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In response to non-violent protests last month by a large number of Wits students at the beginning of the #feesmustfall protests on a principled issue of access to education, a notice was put up and circulated, invoking the Trespass Act of 1959 to criminalise students' use of university space to express their grievances and protest unfair fee hikes at the university.

1959 was quite a year. It was the year that a decade of National Party rule culminated in a slew of new legal mechanisms to entrench the racial project of unequal and separate development – the 1959 Prisons Act, for example, which consolidated the prison as a key means of state repression; and the 1959 Extension of University Education Act, which enforced racial segregation in higher education and established the bush colleges.

In Wits University's invocation of the 1959 Trespass Act, its senior management wrote: "The University, exercising its rights as the owner and lawful occupier of the University's property, hereby revokes its permission for any person who blockades entrances and exits, blocks lifts and stairwells etc to enter or be present on the University's property.

"Anybody engaged in the activities identified above does so contrary to the express instructions of the University and acts without the permission of the University."

Criminalising students

The question we need to ask here is: Who is this "University"? In whose name is it issuing these statements, in whose name is it invoking this 1959 law?

We have seen with incredible regularity over the past year, and especially last month, how senior managements have used the names of our universities to criminalise and marginalise students. They have brought down the force of disciplining procedures on the most vital student politics – the most valuable resource our institutions have seen in decades.

It is precisely this resource, a new student movement that has shown itself not only to lead on principled issues of university transformation, but also to lead on their implementation, that is being squandered by managements that misrecognise their worth and defensively justify apartheid-era disciplinary action.

I have been researching the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement since it began in March this year, and tracking alongside it the emergence of the new student movement at universities across the country. I attempt here to recontextualise some of the RMF activities as creative pedagogical processes, and I do so by unpacking these processes into critical tasks that form the basis of understanding the significance of this movement and moment in the South African political transition.

The RMF movement have gifted us with a radical praxis internal to the university that has insisted that the age-old questions of power, privilege

NEEDING TO LEARN: #RhodesMustFall and the decolonisation of the university

and oppression be addressed in relation to all the facets of the university, such that critical conversation is able to be accessed by ordinarily marginalised members of the university community.

Challenging tradition

Importantly, it has challenged traditional understandings of curriculum, knowledge and pedagogy. It did this in a number of ways – too many to discuss now, so I will focus on RMF's educational programme.

Let me start by noting that the stories of black RMF students are different depending on their lived experience and position in relation to varying privileges: a student from Khayelitsha's version is different to a St John's College-type private school graduate, who in turn is different to the people who have spent most of their lives growing up in exile.

But the common disturbing thread in RMF was "we are alien here, we are other".

The norm at the University of Cape Town (UCT) revolves around what the movement has identified as white-supremacist, capitalist and hetero-patriarchal. The shit hitting the statue on March 9 was a catalyst for the refusal by many black students to continue to hold and hide this alienation.

Spaces to breathe

Black students before RMF were already creating alternative spaces where they were sharing these lived experiences and feelings with one another.

These were also spaces where people were reading and discussing writings that spoke more than others to black experiences, analyses of oppression and questions of decolonisation and revolution.

These spaces were the beginnings of alienating the alienation, and disrupting the normative by making it strange.

A critical task of "decolonising" the university is recognising that there is a dominant norm and that there are many students, staff – administrative, support and academic – who experience being excluded from this norm.

Another critical task is the difficult and scary process of disrupting the existing norms.

This disruption at UCT took on many forms: the much-publicised disruption of the previously "sacred" council meeting, the exposing of UCT's implication and silence around the Marikana massacre, and the highlighting of the hypocrisy of UCT hosting French economist Thomas Piketty to speak on inequality in South Africa when it continues to engage in outsourcing workers and refuses to hear students speak

of inequality on campus, to name a few.

The hijacking of meetings, panels and other platforms created and used by UCT management also started challenging the hierarchies of the university structure and calling out the impotent bureaucratic processes that stand in for, and exhaust, any radical attempts to effect change.

The message conveyed by these hijackings was: "You are not in charge of us, you are not able to lead on these issues, your process is corrupt and vacuous, and therefore you do not tell us what to do and how to do it any more."

This was read by the media and fearful, mostly (but not exclusively) white people in the UCT fraternity as barbaric, uncouth and unproductive behaviour, which focused attention on what I believe to be constitutive acts as misguided and inappropriate techniques.

This perspective missed the point that disruption was an essential part of black students and staff creating a space for themselves to breathe, while also creating alternative platforms and learning and teaching spaces with much more porous boundaries, to start decolonising UCT.

The deepening of consciousness, followed by the hijacking, refusing and rendering corrupt of the official, management-controlled process of transformation, was necessary for a new space to be created. In these acts of refusal, disruption and destruction, RMF turned the whole campus including public spaces and platforms, into a pedagogical arena, extending the classroom boundaries.

They made more explicit the lived experience of black students and staff on campus and called out the silent and implicit privileging of the white, heterosexual, male, middle-class, able-bodied norm, by coming up with creative and interesting opportunities for conscientisation or learning for themselves, but also for the broader UCT and Cape Town public.

Another critical task then is the collective conscientisation of teaching-learning, by creating alternate spaces and expanding the boundaries of the classroom, taking learning into broader life and bringing life into the more traditional classroom space.

The Saartje Baartman performance

One example of this was known as the Saartje Baartman performance. A small group of RMF students painted themselves black, wore only white loin cloths and chains, and walked that way, in silence, to where the Baartman statue

stands. They performed the piece and then did a written a reflection on the performance.

Here I will let one of the performer/teachers explain: "We reject her presentation in the library, we reject that her standing naked commemorates her and retains her dignity. Further, we see no difference in the racist, sexist methods used by the French and British in the freak show attraction, than her presentation in the UCT Oppenheimer library.

"Thus we aimed to illustrate that the violent objectification and sexualisation of the black body is a system, which feeds into the stereotype of racial superiority so subtly and insidiously that it is hard to detect even by those bodies it represents in real life. So our aim is to challenge a history that represents us as a fetish, as base sexual beings.

"There are particular ways in which Saartje Baartman's spirit and legacy can be contextualised and respected. Thus in our climatic end, we draped her and covered her, hoping to show that these violences inflicted on the black body and psychology still continue, and we will not stop until we decolonise the black body and mind!"

These teaching-learning experiments became a significant contribution to the educational landscape of UCT. Black students were leading the educational process of making meaning about situations, contexts, histories, symbols, etc.

This leads to another critical task, which is about reimagining the relation between "student" and "teacher": Who is the architect of the classroom space and who commands the authority and responsibility to teach and learn?

RMF's occupying the Management building, renaming it Azania House and taking over leadership of decolonising the university, is a good example of this. Many of the people who were fortunate enough to be part of making and remaking Azania House will attest to its significance in their own learning, often through discomfort and challenge, two very important things that many agree are imperative for learning, and shifts in consciousness.

I want to reflect more now on the RMF education subcommittee, which was one of the first to be formed – on March 17, prior to the occupation. RMF formed a dozen or so subcommittees, which were working groups that arose out of the need to engage particular questions and issues. These were made up of students who volunteered to think through various parts of what needed to happen in order for the movement to successfully enact the changes it understood as necessary for decolonising UCT.

Each of these subcoms had

its own meetings and processes but they were all linked to the workings of the other subcoms and the chairs of each subcom formed the Strat committee. During the almost three-week occupation, these subcommittees met to discuss, analyse, think critically and then come up with suggested implications and actions of the learning's. The critical task of radical praxis consisting of searching again or re-searching reading, thinking, questioning through critical conversation, as well as principled action, formed part of the daily lives of permanent occupiers as well as people coming in more sporadically.

The education subcom set about re-searching, discussing and planning a number of things – one of the most important of which was organising a nightly seminar series at Azania House. These seminars were open to the public and drew up to 200 people per event, often more.

The form of the events differed from the usual university classroom space, even as it also engaged with some of the techniques and methods of the traditional classroom. But if one looked closer, as those who attended can attest, these were more than the familiar, normative, classroom forms.

Black pain

There was an explicit centring of this lived experience, named as black pain, in all the discussions and workings of RMF, which became more thought through and practised every day. Each discussion, be it in the seminar series, the subcoms, the general assemblies, even the interactions in the communal and social spaces at Azania House, took seriously this praxis, understood further as a three-part frame made up of the philosophy and concepts of Black Consciousness, and Pan Africanism, with the methodology that revolved around the idea or concept of Black Feminist intersectionality.

The form or structure of the conversations that took place in all these forums included criticality based on reading, but importantly also based on action and the practice of the radical concepts that RMF was engaging with – in short, the production of critical conversation.

So at the core of these urgent critical tasks of decolonising the university institution were students experimenting with radical content and new forms of engagement, which understand the everyday life of the university as the basis for decolonisation, as well as foregrounding a relation between intimacy, affect, danger, ambivalence and knowledge.

The relation between these concepts, with radical content and new forms of engagement, is a productive space to continue the conversation about decolonisation and its extension beyond UCT and RMF. We need to recognise the politics as valid and valuable. We need to learn from the leadership of students.

Leigh-Ann Naidoo is a PhD student at Wits University. This is an edited version of her presentation at the National Higher Education Transformation summit last month.



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