience the rollercoaster of pain, love, joy, redemption, fear, and uncertainty together.

**This reading is not easy. You will need to take breaks or skip parts. Take care of yourself while you read. This is the trigger warning.**

As a perfectionist, I wanted to get this research right and do it justice. I had to let go and realize perfection is boring, unobtainable—and quite frankly doesn't exist. It took me about a year to get the courage to write this out for publication. And I am still on the fence.

I reflected on my vulnerability. I did not want to put myself in this research. I was scared of acknowledging my own flaws, assumptions, ego, mistakes, and trauma. Am I sharing too much? How many people will be offended by my words? Will academia delegitimize my work because I inserted myself? What will my school think? How will this piece impact my personal and professional life?

*i came to theory because i  
was hurting - the pain within me  
was so intense  
that i could not go on living.  
i came to theory desperate, wanting to  
comprehend - to grasp what was  
happening around and within me.  
Most importantly, I wanted to make the  
hurt go away. I saw in theory then a  
location for healing.  
-bell hooks*

It dawned on me, near the end, this study was a form of therapy during my senior year—a way to process my four years in

college. I am grappling with the contradictions of life, institutions, ideas, organizations, people, and myself. This paper is a love critique to myself and my communit(ies). I wanted to graduate college with closure and this project helped me receive that. This research allowed me to get (re)acquainted with my future, present, and old selves. I am more than the identity of a Black womxn, Black student, and Black organizer. Ayaan is also a sister, daughter, aunty, cousin, friend, nerd, mentor, mentee, dancer, artist, lover, spirit, and so much more. However, for the sake of this study and time constraints, I needed to focus on specific identity markers and moments to bring this research alive and make it accessible for several publics.

*black brothers,  
black sisters,  
[black siblings],  
i want you to know that i love you  
and i hope that somewhere in your  
hearts  
you have love for me.  
-Assata Shakur*

More importantly, this research is for the students coming after me. We are not crazy. A scholar by the name of Alexis Pauline Gumbs gave me the courage to publish this work. I remember reading her dissertation in high school like a spiritual guide. She confirmed we were never meant to survive, but we could disseminate survival pedagogy:

*a secret and forbidden knowledge that we pass on, educating each other into a set of skills and beliefs based on the*

queer premise that our lives are valuable in a way that the economization of our labor, and the price of our flesh in the market of racism deny (Gumbs, 2010: 92)

She reminded me and still reminds me today that as a Black womxn, survival is possible and necessary—it is a pedagogy I must continuously seek out and share with others. I hope my paper can assist another person on their journey.

To the Black student who was crying because of the recent bombings, I see your humanity. To the Black student who said out loud in class ‘I think about committing suicide,’ I see your humanity. To the Black student who transferred because a tenured professor (who refused to acknowledge your brilliance) lied and said you cheated on the test, I see your humanity. To the Black student who is now in jail for protesting, I see your humanity. To the Black student who was teased because of their accent, I see your humanity. To the Black student nervous about pursuing the Rhodes Scholarship, I see your humanity. To the Black staff who are tokenized, I see your humanity. To the Black faculty juggling numerous roles, I see your humanity. To the Black educators and workers not getting paid enough, I see your humanity. To the Black alumni navigating, I see your humanity. You are valuable. You are loved. You deserve the undercommons. The day I ran into you was the day I wrote out my auto-ethnography.

*I love the word survival,  
it always sounds to me like a promise.  
It makes me wonder sometimes though,*

*how do I define the shape of my impact upon  
this earth?  
-Audre Lorde*

I dreamt that my research could help another student or activist before it was too late. I dreamt South African students would feel loved and seen. I dreamt folks reading this would feel encouraged to heal. I dreamt that other students would contact me so we could collectively dream together. I dreamt that more people would consider abolishing prisons and the military industrial complex to invest in mental health, health care, education, and communities. I dreamt that policy makers would step up. I dreamt that higher education would consider itself a public good. I dreamt of Wakanda University.<sup>8</sup> I dreamt so many things. And after this is published I will continue to dream with all the other dreamers.

### **The Emergence of Contemporary Black Student Activism**

*do u kno how many black kids  
came  
left  
or straight up disappeared?  
this place a joke  
dey don't even notice we disappeared  
or straight up in the sunken place  
drowning  
and u kno black folks can't swim*

On March 9, 2015, South African students formed the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) campaign at the University of Cape Town

<sup>8</sup> Wakanda is a fictional African nation seen in Black Panther, a 2018 Marvel Comics superhero film



(UCT), which aimed to remove the Cecil Rhodes statue as a first step to decolonizing the institution (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Rhodes is the epitome of a White supremacist: a British imperialist who referred to Africans as barbarians and colonized Southern African territories including my father's home country, Zambia. Nevertheless, Rhodes is praised as a global humanitarian who personified good character and moral leadership (Rotberg, 1988). For this reason, the Rhodes Scholarship, a prestigious international postgraduate award at the University of Oxford, is dedicated to his memory. What does it mean for the world to honor Rhodes Scholars who benefit from stolen African wealth?: a question I ask myself while I consider applying.

Chumani Maxwele, a student attending UCT, smeared the Rhodes statue with excrement to symbolize the inhumane conditions of Black South Africans living in townships like Khayelitsha, who are the maids and workers of "Rhodes's descendants who proliferate the suburbs of Rondebosch and Claremont, the neighborhood of UCT" (Nyamnjoh, 2016: 73). Similar protests occurred at Stellenbosch, Rhodes, University of Pretoria, Free State, and Oxford (Nyamnjoh, 2016). The momentum of the RMF movement coupled with decades of dissatisfaction towards tuition fee increases amongst working class students, who already felt alienated on campus, caused the #FeesMustFall (FMF) campaign (Pennington, 2007). Several academics, journalists, artists, politicians, and citizens read about, studied, or participated in the RMF/FMF movement.

College activism sparked a new national dialogue on racial liberation (Booyean, 2016).

That same year in the United States, Jonathan Butler, a graduate student at the University of Missouri (Mizzou) went on a hunger strike. This individual strike inspired the varsity football team to follow and, in solidarity, denounce the President and Chancellor for their complacency with campus racism (Kelly, 2016). The anger of Black students at Mizzou was precipitated by the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, the White police officer who killed unarmed, 18-year-old Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Anderson et al., 2016). Protests expressing outrage towards institutional racism erupted in over eighty colleges and universities like Harvard, Yale, Duke, and lesser-known schools such as my own, Macalester College (Anderson et al., 2016). Inspired by Mizzou, students across the country formed a student coalition titled the Black Liberation Collective (BLC) and submitted formal demands to their schools (Kelly, 2016). The demands shared similar sentiments on "the devaluing, disregard, indifference, and mistreatment of Black lives" on colleges campuses (Anderson et al., 2016: 650).

Both student movements in the United States and South Africa are relatively new, but were formed within a couple of months of one another. Even so, little is known about this current generation of Black activists, their demands, and collective visions for the future. Academics are currently researching student political mobilization, but are overlooking a global trend of Black students expressing dissatisfaction with society (Nyamnjoh, 2016).

The visibility of Black student activism and Black freedom movements have caught international attention as a result of globalization and social media; however, academic accounts solely explain contemporary student movements within the confines of their nation-states and institutions, thus missing the opportunity to explore student movements transnationally and comparatively (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Bowen et al (2017: 26) states:

despite distinct socio-historical contexts, [the African diaspora] face remarkably similar issues—from gentrification to displacement and segregation, cultural appropriation, labor discrimination, to institutionalized racism and the enduring presence of structural barriers to educational attainment and economic parity.

Too often we are solely aware of our own history, society, and phenomena, overlooking and failing to recognize the global dimensions of anti-Black racism.

This study aims to deepen our understanding of contemporary Black student activism. First, I review literature that offers varying opinions on the roles and challenges of universities. Second, I defend my interdisciplinary approach for this study. Throughout this paper, I reflect upon my own experiences as an organic intellectual, an individual “consciously and explicitly rooted in the struggles of the social group” rather than a detached academic researching a topic (Fredrickson, 1996:8). Too often, academics are intellectually, spiritually, and personally removed from their literature. I analyze my

own experiences of student activism at Macalester College and direct action with Black Lives Matter Minneapolis (BLM Mpls). I attempt to insert my subjectivity into my study to challenge discrepancies in literature and add a nuanced perspective on Black student activism. Then, I provide a brief synopsis of Black student politics in the United States and South Africa. Here, I investigate the similar and different dynamics unfolding in both student movements. Universities are incapable of addressing all the demands from Black student activists concerned with racial oppression on campus and society writ large; therefore, students must form transnational Black activists’ networks to actualize their aspirations.

### **Reviewing Literature on Higher Education**

*The university is a critical institution or it is nothing.*  
- Stuart Hall

#### **I. The University in Crisis**

*my late grandmother  
told my mother  
and my mother told me  
civil rights movement died  
not when king gawt killed  
but when we took the corporate jobs*



The university presents itself as a public space, but it is a contested space because it is inevitably embedded with politics. Giroux (2013:202) argues the main objective of Western universities is to “fully participate in public life as the protector and promoter of democratic values.” Regardless of the original purpose of universities, many left-leaning academics claim higher education is in a state of crisis due to universities losing sight of their public mission and instead serving neoliberal interests (Giroux, 2013). Neoliberalism can be defined as:

a theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harney, 2005: 2).

Modern universities are market-driven learning environments, where the decline in public spending is forcing universities to shy

away from investing in studies fostering critical intellectuals and instead preparing students for the labor market (Giroux, 2013).

The university trains students to believe in the public mission of the school, gain knowledge to prepare them for their vocation, and leave the institution with new skills and insights (hooks, 2010). This trend is institutionalized by students pursuing majors and universities connecting them with academics who train them to pursue career and service opportunities directly related to their academic studies (Giroux, 2013). Private schools are granted more agency to establish their own objectives and pursue their own interests, but in the past couple decades, both private and public schools are losing their autonomy to external influences (Giroux, 2013). Maskovsky (2012) disagrees with considering neoliberalism as the root cause of universities’ failing because that framework overlooks other power dynamics and external influences on universities. He suggests the global economic recession, budget cuts to public universities, university mismanagement, the academic employment crisis, consumer-oriented teaching, and the resurgence of neoconservative politics are changing the power, authority, and autonomy of universities.

It is crucial to explore other factors contributing to the modern university shifting away from its original public mission. Universities are no longer considered a public good, but rather operate as businesses. Nussbaum (2016) argues humanities and social science departments play a critical role in democracy. Although this may be true,

Nussbaum (2016) reveals higher education often cuts these programs to generate profit in other departments. Scott Walker, the Wisconsin governor, stressed universities “[meeting] the state’s workforce needs” as more important than “[searching] for truth” or “[improving] the human condition” (Strauss, 2018). If a program on campus does not result in immediate profit, the program is cut immediately, even if the program develops critical citizens (Nussbaum, 2016).

This corporatized approach to higher education impacts students’ development and draws them away from furthering democracy. Giroux (2013) gathers that universities originally exposed students to critical educators who compelled them to bridge the gap between higher education and broader society, while simultaneously training them to operate as critical citizens who felt socially responsible. Higher education has shifted into a site of career counseling instead of civic education and radical imagination. According to Giroux, students no longer feel socially responsible, but rather are interested in short-term private goals that concern job security and upward class mobility. He does not fault students for their decisions to seek out careers for job security, especially when universities are steering students to majors that are in high demand. It is common for students to base their academic decisions to help financially assist their families who are socially, politically, and economically neglected in society; thus, academic decisions are rationalized with market consideration. This logic is also followed by recent graduates

who are frightened by high unemployment rates and paying off massive student debt.

Corporatized education also impacts professors in several ways. For example, several academics are evaluated based on the global market and their research outputs (Naicker, 2016). Non-American academics are pressured to publish in international journals that cater to the American academy (Naicker, 2016). Consequently, non-American academics frequently produce or teach scholarship irrelevant to their local context (Naicker, 2016). In South Africa, Pithouse et al. (2006: 8) predicts:

what is certain is that those students from a working class background who gain access to higher education will find themselves in an environment where the needs and values of their communities are alien. Their communities will become objects of knowledge, but there will be no place for the idea of a university that empowers working class people or provides them with the skills and resources that enables them to challenge their subjugation themselves.

This predicament creates a proliferation of knowledge in academia that is not helpful for underserved demographics trying to resolve their own living conditions (Naicker, 2016).

At face value, Giroux presents Western students and professors as supportive of neoliberal universities. His assumption is illustrated by the examples he gives of students accepting degrees and jobs that offer immediate financial gain. However, Giroux does not acknowledge the rise of students who are upset with formal politics and the

privatization of universities. Brooks (2016) explains that many academics, politicians, and social commentators assume students are not politically active in their universities or in society, which is simply untrue. Positive attributes of universities are often the result of individual actors such as students or staff versus the university management team.

Brooks (2016) suggests that neoliberal and market reforms of higher education and the repositioning of higher education as a private good are the main factors of similar discontent amongst student activity. For example, Turkey student protests occurred in tandem with the Gezi Park resistance to challenge the conservative and paternalist undertones in their national government (Arat, 2013). Naicker (2016) reports that in Chile, students created a popular movement to critique the political system and dictatorship in 2011. Unlike Giroux, Brooks (2016) sheds light on the role student union's play in politics, successes, and failures of students implanting change, and describes the nuances of student engagement in different national contexts. She challenges the misconceptions of students passively accepting the modern university.

Ironically, throughout time, students practicing the public mission of universities by operating as democratic agents are punished for critiquing the university's relationship to "warfare, militarism, racism, the politics of nationalism, and neoliberal versions of imperial violence" (Melamed, 2016: 988). The state is willing to support a students' development and actions when it is in relationship to the politics they want to

uphold. Otherwise, students find themselves criminalized for articulating their civic values or practicing democratic leadership (Melamed, 2016). When students or faculty are upset with practices of the state, they often utilize the space of universities to challenge or critique state decisions. In return, universities cooperate with the state to discipline or control the students, as seen with expelling students who are vocal about Palestinian liberation or hiring private police to arrest student protesters (Melamed, 2016).

Universities, directly and indirectly, serve the state's interests because of funding and often deny or undermine its attachment to state agendas (Moten et al., 2013). During World War I, the federal government financially invested in U.S. universities to pursue scientific research that would benefit the nation during the war (Faust, 2009). This example demonstrates political actors collaborating with universities to create curricula, programs, and students that benefit the nation (Harney et al., 2013). For example, recruiting university students to participate in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which was known for policing social movements or criminalizing faculty who spoke out against U.S. militarism in the Middle East (Melamed, 2016).

The university is a site of frequent contestation for three main reasons. First, the public mission of the university relates to promoting and protecting democratic values and compelling students to practice civic engagement. This instilled public mission causes students to involve themselves in citizen activism and politics to advance

democratic values. Secondly, students question the relationship between the state and the university, which in turn leads students to utilize the space of the university to express their frustrations with formal politics. Thirdly, students challenge the contradictions of the university and question their public mission. These three arguments explain the reasons universities are fertile ground for political mobilization. Historically, Black students utilized the space of higher education to accomplish the public mission, questioned the relationship universities have with states and expressed the contradictions embedded in university culture (Franklin, 2003). In the status quo, Black students protest universities to contest the same issues.

## II. Welcome to the Undercommons: The Transient Space of Black Learning

*can the university ever become  
the undercommons?  
no  
but we can create da undercommons  
university.  
like wakanda university?  
yes.  
so why don't we do dat?  
cuz survival is real  
erica garner tried  
and now she is dead.  
so what's the point of school?  
to visit the undercommons  
for 4 years  
cuz u might not eva be able to see a preview of  
wakanda again.*

My classmates almost never consider the original public mission of universities or the foundations of democracy as colonial or imperialist. Even academics ignore the legacy of slavery, racism, and colonial conquest in the establishment of universities (Anderson et al., 2016). Instead, educators, such as Drew Gilpin Faust, the president of Harvard, boast about the role of higher education in allowing students to achieve the American Dream (Faust, 2009). The American Dream, an opportunity for any immigrant to accomplish their material and economic goals, is elusive for many Americans—especially African Americans and Native Americans. Not to mention, the illusion of the American Dream creates competition between immigrant populations. Also, promoting the idea of the American Dream erases America's unresolved history—that of benefiting from stolen land and labor, internment camps, and inequality. How can individuals promote the idea of the American Dream while politicians still neglect Native Americans, stay indifferent to domestic terrorism, and express fascist rhetoric that dehumanizes immigrant communities?

Some academics would go so far as to say that the university can never be home for certain students because it is a “settler academy” on native land (Greyser et al., 2012). Exclusionary practices targeting minorities persist, despite universities' efforts to practice multicultural, diverse, and inclusive values at their institutions (Ferguson, 2012). For example, after Black students protested universities during the 1960's, universities institutionalized Black studies, but universities did not make changes in their

practices, policies, or environments to improve educational outcomes for Black students (Ferguson, 2012). Numerous universities celebrate diversity, but do not transform to eliminate “classed, racialized, nationalized, gendered, moneyed, and militarized stratifications” (Kelly, 2016: 8). Harney et al. (2013) concludes that any relationship to a Eurocentric university or institution is a criminal one, through its inextricable links to corporate and military powers—powers often used to disrespect the sovereignty of other countries and exacerbate inequality amongst urban Black communities.

Kelly (2016) claims institutions can serve as tools where students work on political education to overthrow the logic of neoliberalism, yet reasons the university itself is unable to transform. Critical pedagogy and knowledge production is often lacking in classroom environments, so critical race scholars advocate for students to intentionally search for enlightenment. Harney et al. (2013:26) argues:

it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment...only sneak into the university and steal what you can.

Similar to Kelly, Harney et al. observes there is “no distinction between the university, the United States, and professionalization.” Thus, Harney et al. (2013) encourages students to “be in, but not of” the university and ascribe to subversive intellectualism. They describe a subversive intellectual—with a metaphor of a woman—asserting:

her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcomed. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons* of *enlightenment*, where the revolution is still Black, still strong (Harney et al., 2013:26).

One can infer that a subversive intellectual is a student who is not invested in extending or transforming the university. This paper is a form of subversive intellectualism. The subversive intellectual aims to participate in cultivated community spaces (undercommons). Harney et al (2013:42) specifies “the undercommons of the university is a non-place of abolition.” Their stance implies the university is not a space for Black students to integrate into, but a place to find the undercommons: a transient space where there is the possibility for culturally specific knowledge production.

Kelly (2016) observes contemporary Black student activism is steering away from subversive intellectualism. Kelly fears too many students center their activism on trauma in contrast to participating in abolitionist thinking. Historically, Black students protested on universities while engaged in a larger Black liberation movement: the civil rights movement (Franklin, 2003). Yet, in the status quo, students are advocating for “safe spaces, mental health support, reduced or free tuition, curricular changes, and the renaming or take down of colonial symbolism” (Kelly,

2016: 4). Kelly (2016) supports students advocating for their needs, but fears students are more interested in creating “post-racial safe heavens” out of higher education instead of fighting against the universities’ exploitative practices embedded in society. Kelly disapproves of students fighting racism—solely through individualistic terms—to feel safe, supported, and accepted on campus. This individualist perspective divorces students from the mission of dismantling structural racism perpetuated by universities and the state.

Kelly reasons that the impact of students fighting for inclusion solely in universities leads to them becoming apolitical professionals. For example, Black elected officials and CEOs, who manage the transfer of wealth to the rich, rarely contest institutions implicated in class oppression (Kelly, 2016). It is a common trend, no matter what job one occupies, for Black college graduates to detach from politics. More Black students yearn to achieve the American or African dream, and so are not politically radical in fear of losing professional and job opportunities. Kelly (2016) observes that contemporary Black student activism in the U.S. is disconnected from a radical agenda because some students are invested in revolution while others are only concerned with obtaining an elite job upon graduation.

### III. Black Consciousness at the African University

*i am  
the product  
of the masses*

*of my country  
and the product of my  
enemy  
-winnie mandela*

After the civil rights movement, Black Americans halted their radical efforts to integrate into mainstream society (Franklin, 2003). During the 20th century, African students continually played an active role in national and revolutionary politics (Luescher et al., 2016). African students collectively participated in shaping governance by participating in anti-colonial movements, opposing neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, or openly critiquing the World Bank and structural adjustment programs (SAP)<sup>9</sup> (Luescher et al., 2016). SAP “ended free higher education, established cost-sharing policies, introduced tuition fees, withdrew education subsidies, and privatized student accommodations” (Luescher et al., 2016: 2). Caffentzis (2003: 3) argues:

the World Bank’s attempt to cut higher education stems from its bleak view of Africa’s economic future and its belief that African workers are destined for a long time to remain unskilled labourers. This would explain why the World Bank has made the shrinking of Africa’s higher education institutions the centerpiece of this policy.

Neoliberal reforms in African education caused higher education to prioritize efficiency, competition, and choice, so now

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<sup>9</sup> SAP, a form of neoliberal reform, are loans provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for financial support. This policy reform hampered several developing countries political economy (Luescher et al., 2016).



the state retreats from funding universities (Luescher et al., 2016). Decades later, many universities are sites of political and economic mismanagement, overcrowding, and inaccessibility (Luescher et al., 2016). The defunding of higher education is provoking student protests to take place in tandem with a global wave of protests against tuition fees “in the form of an internet age student movement” (Luescher et al., 2016: 17).

This brief historical background on university management in Africa highlights that student activity is constant, unlike in the U.S., where it is sporadic (Franklin, 2003). Universities are sites of citizen activism because “the beginnings of trouble in any modern society usually make themselves felt in schools before [students] become evident in other institutions” (Pennington et al., 2017). In the case of South Africa, students consistently played a role in formal politics by participating in anti-apartheid protests during the 1960’s (Pennington et al., 2017).

In 1994, all South Africans were able to participate in the democratic election (Khadiagala et al., 2014). Nelson Mandela was the prominent figure in the African National Congress (ANC) (Khadiagala et al., 2014). Mandela was succeeded by Thabo Mbeki; Mbeki is often criticised for his poor judgment and delayed roll-out of HIV/AIDS policy (Khadiagala et al., 2014). Mbeki was replaced by Jacob Zuma who was socially conservative and notorious for corruption (Khadiagala et al., 2014). In spite of ANC’s downfall, the political party obtains electoral dominance because of its relationship to Mandela (Khadiagala et al., 2014). Khadiagala et al.

(2014) argues South Africa is a “dominant party democracy” because a “ruling party dominates the electoral and political arena under a rubric of formal political competition” (Khadiagala et al., 2014:2).

The ANC contributed to the transformation of South Africa by increasing job opportunities, delivering political goods, and improving the standards of living (Khadiagala et al., 2014). Regardless, a growing population of South African citizens and ANC critics express South Africa’s democracy as fragile, claiming:

the economy is stagnating, unemployment remains stubbornly high, corruption flourishes, popular protest abounds, and government and many public services (notably the intelligence agencies and the police) have earned an alarming reputation for unaccountability (Khadiagala et al., 2014: preface).

Khadiagala et al. (2014:3) express the “agenda of racial transformation which, while promoting the rise of a party-connected elite, has rendered [South African democracy] hugely inefficient and unable to tackle the challenges of reversing the raves of apartheid.” There is a trend of “excessive state bureaucracy and expanding market domination” causing society to overlook environmental sustainability and social equity (Khadiagala et al., 2014:3).

In the status quo, students are upset with South Africa’s political economy and protest the nature of racialized poverty (Pennington et al., 2017). Naicker (2016) argues the ANC’s corruption, restructuring of higher

education, and the aftermath of the Marikana Massacre<sup>10</sup> influenced students to engage in formal politics. News outlets characterized the political actions of mine workers as criminal (Naicker, 2016). The militarized violence towards the workers caused distrust towards representatives, corporations, and the police (Naicker, 2016). Naicker (2016) described the Marikana Massacre as the “first post-apartheid massacre” that exemplified South Africa’s fragile democracy.

Franklin (2003) explains that the reason South African Black activism tends to differ from Black American activism is related to political ideologies they follow. In the case of the United States, many Black students rely on Black Power ideology for their mobilization. On the flip side, Black South African students mirror Black consciousness. Steve Biko claimed Black Power is distinct from Black consciousness by stating that, “Black Power is the preparation of a group for participation in an already established society, and Black Power therefore in the States operates like a minority philosophy” (Franklin, 2003: 212). Black Liberation in the U.S. is inherently tied to the state including and recognizing Black Americans as their own cultural group within politics (Franklin, 2003). Whereas, Black consciousness in South Africa relates to Black political empowerment to gain control of political structures and institutions from the White minority as the Black majority (Franklin, 2003). This distinction between majority and minority illustrates the reason Black American students

are less radical in their student politics; they seek inclusion in a developed country rather than transformation of a developing country. As a result, Black South Africans protest in a more consistent, urgent, and active way to transform and modernize the state.

### **Decolonizing Methods**

*who is ur audience?  
black people  
spat it wit such conviction  
i even surprised myself  
no, dat answer is wrong  
it's too dangerous  
u aint gettin into Oxford wit dat  
so who am i writing for?*

This research was conducted at the University of Cape Town with the assistance of the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences. My six-month study abroad program from December 2016 to May 2017 was conducted under the same department. The American students and International Students, who studied in America, were required to conduct an independent research study and enroll in two courses at the university. The program consisted of twelve students with transnational identities from the United States, South Africa, Japan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Colombia, and Costa Rica.

My second week in Cape Town, I bumped into Maxwele in our kitchen. Although, I had read about him on twitter as the student protester who threw excrement at Rhodes, I didn’t recognize him at first. We started discussing James Baldwin and

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<sup>10</sup> 34 mine workers were gunned down by the police.

RMF/FMF. He spoke openly to me about disliking American students gentrifying the neighborhood (our presence in the house was kicking him out) and the study abroad program. I asked Maxwele for his consent to use his name and describe our interactions together.

After speaking to Maxwele, I reflected upon my own colonial presence in the area and my approach to researching South African history, politics, student activism, and race relations. I questioned: who gets to write, and for who? What makes me qualified to conduct this study? Is my American privilege disallowing me to see nuances? How can Black South African activists gain subjectivity when I am constantly comparing them to the West? In the beginning of my research, I naïvely thought that as a non-White person, I didn't have to ponder such questions. I assumed conducting ethnographic research could resolve all of the ethical and philosophical questions I pondered. In due time, I reflected on how to decolonize my approach to scholarly research.

The interaction between Maxwele and I indicated how much we did not know about one another. It seems obvious, but we both carried skewed perceptions regarding South African or American Blackness and politics. Instead of engaging in ethnographic research of Black activists, I decided to put myself in intentional spaces to observe, listen, process the “call-outs,” unpack my own assumptions, and strictly engage in participant observation. Several South African students suggested it was a prerequisite for me to learn the new

geography I resided in before I began making any interpretations.

Franklin (2003) conducted a comparative study on the parallels of student activism at HBCU's in South Africa and the United States. However, this study specifically evaluated the similarities and differences during the 1960's and 1970's. This previous study suggests comparative studies has the authority to reveal new insights, patterns, and themes that individual texts overlook. My research adds a contemporary lens to Franklin's (2003) study and specifically examines Blackness at PWI's.<sup>11</sup> Combining different methodologies allowed me to start a conversation (often not present in academia) and encourage other scholars, activists, and community members to write out their own interpretations

Comparative studies is a common lens used in qualitative research that “compare a specific ideology, institution, or historical process in one society with its analogue in another and then explore the respective national contexts to uncover the sources of similarities and differences that they have found” (Fredrickson, 1995: 589). Specifically, in the United States and South Africa, previous comparative studies researched the parallels and differences of white supremacy (Fredrickson, 1982), racism and social movements (Fredrickson, 1997), and Black ideologies (Fredrickson, 1996). Many South Africans are upset with the shallow comparisons between South Africa and the United States, but Fredrickson (1996) noticed

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<sup>11</sup> Predominantly White Institutions, specifically colleges and universities

a mutual awareness and borrowing of ideas amongst Black movements. A similar trend can be seen today between BLC and RMF/FMF.

Researchers often combine comparable case strategies with other interdisciplinary research methods to find important characteristics (Lijphart, 1975). I decided to supplement my comparative study with content analysis and auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand cultural experiences (ethno)” (Ellis et al. 2011:1). Denshire (2014) suggests that auto-ethnography challenges the self-other dichotomy in scholarship. Auto-ethnography is discussed as a new methodology, but is a very old practice, especially for Black women. Calle (1996) argues slave narratives were the first form of Black female auto-ethnographies. These auto-ethnographies revealed the horrors of slave experiences and racial discrimination (Calle, 1996).

Zora Neale Hurston, who is rarely read or credited by anthropologists, found innovative strategies to represent ethnographic research through a personal lens. As an African American woman, she studied rural Blacks in the South and in her community of Eatonville, Florida (Robbins, 1991). Audre Lorde combined auto-ethnography with bio-mythology, a writing genre that combines history, biography, and myth (Calle, 1996). There are multiple ways to perform auto-ethnographies. I intentionally decided to use my own

narratives, derived from my personal journals of 4+ years, as a form of data. Inspired by Hurston and Lorde, I combined my journal entries with poetry, science fiction, drama, oral history, and creative non-fiction. I justified incorporating these varying writing techniques and genres to illustrate the surrealism of anti-black racism through a Black feminist lens. I edited aspects of my personal journal to omit names (unless they are public figures) and inserted specific details so readers would comprehend the context of the writing.

Additionally, I collect a variety of school newspapers, articles, academic journals, books, content from social media, and political websites to create a relevant and manageable data set. Content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2012: 24). I compiled and analyzed pre-existing data on BLC and RMF/FMF from academic literature and texts found through researching individual social movements online. I analyzed my texts in a fashion similar to investigating content derived from focus groups or interview transcripts.

In the case of BLC, I found primary sources such as their Facebook group, a political website, or articles we wrote ourselves on Blavity and Huffington Post. Currently, there is almost zero scholarship on the movement, which makes the autobiographical accounts of my data crucial in shedding light on the organization. In contrast, for RMF/FMF, I analyzed both

secondary and primary sources such as academic journals, books, articles, and student writings. Upon collecting my data, I reviewed the documents to identify the political, social, and economic dimensions of BLC and RMF/FMF. Right now, South African students are in the process of publishing their own narratives, according to Maxwele. I also met an African American male planning to write his reflections on organizing at UC Berkeley after going to graduate school. Academia moves very slowly, so these narratives are in the process of forming.

This research was necessary to put existing texts in dialogue with one another. As mentioned earlier in this paper, a comparative or transnational approach to contemporary Black activism is crucial in distinguishing points of similarity and departure with Black activism in different geographical contexts. A major critique of comparative studies is that it overgeneralizes (Lijphart, 1975). Some cases prove this research approach can generalize; however, previous case studies, regarding Black political mobilization, argues:

nations have their peculiarities that should never be forgotten, but they do not exist in isolation. There may be [as there were seen in the United States and South Africa] nations within nations—distinctive population groups that identify with an imagined community that transcends state boundaries and it's very different from the polity in which they are forced to live (Fredrickson, 1995: 591).

**An Account: The Student Rationality to Protest**

*before u wer black  
u wer a spirit*

**I. First Year: The American Dream  
Honeymoon**

*i wish u could have met  
ayaan,  
the spirit  
and not ayaan  
da caricature of a strong black womxn  
ayaan is no longer wit us  
may her soul rest in peace*

My father told me I was part of an international extended family as he explained my grandfather's role in helping Zambia gain independence. As a child, these stories seemed like mere folktales, but over time I began to fully realize that these stories were real accounts of my family overseas. My father believed his daughter, who couldn't even speak a word of her own native tongue, would achieve the American Dream.

My African-American family, who lived, served, worked, and died in the United States for hundreds of years, knew the American Dream was elusive. Regardless, my family participated in south-north and north-north migration patterns for economic and educational opportunities. My maternal grandmother left Slidell, Louisiana for Chicago to escape Jim Crow. My mother, a single mom, would later leave Chicago to Minnesota for better opportunities.

Whereas my Zambian family encouraged optimism for a new world, my

Chicagoan family braced me for the realities I faced as a young Black girl. They taught me to take pride in knowing that our side of the family descended from slaves. Both sides of my family and their narratives gave me the courage to dream—dream of a better society, and dream of what my future might hold even in the bleakest of circumstances. I even fell for the American Dream. And I knew going to Macalester College was the medium to access it—or so I thought.



Macalester College is a private liberal arts school located in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The school values academic excellence, multiculturalism, internationalism, and civic engagement. Students take advantage of learning in a metropolitan area by participating in local internships, volunteering at public schools, and implementing pilot programs to benefit local and global communities. Kofi Annan, the most well-known alumnus of Macalester, served as the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations. His work is advertised all over campus, which influences many students to major in international studies. Another alumna of Macalester is Danai Gurira, a lead

actress in the hit series, *The Walking Dead*, and record-breaking film, *Black Panther*, as well as a renowned playwright. The school's commitment to fostering global leaders attracted me to the school as well as its dedication to nurturing global citizens dedicated to humanitarian work.

My international friend later informed me why the term “global citizenship”, as used by the West, was problematic.

The financial aid package I received from Macalester also persuaded me to attend the college. As an in-state student, I collected high school and college assistance to basically get a full-ride for my studies. For this reason, I felt guilty to ever vent about my dissatisfaction with the school. There was an unspoken rule that as a student—especially a low-income student with a generous financial aid package—you do not speak out of turn. If you critiqued something, it seemed like you were being ungrateful—the first sign of financial and emotional abuse.

The meaning I once found in the American Dream faded after I received the news of non-indictments. I no longer wanted to engage with either side of my family to examine that iconic American Dream. I turned to scholarship to learn how Black Americans historically used civic engagement to both inspire themselves and motivate others. As a Mellon Fellow,<sup>12</sup> I began researching the political history of Black Americans who cited international legal cases to combat structural racism at home. I enrolled in classes that

<sup>12</sup> Mellon Fellow is a shortened name for a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow. A competitive program that trains underserved communities for doctorate programs

investigated the overlap between politics and inequality, human rights, and social death. I contacted elders from the civil rights movement and strove to answer the following research questions: why isn't the plight of Black Americans considered a human rights violation? How could the NAACP benefit from incorporating human rights into their objectives? What is the impact of moving beyond a conversation of civil rights to human rights?

The abstract intellectual conversations about race and class underwhelmed me. My law student and PhD candidate friends were going through a similar struggle. The constant images of Black Americans dying at the hands of police officers elicited fear for my younger brother, Ty, a non-verbal, autistic, 6'1" Black boy. Suddenly I saw how much his unpredictable movements could terrify others, and realized how much their terror also frightened me. Why hadn't I ever noticed that before? I understood that the fears projected onto Ty could cost him his life, without anyone being held accountable. My research was not going to resolve the social death of Blackness.

After Trayvon Martin, I thought going to college would help me learn how to stop lynchings from ever happening again. I thought I would learn how to make democracy work. Instead, I learned several folks were indifferent to Black death.

Renisha McBride<sup>13</sup> knew better. Oscar Grant<sup>14</sup> knew better. Tamir Rice<sup>15</sup> knew better. And now, I thought it was only a matter of time before someone near me would die.

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown  
 burn the city down and make sure they remember my name  
 #IfTheyGunnedMeDown  
 tell my family and friends I loved them  
 #IfTheyGunnedMeDown  
 please stop wasting your time here and go to Ghana, Canada (maybe not there), Japan or anywhere else  
 #IfTheyGunnedMeDown  
 don't have them talk ill about my character  
 #IfTheyGunnedMeDown  
 tell the world this is the American Dream, don't come here

Did you ever come across that twitter thread?

My self-motivated and stable persona clashed with my diminishing mental state in college. I felt lonely in my accomplishments. I stopped doing homework and got wrapped up in solidarity marches for Mike Brown that took place all over the country. A White friend, who happened to be from Missouri, attended the protest in Minneapolis with me. After an hour of shouting chants outside the Minneapolis Police department, the crowd began to move onto the street. The crowd was few in numbers. We were waiting for University of Minnesota students to join us,

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<sup>13</sup> A 19-year-old African American woman injured in a car crash and tried to find help, resulting in her getting lynched by a 54-year old man

<sup>14</sup> A 22-year-old African American man lynched in California by a police officer

<sup>15</sup> A 12-year-old African American boy lynched in Ohio by a police officer while playing

but decided to take to the streets without them.

As I walked out into Lake Street, I lost my friend and other students I was around. Cars around us honked, some irritated that we were blocking the roads and others in support of BLM MPLS. One car started pressing the gas, warning the crowd to move out of his way. I accidentally made eye contact with him. The White man preceded to press the gas running down a White woman a couple feet in front of me. The sound of her body making contact with the hood put me in a state of shock. My Missouri friend grabbed me and pulled me away from the wave of people banging on the car windows. Where did the bat come from?

To my surprise, when I returned back to campus with the same students, I noticed they went back to normal. I went into the “sunken place”.<sup>16</sup> My dad noticed and tried to cheer me up by connecting me to a gig with Zambia Blog Talk Radio. He wanted me to share how I was processing the shooting and why that was important for the diaspora to know. The interview ended up triggering me, even more, when folks calling in asked why Black folks don’t listen to instructions.

They spoke ill of you too. Lied to themselves to hide from the truth. What happens when even Africans rationalize Black death? Don’t you know they kill you too? Amadou Diallo<sup>17</sup> knew better. I was too exhausted to say all that, though.

A couple weeks later, Freddie Gray<sup>18</sup> was lynched. My friend called me crying from Baltimore. She found the blood.

“The city is burning.” I didn’t know what to say and also didn’t want to engage. I didn’t want to experience second hand trauma.

“My city is burning.” I told her I would call her back, knowing that I was lying.

“Ayaan, did you hear me? Our city is burning.” I was already falling behind on my coursework and into the sunken place.

“Fuck, America is burning.” I didn’t know what to say, so I kept doing my homework.

“Baltimore is burning.” That’s why Black folks in Baltimore never say goodbye, they always leave you saying be safe. RIP Freddie Gray.

The protest at Mall of America made me internalize the notion that I was a martyr. We protested on the busiest day of the year near Christmas—#BlackXMas. A lot of the people in the frontline were young refugees, undocumented, queer/trans, or muslim students. When I saw my best friend get arrested, I felt bad that I didn’t stay around. The tear gas and batons scared me. Getting arrested indicated you cared and if you didn’t you were a sell-out. Right? No one told you that, but that’s how you felt. The police even arrested young people who were in the midst of panic attacks.

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<sup>16</sup> Term coined by Jordan Peele in the movie *Get Out*. The sunken place refers to the psychological impact of racial trauma.

<sup>17</sup> A 23-year-old immigrant from Guinea lynched in New York by a police officer

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<sup>18</sup> A 25-year-old African American man arrested by Baltimore Police Department. While transported he fell into a coma and died. Possible lynching.



After Sandra Bland,<sup>19</sup> I couldn't comprehend getting arrested. On the ground, you notice there is a hierarchy of legal support. The older folks only got arrested if they had planned arrest and release strategies in order. Most of the time that was not shared. The youth get arrested first and are the last to leave the station. They often did not plan to get arrested. The misdemeanor hurt their housing and job situations. Cameras move on. There is no spiritual or political training unless you got a certain number of twitter followers. Cameras move on. They almost never credit the people under twenty-five. Cameras move on. Remember when ole' girl educated Hillary and the folks came for her? She was just telling the truth. Hillary is not the first woman to run for office. Here white woman go again erasing Black womxn. It was Shirley<sup>20</sup>. Ole' girl aint find work since. Cameras move on. Your own community will treat you as disposable unless you get the platform to speak on CNN. It's not surprising; even the youth during the civil rights movement experienced similar disposability.

We remember MLK, but not the kids who had no spotlight and were doing sit-ins in the most dangerous places in the country. Did you ever hear about the youth who did

#BlackBrunch?<sup>21</sup> Did you hear about the Dream Defenders?<sup>22</sup> That's what I thought.

I had one Black teacher during that time. She was teaching us about the Scottsboro case.<sup>23</sup> Decent turnout, but I should have known better. Those students didn't care. Well at least most of them didn't. They didn't even notice the Swastika drawn on the chalkboard. Racism is abstract to them. A topic they must explore to receive their credits for taking a class in US history. Then, they move on. Unless race topics are trendy, like talking about dance moves and rap. Then, they listen. Didn't Amandla<sup>24</sup> ask: What if people loved Black people as much as they loved Black culture? The world would be a completely different place.

"Why don't Black people just stand up for themselves? I think they play the race card too much." A student asked. Breathe.

My mom told me she didn't necessarily like going to classes in humanities and social sciences because they silenced her perspective or refused to acknowledge the rich history of the African continent. She was so underwhelmed by her classes, she considered majoring in computer science to avoid hearing anti-black lectures. I considered majoring in Chinese for similar reasons.

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<sup>19</sup> A 28-year-old African American woman who was found hanged in a jail cell in Texas. Some ruled the death a suicide and others read it as a form of racial violence against her. Possible lynching.

<sup>20</sup> Shirley Chisholm was the first Black woman to run for president in 1972

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<sup>21</sup> The modern day version of a civil rights sit-in. Black youth gather in diners and restaurants (that are predominately white) to protest police shootings and anti-black violence.

<sup>22</sup> An organization founded after Trayvon Martin's death by individuals protesting ending police and state brutality. They also worked on gun control.

<sup>23</sup> Nine African American teenagers (between the ages of 13-19) falsely accused in Alabama for raping two White Women in 1931

<sup>24</sup> Amandla Stenberg, an African American actress and singer made an educational video where she posed the question

It was nice to take classes in Chinese for balance. It reminded me that there was more in the world. I struggled with memorizing phrases and practiced writing characters for hours at a time. It was an escape, but some days I couldn't get out of bed and wouldn't know how to communicate in Mandarin that I was just having a Black day.

The whole year I didn't open my door. The smell of your death lingered till winter. I accepted the smell would never go, but still tried to get fresh air. I traveled across the country for answers because the classes wouldn't admit you were gone. I dedicated the rest of my first year to seeking out my spirit.

The first stop was Harvard. I thought maybe Harvard would discuss your death and admit politics lynched you. I noticed other Black folks there for the same thing. I was too scared to approach them. The number one rule of mourning while Black is that you don't vent to other Blacks about it because if you tell other Blacks you remind them of their PTSD. Don't be that person. I kept my distance. I kept pretending that I was respectable, but it was exhausting. Harvard's language was not going to save us. So, I moved on.

New Orleans was different—a trip funded by Macalester. We learned about the lower ninth ward<sup>25</sup> and saw firsthand the impact of Hurricane Katrina. We ate gumbo and learned about Congo square.<sup>26</sup> The instructor informed us that slaves would

come to this location, on their one day off, to experience the undercommons. I wondered if my ancestors could sense me there. We second-lined.<sup>27</sup> I almost saw the color purple. How could these Black people be so content? They reminded me that I could live again, but I felt selfish moving on without you. Living after Black death is heavy.

All the traveling made me not notice my Liberian friend going through a schizophrenic break until it was too late. We would sit in the cafeteria and vent. He specifically vented about the plight of Black male athletes. He told me the campus only acknowledged his humanity when he was throwing a ball around. One day he decided to engage in an individual protest. He walked into the same cafeteria naked so the campus would finally see him. He didn't graduate that year. I never saw him again. The school moved on.

A mixed race student committed suicide. The school moved on. I moved on because it was easier to avoid than engage. I was disconnecting from my own humanity as well as others.

Selma, Alabama numbed the pain. We worshipped the ground to pay homage to the four girls who were bombed in the church.<sup>28</sup> I was able to afford the trip by working with the universalist<sup>29</sup> church. The trip was mostly with White elders, and a sprinkle of Blackness. The mixture felt random, but we all participated in

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<sup>25</sup> One of the most impacted neighborhoods, primarily African American, impacted by Hurricane Katrina.

<sup>26</sup> An open space near Louis Armstrong Park in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. The location is known for its African American music

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<sup>27</sup> A New Orleans tradition where a brass band parades the street

<sup>28</sup> In 1963, White supremacists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church killing Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carole Denise McNair

<sup>29</sup> Christian theology. Many universalists participated in civil rights movement

the civil rights pilgrimage. It got awkward on the bus when the White elders were singing negro spirituals<sup>30</sup> as we arrived in the South. I refused to sing with them. Later, I met Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II<sup>31</sup> and broke down. Selma looks exactly the same. Obama spoke. His words couldn't distract me from the intergenerational trauma. The moment I landed back in Minnesota, I reverted back to the sunken place.

Cleveland, Ohio is where I finally found the undercommons. At the Movement for Black Lives, I got to see reflections of myself. That day I got to meet some of the members who make BLM a leader(full) movement. I felt safe.

I forget BLM is just a name. You don't know what people's intentions are with the name. We should have known from Ferguson. I think that was one of the main reasons students broke away and created BLC. Every movement goes through this.

How do you juggle recognizing the beauty and despair of movements and institutions? A question I thought of while I jammed in the cipher circle<sup>32</sup>.

And then I saw Eddie Conway. I don't know if I approached him. I wanted to go up to him and tell him I admired him, went to a camp that honored him, and I wrote him letters while he was incarcerated. Did he read them? He disappeared shortly afterward so I

couldn't catch him. I had to go to the next workshop—Black On Campus. I wasn't really present at the meeting because I was still processing seeing Eddie Conway.

I felt like I was meeting siblings at the convening, but the tensions flared up afterward. Trans folks held the space accountable. Disabled folks held the space accountable. Cleveland held the space accountable. What about intersectionality? Silence.

Don't let history repeat itself. Ayaan, check yourself.

## II. Sophomore Year: The Illusion of Safety

*i was a woman on fire*

-Terrie M. Williams, "Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting: Real Talk from When There's Nowhere to Go But Up"

The White people in my family started listening.

Macalester is known for attracting very active students, but there is a clear disconnection between classes and organizing. Several professors discouraged student organizing or refused to acknowledge politics in the classroom. When I dared to bring up pop culture, politics or social events in the classroom, I felt ostracized. Sometimes the class would respond, but most of the time I was met with awkward silence, and the class reverted to the lecture. Some courses would discuss BLM, but the conversations were surface level. The conversations ended up being about White guilt and then they would say nigger.

Travyon Martin died in Florida. Florida is in the south. Mike Brown died in Missouri. I

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<sup>30</sup> Spirituals that are generally Christian songs created by African Americans. They come from slaves oral traditions discussing the hardships of slavery

<sup>31</sup> Protestant minister, political leader of North Carolina, and member of the national board of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)

<sup>32</sup> A hip hop infused restorative justice circle where people freestyle and dance

decided to classify Missouri as the south. Black people don't die in the north. Black people don't get killed in Minnesota. I needed to tell my subconscious something. My geography in the north was my first illusion of safety. Marcus Golden knew better.<sup>33</sup>

How does your city organize after lynchings? Organizing in the north is different than in the south. We don't rely on churches. There is no central location for Black folks to meet. Rondo was that and it was destroyed by President Eisenhower with the Federal Highway Act.<sup>34</sup> Maybe churches or art events, but Black folks are very separated here. If you ever ask about Black Minnesotans, people respond: they are weird and have a weird obsession with the color purple. They are Prince's children.

On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2015, a crowd of Minnesotans gathered at Hamline Park for a protest outside the Minnesota State Fair – #BlackFair. The community gathered to protest the fair on the busiest day. At the time, a BLM Saint Paul chapter was beginning to form, but I don't think they ever got chartered by the national platform. I never joined the group although I knew some of the members. I didn't feel that I had much to offer, so I just handed out flyers.

What we want:

1. Department of Justice investigation of the Saint Paul Police execution of Marcus Golden

2. End of grand jury proceeding for police homicides
3. Independent external investigations into police-perpetrated homicides and shootings
4. Body cameras on all officers
5. Police carry liability insurance as their primary on-the-job insurance
6. Immediate video recorded statements by officers involved in or witnessing police shootings, beatings, and homicides
7. Community control of hiring and firing
8. Drop all legal charges against BLM Minneapolis - the people who participated in the Mall of America protests

The listed objectives were very clear, but people attended #BlackFair for different reasons. Some folks came solely to mourn the recent death of Marcus Golden. His aunt was active on the scene and always eager to support the community. White allies were there for the usual. Hmong<sup>35</sup> folks started considering how Asian folks can show solidarity for Black lives while also bringing light to Fong Lee<sup>36</sup>. A few political representatives were at the protests advertising for their campaigns. The adults got recognition, but I heard the youth were behind the execution of the event.

The death threats came soaring on social media. It's as though death threats are a rite of passage. I got this instead. "Nigger,

<sup>33</sup> A 24-year-old African American and indigenous man lynched in Minnesota by police officers

<sup>34</sup> Bill of law that allowed the national construction of highways. The highway construction displaced several families and were mostly constructed in urban low-income neighborhoods.

<sup>35</sup> An ethnic group of people who immigrated to the U.S. from Southeast Asia

<sup>36</sup> A 19-year-old Asian man lynched in Minnesota by police officers

bitch i'll find you at Macalester!" from a White woman. White women contradict themselves. This is why I don't trust feminism. She was probably at the fair that day.

Welcome back to school.

I was working with Saint Paul Public Schools at the time. The kids distracted me from politics, and then Jamar Clark<sup>37</sup> was lynched. One of the elementary students asked if it was war.

It's funny how the Twin Cities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis are acclaimed as some of the best places to live, work, and raise a family, but Black Minnesotans experience some of the country's worst racial disparities in housing, employment, education, and opportunities for social mobility. Don't let the north fool you. The most sophisticated White supremacy is in the north. Even White abolitionists are racist.

I got the notification on my phone about youth gathering at the fourth precinct<sup>38</sup> to learn about the lynching. By some Northside accounts, Clark was handcuffed when he was lynched in the head. I learned later that Clark's then-girlfriend had called the police to report domestic abuse. Black higher ups persuaded the woman to appear on national TV and say he didn't hit her. The higher ups were scared the truth would hurt the case. I can't image the trauma that woman lives with. I didn't know how to comprehend Black death, police violence, and misogynoir<sup>39</sup> at the same time.

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<sup>37</sup> A 24-year-old African American lynched in Minnesota by police officers

<sup>38</sup> A district of a city that operates police matters

<sup>39</sup> Misogyny directed towards Black women where race and gender both play a role in the bias or violence towards them

I heard Clark was the person who helped the women from her abusive boyfriend. There were always four sides to the story: person a, person b, the cops, and the truth.

BLM MPLS partnered with other organizations and people to occupy the area around the precinct until the Minneapolis Police Department released video footage of the incident.

#4thprecinctshutdown

#releasethetapes (not everyone wanted that, including some of Clark's family members)

#justice4jamar

The occupation lasted 18 days by some accounts. The mayor was upset about the bad press and worked with her Black upper-class friends to tell the Black working-class people to get out. It got cold, but folks stayed. Slept in the tents. Made fires. People distributed love, meals, diapers, warming pads, and coats. There were all kinds of posters. One read "With love from Palestine." Homeless folks showed to seek refuge. The first night, I was not there. I only saw folks tweeting about it. The next night, I showed up.

I held hands with an East African older woman. She didn't speak English so we just walked together holding hands. She knew I had come by myself. Her daughter arrived and walked next to us. There was no need for words. How heartbreaking is it to watch Black immigrants and refugees realize Blackness is synonymous with death?

I only showed up five times. I never spent the night. Did you hear Cornel West,

Deray, and the BLM national team were there? Maybe that's why White supremacists said online that they would show up to the occupation and start shooting. Five shots. Thankfully, three didn't hit anyone, but one person was shot in the leg (I heard he was recently arrested). Also, a teenager was hospitalized and might have been in a coma. I didn't know that at the time. Did BLM know that? If they did, why didn't they inform folks to leave the scene? Maybe they just thought it was the usual death threats - all talk, no walk. Fred Hampton<sup>40</sup> knew better. At this point, it's almost impossible to decipher imagined from real fear. BLM MPLS couldn't solve that. White supremacists always showed up in the night when they knew the numbers were low. The community came in waves that night. I think my older brother showed up the next day.

I don't know how I got to the precinct from my dorm. The first five minutes after I arrived, I saw so many breakdowns. White liberal folks didn't know what to do with themselves. They didn't want to be confused with the White supremacists. Some Black folks were trying to identify the shooters. There was talk that the police officer, who randomly went off duty last minute, probably shot the brotha. Didn't you notice the same tattoo? No one knew what to trust. Who to trust? And stayed in their space. A White man approached me who I knew from high school. He asked me, "Ayaan, do I look like one of them?" And proceeded to laugh. My body started shaking. His White friend noticed my body tensing and escorted the White man

away from me. We didn't know if the White supremacists were going to come back. Social media indicated to keep your guard up.

It was awkward when a man known for sexual assault was walking around the occupation. Folks affirmed him with a "welcome, brotha." Several femmes tried to find folks to make the guy leave, but it wasn't until he choked a man in BLM MPLS that folks escorted him out. Why didn't folks believe us when we told them about the women he hurt before? Interesting. No one called the police because everyone was still too scared and on edge. Folks settled on a community restorative justice circle later. That's it?

The organizers were trying to distract the crowd from social media, the shooting, the enclosed stress. They orchestrated a concert. A young Black man started screaming:

"WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU START ENTERTAINMENT NOW. YOU THINK THIS SHIT IS A JOKE. THEY ARE LYNCHING US AND YOU ARE THROWING A CONCERT. WHITE FOLKS STOP FUCKING SINGING AND DANCING! THIS IS NOT A FUCKING CONCERT! A BLACK GUY JUST GOT SHOT! FUCK US! I'M DONE!"

A group of Black folks and elders formed a circle around him. At first, I thought we were forming a circle for healing purposes, but maybe it was to hide the spectacle of Black pain. We all held him and he broke down. I've never seen a Black man cry that honestly in public.

I had romanticized activism. The only hope I had in the U.S. was us, and then that was also broken. Did you hear about the

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<sup>40</sup> African American activist and chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party in the 1960's. He was assassinated.

young, gay, Black preacher in Chicago, who live streamed himself almost committing suicide? I didn't, but weeks later I read his interpretation of the chain of events that led to the moment. As I read the Huffington Post article, I felt less alone because it put into words some of the bullshit I had seen on the ground. It seemed like it wasn't just the Twin Cities, it was everywhere. And I was also a part of the problem.

I didn't know that some of the Northside didn't want the occupation there. Who are you to mourn? This is not your city, you live near the White liberals in your fancy dorm at your fancy school. Where have you been? Fuck you, quite frankly. You wanna come here now when Minneapolis is trending. Were you friends with Jamar? Did you ever stop by before? No! So stop acting like you care. No one said that, but that's how I felt. Am I the Black elite now?

There is always tension between BLM chapters and the local community. BLM is the brand, so the BLM members get the donations and speaking engagements and the rest of the community gets forgotten. Take BLM out of the equation and other organizations and people do the same thing. Did you hear about the person who stole the donated bail money to pay bills? Or about the person who only went to the protest to run for office? Did you hear about the person who used the community fund to go on vacation?

The nights blurred. Unlike #BlackFair, there was no police escort. It was just us alone with the night and our sadness. Someone noticed me and threw me a reflective jacket.

"Let's go, Ayaan."

They were running so I just followed. Five of us with reflective jackets ran down Lyndale or Plymouth. I don't remember.

"Run faster!"

I heard the cars. I adjusted the jacket while I ran.

"Run faster."

Shit. I thought the police were going to come soon and escort us. Isn't it ironic that we protest the police while they escort us? I tripped on myself. Ayaan, get up and run faster. We were running towards the cars. What if a car hits me? The sound of the White woman being hit rang in my ears. They won't hit you. I lied to my subconscious to muster the courage.

"More people are coming so we can form a crowd." Another illusion of safety.

"Ayaan, you are going the wrong way. Run this way." The police were not here this time. I tripped when we went down the ramp to get onto the highway. Get up and run. My feet stopped moving. I never noticed how fast cars drive on the highway. The crowd was still three blocks behind. There was just five of us to stop the cars.

Wait, when did we go through a highway training? Maybe I was in a class that day. Years later my friend told me there was no highway training.

"Run." I started to run. Fuck, don't chicken out and panic. I looked up at the moon for reassurance. Please don't have them run me over.

Please.

Run.

Please.

Run.

Please.

Please.

Run, Ayaan.

Please.

Ayaan, do it for Jamar.

Please.

Run.

Please.

Ayaan, do it for Ferguson.

Run.

When did you internalize that you were a martyr? I cried and ran behind the others with my hands up.

“HANDS UP DON’T SHOOT.” We shouted. The honking was so loud. Look up to the moon. Breathe.

“RELEASE THE TAPES.” We shouted. Are they going to slow down? Look up to the moon. Breathe.

“JUSTICE FOR JAMAR.” We shouted. What if they start running people over like last time? Look up to the moon. Breathe. The cars stopped. I broke down.

The rest of the crowd came through and that’s when the strong Black womxn came. The photographers captured her and she started to speak. The energy shifted, but only a little. We started to dance to distract ourselves. The honking was now one with the beat. We only had about ten minutes before the cops and the helicopter came. I lost my ride. Shit. The school buses were coming to load people up and bring people back to the station. I saw some students from my school. I asked them who I should contact because it was their first time getting arrested. I naively thought it wouldn’t be too traumatizing for them because they were not Black. I think I

said that to myself to not acknowledge how terrified they looked. I wrote all the information on my hand, trying to hurry before the school buses came.

To be honest, I don’t know what stopped me from also getting arrested. I think because my older sisters called me earlier and told me not to. I found a Black student from my school and we left together.

I was never alone to have my meltdown. I panicked in class and the class would awkwardly move on. Any mention of police triggered me. A White male professor decided to teach a lecture on what to do when you run into the police. He didn’t understand his lecture only related to White students. His advice would get me lynched and I panicked. The class didn’t notice. My critical race class talked about the Black girl who got dragged in the classroom like a doll by the SRO<sup>41</sup> officer. They found humor in the situation. Some people laugh when they don’t know how to process. Sitting at a desk scared me for about two weeks. Laughing became a coping mechanism. At this point when I cry, it’s so subtle I don’t even notice and I don’t think others around me notice either. The White male professor would awkwardly look at me and then continue with the lecture. People only see Black womxn when they are angry, but no one cares to see a Black womxn sad. Racism is abstract to them.

A White female professor always stood up for me. The men talked over her.

A White male student noticed me and approached me.

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<sup>41</sup> Student Resource Officer, police officers in schools



“You know police officers don’t mean to lynch you.” He smiled. Breathe.

“They are having a hard time at work and are stressed so you and your community should be nicer.” Breathe. When did having a bad day justify killing anyone? I guess when the target is Black or Muslim that logic makes perfect sense to people. I tried to use campus language to get him out of my space.

“Do I know you? Look, I don’t consent to this conversation.” He had a t-shirt with the word consent on it so I thought maybe using that language could help me get out of the situation. I didn’t trust my mouth and didn’t want to have a moment where he would reduce me to a dark-skinned angry Black womxn. I looked at the other White people in the computer lab watching the interaction already knowing they would not step in. This is White allyship. Silence. Waiting. More silence. Waiting. Then, they create art from it decades later and make millions. Black pain is profitable nowadays. He kept going.

“Your community needs to be more understanding.”

I don’t remember what happened next. I refused to cry in front of him, I would be embarrassed. I walked away and heard him call me a bitch. Stay strong, don’t cry. A Korean woman found me and held me while I cried.

As a dark-skinned Black womxn, you are either rendered an asexual Mammy<sup>42</sup> or Sapphire<sup>43</sup>. You bitch, stop being

oversensitive. It’s crazy that people are publicly watching and don’t say anything.

The protest at the airport (about immigration policies) took things to another level. It’s private space. Federal space. I didn’t go, but I knew of so many East and West Africans that went. Some of them were disabled or undocumented. I should have skipped class that day.

I tried to go to a healing circle on campus with Black womxn about self care. Being on campus felt like another world. We all sat together – faculty, staff, and students – discussing carefree Black girl magic. Everyone was trying to keep the conversation light. The facilitator welcomed us into the space and offered us words of wisdom.

“In my generation, we thought the civil rights movement moved us forward and got comfortable because things improved a little. We didn’t think to waste our breath talking to children about the reality, but that was a disservice to you all. Still, find joy and remember the reason you are in higher education.” I sat there and listened.

“We all have the power to control how we feel and take advantage of the opportunities we now have.” I felt irritable. I told the room.

“Don’t have White people make you feel inadequate or insecure, Ayaan.” I never said that. Her straight hair and her respectability politics<sup>44</sup> made me irritable. She was the light skinned Black that could believe in the illusion of safety. I envied her. I yelled at her and the whole room was caught off guard. I’m jealous

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<sup>42</sup> A stereotype of a Southern Black woman who takes on nanny, housekeeper, or caretaking qualities

<sup>43</sup> A stereotype of an urban Black woman who takes on strong, masculine, or aggressive qualities

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<sup>44</sup> Attempts by an oppressed group to minimize their social values and aesthetic to mainstream values

of Black folks who can still be happy. I'm jealous of Black folks who feel safe in White spaces. We don't know how to be with one another. Specifically, I didn't know how to be with other Black people, especially Black transplants<sup>45</sup>. I left the space embarrassed. I'm sorry.

Jamar Clark was lynched. I called my Baltimore friend crying. Now I smelled the blood.

"The city is burning." She didn't know what to say and also didn't want to engage. She didn't want to experience second hand trauma.

"My city is burning." She told me she would call me back, knowing she was lying.

"Girl, did you hear me, our city is burning." She was already falling behind on her law coursework and into the sunken place.

"Fuck, America is burning." She didn't know what to say so kept studying for the LSAT.

"Minneapolis is burning." That's why Black folks in Minnesota never say goodbye, they always leave you saying be safe. RIP Jamar Clark.

It's different when people get lynched in your city.

A Puerto Rican student in my class once said she'd rather kill herself instead of having someone else lynch her for her beauty. Brazil taught her about her beauty. And they wonder why there is an increase in Black suicides?

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<sup>45</sup> A person originally not born or from a place who migrated to another a place for a work, family, educational, or personal opportunity

Our school hosted an event in the cafeteria to honor Jamar Clark. I was grateful for the Black transplants who helped organize it, but I couldn't help but feel empty. Administration showed up. I was too far gone to engage in respectability politics with them and gave them a mouthful of how much it sucked being local and Black on campus. They seemed surprised. I wanted them to hear the contradictions of the school.

"We have klan families here." A school with no type of cultural competency.

"There is no Black housing for refuge." I only knew the school had a Black house before because my civil rights grandfather told me when he was young he would party with the Black students in the Black House back in the Rondo days. Historical knowledge is important.

"There are only about five Black male students in my class. I am even including a Moroccan, Egyptian, Ghanaian, and Jamaican man to make the number sound better than one." One African-American man and five Black men. There was a huge divide between international and domestic Black folks. There was a divide between domestic Black locals and domestic Black migrants. Then, you had people like me (transnational) that blurred the lines. Who got to identify as Black on campus was complicated. What is Black?

I had so much more to say, but my friend whispered to code switch<sup>46</sup>. I didn't have the energy. What was the point of pretending? A White athlete started laughing

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<sup>46</sup> An action when a speaker alternates between two or more languages. In this specific context, switching between African American and Western American vernacular

and I broke down crying. It was my turn to say something at the event and I snapped. There is a physical impact of enduring these microaggressions. My poor body. No wonder younger alumni of color don't come back.

I tried to tell my mentor of color that I thought I was depressed. She blinked. I was jealous of her light skin - her ability to pass.

"I think I suffer from racial PTSD." If no one else was going to assist me, I would self-diagnose myself. She blinked. She loved Macalester so she didn't believe me.

"Remember when Dr. Joy DeGruy<sup>47</sup> came here and talked about post-traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS). I think I have that." She blinked.

"Maybe I am bipolar. Basically, I don't know what is wrong with me, but I know something is wrong. I think I need accommodations." She blinked.

"What doctor is going to give you 'race' accommodations?" She asked sarcastically.

"Exactly, that is why I am asking you for your help on how to navigate getting accommodations. I face discrimination here and don't know how to deal with it. For example, remember when I told you about the White woman who filed a harassment claim against me and a Chinese woman in class because we disagreed with her. She told Title IX to keep an eye on us." My friend thought she was a model minority so she didn't see it coming when the warning came her way too. She learned that day that Asians would never

be able to fully assimilate. Welcome to being Black.

The White woman who filed the harassment claim was a rape survivor on campus. She was also in some type of sunken place. I think when we corrected her in class she could not comprehend being someone who could also cause people pain. I never could work with her on sexual assault campaigns because we had conflicting politics. I saw her at protests and she would stand next to me, but at school we didn't acknowledge each other. She read my Blackness as masculine - which made her think of her abuser. Her White femininity reminded me that she had the power. We scared each other. It's complicated.

"Ayaan, you always make up these crazy stories."

The person at the time who was leading Title IX was a Black womxn. I knew I wasn't making it up. I think staff forget there are NOT a lot of Black people on campus, so we are always communicating with one another. She finally said, "You are over-exaggerating." I was scared that another harassment claim against me would get me kicked out of school. Only White women get accommodations and can have depression. Black womxn are too strong for accommodations, apparently. Even other women of color sometimes think so.

It became clear no one on campus could help me with my mental health so I decided to create my own anti-depressant pill:

wake up,  
stretch and honor your body,  
pray to the ancestors,

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<sup>47</sup> An African American female researcher, educator, author, and presenter. She wrote the book, "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing"

thank indigenous folks for the land you  
are standing on,  
repeat you are the dream and the hope  
of the slave,  
eat breakfast (early before the students  
that scare you come),  
say hi to the workers from the Rondo  
community,  
be present for the middle school kids  
you mentor,  
say you are going to have a decent day,  
run a lap after you experience  
microaggressions,  
talk to your roommate about trauma,  
journal every day to have an escape,  
meditate,  
repeat.

The “anti-depressant” pill numbed me  
out for the semester. I remember explaining  
my pill to a White man on campus who was  
trying to figure out his own mental health  
routine. I noticed when I talked to White  
people I liked, I always asked them to talk  
about me in a positive light in case I got  
lynched. That way CNN would say Ayaan was:  
thoughtful, loving, curious. And not  
aggressive, combative, and deserving of it. A  
couple weeks later, he died on campus from  
an overdose.

I made a promise to myself to not  
attend any more protests. I couldn't go to the  
Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Someone  
offered me a ride, but I refused to go out of  
state and protest. I ain't tryna get lynched -  
especially in a state that could care less about  
me. A Black man who went out to support  
#NODAPL got lynched in his mom's backyard  
a couple weeks later. See.

My body didn't know how to stop  
twitching. No more protests. No more trying  
to talk to moderate people to get them to  
understand. No more facilitating diversity  
talks. No more twitter rants.

I tried to attend only healing meetings  
in the community. Those got awkward. All the  
beef would come up. Sometimes I would even  
go off on folks. Black folks and white passing  
indigenous organizers would come at each  
other. I could never attend the promising  
healing events because I had exams.

I was too overwhelmed by community  
organizing, and so decided to bloom where I  
was planted - higher education. I thought  
maybe organizing on campus could restore  
my hope. The institution was using my image  
to promote the school, and I felt guilty for  
Black students who would come after me. I  
learned from BLC what to do and when I  
needed help I called them. I called alumni who  
previously mentored me. BLC members told  
me that they had my back if anything came  
up. I was back in the game.

Dear Macalester Community:

The Macalester Black Liberation Affairs  
Committee (BLAC)<sup>48</sup> has now joined the  
wider Black organizing network, 'BLC'.  
The Black students at University of  
Missouri inspired students of color to  
be bold and brave enough to demand a  
better educational space that caters to  
our needs. BLAC coordinated a  
#BLACKOUT<sup>49</sup> day in Cafe Mac to share  
their experiences being Black at

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<sup>48</sup> A Black campus organization for the Black diaspora

<sup>49</sup> Students dedicated a day called #StudentBlackOut to  
demand change on campus and acknowledge racial injustice

Macalester after the murder of Jamar Clark. The same day, Muslim students gathered to talk about their experiences with Islamophobia. An administrative representative attended both events to stand in solidarity with marginalized students on campus. It was courteous of the representative to attend both events, but that's not enough. His email and attendance at our events is not enough.

This letter's purpose is to hold Macalester faculty, staff, and students accountable for neglecting students of color. Historically, there has been a decrease in admitting students of color - specifically Black students. Furthermore, Macalester has put racial and multicultural concerns at the periphery of its agenda. Black, African, Asian, Latinx, American Indian, Muslim, International Students of Color, undocumented, low-income/working class, disabled, and first-generation students have tirelessly revealed ways in which they have felt unsafe, unwelcomed, ignored, or erased on campus.

However, thus far, there have been insufficient tangible institutional commitments to tackle these concerns persistently and effectively. It is only individuals working on initiatives. Throughout this letter, we (indigenous, students of color, & other minoritized groups) outline needs for ourselves by posing questions and/or suggestions for Macalester. This letter aims to answer the question: How do we as a campus practice a culture of

accountability for overlooked identities on campus?

And with that, here are the demands we have for Macalester College.

1. We need a statement from the President in collaborating with the Board of Trustees that confirms they support the efforts of students of color and other minoritized demographics because we deserve to feel safe and welcomed on our own campus.

2. We need this campus to acknowledge linguistic racism by simply condemning language that historically relates to slavery, violence, terrorism, or genocide. For example, the term Scottish Clans and Clan leaders need to be changed immediately. The term can easily be converted to Scottish Groups, Families, Leaders, etc. Students and staff have previously articulated that this term brings up discomfort for individuals who know the history of the Ku Klux Klan<sup>50</sup> and Klan Leaders.

3. We need more Black students to attend this college. It is a shame that there are less than 2% of Black students at Macalester. From 2000-2015, the number of Black students has dramatically decreased. This decrease in representation has not only occurred for Black students, but also for numerous identity groups. This campus consistently advocates multiculturalism. Yet, the lack of domestic multicultural representation on campus is not something we as a campus should be proud of, as well as the tokenization of the few minority students enrolled. There is a difference between

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<sup>50</sup> A White supremacist organization based in the United States

advocating multiculturalism on campus and tokenizing students. We need statistics on students of color and diversity to differentiate from the percentage of domestic students of color and international students of color. Students applying to this school are not receiving accurate information about the percentage of domestic students of color because the percentage does not take into consideration the different representation of domestic, mixed, indigenous, undocumented, and international students.

4. We need this campus to be honest about the lack of domestic diversity present at Macalester. There is more of an emphasis on internationalism and studying global concerns than domestic issues that affect domestic students of color. Moving forward, there should not be a binary between global and local, but we should simultaneously look at global, transnational, domestic, and local issues.

5. We need a “People of Color House”. This space would be an additional housing option (not connected to the C-House<sup>51</sup>). The purpose of this additional house will be to have a safe space on campus where students of color do not have to coddle White students’ emotions and can empower themselves. Decades ago, there was an American Indian, Black, Asian, and Hispanic house. These houses are now for language programs called the Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, and French house. We want a space exclusively for us where we can get a

break from our daily struggles as people of color on campus.

6. We need White students to stop using students of color as their source of information about oppression. Please join the White Identity Collective<sup>52</sup> (change the name to White Privilege Collective). It should be a priority for White faculty, staff, and students to critically examine their Whiteness, history, and allyship. Allyship is more than a noun. It should be used as a verb.

7. We need an increase in students of color, faculty, and staff. POINT BLANK PERIOD. Stop hiring mostly your friends and neglecting individuals who are more qualified. This is a perfect example of implicit bias.

8. We need to improve our admission tactics with local schools in the Twin Cities. More local Minnesotans - especially indigenous students - should have equal opportunities to attend Macalester. First generation or local students of color have been working on forming a local students conference to bring more Minnesotans to Macalester in the summer. The conference will have a workshop to teach local students about how to apply for competitive colleges. Also, the conference will have a panel of indigenous & students of color (domestic and international) to talk about their experiences at a predominantly White liberal arts school. The objective of this conference will be to connect more students from the Twin Cities to the Macalester campus so they can be tracked for admissions.

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<sup>51</sup> Safe space for students of color and allies who want to live in a multicultural community

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<sup>52</sup> Anonymous group for White students to learn about Whiteness, allyship, and social issues

9. The Mac Weekly<sup>53</sup> needs to diversify its staff, writers, and content.

10. It is dehumanizing to only acknowledge international students for advertisement. They also need culturally specific programming to educate them about how their identity is read in a U.S. context, mental health services, and additional support. There has also been a concern that in recruiting international students, admissions only seek out students at United World Colleges<sup>54</sup>. Can there be a plan to seek out international students from other educational institutions?

11. Can we update the allies training to be more explicit? It needs to be completely remodeled.

12. We need a way to improve professor and faculty recruitment, training, evaluation, and accountability. There should be a series where faculty and professors meet to hear testimonials of students in classes to be aware of the microaggressions they face. Students repeatedly say nigger in class and the professor doesn't say anything. The provost must hire consultants to learn how to combat microaggressions and macroaggressions in classrooms. How can we hold professors accountable for professional misconduct? How can professors go through training so they can be better allies for students of color in the classroom?

13. We need to know more about the jurisdiction of each staff's role in administration and student affairs.

14. We need the Department of Multicultural Life<sup>55</sup> to improve their relationship with students of color (with the school increasing its budget) by

a. Establishing a more cohesive alumnus of color network to help students of color get mentors that can help with their personal and professional development.

b. Update the DML website. There should be a section that offers tips on how students should get institutional support when they experience a hostile or racially charged incident with faculty or staff

“The word demand is a little too aggressive. You are going to need to revise this document several times.”

I planned to collaborate with other campus groups to build on the list, but I didn't have the energy to finish the letter so I gave it to a staff member I trusted. Later he publically charged at me. I cried. He, too, was in the sunken place. I didn't have the energy to organize anymore.

You think we are the first to say these things to administration. The first Black womxn<sup>56</sup> to ever graduate from the school was saying similar things. History repeats. Shh, don't tell them I told you that. They are keeping it a secret.

Other students connected to BLC were working on prison divestment, reparation proposals, and I couldn't even work on my

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<sup>53</sup> Student newspaper at Macalester

<sup>54</sup> International schools created after the Cold War to form a global educational movement.

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<sup>55</sup> Department dedicated to expanding multicultural efforts on campus

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Lealtad. After she graduated, she sent the school letters about her critiques

demands. BLC was hosting a conference soon, but I didn't show. I needed to focus on getting out of the sunken place.

Never make the assumption that people are not trying to resist. Instead, ask who are the few people trying to resist and how can I help them overcome the historical and institutional barriers they are facing?

White supremacy loves when you burn out. Then they erase you.

“Who is Ayaan?”

The work now gone.

I started relapsing.

### III. Junior Year:

#### A. The Day Gonna Come When I Won't March No Mo

*i am listening now with all my senses,  
as if the whole universe might exist just to  
teach me more about love*

-Adrienne Maree Brown, “Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds”

Who determines if a demonstration is a protest, march, or riot? Simple, it depends on how many White people show up.

I was disturbed when pro-life protesters stormed the front of my high school accusing me of aborting a child. I was pissed at the way they accused Black girls of abortions and then calmly approached White girls with brochures. I tried to hurry past the school towards the recreational center to get out of the crowd. The White protestors followed me and held up posters screaming in my face. I kept walking to the recreational center as fast as I could with my heavy backpack to lose the protestors. The incident

got me so upset, I made it a point for my first protest to be with Planned Parenthood<sup>57</sup>. I didn't really understand all the politics involved. I was hoping to see the pro-life people who were at my school to give them a mouthful.

The next protest I went to also occurred in Minnesota. The Washington Redskins<sup>58</sup> were playing the Minnesota Vikings<sup>59</sup>. Protesters rallied for the athletes to refuse to play the game and not support a team that uses the racial slur “redskins<sup>60</sup>.” There are at least eleven federally recognized tribes in Minnesota, which made people fear how large the demonstration would be – especially with other tribes coming to support.

I never considered myself an activist. I just showed up to protests or stumbled into organizing. Instead of planning the protest, I would participate, volunteer as a street patrol, or give speeches. There is an alluring element in protest. It made you feel less alone or crazy. The idea of participating in actions that can change society is comforting. As a Black womxn, you learn really early no one else will ever save you so you better learn how to save yourself. Sometimes protests teach you how to save yourself (when no one else will).

I was in a Mellon fellowship meeting when I sensed that Philando Castile<sup>61</sup> had been lynched. I was sitting in a room at the Minnesota Science Museum with a police

<sup>57</sup> Non-profit organization that provides reproductive health care

<sup>58</sup> American football team

<sup>59</sup> American football team

<sup>60</sup> A historical racial slur towards Native Americans

<sup>61</sup> An African American lynched in Minnesota by a police officer



officer and other classmates discussing the race exhibit. When I left the seminar and walked back from campus, my body tensed up every time I walked past a White person. Later, I learned the person who lynched Philando was Hispanic. I flinched every time I passed someone. There was a moment where I physically jumped and felt too embarrassed to explain to the person what happened. We both looked at each other with confusion. My phone was buzzing with notifications, but the moment I peeped the content, I turned my phone around. I took a nap to escape.

I woke up and watched a part of the video and then turned it off. I messaged BLC. Members of the group asked everyone to save the video because they figured that facebook would delete the evidence soon enough. I turned off my phone, didn't listen to the advice, and watched the rest of the video. Then followed the plea and I made my way to the crime scene.

My uber driver was a Black womxn. She kept telling me to be careful. I could tell she was worried that I was going alone. I reassured her by telling her I knew I would run into people from the community while I was there. She didn't seem convinced. I walked out of the car and saw old high school classmates, BLM MPLS + adjacent members, and community folks.

Sadly, the chain of events seemed familiar so the question kept popping up: What's next? What are we going to do this time for a different outcome? Philando went to my high school so the proximity of Black death was too close. If we didn't figure out what came next I felt like I would be next.

Fuck, I was going to be lynched next. We already did an occupation and no justice. It had to be 1 am so the best answer at the moment was go to the governor's mansion and occupy the White neighborhood.

"Let's disturb the wealthy so they can enter our nightmare." I was unsatisfied with the answer, but grateful someone made a suggestion because we were all too emotionally exhausted to think completely straight.

Someone tried to have an optimistic outlook and spoke aloud.

"Maybe the ancestors are trying to give us guidance right now. Remember a year ago we were here protesting less than a mile away for Marcus Golden and they told us we were wrong. A couple months ago we were near protesting for Jamar Clark and they told us we were wrong. Maybe the universe is preparing us for a victory this time around and they will finally understand we are right." I tried to believe.

It was about 3am when we arrived at the mansion. We were the first to arrive on Summit Avenue, the block of old wealth, and stayed quiet until the rest came. We got out the car when others showed up and started dancing to Kendrick Lamar. Some families turned their lights on, but only looked at us from their windows. I was less scared to protest in the White area. We anticipated that the cops would come soon, but they never did. Cars blocked off the opposite ends.

I saw a Nigerian woman in all Black gear.

"What's next is to strap up like Black Panthers and build our own." You'd be

surprised at how many Africans are in BLM. I later learned she was one of the youngest that got arrested at the Mall of America protest. In her eyes, the Black community was fake for leaving her hanging after the arrest, but she still wanted to invest in us. She then proceeded to tell me about the upcoming firearm educational events. I was too tired and scared to engage. Folks were now at a place to think about carrying to protect themselves. Made sense. Just a couple days ago the White boy lynched all the Black people in the church. I never saw the womxn again. She refused to go to any more events and declined all the invitations.

The White anarchists came through around 3:30am. Usually when media tells the public Black protests got violent it's because of the White anarchists. They always come filled with energy and Black folks tell them to calm down so the news doesn't label the event as a riot. And in this case, like the many others, they didn't listen and started lighting things on fire. Why? I will never know. I don't even think the White anarchists knew. I just glared at them and asked for White allies to get their folks in order. It worked for the night.

The Russians were trying to get into contact with BLM MPLS.

I don't remember how I got back home, but I couldn't take being on Summit anymore. I wanted to leave before the clash between the old folks and millennials took place (about steps moving forward). When I woke up I went back to the mansion and saw my civil rights grandfather. He asked me to speak in front of the cameras to give a youthful

perspective. I didn't code switch when I talked at all the media outlets. Fuck. I hurt the case by not being respectable on camera. I biked to the Mississippi river to run away from everyone and the cameras. I felt so selfish. If Philando's mother and girlfriend could keep a calm demeanor in front of cameras, what was my excuse? Philando, I am so sorry. I messed up the case. For the rest of the day, I rode my bike around the Twin Cities with my boyfriend and we alternated saying things we were grateful for. Number one: I am grateful to be Black and still alive.

My big mouth at the protest made me step back. School was about to start in a couple weeks and I was nervous. The state of my mental health was already so low. I had no idea how to juggle my mental health with the extra burden of school stress. I got the idea to work with BLC and other Black students on a love letter. We ended up publishing it on the Huffington Post. Working on the writing piece with other Black students distracted me for the rest of the summer. "Ayaan, you should join the BLC national team." I laughed. I didn't have my spirit back yet.

"Whats next? Electing someone we trust?" Bernie Sanders came to the Twin Cities for a private event where Black organizers asked him questions. The panel pressured him to answer: What is your stance on mass incarceration? How will you improve the racist nature of unions to help Black working class folks? Please describe how you will support small Black business owners? What are your views on environmental racism? An Afro-indigenous woman asked, are you willing to advocate for reparations? An

indigenous woman tweeted about how the event was disrespecting indigenous people by talking about reparations without indigenous representation. The tweet went viral.

Several of us needed to hear Bernie's stances because we were still unsure of who to vote for. Black organizers were hosting a similar event with Jill Stein later. Hilary declined the offer to come. I am not surprised. Bernie didn't avoid answering a lot of the questions, which surprised me. So many people in the audience, though, were unamused by his answers (especially about reparations) and thought he was adding fluff to not answer the question. In the end, an indigenous elder pushed Bernie further about reparations for indigenous communities. When Bernie answered, the man got very uncomfortable and told Bernie about his distrust of him and his running mates. Bernie left the forum in the middle of the indigenous man speaking. Bernie claims he left because he was about to miss his flight, but he was going to another Democratic meeting with his counterparts. The indigenous man began to cry. I started crying too.

"What's next? Learning from Black public intellectuals?" A White student brought Shaun King<sup>62</sup> to talk about race relations. The thesis of his presentation was essentially it sucks to be Black, here are some triggering videos of Black people getting lynched, and thank you for listening. I was so underwhelmed. The presentation was so basic even White students felt insulted that the man gave such a basic lecture on race. I started texting my Black friends if we could reclaim

the space and only have Black people ask questions. We slowly moved up and congregated near the mic. When White people stepped up to stand behind we turned around and asked them politely to sit back down. The staff looked upset that we reclaimed the space without their consent.

Staff of color escorted us away from the crowd and asked us if we were finally serious enough to organize on campus for what we wanted. They disclaimed that it couldn't just be us - Black womxn - because the administration is waiting for us to graduate and does not plan to meet our demands. They suggested we find other students to organize with.

"Do you know how much power you, as students, have?" We did, but as "Black women we were exhausted from being woke, we needed a nap".<sup>63</sup> There were other individuals trying to make institutional change, but they were also burnt out, creating little change in isolation, and not working together to elevate their efforts. That's one of the problems. We do not have numbers, collaboration, or trusted gatekeepers in decision making positions. We don't have people to create an undercommons. So we decided to focus on recruitment because the number of students of color - Black students - was so low.

"What's next? Building coalitions?" I actually thought that strategy might work after Trump won, but folks disappeared after a couple months. The work got too hard for them.

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<sup>62</sup> American writer and civil rights activist

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<sup>63</sup> Melissa Harris Perry said this line in a speech she gave at Afropunk Atlanta

A Latino man was leading the campus Republican party somewhere in the north. He pretended to be friends with the other Latino students to report them later to the cops for deportation. It's not just White people. You have to laugh to keep from crying.

People in political science were blaming Black people for not voting. My body started twitching. When are we going to talk about the White feminists who voted for Trump? I told them I actually voted for Hillary. Some of my friends were upset with me. Don't you remember what she did in Honduras?

"What's next? Building Black institutions?" I laughed. Everyone already integrated and is unwilling to build something else, but this option intrigued me the most. I wish I was White enough to assimilate. I envy White passing people of color.

Everyone is going to die. Ayaan, you are late. Where were you after 9/11?

"Ayaan, what's next for you?" Maybe, Pan-africanism is next.

It's not just about the police. A White man told me that he was so desensitized to Black death from constantly seeing videos of Black people lynched. Exactly. America is desensitized to Black death. America is lynching folks and news outlets are bold enough to say we deserve to be lynched.

Watch America claim they love me after they lynch me.

**B. The Beauty of Cape Town I Couldn't See**

*I am not  
going to die,  
I'm going home like a  
shooting star.*

-Sojourner Truth

I first landed in Amsterdam. As I looked for my new gate, I started worrying about my luggage. Then, it hit me how tired I was. Instead of sleeping, I was dedicated to reading a book by Robin Kelly.<sup>64</sup> Time became a social construct.

A Canadian Black womxn approached me and acknowledged me. It's funny that even abroad there is an unspoken rule to greet other Black travelers. We were some of the few Black people boarding. The rest were mostly White; it seemed like they were speaking mostly Dutch and German. Their Whiteness was unfamiliar.

My dad arranged for me to stay with two Zambians on my first night in Cape Town. He thought knowing Zambians would help me while I was abroad. I saw a Black worker at the airport and smiled at him. There are not a lot of Black people in Minnesota so when you see another Black person you say, hello. If you don't, it's considered rude. The Black greeting rule also seemed to carry abroad, so I thought it would carry a similar way in South Africa. I don't think this guy understood the gesture. He stopped me and asked, "What's in your backpack?" I didn't think it was weird that he stopped me. I acknowledged him. I think he assumed I was a local. I told him books. Next thing I know he was directing me to take off my bag and starts searching inside.

"Where are you coming from?" I watched as all the other White Europeans passed. No one stopped them to question them or look into their personal items. I felt

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<sup>64</sup> African American professor

on edge, sensing that his question implied something accusatory.

“I am returning home from Minnesota.” He responded with a welcome back. He was still holding my backpack so I awkwardly took it back. He seemed confused by my accent.

I finally ran into my Zambian hosts. They drove me back to their home near the suburbs. We passed townships<sup>65</sup> while we drove further out of Cape Town. Rows of shacks stood next to each other. Sometimes the shacks caught on fire easily burning everything in its path.

They noticed my face and told me townships represent the wealth disparities in the country. I asked them how they felt about the student movements and they told me they thought the movements were too violent and hurting other students who wanted to learn. They tried to update me with miscellaneous information that I should know as a Black tourist.

- a. Afrikaners,<sup>66</sup> Indians, and Coloureds<sup>67</sup> are very anti-black so avoid them
- b. Black on Black prejudice is rampant and colorism doesn't make it better (to confirm what happened to me at the airport was not in my head)
- c. Blacks are going to assume you are local and speak to you in Xhosa<sup>68</sup>. They get upset when you don't respond so tell them you are American so they

don't get offended, but they probably will still be offended

d. It is controversial to claim Blackness as indigenous here. You will see soon enough

e. Racial tensions are high. Whites are leaving because they feel like South African Affirmative action and labor laws are leaving them without jobs so they are going to Australia, America, and Europe

f. Don't talk about the ANC with people. It's too controversial

The next day, a person from the program came to pick me up. I saw Table Mountain for the first time. It looked too beautiful, almost photoshopped. When we arrived at the house, I learned there would be perhaps nine of us living in the same house. There were two other Black people in the program, but they didn't live in the house. One student was a lighter-skinned Black man from Oakland, California, and the other was a Black, South African woman. We started talking because I learned she was also a Mellon Fellow and participated in the RMF/FMF movement. I ended up talking to her more than the other Black student because, to put it diplomatically, his political sentiments did not align with mine.

Even though there were three Black people in the space, our perspectives and politics were so different. It began to make sense why Pan-Africanism might not ever really be a thing. The Black South African woman admitted she didn't know what to think about Pan-Africanism because there were so many internal divides in RMF/FMF. How can Pan-Africanism occur when, even in

<sup>65</sup> Townships are underdeveloped segregated urban areas. During apartheid, Coloureds, Africans, and Indians lived there.

<sup>66</sup> Afrikaans-speaking people who are from Dutch and Huguenot settlers of the 17th century in South Africa

<sup>67</sup> Ethnic group in South Africa known for mixed race people. Khoisan (indigenous population), Bantu-speaking Africans, Ethnic groups in Europe, and Asian people are considered Cape Coloureds

<sup>68</sup> Bantu language mostly spoken by Xhosa and Zulu people

a local context, we don't get along? She was right, but I needed another illusion, so I had to believe Pan-Africanism was a possibility. What else was there?

Her point was further proven when I sat in on the Ngugi Wa Thiong'o decolonization lecture (that was requested from RMF/FMF students). Wa Thiong'o dedicated his life work into empowering the African continent. I didn't know who he was before the event. Before he got on stage, students were singing and dancing as a way of showing gratitude to him. During his speech, a Black womxn sat on stage next to him with a sign stating, "San Edukation is Excluding Poor Black Disabled People." A staff on stage tried to get the womxn away, but Wa Thiong'o told her to stay. He was down to listen to the student's critique. He embraced the fact that we were not all going to agree with each other, but wanted to have the opposing viewpoints in the same room. I admired that and strived to get there as a person. Maybe one day Pan-africanism could get there.

He stressed the importance of individuals knowing their mother tongue. Also, he argued Africans only knowing the languages of the world but not their own is enslavement. What did that mean for African Americans? His lecture was a lot to process.

After his speech, a Black man thanked him for coming and asked him questions regarding his advice on how RMF/FMF should move forward. There was tension in the room while the Black man started talking. A Black womxn in the crowd started shouting, asking why are men always speaking for the movement when they are known for their

sexist and transphobic behaviors? The staff interjected saying the crowd needed to calm down and he opened the space for questions. A person asked: "How can we start decolonization when we are coexisting with colonizers?" The next question was from a White man. His question was cut short with boo's. People in the audience said, let the oppressors leave; several people in the crowd started clapping. I think I did too. Black staff members called out the Black students for attempting to hijack the mic. One Black staff member was so frustrated with the tensions in the room that he stopped the entire event. I felt like I was in the undercommons with a White gaze.

While we walked home from the cut event, people were reflecting about the role of Whiteness in liberation movements. The event reminded me of Shaun King's Macalester visit. Why was Black student advocacy for transient Black space in heterogeneous locations read as disrespectful?

I learned about Saartjie Baartman around the same time I learned about Black feminism. When I was a kid, I heard she was a Khoi<sup>69</sup> womxn stolen and showcased in European freak show exhibits for her large butt. The West became obsessed with her South African features and mocked her at the same time. I saw a poster of her while I was walking around in the neighborhood. The poster described her as Coloured. Her skin tone looked like my skin tone. Her hair texture was the same as mine. I was confused. What is indigenous? What is Black? My

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<sup>69</sup> Also called Khoisan, the original inhabitants of southern Africa

American understanding of race made no sense in this context.

Our house was divided. The conventional Americans stayed with each other. The international students, who studied in America, American womxn of color, and South African students stayed together. There were two people who mingled between both groups. I didn't really trust the conventional American students. They were nice but, after Trump won, nice wasn't enough anymore.

The entire study abroad program 'staff' was White - mostly Afrikaners. Our class went on a field trip to a township, where one Afrikaner told us about how filthy the people there live and act. He openly shared this as the residents went about their lives. His audacity embarrassed and surprised me. He asked a Black South African woman if he could enter her home and show the twelve of us her living conditions. Later, when we got back on the bus, an American woman of color, told the man she thought we were extremely disrespectful and out of line. He responded by saying our year, in particular, was too sensitive (probably because it was the most diverse).

I didn't know who to trust. I didn't know if Afrikaners were like White liberals in the north or White conservatives in the South. A Ghanaian friend of mine, who grew up in Norway, warned me to trust my gut when I met Europeans and Afrikaners. The way the Afrikaner talked to me was more intense than the other students (maybe cuz of my critical stance). The same guy playfully hit two women in the program with his car. He said it

was a joke, but his humor made me uncomfortable. The other people in the program liked him and thought his jokes were funny, though. Go figure. Again, they were nice, but my gut told me to not let my guard down. The man was later removed from the program.

The entire program went on a tour to visit UCT. The campus looked similar to U.S. universities with the architecture. At the top of the campus (or hill), students had a view overlooking the entire city. One of the coordinators of the program and tour guide talked to us about the Rhodes statue. It was no longer there. Instead, there was a box in its place.

They gathered colonized objects on campus and brought them to the center of the campus, lit the objects on fire, and celebrated. Some people feared the students. There were stories of Black male students attacking White female faculty. I didn't know what to believe.

That's when I ran into Maxwele. He gave me a mouthful about how White the university is: "Do you feel crazy yet? Why is it that you are in South Africa, but you feel as if you are in Europe? What lies have they already told you about us?" He often sat in the dining room with a stack of newspapers. He cut out any sections about RMF/FMF. I think he was working on his own research and also trying to find a new place to live in the Rondebosch area.

The conversation with Maxwele gave me a new confidence to speak up about the critiques I had about the program, subtle racism, and Whiteness. The program would often denounce my claims, saying, "As an

American student you don't know what you are talking about." True, most of the time I didn't (as a Black transplant), but then there were moments where nonsense would take place and no one would say anything. One day an Afrikaner started making click clack sounds to mock Xhosa. I got so pissed. Those type of jokes were so familiar – ones that people make behind my dad's back (even though he speaks Tonga<sup>70</sup>). I expected more from South African Whiteness. I don't know why. I assumed that living amongst different cultures in the "Rainbow nation," they would practice more respect. Some of them did. Whiteness has its limitations. I should have known better.

I tried to validate my claims of discomfort about the program. Even the Zambians and South Africans here understood what I said about the Whiteness, so why did the program deny its own flaws and contradictions? Even Black South Africans warned other Black South African students to not do the program.

I think I mentioned the conversation I had with Maxwele in class. A South African Coloured student quickly shut me down. She expressed that Maxwele is a very controversial figure and I should check my place before I start making accusations I knew nothing about. I got worried about what exactly "controversial" meant.

In one instance, I understood where she was coming from. I tried to check my privilege regarding speaking with authority on an experience that was not my own. At the

same time, as a person with multiple identities, I had to recognize what I was feeling as an American, Black American, Zambian womxn (whatever you want to call me) was also my experience. It was inevitable that our perspectives would clash. We each spoke our own truths.

I often talked to the workers at our home. A Coloured woman told me her son had autism. She expressed health care services were nice in South Africa, but she always wondered if her son would be better off if he was in America. I told her about my brother and the difficulties we face with giving him assistance in the U.S. We confided in each other on hard days.

I became really good friends with a White South African student in the program. She explained the British grading system. There was an emphasis at UCT on academic excellence. They compared themselves to Harvard and Oxford. I was taking two honour's courses and she helped me adjust to the new academic standards. I've never learned so much in one semester. One day in class, our reading assignment was about BLC. The irony.

We brainstormed about what to do if the water cut off. I was honest with her and said I didn't really think about climate change. In Minnesota, people liked the idea of climate change because it meant warmer winters. Now I see.

I confided with her about what was happening in the U.S. and she shared her feelings about the counter-ANC protests. She also shared that she felt bad about her colonial presence in South Africa, but had

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<sup>70</sup> Bantu language mainly spoken in Southern and Western provinces of Zambia



known no other home. I told her I felt a similar way in the U.S. The ground is haunted in both geographical contexts because no one acknowledges indigenous people and racialized poverty. Where else do Black people go when we were stolen from a home and brought to indigenous land? Where do Afrikaners go when it dawns on them that they can't claim true ownership of the lands they stole? We sat in silence.

"You know you are not the first Black American to come here and work with RMF/FMF? You don't get it. And then you try to come here and insert your opinion. No one asked for your opinion."

No one said that, but that's what I thought.

All the students returned to campus. There were so many Black students, I felt like I was at a HBCU. I even forgot other demographics were there, especially as I sat near the cafeteria. If you look at the statistics though, the numbers are actually not that high - just high to me because I was coming from a smaller campus. I could just blend in. I've never felt so safe before.

I accidentally left my cup in the bathroom so I went back to get it. As I reached out for the cup, a Coloured UCT staff asked me,

"Where did you get that cup from?" Her tone indicated she was irritable and frustrated.

"I got the cup from the tearoom." She looked away from the cup and into my eyes.

"All day I was thinking of what I would do to the person who took my cup. Do you know what I wanted to do?" At this point, I

didn't know whether to laugh or try to deescalate the situation. I tried to read her facial expressions. There was a hint of humor in her face so I thought she was awkwardly joking. Next thing I know, her hands are around my neck. See, this is the thing about discrimination: Sometimes it feels so surreal, almost like a dream. While she had me in her chokehold I continued to apologize.

"I am an American student who thought the tearoom was open to everyone. I didn't know the cups were for the staff and faculty." Her hands still wrung my neck.

This was not the first time on this trip that folks saw nothing wrong with invading my personal space. I did my best to ensure she felt in control of the situation. I didn't want to be read as an angry Black womxn, and I remember my Zambian hosts warning me about colorism. I don't remember how I left the situation.

I went back to class and told my friends what happened. People responded in one of two ways. Either they thought I was joking and laughed, or they insisted that the staff member was just playing around. Wait? What?

So this staff member is known for jokingly putting her hands on Black UCT students? I didn't ask any further question. I was too exhausted from both the unexpected chain of events and holding back my tears. So I tried to forget what happened once the class was back in session. I avoided that woman for the rest of the program.

I knew I needed to stop speaking so much and just soak up other people's wisdom. "Listen, American."

The program's subtle racism was very triggering. The way I felt, I couldn't tell if I was in the U.S. or South Africa. I began catching flashbacks and would just cry, especially after one day a White Zimbabwean woman said, "nigger," in class. A lot of people probably thought I was overly sensitive. I felt years of the unchecked trauma working through my body. That same trauma found me in South Africa.

I would hike, go to the movie theatre, eat pap<sup>71</sup> that reminded me of nshima<sup>72</sup>, visit museums, volunteer with other Black students for Inkanyezi<sup>73</sup>, and participate in the Gender and Sex Project<sup>74</sup>. All of these activities were a form of self-care, but I was still in a funk. It got so bad a couple of my housemates directed me to counseling. My therapist told me RMF/FMF advocated for her position. One of their demands was specialized mental health service. I was so grateful, but then felt bad that I was getting the service instead of them. I would think about that when I rode the jammie<sup>75</sup> back to upper campus.

I quickly became really close friends with my spiritual twin (another Mellon Fellow). He reminded me of how I had been, before Trayvon Martin. He was spiritually grounded and brimming with light and love. When exactly did mine disappear? I vented to him about how I had noticed a lot of American

students – even students of color, including myself – didn't understand that we could be the oppressed and the oppressor in the same body. My trauma moved through everything I encountered and touched. From the sunken place, I lost sight of South Africa's beauty. He shared with me the pressure of juggling Black tax<sup>76</sup> and processing the RMF/FMF protests that took place only a couple of months earlier. I was surprised that he was still so grounded after everything he shared with me.

He invited me to his (decolonized) birthday party. The party was centered on Black joy, and when I went home I realized how rare it was for me to congregate with Black folks over love. In Minnesota, oppression and Black death is what brings Black people together. In Minnesota, there is really no such thing as independent, autonomous, Black space (and if there is it's getting gentrified). I realized I was so focused on what I was fighting against, I lost the ability to visualize what I was fighting towards. At the party, I saw Black students imagining different worlds and realized I lost my imagination. I wanted it back.

What's decolonized love?

What's decolonized friendship?

What's decolonized mental health?

What's decolonized writing?

What's decolonized democracy?

I usually vented to my therapist about how I would go about answering those questions and asked for her thoughts. She encouraged me to practice mindfulness techniques and visit Joburg where more Black people were. I did.

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<sup>76</sup> The financial responsibility of providing for extended family

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<sup>71</sup> South African dish made from maize flour

<sup>72</sup> Zambian dish made from maize flour

<sup>73</sup> a UCT volunteering program to help underserved high school learners

<sup>74</sup> a UCT organization aiming to combat gender-based violence and discrimination

<sup>75</sup> A campus shuttle

I told her about the theory I discovered. If you are a Black transplant and go to a new place, you are almost always treated better than the Black locals. If my mom (from Chicago) goes to Brazil, she will probably get treated better than Afro-Brazilians. If my dad (from Zambia) goes to the United States, he gets treated better than my mom. Now here I am. I get treated better than Black South Africans because people hear my accent and know I am American, but when I don't talk they treat me like another Black South African and it's anti-black.

The theory doesn't work for everyone, especially certain immigrants. The xenophobia in South Africa confirmed that. Did you hear about the attacks against Mozambican and Congolese immigrants in 2012? My dad warned me to never say I was Zambian and instead say I was African American because he was scared about the afrophobia<sup>77</sup>.

I learned that term in South Africa and thought about afrophobia with the Muslim Ban in America. I kept thinking about all the other people with the name Ayaan getting kicked out, harassed in airports, or separated from their families.

Someone in the program said how privileged Americans were and I just kept quiet. Tell that to Flint, the poor community who still doesn't have water. Or tell that to Richard Collins III, a Black student, who was days away from graduating, lynched by a White student at the University of Maryland. See trauma. Work on mindfulness, Ayaan.

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<sup>77</sup> Fear and xenophobic violence towards African people by other African people

Don't get me wrong; I understood where they were coming from. At least I thought I did. No, I didn't.

A lot of the Americans that go to South Africa or move there are the same ones I avoid back at home. For example, one White female expat voiced her passion about fighting gentrification in South Africa. I did research on where she was from in the U.S. And (not) to my surprise she was from a rising gentrifying area in D.C. Instead of staying back home and opposing inequality in her own backyard, she was eager to stay in South Africa. Working on anti-gentrification efforts in African American communities was probably not exotic enough for her so she had to go to "Africa". That's what most of my classmates do so she didn't surprise me.

You know you've seen the pictures they take with African kids. They love to show them off too in the African studies department meetings.

South African activists brought Ericka Higgins<sup>78</sup> to campus for a talk. Several femme students wanted to hear how she navigated sexism and rape culture in organizing spaces. She encouraged activists to organize cross-culturally and practice restorative justice circles. She liked the idea of Biko Blackness<sup>79</sup> and thought Americans should adopt it. Her talk made most of the people in the room feel hopeful.

The last meeting I had with my therapist she told me to continue counseling when I got back to the United States. I

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<sup>78</sup> Former female leading member of Los Angeles Black Panther Party

<sup>79</sup> Derived from Steve Biko. An idea than non-Black people can identify politically as Black.

listened. All I could latch on to was pain. I forgot how to bring joy in my life. It felt like I was holding my breath for three years.

You are the global babies. We left but we were completely unaware of how long we would be away and the new homes we would form, but home is always calling. Thus, home can never be somewhere else. Eventually, we want to go back to our mother's arms even if she is alive or dead, her spirit emanates from the ground. She is waiting for us. The spirit doesn't call you in the same way. Either you lost the ability to hear your mother's voice or you have new mothers in different parts of the world.

"Twaambo, exhale."

My grandmother only called me by my ancestor's names. She refused to speak English to me because she wanted me to see another way -decolonization. I honored the living and dead on the farm, spoke with nature and ancestors. I started to heal.

Maybe, now I can truly begin my own process of decolonizing my mind

finding light

and finding joy.

### C: #OppressionMustFall<sup>80</sup>

*we see ourselves  
as microcosms of the world,  
and work to shift oppressive patterns in our  
bodies,  
hearts, minds, speech, interactions,  
liberating ourselves into purpose,  
liberating our communities into new practices.*

<sup>80</sup> I borrowed this term from T.O. Molef's journal article titled, "Oppression Must Fall: South Africa's Revolution in Theory"

*We each set the pace of our own transformation.*

-Adrienne Maree Brown, "Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds"

Home for less than a week and then left to go to the competitive public policy program at Berkeley. I was waiting for this moment since the night of Castile's death. I was eager to meet with other like-minded organizers who were ready to answer, what's next? The program was not what I expected. It was a graduate school bootcamp where we took classes on statistics, policy advocacy, and economics. The program was dedicated to training up and coming leaders to integrate into elite law programs or consulting work. I was confused. That is not what's next.

Being in academia is like being a house slave. You have to recognize your privilege. You are no longer getting constantly whipped on the plantation. Field slaves don't get the option to be in the house doing domestic labor. Be grateful. There are some people who didn't survive on the field so who are you to complain about being a house slave? You learn how to read and write. You get to take self-care breaks. You meet other slaves learning how to read and write. How can you be content with being a house slave though? You are still a slave.

The massa still puts you in check when you speak out of line or don't handle your responsibilities. Produce more. Talk and read less. Produce more. Watch the children. Produce more. Cook the meals. Produce more. Iron the clothes. Produce more. Give my wife a pep talk. Produce more. Remind me of how nice I treat you. Produce more.

The massa always warns you if you do anything out of line, you will return to being a field slave. That reminder helps you keep producing. The massa always threatens you about the slave catchers aka the Black Identity Extremists<sup>81</sup> catchers. This reminder helps you keep saying you don't know who Harriet Tubman is. You look out the window at the field slaves. One tried to run away, got caught, and got lynched. RIP Erica Garner<sup>82</sup>. A female field slave, who was pregnant, got lynched after work. RIP Charleena Lyles<sup>83</sup>. The field slave is getting whipped. The field slave successfully ran away to Cuba, but the catchers still hunting her down. You best to not say her name before they lynch you. You ain't in hiding so shut up before they lynch you.

You have three options left: submit, learn to get free or run away. At first, I thought I was gonna learn how to get free, but it's too hard and too many people won't help you because they submitted. Do I run? Where do I run? Who do I bring with me? What if no else wants to run with me? The folks who did run had money. I don't have money. Maybe that's why you submit. Survival is real.

That is such an insensitive analogy. Your experience is not the same as a house slave. What about the Libyan slave trade? Syria? Human trafficking?

Be better. Vent. Be better. Vent.

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<sup>81</sup> Term from the FBI counterterrorism report on implementing a national investigation of Black Lives Matter and Black gun ownership advocates

<sup>82</sup> A 27-year-old African American woman who died of a heart attack. Known for her activism work after the murder of her father Eric Garner, a 43-year-old man lynched in New York by a police officer

<sup>83</sup> A 30-year-old pregnant African American lynched killed by a police officer

A week into the Berkeley program I heard the news. The officer who lynched Castile is not charged on all accounts. Not charged for second-degree manslaughter. Not charged for reckless discharge of a firearm. Not charged for almost shooting the Black girl in the car. I panicked. How is the little Black girl doing? Cameras move on.

The lawyers did everything right so what's the point? Again, what's next? I had to tell myself this time it would be different. It was a facebook live video, there was a kid in the car, even White folks (popular opinion) were saying it was manslaughter. I tried to carry on with the program but I panicked.

When I die will people also just move on? She was a nigger bitch that deserved to die. I knew the answer was yes because I've already seen the scenario played out so many times. She told the White people the truth so let her hang. The people who did like me would record the people chasing me and put the video on instagram for more followers. The people who didn't like me would find the rope and laugh about where to hang me. They would shot me from the back. They would shoot twenty seven times. The last shot in my head. The next day my body would be found at Macalester College. Some people will say she was a decent person. Others will say the lynching went according to plan. Cameras move on. RIP Ayaan Natala.

I relapsed. The director of the program found me on the bathroom floor shaking. She brought me to the emergency room.

"How often do you think about suicide?"

"I don't"

“Well, why are you here today?”

“I had a panic attack.”

“It seemed pretty serious.”

“Look, Black person to Black person. I was having another Black day and you know it’s hard explaining a Black day to non-Black people. Let me be clear. I do not think about suicide, but I think about my lynching constantly. Not because I inflict harm on myself, but because I see Black people getting lynched all the time. Maybe the medical term for a Black day is suicidal ideation. I dunno, you are the therapist.”

“Sometimes, I have those days too. I invented this concept called Black YOLO<sup>84</sup>. If you are going to possibly get lynched today, live your life to the fullest before they catch you.” He vented to me about how he processed Black thoughts as a Black man. The Black man told me he got the job because the Black students protested for more Black therapists and mental health services. The whole process sounded very similar to my former therapist in South Africa. He warned me to take care of myself and wrote out a list of different programs, services, and community events in Oakland.

A French staff in the program vented with me about his own mental state. He informed me about French politics and the heaviness of the world. Even other people felt it. Everyone was in the sunken place. At least we knew though.

I stay in academia because as a formerly incarcerated man, these institutions give me social capital.

I stay in academia because I am undocumented and universities are my own legal safe haven.

I stay in academia because I want to help other foster care children and I need to go to law school to do that.

I stay in academia because I want to give back to my family abroad.

I stay in academia to learn tribal law for indigenous communities.

I stay in academia because the discussions help me process the world.

I stay in academia because I am poor and need to get out of the hood.

I stay in academia because I know a PhD next to my name will have White people take me seriously.

I wrote a love letter to each person. I was happy they were navigating their own fugitive dreams<sup>85</sup> and yet i didn't believe in the illusion anymore. I no longer knew why I was there and the panic attacks wouldn't stop. I quit the program.

The last day I was in Berkeley I met up for coffee with a member in BLC. I thanked him for what he did on the Berkeley campus and told him about my run in with the therapist. He shared with me how tiring the work was. The death threats. The isolation from other Black students, staff, and faculty. He also shared the tensions with the BLM chapter in the neighborhood. He is trying to

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<sup>84</sup> YOLO refers to the phrase “you only live once.” A phrase used by many young adults to encourage themselves and others to live life to the fullest

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<sup>85</sup> Fugitive Dreams comes from Patricia J. Saunders’ work “Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman”

get his PhD in law to write about his activism work.

When I arrived back at home, I stopped protesting. Many others stopped protesting too and found other gigs. Black history repeats itself once again.

THE DAY GONNA COME  
WHEN I WONT MARCH NO MO  
THE DAY GONNA COME  
WHEN I WONT MARCH NO MO  
BUT WHILE MY SISTA AINT EQUAL  
AND MY BROTHA CANT BREATHE  
HAND IN HAND WITH MY FAMILY  
WE GON FILL THESE STREETS<sup>86</sup>

The movement song now had a double meaning. I was too emotionally and spiritually exhausted to march anymore.

BLM MPLS tried their best.  
I did too.  
heal.

A couple months later, a White Australian woman was murdered by a Black Muslim cop in South Minneapolis. He was charged. The layers.

I saved up money and asked the president for funds to visit undercommons. When I got back to campus I tried to create my own.

#### **IV: Senior Year: Right Now, Reparations is Body & Trauma Work**

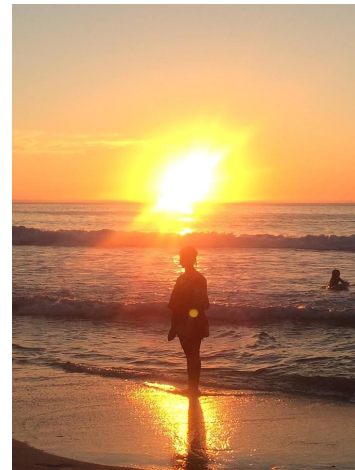
*And for those of us  
from communities*

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<sup>86</sup> A portion of the lyrics from a Twin Cities movement song created by Jayanthi Kyle

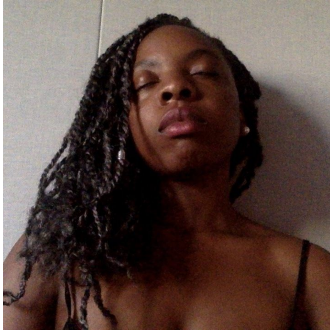
*with historic collective trauma,  
we must understand  
that each of us  
is already science fiction  
walking around on two legs.  
Our ancestors dreamed us up  
and they bent reality to create us...  
we think of our ancestors in chains  
dreaming about a day  
when their children's  
children's  
children  
would be free.*

*They had no reason to believe this was likely,  
but together they dreamed of freedom,  
and they brought us into being.  
We are responsible for interpreting their  
regrets  
and realizing their imaginings.  
We wish to continue the work  
of moving forward with their visionary legacy.  
-Walidah imarisha and Adrienne Maree  
Brown, "Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction  
Stories from Social Justice Movements*



*"Healing trauma  
involves recognizing,  
accepting,  
and moving through pain-  
clear pain.*

*It often means  
facing what you don't want to face,  
but have been reflexively avoiding or fleeing...*



*By walking into that pain,  
experiencing it fully,  
and moving through it,  
you metabolize it  
and put an end to it.  
In the process you also grow;  
create more room  
in your nervous system  
for flow and coherence;  
and build your capacity for further growth...*

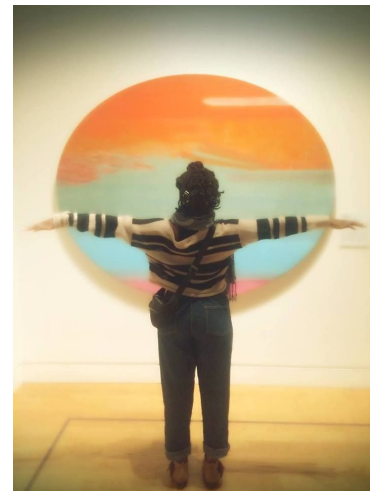


*Clean pain  
is about choosing integrity  
over fear.  
It is about letting go*

*of what is familiar  
but harmful,  
finding the best parts of yourself,  
and making a leap -- with no guarantee of  
safety or praise...*



*The healing  
does not happen in your head.  
It happens in your body.  
And it is more likely  
to happen to a body  
that can stay settled  
in the midst of conflict and uncertainty...*



*When you come out  
the other side of this process,  
you will experience more than just relief.*



*Your body will feel more settled.  
There will be a little more freedom in it -  
more room to move.  
You will also have grown up a notch...*



*What will the situation  
look like when you come out the other side?  
You don't know.  
You can't know.  
That's how the process works.  
You have to stand in your integrity,  
accept the discomfort,  
and move forward into the unknown.."*  
-Resmaa Menakem, "My Grandmother's Hands:  
Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to  
Mending Our Hearts and Bodies"

## **The Dynamics of Black Student Mobilization**

*to be black  
in the world  
is a crime  
against the state  
-Richard Wright*

### **I. United States Context**

BLC wrote a collective piece where they asserted, "we are still students, even

after we leave our local BLM actions and return to our campuses" ("On Urgency...", 2016). This assertion highlights that BLC is attached to BLM, which is a chapter-based organization fighting systems that impair Black humanity (Garza, n.d.). My experience at Macalester mirrors this sentiment. As a student, I often navigated two worlds of being a successful student while participating in traumatic protest activity outside higher education. This is a perfect example of double consciousness. Unlike other students, I constantly had to navigate the dichotomy of being Black and American.

In 2013, #BlackLivesMatter was established by three Black queer women who created the hashtag after "17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder" (Garza, n.d.). The hashtag allowed members of the Black community to vent about the inequality in the United States criminal justice system. Social media and BLM events became one of the only outlets for Black students to process social events.

A couple years later after the inception of BLM, BLM organized the first "Movement for Black Lives Convening". BLM coordinated the event, which resulted in the gathering of 2,000 Black activists and 50 organizers in Cleveland, Ohio ("About Us", n.d.). The organizers strove to build a revolutionary Black agenda ("About Us", n.d.). At the Convening, individuals picked which events and workshops to attend based on their identity, occupation, and passions. BLC originated at the convening. BLC members wrote:

Like a number of social justice oriented circles, some of us met at the Movement of Black Lives convening stayed connected, we continued to envision a future filled with the radical love of our people. We know that a lot of us who are engaged in Black Lives Matter work are also students, and that college organizing is a realm that has been left uncoordinated at the national level since [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and the Black Student Leadership Network in the 90's. We saw this as an opportunity, to forge a new future for Black higher education in this country...So we brought in other student organizers from across the country who dedicated their very being to the liberation of ALL Black people. They come from [historically Black colleges], small and large state schools, Ivy league schools, community colleges and even universities in South Africa...We are a microcosm of all Black movements, even in our short life span. We started strong, began to fade, were revived, and were reinvigorated through crisis ("On Urgency...", 2016).

The students aspire to connect different schools and form the largest mobilizations of Black students since the 1990's. The students insinuate the historical significance of their work by acknowledging former Black student movements that lost prominence. The concept of "radical love of our people" mirrors BLM's collective imagination. Bailey et al (2015) argues that BLM is an affirmation of love to Black people. Similarly to BLM, BLC is trying to create coalitions with other organizers to improve the future of Black higher education and achieve liberation by centering love.

BLC often reference Assata Shakur and Ella Baker as inspirations for their political work ("Our Demands", n.d.). They proclaim on their political website that their objective is to form a "collective of Black students who are dedicated to transforming higher education through unity, coalition building, direct action, and political education" ("Our Demands", n.d). BLC's political website elaborates that they want to:

[Provide] a platform and network for Black students around the globe to build power, using an intersectional lens, in order to make our campuses safe from the various manifestations of anti-blackness and White supremacy. We understand that while there may be various differences in our campaigns as they relate to our specific universities, what unites us is our desire to bring about freedom for all Black students, and more broadly, all Black people. The only way we can do this is by building power collectively, as our liberation is tied up with one another ("Our Demands", n.d.)

The students' objectives mirror the principles of BLM by claiming their intersectional approach to liberating all Black people. They stress an emphasis on organizing around numerous Black issues and recognize that each student will engage in those endeavors differently.

As mentioned earlier, originally, the BLC platform was started by Mizzou, where a Black graduate student alongside a football team went on strike. Racial tensions continued when White students disrupted a Black student group by yelling racial slurs

(Anderson et al., 2016). The harassment by White students led to a student organization at Mizzou, by the name of Concerned Students of 1950, to create t-shirts with the phrase, “1839 was built on my B(l)ack”; The shirts indicated the unresolved racial history of the campus and conveyed discomfort with the present racial climate in the country (Anderson et al., 2016: 652).

Many other schools were not able to accomplish all of their demands in the same way as Mizzou. The football team going on strike influenced the school’s profit. As a result, there was more incentive from the school to address the students concerns. At a small liberal school, such as my own, national press is often the determining factor that leads administration to work on student initiatives (that are unfavorable). However, it is extremely unlikely for students to collaborate on collective goals, even with Black students. I speculate that it is unlikely for Black students at my campus to organize strategically because of the low number of Black students on campus, the tensions between migrants and locals, burnout, and our inability to see that there can be another way due to depression and financial responsibilities.

It is extremely common for Black organizers to feel burnout. Moreover, financial pressures cause several members to leave organizing, especially when there is no promise of compensation. Compensation usually is only distributed to professors or individuals with enough social capital like Cornel West or Shaun King. Several people aspire to become recognized as Black Public

Intellectuals like Shaun King, but often experience a harder time if they are not connected to the BLM brand. For example, the forgotten Black youth who participated in city protests or Black brunches barely obtain financial opportunities related to their organizing work.

It is important to note that there is no official record indicating internal divides amongst BLC members. However, the internal divides amongst BLM, community partners, and individuals indicate tensions are occurring between organizers. Social media and gossip are often the ways individuals learn about these divisions that are not highlighted in the news. Additionally, the anti-black critiques of BLM by mainstream and conservative media discourage Black organizers from speaking openly about the local organizational conflict. Currently, BLM is shifting its political priorities to assist organizers to run for elected positions. Many Black organizers believe this tactic compromises the original radical ambitions of the movement.

BLC is a network of about eighty-six chapters on numerous campuses (“Our Demands”, n.d.). In spite of several chapters, there are not many active members. My participation in BLC mirrors this fact. I mostly engaged in group therapy calls or wrote news outlets. Some schools or individuals are more active than others. For example, UC Berkeley was able to accomplish most of their goals.

The chapters are located mostly within the United States, but other schools like the University of Toronto are in solidarity and organize alongside Black American students.

The organization references that it is connected to universities in South Africa, but never elaborates on the nature of the relationship. Upon arriving in South Africa, I realized almost no one in South Africa knew about BLC. The only time I heard South African students talking about BLC was in my class because the organization was mentioned in an assigned reading. The reading was about numerous critiques a scholar named Robin Kelly had on the movement. Similarly, in the U.S., few students are aware of the RMF/FMF movement.<sup>87</sup> Also, no South African universities are written out in the list of institutions as part of the collective (“Our Demands,” n.d.). It is important to note that BLC seeks to create solidarity links with other Black students domestically and globally, but has only achieved the latter with the University of Toronto.

A couple years ago, BLC wrote a love letter to Black students, which was published in the Huffington Post, where they alluded to a global component of their activism, claiming:

The struggle is global... and so is the movement for Black lives. Know that you're part of a global village that transcends language, borders, and politics, a village in which we co-create a more balanced vision of freedom in which freedom from transforms into freedom to. Together we're building a new world filled with alternative ecologies. We're growing our own food,

resisting gentrification, organizing in favelas, and not only dreaming but seeking out transient zones of freedom throughout the world (Natala et al., 2016)

The mention of a global village indicates that BLC is interested in pursuing transnational networks. They conceptualize their activism in relation to Black communities who are organizing in other places in the world by referencing favelas<sup>88</sup> and other places where language, borders, and politics separate Black communities.

Social media is a common tool BLC activists use to communicate and organize with branches or connect with the public. BLC utilizes several Facebook pages for individual chapters as well as a political website, which informs the public about their initiatives, principles, news, chapters, demands, and contact information. For example, the University of Toronto created their own Facebook page with similar information about the collective. Their profile picture is a banner that says, “Fees Must Fall, From Toronto to South Africa”.

The internet serves to vent or organize events and conferences, as seen with the following hashtags: #BlackOnCampus, #NationalBlackOutDay, and #BLCConvening2017 (“Our Demands”, n.d.). More importantly, social media is a platform where students voice their discomforts on campus and experiences of social exclusion, alienation, or violence. For example, Black students used social media to reveal the

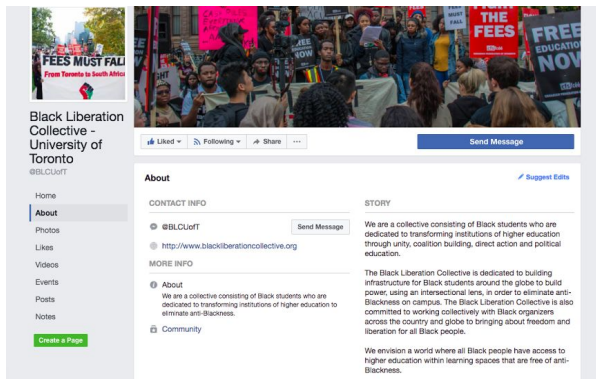
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<sup>87</sup> This information was barely expressed in my auto-ethnography. I am aware of this information through talking to people about my research. Recently a friend (from Maryland) told me she learned about South African student movements in class

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<sup>88</sup> A Brazilian shack or slum

tragedy of Richard Collins III's murder on campus (Zirin, 2017).



A screenshot of a Facebook page (Black Liberation Collective –University of Toronto, 2015)

With the prevalent violence of anti-Black racism, students take it upon themselves to discuss Black Pain. In the same Huffington Post love letter, students discussed how mental health and trauma impacted them. Students in BLC share:

the utter disregard for Black humanity demonstrated through the deaths of Korryn Gaines, Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, Skye Mockabee, and countless others left us feeling spiritually numb. We handle the numbness differently, but the guilt of being alive coupled with the gratuitous violence against Black bodies left us asking daunting questions: Where do we go from here? How do we collectively and individually sustain revolutionary hope, love, and joy when the world is burning? And to complicate matters even further, how can we practice accountability within ourselves and each other so when academic pressure juggling papers, loneliness, financial dilemmas, anxiety, deadlines, endless projects, mental

illnesses, and no sleep returns?... They will tell you that what's happening to Black lives outside of your school has nothing to do with your own livelihood; that the deaths of people who look like you have no bearing on your own soul (“Walk Into The...”, 2016)

The love letter is an attempt to practice Black love and establish Black community while simultaneously voicing the despair students feel about the recent killings of Black Americans over the summer. Love is a common theme in the writings of BLC members as an act to reclaim life and humanity (Bailey et al., 2015). Often, the organization references the exhaustion they feel on universities trying to fight for inclusion in school and processing the realities of being Black in the United States. The students admit that they tried to practice self-care, but became overwhelmed by racial injustice and trauma.

These personal and societal stresses on students led many to stop engaging in student protests or any advocacy work (Charles, 2016). Melissa Charles, a Black student at the University of Michigan, openly shared that watching CNN made her feel helpless, so she “[plagued herself] with coursework, internships, volunteering, retreats, and group projects” (Charles, 2016). Charles’ behavioral patterns of avoidance and busyness are coping mechanisms. My first year in college was mostly spent traveling - my own version of avoidance from my trauma. Charles continued by saying:

There is simply no time for me to think about all the Black people being

murdered on a daily basis. If I allow myself to stop for even one minute to contemplate the terror being inflicted on my brothers and sisters on a daily basis, I know I will enter into a deep depression (Charles, 2016)

Charles' statement echoes the sentiments of the BLC Huffington Post article where students explain that the hypervisibility of Black Death hampers their psychological state. Also, she reveals that her activism is centered around being an ally, specifically by bringing topics of racism into class discussions (Charles, 2016). Her distinct form of practical politics demonstrates that she still yearns to be involved but seeks activism through university spaces, instead of non-violent direct action for her mental sanity. Charles' decision to remove herself from media and direct action illustrates a dilemma students face - organize for change or focus on survival and social mobility. The exhaustion and wavering mental health of Black students compel many to solely focus on academics and professional development.

BLC, as a national organization, aims to meet three main demands that are generally agreed upon with all the chapters: improving diversity, free education as a form of reparations, and prison divestment. However, some chapters are more active in accomplishing the national demands, while other campuses consist of more students like Charles who choose to focus on academics and survival.

More students are attempting to involve themselves in decision-making processes and university politics with

strategizing for free education (Anderson et al., 2016). Bernie Sanders advocated for free education, but he was very reluctant to talk about reparations. BLC members are arguing that free education, specifically for Black and indigenous students, is a form of reparations the country should take seriously. At Western Kentucky University, Black students took it upon themselves to "demand reparations for the systematic denial of access to high-quality educational opportunities in the form of full and free access for all Black people (including undocumented, currently and formerly incarcerated people) to [our school]" (Glum, 2017). The Student Government Association endorsed the "Resolution to Support Reparations" because they believed it made amends for slavery, but the university administrators refused to adopt the policy (Glum, 2017). Even though the students did not achieve the goal, the efforts to demand reparations demonstrate how the students are practicing radical political imagination. Also, students are demanding that all universities divest from prisons and invest in marginalized communities, as seen when several Black students pushed for California Universities to divest \$30 million from "its holding in companies that operate private prisons" (Song, 2015).

There is an array of responses to the movement. Immediately, students received backlash and encountered racist flyers, nooses, or death threats (Zirin, 2017). Some students and staff felt Black activists were impairing their freedom of speech and that their protest movements were hostile (Jaschik, 2015). With the current polarized

political climate, bipartisan tensions are exacerbating racial tensions on universities between conservatives and liberals (Jaschik, 2015). Rochester (2016) believes Black students have a sense of entitlement to think that every staff and student must practice political correctness in front of them. Rochester labels Black students using social media to express their frustrations as bullying. He also argues asking university presidents for apologies to broad social and historical issues as absurd. Furthermore, Rochester claims that, unlike the 1960's, the United States is a post-racial country, so it's unnecessary to have a dialogue on White supremacy and White privilege. He justifies his argument by explaining that, in the status quo, Black Americans have occupied positions in iconic American corporations or the oval office (Rochester, 2016). This rhetoric of post-racial progress causes several schools to hesitate in granting students their demands because administrations believe the demands are absurd, unrealistic, or out of their capacity (Jaschik, 2015).

Many Black professors from across the nation showed support to these demands and wrote a love letter to Black students. Black professors collectively state:

You already know your life matters. Know we're fighting with you and for you. With all of us. For all of us. We got you. We see you. We hear you. We love you (Bailey et al., 2015: 70).

Their letter supports the students in their decision to create spaces on campus to protest and demand "an alternative to the present racial configuration in the United

States" (Bailey et al., 2015: 77). Despite varying responses to Black activism, some universities are responding to the concerns of students. At Yale, the president declared that over the next five years, the university would invest \$50 million in campaigns for "cultural awareness and inclusion, increase faculty diversity, and construct an academic center to 'build a more inclusive Yale' and 'reaffirm and reinforce [*their*] commitment to a campus where hatred and discrimination have no place" (Anderson et al., 2016: 652). Similarly, Georgetown University initiated a healing process on their campus where the university officially acknowledged its troubling history, specifically that of the institution being built by slaves. To this effect, Georgetown University is paying genealogists to trace "the descendants of the 272 enslaved Blacks sold to keep the university solvent" (Anderson et al., 2016: 654). The university is also in the process of apologizing for profiting from slave labor and are creating a memorial to those who were enslaved and providing scholarships for their descendants (Anderson et al., 2016).

## II. South African Context

RMF/FMF is one of the biggest instances of student protests since the dawn of democracy (Pennington, 2017). Often, the contemporary student protests are compared to the Black Consciousness Movement or the 1976 Soweto revolt<sup>89</sup> (Booyesen, 2016). Unlike

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<sup>89</sup> Young Black South African students protested the introduction of Afrikaans as the official language in local schools

the 1960's, the resurgence of student activism in South Africa is not attached to a contemporary Black freedom movement. Yet, it seems as if the student movement, itself, is the Black freedom movement. Naicker (2016) infers that South Africa is witnessing a transformative moment where students are embarking on a quest for racial liberation inspired by the Marikana Massacre. Booyesen (2016) argues that the resurgence of the Black freedom movement is an organic crisis due to the rate and change of two decades of democracy (Booyesen, 2016). A student voices:

“Our parents were SOLD dreams in 1994. We are just here for the REFUND” (Badat, 2016).

This quote indicates that students are challenging the notions of progress by critiquing the broken promises their parents were given about neoliberal racial democracy (Kamanzi, 2015).

Badat (2016) claims that bystanders could perceive RMF/FMF activism as “a reminder that there is unfinished business” in South Africa. The lingering racial tensions in Cape Town are very blatant. In my time there, being read as a local caused me to experience or witness anti-black rhetoric or violence from Afrikaners, Coloureds, and Africans. At the same time, I also witnessed Coloureds, Afrikaners, and Black South Africans listening to a lecture by a former Black Panther Party on working towards equitable democracy. Several Coloureds identified with Biko Blackness and many Afrikaners were more willing than White Americans to collaborate on liberation campaigns. However, the justified Black rage that has formed amongst

Black residents indicate that racial tensions are still high.

Today, South Africa's democracy is fragile and students are confronted with reflecting on how promises of citizenship, rights, and belonging are elusive due to South Africa's political economy (Pennington, 2017). Similar to the 1970's, students are faced with a society filled with high economic inequality, slow economic growth, massive unemployment, and increasing state debt. Dominant social classes and groups are still able to flourish in the country (Badat, 2016). These dominant groups include Afrikaners who benefited from apartheid, well-off educated or skilled immigrants like my host family, and individuals like myself (American tourists, study abroad students and expats). The small Black elite and vast townships in South Africa confirm the difficulties in redistributing economic opportunities. Several students, especially Black South African students, quickly experience social exclusion and receive few socioeconomic opportunities after graduating (Badat, 2016).

The example of study abroad students gentrifying the Rondebosch neighborhood and kicking out local students such as Maxwele indicate how global wealth from American travelers recreates massive wealth inequalities. Moreover, Black South African students have extra burdens (which they often describe as Black tax) to care for family members who do not have access to upward mobility.

Originally, RMF started on the UCT campus, then abruptly spread to schools across the nation and even went as far as



Oxford University (Chaudhuri, 2016). This cross-institutional alliance demonstrates that other universities outside South Africa are inspired by the actions of UCT. Moreover, RMF organizers acknowledge the violence towards other Black bodies in the diaspora. For instance, UCT RMF wrote a solidarity statement to Garissa University College in Kenya because of the Al-Shabaab killings at the school<sup>90</sup> (Movement, 2015). In a UCT statement the students express:

We condemn...terrorism. In the same breath we condemn all acts of state terrorism perpetrated by neo-colonial powers against Black Bodies” (Movement, 2015:11)

Their declaration reveals that UCT RMF students are aware of the “inarticulate pain that is not only suppressed but condemned by society - the pain of being Black in the world” (Movement, 2015:13). The students recognize the assault on individuals’ right to life. The students also share their grievances for Walter Scott<sup>91</sup>, emphasizing their awareness of anti-blackness not just within their own local context, but also in a global context.

Additionally, the UCT RMF students outline multiple demands. In tandem with my school, they advocated for “radically changing the representation of Black professors, replacing colonial artwork and statues, adopting an admissions policy that prioritized Black applicants (especially local Black people), and improving academic support

programs.” (Movement, 2015: 8). Unlike U.S. schools, the students are advocating for “improving the living wage for campus workers (in honor of the Marikana Massacre), opening opportunities for workers’ children to go to school at the university for free, and implementing a curriculum that centers Africa and the subaltern” (Movement, 2015: 8). Some schools like UCT are working on a list of demands while other schools choose two or three to pursue.

Months after RMF formed, FMF emerged from Wits University<sup>92</sup> (Pennington, 2017). They organized via WhatsApp and email to shut down their campus (Molefe, 2016). Wits<sup>93</sup> students demanded that former President Zuma halt fee rates (Molefe, 2016). Students waited for Zuma’s response and received police firing stun grenades and rubber bullets at them (Molefe, 2016). There are debates regarding whether the student mobilization should be classified as a social movement, revolt, uprising, or revolution (Pennington, 2017). It is hard to classify the student protests because solidarity networks are taking place cross-institutionally at “historically Black, far-flung, and non-ivy league universities” to work on decolonization efforts at their respective institutions differently (Pennington, 2017). For example, at Oxford University, in addition to protesting momentums, students protested the Rhodes Scholarship for symbolizing colonial conquest (Chaudhuri, 2016). This example demonstrates each chapter engages in resistance and

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<sup>90</sup> The Al-Shabaab is a terrorist organization based in Somalia that massacred about 147 people at Garissa University College in Kenya

<sup>91</sup> An African American lynched in the back by a police officer in South Carolina

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<sup>92</sup> Shortened writing of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (Joburg)

<sup>93</sup> Shortened writing of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg (Joburg)

strategies differently so the movement is hard to classify.

The students individually, collectively, and organizationally challenge educational spaces and seek wider social change to redress the financial exclusion of Black students and reject liberalism and neoliberalism (Pennington, 2017). Additionally, students analyzed Sub Saharan African student struggles and the North African uprisings to apply their tactics in their organizing (Pennington, 2017). The students are inspired by the works of “Franz Fanon, Steve Biko, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Audre Lorde, Robert Sobukwe, bell hooks, Amicar Cabral, and Kimberly Crenshaw” (Booyesen, 2016). Collectively, students center their activism on intersectionality, Pan-Africanism, Black consciousness, decolonization, Black self-empowerment, and African nationalism (Pennington, 2017).

It is important to note that the key thinkers and ideologies the students follow are centered on Blackness. This debate regarding the definition of Blackness occurs in South Africa due to its complicated history and the transformations of racial classifications (Franklin, 2003). There is a dilemma between students; they are uncertain with how they should frame their identity politics. Some students want to center their organizing efforts on the unique plight of Black South African students while others want to engage in cross-cultural coalitions. In the early stages of RMF/FMF, identity politics became salient as the movement gained momentum (Pennington, 2017). RMF/FMF retreated from multiracial

coalition building to solely focus on Africans and expressed the necessity to Africanize institutions as a way to decolonize Western institutions in South Africa (Nyamnjoh, 2016).

Khumo Sebambo, a Black student at UCT, proclaims that Black identities heavily influence where Black people live, work, travel, and go to school (Sebambo, 2015). Sebambo notes that blackness occupies spaces that are predetermined by the legacy of apartheid and colonialism (Sebambo, 2015). Her observation is crucial because it illustrates that students are conflicted with endorsing or rejecting the ideology of Biko Blackness from the Black Consciousness Movement and South African Student Organization (SASO). During the 1960’s and 1970’s, Biko Blackness was a political term that considered Black Africans, Coloureds, and Indians as a collective identity outside Whiteness (Franklin, 2003). In the status quo, some students are retreating from that definition to focus on the unique plight of Africans, especially South Africans (Pennington, 2017).

The emphasis on Blackness leads to new challenges pertaining to collaborating with African immigrants. Nyamnjoh (2016) observes a hierarchy of Blackness unfolding where students are concerned with focusing on Black South Africans. Conversely, with the rise of afrophobia, other students are trying to resolve tensions amongst Black South Africans and African immigrants. Different African demographics are working together on their demands that consist of ending outsourcing and labor brokering, decriminalizing protesters, ending debt, “reforming

governance structures to promote participatory rather than representative democracy, and an end to all oppressive systems including racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, [and] ableism” (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Still, it is unclear if the agendas of decolonization and the demands of students include African immigrants (Nyamnjoh, 2016).

Movement (2015) emphasizes an intersectional approach to their work, especially with gender, sexuality, disabilities, and mental health. There are several internal debates occurring that pertain to different viewpoints of ideology, strategy, and tactics within the movement. Practicing intersectionality and accountability is a major challenge within Black political spaces, as seen when UCT students occupied a university building. Previously, the building was named Bremner and later the students began to call it the Azania<sup>94</sup> house (Pennington, 2017). Sebambo recalls:

The Azania house became an important space for Black people to construct their own identities. It was a fantasy world in some ways because it was in a way removed from the White gaze and from the violent constructions of blackness.... Actively fighting Whiteness and its supremacy and engaging with one another will feed our imagination. Azania House provided this space to us, she protected young black students from the violent physical and psychological space of UCT and it also forced them to interrogate blackness and what it is” (Sebambo, 2015: 109).

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<sup>94</sup> Azania refers to the name South Africans dreamt of for South Africa during apartheid

Another UCT student, by the name of Thuli Gamedze, agreed that the Azania house allowed freed thinking to take place by oppressed bodies “to imagine humanity outside of stifling White, male heteronormative structure” (Gamedze, 2015:122). Sebambo’s statement on the Azania house illustrates that it was an undercommons space students reclaimed to heal from their trauma and engage in political imagination.

The undercommons space became tainted when misgoynoir took place. Gamedze expresses that the Azania house strove to incorporate an intersectional approach but failed due to the “history of patriarchy in Black consciousness movements” (Gamedze, 2015:122). Furthermore, she claims that “popular imagination of Black consciousness resides in Black heterosexual maleness,” so informal hierarchies still unfolded in the construction of Azania (Gamedze, 2015:122). The Wa Thiong’o lecture also demonstrated the divides with ableism and gender bias embedded in the movement. Also, tensions arose due to bipartisan disagreements with several members of RMF/FMF being involved in national politics through African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), Democratic Alliance (DA), Black First Land First (BLF), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (Booyesen, 2016). These tensions emerging highlight the dynamic conflicts students are attempting to resolve, while also juggling academics.

There are still several students who feel conflicted with participating in student protests (especially Black transplants) because

of the potential loss in loans, threats of academic exclusion, loss of housing, or fear of not finishing courses and exams (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Other students, especially locals, are formally or personally attached to the organization, as seen with Maxwele. Maxwele's family resides in a township or informal settlement near Eastern Cape where locals receive limited basic facilities like water, proper toilets, electricity, or proper sanitation (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Several of the residents, including his father, who is a miner, live below the poverty line. His geography, class, and proximity to anti-blackness cause him to operate with more urgency than other students. He is the epitome of a working class student that is disappointed by the knowledge production in higher education not relating to transforming his local communities' state of subjugation.

Nyamnjoh (2016) claims Maxwele is an independent body but works on the behalf of the Black majority. Maxwele is often associated as the face of the movement due to his decision to smear the Rhodes statue with excrement (Kamanzi, 2015). His name is cited in academic pieces and his presence is seen in local and international news (Kamanzi, 2015). Maxwele shared to a journalist:

“We want White people to know how we live. We live in poo. I am from a poor family; we are using portaloos. Are you happy with that?” I have to give Cecil John Rhodes a poo shower and Whites will have to see it” (Kamanzi, 2015).

Maxwele considers his decision a way to showcase his pain and disgust towards his

communities living conditions. His words exchanged with the journalist also refer to the intergenerational trauma he inherited from living in a township next to global wealth.

The focus of Maxwele as the face of the movement confirms the critiques Gamedze spoke about in her reflections on the Azania house. In an attempt to make the movement leaderless and instead leader(full), male bodies often end up gaining the attention of the public and respect from the press. This is problematic because Maxwele's behavior, actions, and rhetoric are contested by those involved and outside the movement (Nyamnjoh, 2016). There are many other students who deserve to have their perspectives highlighted to the public. For example, the Black women who covered their mouths with tape to protest rape culture on campus and the silence of their male peers in activist spaces (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex students are confronting Black masculinity as well (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Students strove to incorporate anti-hierarchical structures into their activism, but are facing conflicts with students gaining more power, respect, or visibility who are controversial figures (Pennington, 2017).

The silencing of Black students in classrooms and practices of exclusion unfolding in activist circles are leading students to use alternative means to express themselves. Often, students rely on social media to vent and shed light on their feelings of betrayal by the state, university, or peers (Bosch, 2017). The feelings of rage and pain towards systemic exclusion was evident when

students began tweeting with the hashtags, #RainbowIsDead, #Hope, and #Transformation (Pennington, 2017). Another hashtag called #Brixton163<sup>95</sup> circulated online after students were put in jail (Booyesen, 2016). Students followed the hashtag online to receive updates on when the student would get released (Booyesen, 2016).

Similarly, students took advantage of other outlets such as documentaries to showcase the experiences of Black students at predominantly White, Afrikaans universities like Stellenbosch (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Despite universities integrating post-apartheid, students still feel that the materials “exclude or devalue their bodies and culture” and are not relevant to African students (Nyamnjoh, 2016). Moreover, Black students use performance art in demonstrations, as seen when several Black students left the Azania house in chains, black paint, and diapers to pay homage to Saartjie Baartman<sup>96</sup> (Kamanzi, 2015). Also, on the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, a statue of King George V<sup>97</sup> was smeared with white paint by students angry at the colonial symbolism (Kamanzi, 2015). Another demonstration occurred where Black academics read testimonies on their experiences working within the institution (Kamanzi, 2015). The demonstration was described as a “lively, packed room, intermittently infused with protest songs and dances that served to raise spirits and refocus strength in the wake of the heaviness of the

topic at hand” (Kamanzi, 2015:). These demonstrations are strategies for students and staff to reclaim university space for their own healing purposes (Sebambo, 2015).

There are several critiques about the political mobilization of students whose discourse is centered on decolonization. It is unclear of what policies, practices, or tactics are necessary to decolonize institutions (Nyamnjoh, 2016). What does decolonized higher education look like? The question is still unresolved. Furthermore, the attempt to have no visible leaders or face in the movement is leading to a perceived lack of direction with the movement (Booyesen, 2016). Also, South African tv media depicts the student protests as violent and destructive (Nyamnjoh, 2016). In spite of the different critiques of the movement, the students influenced national governance by working with the minister of Higher Education to halt the increase of tuition fees (Pennington, 2017). Even though students were not able to achieve free higher education, their ability to influence governance to halt the fee increase highlights that students are gaining political capital to change formal politics (Pennington, 2017). Not to mention, students question how to redistribute land and alleviate poverty (Booyesen, 2016). The yearning to serve campus and local communities resembles students in Black consciousness groups providing “food, clothing, and resources to Blacks in urban areas and rural townships in need of assistance (Franklin, 2003). Black students are mobilizing to transform university climate, but are also using their agency to assist

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<sup>95</sup> Hashtag to spread awareness about the 163 students and workers arrested for protesting on university property

<sup>96</sup> A South African Khoikhoi woman who was stolen and showcased in European exhibits for her large buttocks

<sup>97</sup> Grandson of Queen Victoria and self-governed South Africa, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand

workers' rights and other demographics (Pennington, 2017).

### **III. Identifying the Parallels and Departures**

The resurgence of student political mobilization in the United States and South Africa are the biggest student movements since the 1960's-1970's. Both student movements are learning from previous Black freedom movements to express their dissatisfactions with the political climate and false nature of post-racial discourse and democracy. It is common for students to participate in activism while they are in colleges and universities, but the trend of Black cross-institutional networks forming is unique. The origin of both movements reflects Black students are upset with the broken promises post-the civil rights movement or post-apartheid.

Yet, the difference between movements relates to the unique political condition that caused the movements to form. In the United States, BLM formed after the extrajudicial killing of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown. The civil rights movement fought for equal rights, but the anti-blackness embedded in individuals' consciousness and American institutions indicates the country moved backward. America romanticizes false depictions of the civil rights movement and MLK to deflect from honest conversations about the criminal justice system. BLM is protesting for the right to life. The right to life is a prerequisite to equal rights because Black Americans need to be alive in order to practice their Constitutional rights (to then further explain how those rights are also

violated). How can you practice any constitutional right if you are dead? A question post-human Trayvon probably asked himself when his spirit was in court and placed on trial. This depressing reality mobilized Black students to collaborate with BLM. In due time, several of the students created a separate student movement. Some might speculate that the separation was due to internal divisions in BLM, but there is no written confirmation from BLM that says such.

Unlike BLM, RMF/FMF is not attached to a contemporary Black freedom movement. Instead, the student movement, itself, is South Africa's Black freedom movement. RMF/FMF did not emerge after a specific political conflict, but formed as an organic crisis in response to South Africa's political economy. Nonetheless, the lack of accountability amongst police, corporations, and political parties towards workers' rights, as seen with the Marikana massacre, influenced students to critique formal politics.

BLM is mostly capable of creating incremental or reformist changes in the university climate, but has not played a significant role in national governance. Still, BLM has drastically left positive impacts on their campuses and communities by working alongside BLM to fight for Black Americans' right to life, advocating for prison divestment, and inspiring the next generation of students to dream of reparations. Conversely, RMF/FMF actualized their demand of halting tuition fee increases and decreased outsourcing. Furthermore, RMF/FMF is concerned with worker rights and their children's right to free education.

The notion of Blackness and how that relates to political demands is complicated and unique in both geographical contexts. Defining Blackness in South Africa is more complicated due to the history of apartheid. Even though Biko Blackness is a desired concept by many people, Black South Africans are retreating to focus solely on centering African identities. Black South Africans make up the majority of the population, which causes an urgency to fight for their right to land and institutions. Although, the role of indigeneity complicates which Africans have the right to claim ownership of the land.

Decolonization is a word constantly thrown around to reimagine South Africa. Additionally, Black South African students feel a responsibility to modernize the state because demographics, primarily Black, are often are living in poor conditions.

Whereas in the United States, Black Americans often do not use the word decolonization because they are not indigenous to the land. Instead, they advocate for reparations (sometimes with indigenous demographics). With BLC, they associate free education to Black students as a form of reparations to redress the lasting legacy of slavery. Moreover, they mostly consider fighting against White supremacy as divesting from prisons, but have no further articulation of what they are fighting towards. Also, sometimes student protests can become solely trauma-centered rather than resisting the state (and the universities' relationship to the state). I argue that Black activists diligently maintaining their mental health is a

prerequisite to organizing. We could be the generation of healers.

Globalization and diverse migration patterns are causing new Black identities and realities. Some Black people can consider two or three places home, which influences how they identify, engage in activism, and connect with Black people who construct home as one fixed location. For example, I was born and raised in Saint Paul Minnesota. My mom is from South Side Chicago and my father is from Mazabuka, Zambia. These different geographies impact how I understand my Blackness. This example highlights children of the diaspora are embodying and constructing new interpretations of identity, belonging, and Pan-Africanism.

The emerging “Black global identities” phenomenon is causing tension between Black transplants or migrants and Black locals. This is seen with my own personal experience. At Macalester College, there is a conflict between international and domestic students of color. We often are confused by one another; thus, we miss the opportunity to build transnational linkages. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding about the unique local context of Blackness. Several faculty, staff, and students will be shocked when they read my auto-ethnography because of how high-functioning I was on campus. The shock demonstrates how campus life is often completely separate from the local community unless students intentionally get acquainted with the area.

I also experienced the same thing as a Black migrant in South Africa. I didn't really consider my “newness” to the area and was

unaware of the local plight of Black South Africans. I was quick to try to connect, but had to check my own assumptions and get familiar with my new geography. And yet still, transnational linkages barely occurred. The tension between Black transplants or migrants and Black locals must continue to be explored so we as a diaspora can learn more from each other.

Black South Africans and Black Americans are sadly aware of the impact of misunderstanding different African populations. Black locals engaging in xenophobia (afrophobia) is a form of internalized anti-blackness. On the flip side, Black transplants' indifference and judgment towards Black locals is internalized anti-blackness. Black South Africans are trying to resolve afrophobia by collaborating with other African migrants and immigrants to work on demands. Likewise, Black students at my school engage in similar work. At the same time, both movements must work in collaboration more.

*minnesotan  
kenyan  
norwegian  
zambian  
moroccan  
ghanaian  
congolese  
tanzanian  
venezuelan  
jamaican  
californian  
somali  
nigerian  
dominican*

*resist*

*as one*

*@ 1600 grand avenue*

Black student political mobilization, unlike other student movements, are specifically critiquing the colonial and racist undertones embedded in the public missions and culture of universities. A common strategy to expose the problematic history of universities has been demanding university management to take down statues, change curriculum, or recruit more Black students and staff. Also, BLC and RMF/FMF challenge institutions to reevaluate the ways universities leave racial stratifications intact by expressing their own experiences of alienation and exclusion on campus. Often, social media is the platform students use to describe civil society, their Black pain, or treatment. Social media is also used to form national or cross-institutional demonstrations. There is a false assumption that modern universities serving neoliberal imperatives cause students to become apolitical. In both cases, Black students play an active role in campus and community affairs.

Black Pain is a common theme in student expressions. In my auto-ethnography, I am very open about my raw emotions, trauma, and neglect on campus. I know my experience is my own, but it saddens me to know that several people reading this piece will be able to relate to aspects of my experience. The way white supremacy, racism, institutional silence, and other forms of oppression impact an individual's psyche, relationships, and body is still not researched



enough. Moreover, mental health services adopt a Western and colonial model that is insufficient in tackling the trauma of Black bodies. To complicate matters further, our own communities have a stigma towards discussing mental health. The efforts of UCT and UC Berkeley students to demand and carry out obtaining Black therapists and specialized mental health treatment for racial trauma saved me. More work must be done for the others hurting in secret.

Although both movements rely on intersectionality as their approach to organizing, South African student activists rely on numerous political ideologies, primarily Black consciousness, to ground their activism. Historically, Black consciousness marginalizes other Black identities like female and gender-nonconforming identities. Additionally, it is evident that more internal tensions occur in RMF/FMF and the tensions are exacerbated by partisan disagreements in the movement. BLC is grounded in the Black Power ideology. Students consider how to prepare and adjust to an established society (or university). It can be argued that the divestment of prisons and demand for reparations indicate that some BLC students are adopting other Black ideologies. I would stress that both organizations are still fighting against White supremacy instead of pursuing decolonization projects. However, RMF/FMF brainstorm decolonization efforts more diligently.

BLC and RMF/FMF are interested in global networks. BLC students are already connected to Canada, yet allude they yearn to become connected with individuals in Brazil

and South Africa. In contrast, RMF/FMF mention tragedies in the African diaspora, but specify that they are interested in supporting and collaborating solely on the continent. It is unclear how RMF/FMF students feel about building transnational linkages within and beyond the African continent. Not to mention, the way Black South Africans speak about Black Americans leads me to believe it is not on their mind. Only time will tell if these movements ever cross. We could teach each other how to survive.

**welcome to decolonized wakanda university**

*the*

*diaspora is absolutely breathtaking*

*and*

*the diaspora is hurting*

*we*

*are*

*a great many things, all at once*

*-myriah, nayyirah waheed, "Salt"*

I wrote half of this in one breath while I returned to my ancestors land and in another breath when I received the tragic news back in space. I am so sorry for your loss and your loss oh and your loss too. There are so many losses I can't keep track anymore.

It makes sense now why certain pieces of life happened. All the moments brought me to this exact moment. This moment brought me to you. You got me through senior year. You allowed me to dig so deep into myself I saw my soul. It was rustic.

You told me a cup of dirt, a waterfall of tears, hearing my unborn child's laugh, and feeling my ancestors touch would bring me back.

The recipe didn't work.

Every time I wrote out lynched it felt like accountability. For a split second, we were both brought back to life. An ounce of dirt entered my mouth. It tasted odd yet familiar. Like in another life I ate it before.

I looked at the white page of emptiness. An ancestor gave me a pen. I put it down.

An ancestor took over my body during certain pages. I forgot where I was. I didn't sleep. Somehow the ancestors fed me so I wasn't hungry. I refused to cry.

The ancestor told me I had to read it out loud. Read it with your head high. Read it with new understanding. No shame. Forgive yourself. You are a blessing.

The waterfall came.

I chickened out and decided to back out. It was too much.

The universe let down snow in april so I was trapped. Community held my hand and gave me back the pen. The ancestors sat next to my desk watching me write. No escape. All love.

I read some more out loud and started laughing. In the background I heard a snort. The last day I panicked and within two hours my body relaxed. And then I felt the warmth. My body loosened up; I felt you holding me

gently and then realized you were always holding me. I wasn't present enough before to notice.

You told me to close my eyes. I saw my soul and it was intact. Recovering. The ancestors warned me that I did enough.

I started choking on dirt. This would be the conclusion.

If I go any further alone my soul might crack again - for good this time. They told me it couldn't because you are waiting for me. I have been waiting for you too. They told me to tell the diaspora to dream. We already are, but the ancestors told me to tell you to dream bigger.

Dream of the undercommons. Bigger. Dream of abolition. Bigger. Dream of decolonization. Bigger. Dream of a world with no fear. Bigger. Twaambo, allow yourself to dream with your ancestors. Dream bigger.

I can't wait to meet you next semester.

My soul lives on. Your soul lives on. Our souls dance together.

Ashe.

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