LIBERATING THE FAMILY: EDUCATION, ASPIRATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

In October 2015, South Africa witnessed the largest student protests since the end of apartheid over rising tuition costs. Based on qualitative research conducted between 2015-2016, this dissertation analyses these protests through the experiences of working-class students from Khayelitsha, an urban township in Cape Town. Education-based resistance since the end of apartheid occurs in a context of rapid and shifting patterns of class formation, in which higher education is both critical to ensuring social mobility and avoiding chronic unemployment. At the same time, higher education access is constrained by the endurance of racial and spatial inequalities, and limited forms of state support for working class students. My research reveals how working-class students develop aspirations toward higher education and how these are intimately connected to circumstances of household poverty. For these students, support for the protests did not merely involve opposition to commodification, but was connected to shared experiences of racialized poverty, aspirations toward collective social mobility, and the debilitating role of student debt. By focusing on how higher education reconfigured young people’s bonds with family and generated anticipated financial obligations, I highlight how the protests spoke to a crisis of social reproduction affecting working-class households. In doing so, I highlight young people’s role as economic actors in distributive household economies. This
dissertation also reveals how higher education is frequently a contradictory resource for working
class youth. It provides pathways toward social mobility for a limited number, while
simultaneously binding them into systems that reproduce wider forms of social inequality.
Rather than simply struggles against neoliberalism then, the protests reveal the multiple and
contradictory functions of higher education in South Africa, as it is aimed at addressing
racialized inequalities while meeting the human capital requirements of a globalized economy.
Finally, I highlight the importance of relational approaches to youth studies, that understand
young people’s agency as embedded within wider social, political and economic structures.
Acknowledgements

If you stand on the slopes of Table Mountain and look east toward the edge of the city, you can glimpse South Africa’s history in urban fragments. The lush green suburbs give way to railway tracks and industrial zones, and if you follow the N2 highway you can see the sun reflecting off the zinc shacks that dot the Cape Flats. As a South African and a geographer, I have tried to make sense of this landscape and how the violence, displacement and inequality that are etched into it affect people’s lives. Moving between these spaces over the last five years has been both a rewarding and challenging experience. It would not have been possible without the assistance, care, friendship and mentorship of a number of people.

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Introduction

Young people bear on their bodies, in their heads, and in their hearts, the most gaping wounds and the craziest dreams and hopes of African societies.
– Mamadou Diouf (2003, 10).

On 10 January 2012, Gloria Sekwena was trampled to death while waiting in line with her son, a prospective student at the University of Johannesburg. In 2012, about 85,000 students applied for roughly 11,000 seats available at the University of Johannesburg (Polgreen 2012). This tragic episode reveals the desperation felt by many young people and their families to secure a spot in a higher education institution in South Africa. The consequences for not doing so are revealed in the country’s unemployment figures: In 2014 more than 5 million South Africans were unemployed; Young people (aged 15-34) made up approximately three quarters of that number. According to recent labour force surveys, the labour absorption rate for men and women with some form of tertiary qualification is between 67% and 88% respectively. For men without grade 12 it is 40.4% while for women it is even lower at 27.6% (StatsSA 2015a). South Africa has both the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world and the second highest rate of return on investments in higher education (World Bank 2017, Montenegro et al. 2014). While getting a qualification provides no guarantee of employment, those who complete higher education are 3 to 5 times more likely than a high school graduate to find a job (Van der Berg 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising then that as the state raised tuition fees in 2015, higher education institutions exploded in a wave of protests dubbed the Fees Must Fall movement (#FMF). These protests were not only, however, about the commodification of higher education. They tapped into a deep vein of youthful anger at the ruling party, the limitations of post-apartheid reforms, and the endurance of racial inequalities.
Because of this, the protests had resonance beyond university campuses, as they allowed young people, for the first time in the post-apartheid period, to collectively voice their dissatisfaction. In Khayelitsha, an apartheid-era township on the edge of Cape Town where I conducted field research, many young people were eager to discuss the protests and their meanings. A Hip-Hop group based in the township recorded a track lauding the students, and describing the promises contained in the 1955 Freedom Charter, a key document in the country’s political history, as nothing but ‘paper confetti.' None of the artists on the track were students at the time, yet they felt some sense of solidarity with the protestors as they described how young people were ignored by those in power unless they were violent and disruptive. Khusta, one of the artists on the track, had previously been a student at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), but dropped out due to financial hardships.

Khusta: You know when you are at university, you have this thing of now you are on your way to escaping the Ghetto life immediately after you are done. There is this idea that life will be smooth afterwards. But for me, I don’t want to lie, this thing of Fees Must Fall it was exciting for me. The system has not cared for students and their development, but for a long time. They were blind to that idea. So FMF in many ways it showed young people that when you are in university, it’s not guaranteed that you’re going to become middle class and everything is going to work out for you. It was a rude awakening.

Khusta’s comment captures many of the central themes of this dissertation: The aspirations toward social mobility that accompany the pursuit of higher education; the challenges that working-class students face in pursuing their studies; and the sense that the post-apartheid state has abandoned youth and the promises of the liberation struggle. The ‘rude awakening’ brought about by #FMF was not only that education was increasingly commodified, but that in a context

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1 The freedom charter was written in 1955 and was a core document of the Congress Alliance, which brought together a range of political organizations opposed to apartheid. It remains a foundational political document for the ANC but its influence extends beyond the party as it is widely seen as capturing many of the promises of the anti-apartheid struggle and is still a point of reference for many activists. The charter begins with the opening lines, ‘The people shall govern’ and includes the oft-quoted line, ‘the doors of learning and culture shall be opened,’ a reference for many student activists. For a more thorough discussion about the contemporary relevance of the Freedom Charter see Suttner (2006).
of deep inequality and structural poverty, millions of young people saw it as one of the only routes toward social mobility not only for themselves but their families. Yet education is no guarantee of employment, it is perhaps better understood as an investment in a potential future that is deeply affected by social and economic forces.

Anger over rising costs, debt, and financial exclusions revealed that many young people in South Africa see higher education as the only pathway out of poverty. This belief in the redemptive power of education is due to two socio-economic changes that have characterized the post-apartheid period. First has been the dramatic restructuring of work and the growth of unemployment. Starting in the mid-1970s unemployment in South Africa grew as a result of declining domestic demand, international sanctions and the contradictions between capital’s labour demands and apartheid’s segregationist policies. These changes were accelerated by globalization after the end of apartheid, with employment declines being sharpest in sectors that had traditionally employed un- and semi-skilled workers, such as mining, agriculture and manufacturing (Cazes and Verick 2013). At the same time, South Africa has witnessed an increase in demand for ‘high skills’ employment in service, finance and technology. As Barchiesi (2011) has demonstrated, this was accompanied by the rapid growth of precarious employment, which has had the effect of limiting the prospects for social citizenship through employment. Second has been the rapid growth of a sizeable African middle class, buoyed by black economic empowerment programs in the private sector and the affirmative action in the public sector (Southall 2016). In other words, class formation has been rapid and uneven; there are limited prospects for intergenerational social mobility in South Africa (Schotte, Zizzamia & Leibbrandt 2018). For young people like Khusta, one of the only avenues for achieving this mobility is through accessing higher education—distinguishing him from the millions who are
neither in education or employment. But if higher education provides the possibility for social
mobility, it is not an easy path. Only 5% of youth between 15 and 34 are enrolled in universities
and drop-out rates are alarmingly high (Muller 2018). While the National Student Financial Aid
Scheme (NSFAS) was designed to facilitate enrolments among poor and working-class students,
it has left many inadequately supported and burdened with high levels of debt.

The current crisis in South African higher education should also be understood in relation
to shifts in South Africa’s political economy since the end of apartheid. Education reforms were
initially aligned with the 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which spoke
of, “meeting the basic needs of the people…developing human resources [and]…democratizing
the state and society” (Ministry in the Office of the President 1994). The turn from the RDP to
the Growth, Employment and Redistribution program (GEAR) in 1996 has been described by
many commentators as a neoliberal shift in which the emphasis on redistribution and redress
shifted to a focus on growth and global competitiveness (Bond 2004, Saul 2005, Marais 2011).
This was replaced with the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA),
which envisioned the creation of a developmental state through public investments in
infrastructure and investments in education aimed at addressing skills deficits. The prospects for
this, were, however short lived and few attempts were made at establishing the foundations for a
developmental state project (Fine 2010). More recently the National Development Plan (NDP)
has set ambitious targets for early childhood, basic, higher education and skills development,
particularly the promotion of ‘knowledge economy’ skills (South African Government 2012). At
the same time, funding for higher education stalled and declined after the 2008 economic
recession. As a result, many institutions were forced to raise tuition costs while others lurched
from crisis to crisis due to funding shortages and high levels of debt. In many ways, this is a
global story: Higher education is increasingly seen by states as producing human capital which will allow them to compete in global markets and spur economic growth (Vally and Motala 2014). Students are encouraged to pursue degrees that are functional to the requirements of this economy and invest in themselves and their futures through purchasing higher education as a consumer. If education policy was initially guided by ideals of democratic citizenship in the immediate post-apartheid period, today it is simply seen as functional to economic growth and, through this, poverty alleviation.

The #FMF protests also point to a deeper contradiction about the role of higher education in unequal societies. While students’ demands were rooted in concerns over access for poor students, higher education is a poor mechanism for addressing poverty and inequality. Research has shown that in South Africa, higher education spending is the least progressive of all social expenditure in reducing inequality (Woolard et al., 2015) The growth of inequality since the end of apartheid is a good illustration of this. While enrolment numbers have expanded and the number of black graduates, in particular, has grown, this has not brought about any significant decrease in inequality. Rather, South Africa’s distributional regime has been characterized by growing rates of intra-racial inequality, as a black middle class has grown alongside a vast unemployed cohort (Southall 2016, Seekings and Nattrass 2008). The increasingly commodified nature of basic and higher education in South Africa has also meant that it is increasingly income, as well as geographical proximity to better schools, that determines educational access and social mobility. For those who are born into poverty in poor rural or urban areas, there are limited prospects for escaping from inter-generational poverty (Schotte et al. 2018). For the vast majority, higher education is simply out of reach even with government support. This is reflected in the relatively low levels of higher education attainment. Only 15% of South Africans hold a
Bachelor’s degree or equivalent qualification (OECD 2014). Yet in the absence of widespread job creation or employment programs targeting young people, education has arguably become one of the few pathways out of poverty. This shifting of responsibility from the state onto young people has been noted elsewhere as a hallmark of neoliberal governance (Raco 2009). In effect, young people must be taught that rather than expecting a job and a secure future, they must develop aspirations toward higher education which will provide this path for them.

If higher education is increasingly seen as necessary to find any form of decent work, accessing and completing it is no easy task. As De Lannoy’s (2007, 13) research on the educational choices of marginalized youth in Cape Town illustrates, young people struggle to realize aspirations toward higher education in a context of, “fluid social relationships, economic pressures and inequalities…that offer multiple choices but limited guidance.” While education opportunities have expanded massively for young South Africans, the rates of participation and completion remain shaped by race, class and gender inequities. Black youth are far more likely to cite financial reasons as the main barrier to not enrolling in higher education (Makiwane and Kwizera 2009, 227-234). Public school enrolment rates have increased since the end of apartheid among black youth, but rates of dropout are high. Around 500,000 students drop out of school each year and 179,000 Grade 12 students fail their exams each year (Ibid., 228). In many ways poverty within educational institutions is an extension of racialized poverty within households and communities—this is also geographically specific as the lowest performing schools are frequently located in urban townships and former Bantustans. Similarly, within higher education enrolment numbers are now closer to reflecting the national population, with black students comprising around 70% of the student body (CHE 2017). However, graduation rates highlight ongoing racial disparities. In 2015, 46.2% of young white South Africans had graduated with
some form of tertiary education compared to 8% of young Black South Africans (StatsSA 2015b, 46).

The #FeesMustFall protests were widely seen as a youthful critique of the limitations of post-apartheid citizenship (Naidoo 2016). Those born after 1994 are colloquially described as ‘born frees,’ or those who did not experience the brunt of apartheid policy. Yet through these protests, students drew parallels between their own lives and their parents. As Everatt’s (2016) research on multiple generations of youth has revealed, young people continue to experience challenges similar to their parents: High rates of unemployment, informal housing, lack of services and spatial distance from education and employment opportunities. Many young people are also deeply indebted, not just an aspirational middle class, but working-class youth who have gone into debt to finance both major and everyday purchases (Everatt 2016, James 2014). In the labour market, more than two thirds of youth between 18 and 35 are unemployed with black and coloured South Africans experiencing the highest rates (Makiwane and Kwizera 2009, 230; StatsSA 2015d, 39). While critiques of post-apartheid citizenship by youth are not new, the #FMF movement was the first instance in which youth, on a mass scale, advanced a critique of post-apartheid inequality that disrupted normative assumptions about the so-called ‘born frees.’

Research Questions

In 2015, on a pre-fieldwork visit to Cape Town, I spent a considerable amount of time in Khayelitsha, a township in Cape Town, attending music events, meeting up with political activists, going to protest marches and so on. I spent time ‘hanging out’ with a number of youth, some employed, some unemployed, some working between the formal and informal economy. It was during this time that the #Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) movement emerged at UCT in opposition to both a statue of Cecil John Rhodes on campus and the lack of transformation
within the institution. The protests (as I describe in Chapter 5) went well beyond these demands and included calls for decolonizing institutions and society more broadly. I was interested in the resonances of these protests in Khayelitsha. Were these protests simply the bleating of the middle class, or did they share something with the frustrations experienced by young people in the townships? In late 2015, when I returned to Cape Town, I found an opportunity to answer this question. I began interviewing students from Khayelitsha attending three higher education institutions in Cape Town, each one quite different than the other. By this time, the #RMF movement had morphed into a national #FMF movement and every student had strong opinions about the meanings and causes of the protests.

The #FMF protests provided an entry point to explore the wider meanings of higher education among working class youth. If the protests were primarily around accessibility and the prohibitive costs of higher education, then what better way to study them through the narratives and experiences of youth from working-class households? If the protests were intended as critiques of the limitations of post-apartheid citizenship, then what resonance did they have among youth from marginalized communities? The label ‘working class youth,’ does, however, require further clarification. Youth from urban townships are not a homogenous category, as townships themselves are internally differentiated spaces. In his research on the township of Soweto, for example, Alexander et al. (2013) use a definition of class that includes those who are unemployed or informally employed, focusing instead on the work people actually do. They define Soweto as a “differentiated proletarian unity,” meaning that the majority of township residents are “workers, wannabe workers, or directly dependent on workers” (Ibid., 30). Khayelitsha, described in more detail below, is best characterized in the same manner. There is
considerable variation among township residents in how they make a living, but most are dependent on wage earners, directly or indirectly, or the state’s social grant system.

Further, ‘youth’ has multiple meanings and describes both a demographic cohort and a transitional period. I focus on youth as a social category, highlighting both the agency that young people have in shaping their own circumstances but also the structures that constrain this agency. Youth, as Sukarieh & Tannock (2014) argue is a social construction, shaped not only by young people themselves, but by different institutions and actors, and the political economy of global capitalism. In the South African context, for example, youth has explicitly political connotations. Youth have been described as ‘young lions’ of the liberation struggles and ‘victims’ of apartheid violence and disorder (Marks 2001, Seekings & Everatt 1994). In the post-apartheid period, they are seen as representing both the triumphs and failures of policy reforms (Everatt 2002). While anthropologists have studied shifting patterns of youth behavior in relation to kinship systems (Bucholtz 2002, Durham 2004), geography has also experienced the rapid growth of studies that focus on the ‘geographies of youth’ and the relationship between youth and the wider political economy of space (Jeffrey 2010b, 2012; Kraftl, Horton & Tucker 2012).

In focusing on youth from one urban township community, my aim is to provide a more nuanced and complex portrayal of these protests while simultaneously highlighting the obstacles and motivations shaping higher education access. Immediate portrayals of the protests veered between praise singing, in which the protests were seen as an impending Arab Spring moment, or condemnation in which they were seen as facilitating the impending collapse of higher education (Gumede 2017, Jansen 2016). In one instance, students were described as descendants of Nongqawuse, a 19th Century millenarian amaXhosa prophetess who called on the Xhosa to kill their cattle in order to drive white people from the country (Bank 2018). I proceed from a
different vantage point. By interviewing students from urban working-class households, I examine just why free higher education held such widespread appeal, the relationship between these protests and circumstances of household poverty, and, ultimately, what the protests say about young people’s aspirations and hopes toward a better life. Former university vice chancellor and education scholar Saleem Badat (2016, 24) has called for, “imaginative theorization, extensive description and rigorous analysis of the 2015-2016 students protests [that]…avoid both spectacular claims about their meaning, as well as fanciful predictions about their future trajectory and their significance.” This dissertation proceeds in this spirit, recognizing both the limitations of the protests in advancing radical change in South African education and society more broadly, while also recognizing that they tapped into widely-held frustrations.

This dissertation addresses the following primary research question:

1. Why did the #FeesMustFall protests occur and what do they reveal about the educational motivations and obstacles facing working-class youth in South Africa?

In centering these protests, my aim is not to provide a description of the different actors involved, or the relationship between student organizations and the state, but rather to unpack the multiple causes of the protests, to examine the forms that they took, and to ground them in the experiences of working class youth. While I centre young people’s voices and experiences, my aim is not to uncritically celebrate youth agency. Rather, I consider young people’s actions in relation to the broader structures of social change and political economy in which agency is embedded. In pursing these lines of inquiry, I raise three of critical sub-questions:

1. What shapes young people’s aspirations toward higher education in South Africa?
2. What role does debt play in the lives of young South Africans and how did it contribute to the #Fees Must Fall protests?

3. How does higher education both reproduce social inequalities and generate resistance in South Africa?

This dissertation reveals that higher education is a contradictory resource for young working-class people. On the one hand, it allows them to develop aspirations toward social mobility for them and their families. In other words, it allows them to imagine themselves assume aspects of middle class life. On the other, it generates significant obstacles to realizing this future. Even as it provides a potential escape from poverty, it also ties them into systems that reproduce social inequality. Because of this, higher education in South Africa has historically been, and remains, a key site of reproduction and resistance. It serves a variety of, frequently contradictory, functions. It is aimed at reproducing skilled labour power for a globalizing economy while at the same time meeting goals of equity, inclusion and transformation. The contradictions between these functions underpin social unrest in higher education and highlight the importance of situating student agency within wider social structures.

In addition, this dissertation makes a number of other contributions to debates around youth, aspirations and resistance in South Africa. First, I suggest that while young people’s aspirations toward higher education are informed by a broadly neoliberal context, in which education is seen as the sole pathway to social mobility, their aspirations are frequently collective and centred around desires for family well-being. Second, I suggest that obligations to family, both immediate and anticipated, are fundamental to the educational experiences of working class students in South Africa. Youth are not merely neoliberal subjects in systems of human capital formation, they bring with them into higher education institutions, desires and
hopes for the future that frequently transcend these neoliberal logics. For example, many working class students anticipate obligations to kin after graduation, particularly in contexts of household poverty. Their reflections on these obligations highlight the ways in which education is bound up with the broader social economy of households. Third, I suggest that underpinning the #FMF protests of 2015-2016 were concerns over the debilitating role that debt plays in relation to these aspirations and obligations. While #FMF was widely seen as a political challenge to the ruling ANC, and the rise of a new militant post-apartheid generation, a more fine-grained analysis based on ethnographic research reveals that working-class students supported this movement out of concerns over debt repayments and social mobility. #FMF reveals the limitations and contradictions of student politics; by calling for greater access and inclusion the protests did not fundamentally challenge neoliberal logics in higher education nor its role in reproducing wider social inequalities.

Key Literatures and Research Contributions

Youth, Aspirations and the Family: Recent decades have witnessed two broad trends in the study of youth. The first has focused on youth transitions, or the life-course of young people and the challenges they face as they move from parental homes to homes of their own. In the Global North, these studies have frequently focused on the impact that neoliberalism, austerity and the transition to post-Fordism has had on the temporality of youth (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). In the Global South, anthropologists have been concerned with how high rates of unemployment and low rates of economic growth have affected the social mobility of young people and their move toward independence (Honwana 2012, Jeffrey 2010). A second approach has focused on young people’s agency, often in response to these delayed transition, often through the lens of culture (Hodkinson & Deicke 2007; Furlong, Woodman & Wyn 2011). In
this vein, Honwana (2012) suggests that youth are not passive but produce ‘youthscapes’ involving both consumption and cultural resistance. Yet these approaches frequently emphasize individual perspectives and agency over structural ones, often ignoring the impact of changing political economy on young people (Sukarieh & Tannock 2014, 4-6). Earlier approaches emphasize the construction of youth as a social category and the relationship between youth and the shifts in capitalist societies (Cohen & Ainley 2000, Griffin 1997, Mizen 2002).

In this vein, recent geographical scholarship has attempted to unpack how youth think about education and, ultimately, their futures in the context of austerity (Brown 2011, 2013; Grant 2017; Holloway, Brown & Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Holloway & Pimlott Wilson 2011; Pimlott-Wilson 2015; Raco 2009). These studies have linked economic change (deindustrialization, the rise of service and financial sectors), the rise of government programs aimed at raising young people’s aspirations toward higher education, and changing youth subjectivities. Raco (2009) suggests that successive Labour governments in the UK facilitated a shift from a universal citizenship based around labour expectations (aligned with the Keynesian welfare state) to individualized forms of social mobility based around aspirations toward higher education. In short, youth should no longer expect a job but should embrace ‘life-long learning’ in order to meet the shifting economic demands. Through qualitative research with young people, Pimlott-Wilson (2015) suggests that young people internalize rhetorics of individual responsibility through neoliberal policies, which affect their present and future emotional well-being. Neoliberal policies offload the burden of addressing poverty and economic uncertainty onto young people, which has a deep emotional impact. Yet as Grant (2017) has emphasized, young people’s aspirations are complex and multi-layered; desires for individual social mobility often confront values of collective responsibility and care. While there is some internal variation,
the use of ‘aspirations’ in these studies is relational. Rather than focusing on young people’s agency, they reveal how young people are affected by shifts in political economy and capitalist society. These shifts have an impact on how they approach higher education and their emotions.

Research on young people in South Africa has often focused on the ‘dreams’ they construct about the future. Ramphele (2002), in a study of the lives of young people from townships around Cape Town, notes that resilience was an important factor shaping young people’s dreams about the future. De Lannoy (2007, 60-61) also notes that having a ‘dream’ enables young people to maintain a focus on the future. The young people in her study value education because it allows them to dream about a potential future in which they are middle class. Yet this focus on dreams elides the relationship between how young people think and act and broader shifts in political economy and society. For example, Ramphele (2002, 101) notes that many black youth reject manual work because it is associated with the, “degrading working conditions their parents had to endure.” This misses the fact that these decisions are also highly influenced by economic restructuring and the opportunities for social mobility provided by higher education. Looking at young people’s aspirations allows us to understand how their present circumstances and wider social and economic shifts affect how they think about the future. As Soudien (2003, 69) has noted, young South Africans’ aspirations have been deeply affected by the uneven process of class formation, in which affirmative action programs have provided some with, “previously undreamed-of opportunities.” Furthermore, Brown (2016) suggests that studying young people’s aspirations provides a valuable opportunity for understanding how neoliberalism plays a fundamental role in shaping how young people hope.

Further, examining young people’s aspirations provide a valuable opportunity for studying how young people’s *habitus* is shaped by a range of social and spatial dynamics (see
Chapter 2). Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* attunes us to the different opportunities education provides to different social classes, emphasizing the importance of social networks, cultural power, and demeanors. Those from elite classes develop a ‘feel for the game,’ which allows them to navigate access to prestigious jobs and qualifications. Youth from non-elite classes are often excluded from education opportunities not only because they lack financial capital, but because they lack the connections, supports and embodied attributes that are recognized in education systems. Jeffrey et al. (2008, 209) have drawn on Bourdieu’s work in their study of youth in India to emphasize, “how the efforts of subordinate people to capitalize on their education are played out within landscapes of power.” In other words, youth are differentially empowered to make certain choices. Grant (2017) notes that while working class students can alter their *habitus* in order to pursue educational opportunities, this can result in a destabilized *habitus* in which they are pulled in multiple directions, between desires to be mobile and go to university and their responsibilities and attachments to family. Drawing on studies which emphasize the relational geographies of education, I also view *habitus* as profoundly shaped by space (Fataar 2009). In South Africa’s divided cities, space plays a fundamental role in determining access to education, with students and parents working to transcend apartheid geographies in order to access better quality education (Hunter 2010, 2015). Transcending these spatial boundaries also allows students to alter their *habitus* and develop aspirant dispositions toward higher education.

If education is often understood as an individual endeavor, its impacts are frequently collective. Young people’s aspirations are not merely focused on social mobility or financial success, but future emotional well-being for themselves and their families (Brown 2011, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011). Education, particularly in a context in which access was
heavily stratified by race and class, creates obligations and responsibilities to kin that cut across generations. As Hunter (2014) has noted, during apartheid urban African families often invested in their children’s education as a form of insurance as it was seen as bringing future returns. Today, young people from townships frequently value higher education for the future returns it will bring to their families; their rationale for pursuing higher education is intimately shaped by these systems of reciprocity centred around family (see Chapter 4). Anthropologists have long noted that reciprocal kinship exchange, particularly ‘wealth in people’, are central to the structure of African households in many parts of the continent (Fortes 1949, Guyer 1995, Ferguson 2013). These exchanges are part of the social economy of everyday life under post-apartheid capitalism, that is increasingly defined by redistributive circuits and income sharing within and between households (Ferguson 2015, James 2012, Bähre 2011). Geographers have similarly emphasized the diverse practices of economic appropriation, production and distribution that occur across households, neighbourhoods, organizations and enterprises (Gibson-Graham 2008, 2014). By examining how education creates immediate and anticipated obligations to family (what some describe as a ‘black tax’), I highlight the diverse distributive practices that characterize contemporary township life. I also emphasize the bonds that education creates between parents and children and how young people’s aspirations involve more than simply individual success.

These bonds are economic and emotional, yet education itself rarely features in the literature on emotional geographies (Kenway & Youdell 2011). Emotional geography express a, “concern with the spatiality and temporality of emotions, with the way they coalesce around and within certain spaces” (Davidson, Smith & Bondi 2012, 3). Emotional geographies are also aimed at understanding emotion in terms of its socio-spatial articulation and, as such, can help us
understand both everyday encounters and larger questions of political economy. What happens in
schools, colleges and universities, for example, may depend on emotional entanglements with
kin, community and households that exist outside these spaces. While education is frequently
seen as an individual pursuit, it is embedded within social and cultural processes (Kenway &
Youdell 2011; Cook & Hemming 2011). As I discuss (see Chapter 4), young people’s
experiences within higher education institutions are intimately shaped by the emotional
attachments they have to home. Soudien (2008) suggests that higher education has the effect of
weakening young people’s identification with home as they develop new class identities that are
in tension with their previous attachments. My research emphasizes a different phenomenon,
namely the ways in which education reinforces bonds of responsibility and obligation between
students and their families. These are more than simply emotional bonds, but products of the
changing structures of a capitalist society. These attachments are both a source of concern
(household income insecurity, for example) and a deep source of motivation. The pursuit of
higher education is both shaped by bonds and obligations to kin, and, among many young black
South African students, desires for dignity denied to their parents.

My contribution to these literatures is to emphasize the importance of relational
understandings of youth. To understand youth, it is necessary to go beyond examining their own
experiences and understandings and situate them in relation to the wide range of social, political
and economic factors that shape their lives (Sukarieh & Tannock 2014). Young people’s actions
and hopes about the future are the product of more than just individual ‘resilience;’ they are
outcomes of structures and processes of class, race, gender and geography. We can only
understand young people’s experiences and agency then by paying attention to the broader
structural terrain they occupy.
Debt and the Right to Education: The global growth of higher education has been underpinned by the belief that it will both generate economic growth and individual social mobility (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley 2009). This massification has also, however, been accompanied by the rise of global student protests, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis (Sukarieh & Tannock 2014). These protests have largely been driven by both the rising cost of higher education as states have shifted the cost of education onto students and families, driving up debt and making these institutions less accessible. The centrality of debt to student protests has been noted in a number of instances such as Quebec and Chile, but particularly in the United States, where total student debt passed the $1trillion mark in 2012 (Ibid). Scholars have suggested that student debt in the US is more than a financial instrument, but a disciplinary mechanism that forces students to choose practical majors and value high paying jobs in the private sector over lower-paid public interest jobs (Williams 2013, Ross 2013). Others have also noted that it is a racialized form of accumulation, as it is frequently black and Hispanic students that take on large debt burdens (Marez 2014). The rapid growth of higher education enrolment in South Africa has similarly been accompanied by both rising expectations and debt; in 2016, R24billion was owed to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Gumede 2016). The vast majority of this debt is borne by poor, black South Africans and their families. The #FMF protests of 2015-2016 are direct outcomes of both this debt regime and concerns over the social mobility function of higher education.

Anthropologists working on credit and debt have recognized that it is historically specific and coexists with other social obligations (Peebles 2010, Graeber 2011, James 2014). James (2014) has noted that the growth of post-apartheid consumer debt was fueled not only by the end of ‘credit apartheid’ (in which banks expanded lending to non-whites) but by rising expectations
and aspirations brought about by political liberation. The expansion of credit underpinned both the growth of an aspirant middle class and subsidized the low and stagnant wages of unskilled workers. Taking on debt was therefore about aspirations toward upward social mobility and about sustaining livelihoods in a context of economic uncertainty. Peebles (2010) describes debt in temporal terms, as present consumption financed by future labour. Yet as Harker (2017) suggests, debt is also deeply spatial involving complex entanglements between formal and informal institutions, families and states. Debt is also an increasingly common experience for young people around the world. Horton (2017) suggests that after the 2008 financial crisis, young people in the UK have come to see debt as inevitable, something that pervades every aspect of their lives and, ultimately, shapes how they think about the future.

In a reflection on the #FMF protests, Mbembe (2015b) has argued that one of the underexplored features of the protests has been the ubiquity of debt as a feature of everyday life under contemporary capitalism. In an analysis of student’s responses to both debt and the #FMF protests (see Chapter 3), I suggest that debt to the state conflicted with anticipated obligations to family. The intersection between rising levels of debt, racialized forms of household poverty, and the collective obligations to kin in the form of a ‘black tax’ underpinned student anger in these protests. If debt shapes how young people think about the future, it can also be a potential source of politicization as the social mobility function of higher education is eroded. As Sukarieh & Tannock (2014) have argued, global student protests are not solely about rising tuition fees but a crisis of confidence in higher education as a route to social mobility. On a global scale, many young people have their aspirations toward higher education raised only to discover that it does not lead to the high-wage jobs they were promised.
Low levels of student debt repayment also highlight the politicized nature of debt and the way in which education is widely seen not as a commodity but as a right. Debt refusal has a long history in South Africa. Von Schnitzler (2008, 2016) has argued that low levels of service and rate payments in South Africa, described by municipal officials as a ‘culture of non-payment,’ are due to South Africans seeing these services as a right rather than a commodity. Poor South Africans see service delivery not as a product, but as a right which they fought for. James (2014) has argued that the boycott tactic of the 1980s, in which black South Africans refused to pay rents or fees to the apartheid state, has endured. During #FMF students opposed not only fee increases, but called for free education as a right, opposing plans to expand access through NSFAS as this simply saddled poor students with debt. This highlighted key differences with the state’s position, which saw the cost of education as something to be shared between students, their parents and the state. In this sense, #FMF shares something with service delivery protests that have seen poor community oppose increasing service fees and slow delivery (Alexander 2010, Von Holdt 2013, Booysen 2007). While student and service delivery protests may differ in their demands, they share a frustration with the slow pace of social and economic change and a desire to see sweeping, immediate action (Gibson 2016, Satgar 2016). This highlights the importance of understanding the experience of citizenship rather than simply its constitutional guarantee (Runciman 2016; Robins, Cornwall & Von Lieres 2008).

This approach to #FMF is different from other analyses of the protests, both popular and academic (Badat 2016, Bank 2018, Bond 2015, Booysen 2016, Bosch 2016, Cherry 2017, Fick 2016, Gibson 2016, Hodes 2017, Langa 2017, Naicker 2016, Naidoo 2016). In an edited collection on the protests, Booysen (2016) suggests that they were significant because they allowed students to unite, for the first time in the post-apartheid period, across multiple
institutions, across class and race lines, and, in two weeks, significantly increase public funding for higher education. They also allowed students to advance a critique of the ruling party and the slow pace of social and economic transformation. They were popularly seen in the press as the awakening of a ‘post-apartheid’ generation of ‘born-frees’ venting their anger at the ossified ruling party. Naidoo (2016) suggests that the protests contained elements of a decolonial praxis, which challenged notions of state-led transformation and called for sweeping and immediate change.

While these are valuable insights, my research focuses on a different element of these protests: The often-fragile promise of social mobility through higher education. While scholars have written of the extension of youth in the global South and the experience of waithood, I emphasize that youth is not only a protracted life stage but highly insecure, uncertain and fraught with risk (Honwana 2012, Mains 2007, Masquelier 2013, Jeffrey & Young 2012). For many working class students, the value of higher education was linked directly to the returns it could bring to their families one day. Rising tuition costs, academic exclusion and mounting debt threatened to destroy this function. By focusing on these, perhaps more mundane aspects of the protests, I highlight the connections between students and households and the role that education plays in shaping emotional and financial bonds between family members. In doing so, I reveal how debt was widely seen by black students as a racialized form of accumulation and control that impacted their educational trajectories and hopes for the future. This provides both a more fine-grained understanding of the issues underpinning these protests, and an analysis of the impact of debt on young people’s lives, a topic that is missing in much of the literature on youth in South Africa.
Reproduction, Resistance and the Function of Higher Education: On one level, #FMF has a lot in common with global student struggles against neoliberalism, whether in Chile, Quebec or the United Kingdom (Bellei et al. 2014; Giroux 2013; Solomon & Palmieri 2011). These protests have opposed government cutbacks, rising tuition fees, increasing inequality and the growing corporatization of higher education (Sukarieh & Tannock 2014). Yet #FMF had particular South African characteristics, shaped by the racialized history of unequal educational access, class formation and resistance. Education was integral to the reproduction of a racialized form of capitalism in the 19th and 20th century (see Chapter 1), and a space in which oppositional consciousness and new forms of resistance emerged (Heffernan et al. 2016, Badat 1999, Biko 1996). Education has both facilitated the social mobility of certain sectors of South African society while constraining the mobility of others. This has, in turn, given rise to social and political struggles within educational institutions from the colonial period onwards. This fact reveals the utility of structuralist approaches, that link education to the reproduction of capitalism, and resistance approaches that highlight the agency of multiple actors in shaping education policy (Christie and Collins 1984, Legassick and Wolpe 1976, Kallaway 1984, Hyslop 1999).

Structuralist approaches emphasize the ways in which education reproduces not only future generations of workers but ideologies integral to the functioning of capitalism (Althusser 2006, Bowels and Gintis 1976). Building on this, Bourdieu (1986) highlights the role of culture. While appearing meritocratic, education reproduces certain forms of class power that secure the privileged position of the dominant classes. Education advantages the dominant classes precisely because of the participation of the dominated. It holds the potential for upward social mobility which obscures the role it plays in the reproduction of inequality. As Bourdieu and Passeron
(1977) further explained, this participation legitimates systems of domination, what they call ‘symbolic violence,’ which obscures power relations and legitimates class inequalities. While valuable in understanding the relationship between education and economic change, reproduction theories often ignore the role of students, parents and educators in shaping education systems. South Africa’s educational history, as Kallaway (1984) notes, involved both racial domination and significant resistance from students who, particularly after 1976, became significant political actors. As Giroux (1983) has emphasized, structuralist approaches are important in understanding the relationship between education and capitalism, but agency reveals how students, teachers and parents come together within specific social contexts to reproduce and challenge the conditions of their existence.

My contribution is to situate #FMF in a continuum of educational resistance in South Africa (see Chapter 1). Post-apartheid education reforms have provided some degree of social mobility for black South Africans, while also reproducing racialized inequalities and giving rise to new forms of resistance. Initially reforms were guided by the redistributive vision of the RDP, yet the turn to market-based solutions in the late 1990s limited these egalitarian promises. As Badat (2009) notes, the choice was between development or equity, with the state attempting an awkward balance. Universities were encouraged to enroll more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while at the same time forced to adopt performance indicators, outsource key functions and revise management functions (Nash 2006). Unsurprisingly, historically disadvantaged institutions have struggled to meet these measurements as they are largely reliant on a fee base comprised of poor and highly indebted students. Historically advantaged institutions have largely maintained their privileged position, diversifying their student body as black middle-class students claim some of the privileges previously enjoyed by white South
Africans. At the same time, black students who have entered these institutions frequently face forms of racism and alienation (Soudien 2008). The #FMF protests must, I argue, be situated within this continuum of educational struggles that are linked to changes in the country’s political economy, historic claims for dignity (in the face of racialized oppression) and desires for social mobility.

In doing so I reveal how the #FMF protests were not only a consequence of rising fee levels, but the contradictory functions of South Africa’s higher education system after apartheid (see Chapter 5). South Africa has promoted higher education as key to economic growth and social mobility (Vally & Motala 2014). At the same time, students have found their access restricted by rising fees and that access to high wage employment after graduation is not guaranteed. Rather than ameliorating social inequalities, higher education often reveals the profound racialized nature of educational inequality. Inequalities at the level of basic education, heavily shaped by income levels and the ability of parents to secure better quality schooling, are replicated at the higher education level. At the same time, the social mobility function of education is frequently limited by existing economic circumstances. Around the world, researchers have noted that there are deep contradictions between the promises of higher education to produce high wage jobs for all and the realities of a capitalist economy and society (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011; Livingstone 1999). While the private returns on higher education in South Africa are high, unemployment has been exacerbated by the 2008 global financial crisis, in which nearly 1 million jobs were lost and unemployment has remained high (Rena & Msoni 2014). Finally, #FMF challenged the symbolic function of higher education in South Africa as emblematic of non-racial transformation. In calling attention to the multiple struggles that black students faced, the movement was seen as a panacea to a range of social,
political and economic issues tied to South Africa’s incomplete transition from apartheid into the neoliberal era.

All too often, studies of education are delinked from society. As the late Neville Alexander (1990, 9) wrote, “schools, generally speaking, reflect what is happening in society at large.” While a celebration of agency dominates the youth studies literature, an analysis of how youth are affected by changes in global political economy is less widely practiced. Studies have emphasized youth experience, youth consumption and cultural activism, but they have done little to contribute to a global understanding of youth in the age of neoliberalism. While based around one particular case, I have hoped to show that young people in the global South also develop complex aspirations around higher education that are shaped both by their own agency and wider social and economic forces. This dissertation strikes a balance between young people’s agency within education systems and the structures that shape these systems. Focusing on how youth develop aspirations, for example, allows us to take young people’s agency seriously while at the same time attending to the structural factors that shape this agency. In examining young people’s reflections on debt, I also highlight how these concerns and anxieties reflect a wider crisis of social reproduction in poor households. Young people’s narratives and experiences therefore provide a window to explore wider concerns of political economy and social inequality.

Finally, my contributions to these themes raise critical questions for global youth studies. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2015) have noted, the rise of ‘youth studies’ across the social sciences has, provoked questions about how we define youth and what connections we can draw between different national contexts. Geographers and anthropologists, in particular, have drawn attention to the multiple forms of agency young people have and how they construct spaces of resilience and hope often in contexts of significant uncertainty. While recognizing the value of these
approaches, I believe a relational understanding of youth as embedded within social structures, history and political economy provides stronger grounds for comparative research. In this regard, my research makes four key contributions. First, I highlight how young people’s agency (in the form of aspirations toward education) is shaped by conditions of urban inequality. An understanding of urban inequality is therefore critical to understand how young people’s lives and agency intersects with urban change. Second, I suggest that young people’s lives cannot be considered as separate from the households they occupy or their relations they have with family members. In this sense, youth studies must also involve an analysis of household and family dynamics and how these are impacted by social, environmental and economic change. Third, it is imperative to examine the relationship between young people’s prospects for social mobility and the structural conditions shaping higher education on a global scale. Higher education is increasingly promoted by governments around the world as a vehicle for social mobility, yet young people frequently find their access restricted due to rising costs or the diminishing prospects of stable, high wage employment. The growth of an educated, underemployed and precarious youth cohort, and the political consequences that emerge from this, should continue to be a concern for researchers. Finally, young people increasingly live with or anticipate high debt burdens as they complete their education and work to assume markers of adulthood. The way in which young people engage with financial markets, and both cope with and resist indebtedness can help us understand the relationship between young people’s economic roles and political identities.

**Research Context: Changing Geographies of Education in Cape Town and Khayelitsha**

Khayelitsha, meaning new home in isiXhosa, is located on an area known as the Cape Flats approximately 35km from the centre of Cape Town (see Map 1). Following apartheid urban
planning, the township was designed as an ‘urban homeland,’ in which residents would migrate out of the area for work (Dewar and Watson 1984). The original plan for Khayelitsha involved consolidating all of Cape Town’s legal black population (those who had work permits) from older areas such as Gugulethu, Nyanga and Langa (Seekings 2013, Dewar and Watson 1984). This soon proved untenable, however, as opposition to relocation in places like Crossroads intensified (see Images 1 and 2). In 1983 the state announced the construction of Khayelitsha on a section of land south-east of the coloured township of Mitchell’s Plain. Shack dwellers resisted relocation to an area that was further from employment, transportation networks and was, literally, a wind-swept expanse of sand dunes and swamps—the civil society group Black Sash described it as a ‘desert town’ (see Image 3). Many of those who initially settled in Khayelitsha were driven out of neighbouring communities through violent attacks by a group known as the Witdoeke, who were supported by the apartheid government in an attempt to crush the anti-apartheid UDF movement in the Western Cape.²

Map 1: Location of Khayelitsha

The history of education in Khayelitsha was shaped by racial segregation and capitalist development that shaped Cape Town in the 20th Century (Western 1981). The 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act restricted African residency in cities to specific areas, although this was poorly enforced (Wilson and Mafeje 1963). Two significant pieces of legislation altered residential patterns. First was the Population Registration Act of 1950 which classified people as Native, White and Coloured. This laid the foundation for the Group Areas Act, which gave the government power to demarcate where each racial group could live and own property. Starting in 1961 the state divided Cape Town along racial lines. The most dramatic changes were the classification of formerly mixed coloured, Indian and black neighbourhoods like District Six, Tramway Road and Windermere. Coloured residents of these neighbourhoods were moved to the Cape Flats and many of these areas were reclassified as white residential areas.
The apartheid government also embarked on a program of discouraging African settlement in Cape Town. This was in line with the Western Cape’s Coloured Labour Preference Policy, which demarcated an area west of what was called the Eiselen line, where coloured workers would be given jobs before black workers (see Map 2). What this meant, in practice, was that black workers were consigned to contract employment that was largely unskilled and held little promise of job advancement. However, the failure to effectively enforce influx control in the Cape had, by the early 1980s, led to the settlement of a large number of black residents in a city (Makhulu 2015). While influx controls and labour preference policies were aimed at shielding white and coloured workers from competition with black workers, there was a contradiction in these policies as demands for labour by capital continued to grow in the postwar period. Between 1950 and 1960 the African Urban population grew by 49.5% (Posel 2011: 340-341). In 1983 there were 250,000 black people living in Cape Town of whom around half would have been considered ‘illegal’ (Bishop 1983).

The provision of education for Cape Town’s non-white population was determined by labour demands of white-owned industry and policies that regulated residency, education and training. The 1922 Apprenticeship Act gave white workers a secure position by setting educational standards for apprenticeships, effectively excluding non-white workers from accessing secure employment through apprenticeship training. The Bantu Education Act (1953), and the Coloured Person’s Education Act (1963) enforced segregation within schools. While coloured workers in the Cape were provided with some degree of technical training, as Barnes (2009, 174) notes, apartheid restrictions, “hemmed in the breadth and depth of courses and qualifications that could be offered.” While the education of the coloured population was prioritized, it also remained extremely limited (Hirson 1979). At the level of higher education,
the University of the Western Cape (founded 1959) and Pentech (founded 1967) provided some degree of professional and technical training for the city’s coloured population—both institutions regularly pushed the boundaries of apartheid policy and enrolled non-coloured students.

Education opportunities for Cape Town’s black residents were purposefully limited. Black migrants from the Eastern Cape were not supposed to be permanent residents in cities. The result was that education opportunities for black children in Cape Town were insufficient or non-existent. There was limited construction of school buildings even as the population increased—Hirson (1979, 220) estimates that in 1976 around 75% of black children who finished primary school could not be accommodated in high schools in Cape Town. In the city’s oldest African township, Langa, there were no high schools until 1938, and while high schools were gradually established in townships like Nyanga, Gugulethu and Crossroads in the mid-century, enrolment in higher grades was limited (Lemon and Battersby-Lennard 2010, 98). In Khayelitsha there were no high schools at all until 1986 (Nekhwevha 1991, 88).

Educational desegregation in Cape Town schools began in 1991 and has been highly uneven (Wieder 2001). For example, a study of school integration by Chisholm and Sujee (2006) notes that schools in the Western Cape have integrated the least in the country. Schools defined as Indian, coloured or white before 1994 are now certainly more diverse, but the number of Africans enrolled in formerly white schools has remained limited (Ibid., 154). Formerly white schools have experienced desegregation mostly due to the influx of coloured students. Black students at these schools still constitute a minority, mostly due to cost and distance from these communities (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard 2010). In a study on Western Cape primary schools, Fiske and Ladd (2004) found that nearly 100% of the enrolment at formerly black schools remained black, but in formerly white schools 34% of students were black or coloured. In a study
of Cape Town high schools, Lemon and Battersby-Lennard (2010) found that in 2010 some formerly white schools had less than 50% white students. Schools in black and coloured communities, however, remain largely homogenous, although children from middle class families in these areas are increasingly sending their children to schools in other parts of the city (Fataar 2009).

For youth from Khayelitsha one of the only means of escaping poverty is through education, yet this poses a complex set of challenges. Khayelitsha is a community shaped by circular patterns of migration, as people move between the Eastern Cape and the township in search of employment, housing, and education opportunities. This movement often results in disjointed schooling histories as students are shuffled between parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles over the course of their younger years. While the quality of secondary schooling in the township varies, schools are often ill equipped, have limited resources and teaching is often of poor quality (Equal Education 2010). High rates of domestic and community violence also do little to cultivate a safe learning environment. Gangsterism, in particular, is a constant feature of township high school life, as territorial battles are often carried out on school grounds (Pinnock 2016). For those who consider studying further, a new set of challenges appears: In an area with a high unemployment rate, family pressure to earn any income at all is high. The distance from educational institutions is often prohibitive and funds have to be found for transport. Registration costs are often beyond the reach of families, and lack of information and guidance can make the entire process bewildering and alienating. In 2011 only 45% of young people (aged 20-29) in Khayelitsha had finished high school, and, with some variation between different areas of the township, around 1 to 4% of the township’s population had some form of post-school education or training (Census 2011).
While Khayelitsha appears to be a typical apartheid-era township with high rates of informal housing, it is not homogenous (see Image 5). Areas like Enkanini have over 80% informal dwellings and an average annual household income of R14,600 a year (~$3000 CAD). Other parts of the township like iLitha Park have larger houses, higher household incomes and even privately-funded schools (Census 2011). Poverty and unemployment, however, are deep problems and few households are immune to this. Seekings (2013) estimates that somewhere between 32% and 46% of households in Khayelitsha have per capita income below StatsSA’s food poverty line. The overall unemployment rate for the township is 40% and among men and women in their 20s it is 52% (Ibid., 15). There is a high dependency rate among young people on employed family members and on the state’s social grant system. In short, Khayelitsha, like many other large townships in South Africa is a highly differentiated urban space. It has both sprawling informal settlements that lack access to basic services and new shopping mall complexes complete with coffee shops and gin distilleries (see Image 5). By 2001 the population of Khayelitsha was 329,000 and by 2011 there were 400,000 residents living in the township, with just under half residing in formal housing (Seekings 2013). While Khayelitsha was profoundly shaped by apartheid-era urban planning, it has also been shaped by post-apartheid policies. Older residents of the township are overwhelmingly born outside of the Western Cape, primarily in the Eastern Cape Province (Seekings, Graaff and Joubert 1990). Data from the 2011 census reveals that 78% of children and adolescents were born locally and only 18% were born

3 There is much speculation about the actual population size of Khayelitsha. While the 2011 census reports 400,000, media reports often suggest that the population is closer to 1 million. This claim is repeated in an academic article by Brunn and Wilson (2013), who claim, rather bizarrely, that despite the township having ‘over a million’ residents it remains ‘terra incognitae’ for researchers, ignoring the substantive body of research in income dynamics and public health conducted in the community. While the migratory nature of the township certainly does indicate some degree of population flux, as Seekings (2013) points out, the figure of 400,000 roughly corresponds to other measures, such as the number of children in schools or those accessing state social grants.
in the Eastern Cape (Clark 2015, 3). The township remains, however, a migrant neighbourhood. In older more prosperous areas of the township, about half the residents were born in the Western Cape. In more informal areas, particularly those on the edge of the township, like Endlovini and Enkanini only 7-12% were born in the Western Cape (Seekings 2013, 12).

Image 4: A mix of formal and informal housing in Khayelitsha’s SST section, a relatively new section of the township. Source: Personal photo.
Today Khayelitsha has approximately 65,000 students who attend 55 public schools in the township (Clarke 2015). All 20 high schools in Khayelitsha are designated ‘fee free,’ although there are some small private schools within the township that charge fees. Interviews with high school principals in the township suggests that while the majority of students come from within the township, schools accept children from nearby townships of Nyanga and Crossroads. Schools generally enrol students on a first-come basis, meaning that the best performing schools are frequently filled first. An analysis of grade 12 pass rates indicates that

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4 While ‘fee free’ schools are the norm in poor communities like Khayelitsha, the label masks the fact that parents frequently make payments toward their children’s education. Fee free schools are prohibited from charging fees, but they frequently ask parents to make ‘contributions,’ which are sometimes framed as compulsory. While this is illegal, students frequently understood them as fees paid by their parents to the school and not as a contribution. Fairly common, was also the payment of up front registration fees to secure spots for children at the time of registration. One principal informed me that this payment was to show that this payment indicated that parents were making a serious commitment to their child’s education. In 2016 protests erupted in one school over students being charged fees for showing up late for class, using a cell phone or missing classes (see Mackay 2016).
there are indeed some schools that perform better than others, achieving pass rates comparable to schools located in more affluent parts of the city (WCED 2014b).

Khayelitsha experiences both out-migration of learners from the township as well as significant educational migration within the township. Urban educational mobility has been the focus of a substantial body of research (Soudien 2004; Msila 2005; Nkomo, Amsterdam & Weber 2008; Fataar 2007, 2007b, 2009, 2010; Bell & McKay 2011; Hunter 2010, 2015a, 2015b). As Soudien (2006, 25) describes it, the migration of black township learners to historically white, Indian or coloured schools is frequently a, “vehicle for entry into the middle class, and relief from the claustrophobia of the township.” While it was not possible to obtain a dataset that linked school enrolment to residency, interviews with students, high school principals and demographic data provide some insights. The majority of young people in Khayelitsha remain in the township to attend high school, although many of them do not attend the closest high school to them (Clark 2015). Those who attend high school out of the township tend to migrate further afield than any of the immediate coloured townships around Khayelitsha as English-medium schools are seen as desirable. Schools closer to the southern suburbs and city bowl, for example, are preferred and there are certain legacy schools that enroll a high number of students from township communities.

At the higher education level, students from Khayelitsha who attend UCT make up a small minority of the overall university body. In 2016, there were only 63 students from 20 high schools in Khayelitsha entering UCT as first year students—compared to 114 students that came from one historically white high school. In the same year, there were 177 graduates from the same 20 Khayelitsha high schools entering UWC and 494 entering CPUT. In 2009 the same number of students from Khayelitsha attended CPUT as enrolled in UCT over a nine-year
period. A spatial analysis of higher education mobility in Cape Town reveals how inequalities continue to shape enrolment patterns across the city. Map 3 reveals both the location and size of the top ten feeder high schools for UCT, UWC and CPUT from 2009-2017. Students attending UCT are overwhelmingly drawn from a small number of historically white and private schools located in the southern suburbs and the city bowl area. Students attending UWC are overwhelmingly drawn from feeder schools in the working class northern suburbs and Cape Flats. While these schools charge fees, they are far below the levels of UCT’s top-ten feeder schools. Similarly, the top feeder schools for CPUT are drawn from working class coloured communities on the Cape Flats, and the northern suburbs.

Map 3: Location and enrolment size of top ten feeder schools to 3 higher education institutions in Cape Town, 2009-2017.
The geographies of education in Cape Town today are highly influenced by legacies of educational, residential and workplace segregation. Inequalities in schooling are themselves reflected in enrolment patterns in the city’s higher education institutions. Formerly white universities like UCT continue to draw a high number of their first-year students from a limited number of formerly white high schools in close proximity to the university—the bulk of these schools are located in the Southern Suburbs and city bowl area which were classified as white under the Group Areas Act. While these high schools have desegregated in the sense that they now have a higher number of coloured students, they have few black students. Institutions like
UWC and CPUT continue to draw a high number of students from historically working class white areas and coloured townships.

Methodology, Methods and Profile of Participants

Between 2015 and 2017, I spent 12 months in South Africa conducting field research. In 2015, on a preliminary fieldwork trip I spent 4 months meeting young people in Khayelitsha and getting to know the township and dynamics therein. During this time, with the help of a research assistant, I spent a considerable amount of time ‘hanging out’ with youth in the township. I conducted 30 interviews with 22 young people that touched on their employment histories, barriers to employment, and experiences in high school. While these narratives are not directly included in this study, these encounters were invaluable in helping me understand the social and spatial dimensions of township life. Following Geertz (1998), this process of ‘deep hanging out,’ involved immersion in the lives of young people through informal encounters, such as attending protest marches, hanging out in parks and shebeens, attending musical performances, and driving young people to visit friends and relatives around the township.

Through this preliminary phase I came into contact with a group of students from Khayelitsha enrolled in higher education institutions. The students had previously been enrolled in the 100UP program run by the University of Cape Town, which provides tutoring and mentorship to township youth. Through a program manager, I was able to gain access to contact information for these students. Using snowball sampling I also contacted a number of students from Khayelitsha who were not enrolled in the program. Between January and August 2016, and then returning in May 2017, I conducted 74 interviews with 41 students. I also conducted a focus group with an additional 25 students from the 100UP program. I interviewed seven

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5 Informal bars in the township.
parents/guardians of my participants, seven high school principals, and one teacher in Khayelitsha. I also interviewed officials from UCT involved in the administration of the 100UP program, as well as officials from NSFAS. Finally, I interviewed 14 student activists involved in the #RMF and #FMF movement at various campuses around Cape Town. Through institutional and departmental requests, I was able to gain access to statistical data on enrolment numbers at UWC, CPUT and UCT as well as demographic and fee information for schools in Cape Town.

Interviews with the 41 students were semi-structured and based around a series of themes. These included their family backgrounds, their experiences in high school, their experiences attending higher education, values they assigned to higher education, their feelings about debt, and their reflections on, and sometimes involvement in, #FMF protests. These interviews took place in a number of places around Cape Town. The majority of interviews were conducted with students on campus, in campus residences, dining halls or empty classrooms. On a number of occasions, I conducted interviews with students as I drove them back to Khayelitsha, which allowed me to gain some insights into where they were from in the township and visit their homes. At other times, interviews were conducted in spaces around the township, in parks or at the informal tshisinyama stalls that dot the township. These different locations allowed me to gain a greater understanding of my participants’ spatial practices and how they move across the city, a technique Anderson and Jones (2009) describe as ‘emplaced methodology’.

Initial interviews were coded for key themes and follow up interviews were conducted later in 2016 and again in early 2017. In addition to these interviews, a number of other ethnographic methods proved helpful. First, due to my initial affiliation with UCT I was able to

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6 Informal BBQ stalls in the township.
spend time ‘hanging out’ in the buildings occupied by students during the #RMF protests in 2015. This provided valuable contacts for subsequent interviews. My affiliation in 2016 with the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) allowed me to attend many meetings of the #FMF movement at UWC, where students were attempting to abolish outsourcing on campus. It was through these meetings and connections that I was able to approach #FMF activists and gain a greater understanding of the various dynamics of these movements at each campus. Finally, my time in Khayelitsha visiting schools, observing weekend tutoring classes and, tutoring high school and university students myself provided important depth to my understanding of the township.

Surveys allowed me to develop a preliminary profile of these students and their backgrounds. Through qualitative interviews with them I was also able to get a sense of their backgrounds, their household dynamics and the struggles they faced in accessing higher education. In this respect, qualitative methods were helpful in gaining insights into how young people spoke about the present, past and future. Multiple interviews with these students also allowed me to develop key themes that I used in interviews with student activists and other participants, including parents and teachers. Moreover, working with this group of students at a time of significant turmoil within the higher education system provided a valuable opportunity to study broader questions about the functions and meanings attached to higher education. Studying #FMF in this manner introduced multiple layers of complexity to what, on the surface, seemed to simply be a movement against tuition fee increases.

This research was informed by the grounded theory approach to qualitative research (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded theory refers to a set of inductive methods in qualitative research that allow researchers to construct mid-level theories built upon the collection and
analysis of empirical data (Charmaz 2003). The value of this I approach is that it allows for flexibility, open-ended analysis and imaginative theorizing from empirical data. While grounded theory is marked by significant differences and divergences in philosophies, approaches and methods, its significance to studying education has been noted (Bogdan & Biklen 1997, Hutchinson 1986). My approach was to begin interviews with a broad set of themes that explored the educational and household histories of participants. I then listened to these interviews shortly after conducting them in order to draw out key themes and leads for subsequent interviews. These themes were also influenced by issues occurring within the general sphere of higher education and South Africa more broadly, issues like the #FMF protests. This technique allowed me to explore a variety of topics that were both directly and indirectly related to their experience in higher education. For example, while some students were not eager to discuss debt directly, they were willing to talk about their families which brought up issues of future obligations and anxieties about the role that debt would play in the future. Final rounds of data analysis were done using NVivo, which allowed me to take key themes and group them together as codes in order to draw connections between them. Research participants were assigned pseudonyms in order to protect privacy and confidentiality.

This research was motivated by personal and political concerns about the role of youth in post-apartheid South Africa. It was only well into the fieldwork, however, that the emotional weight of the project became apparent to me. On the surface, education research is concerned with policies, infrastructure and curricula. At a deeper level, as I discovered through my interviews, education is also emotional; in a context of racialized inequality it is about desires for dignity, wellbeing and belonging. In spending time with these students, meeting their families and learning about their personal struggles I was struck not only by their resilience and
motivation, but by their sincere belief in a better future and the role of education in helping them reach it. While my positionality as a middle-class white South African/Canadian graduate student placed me in a very different relation to higher education, I was able to find some common ground through discussions of campus life and politics. It is my hope, through these narratives as well as historical and political background, to produce an account that is neither disinterested nor claims to ‘speak for’ South African students.

**Participant Profile:**

At the time of fieldwork (2016-2017), key participants in this study (n=41) were all studying at one of three higher education institutions in the Cape Town Metropolitan Area: The University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Western Cape (UWC), or the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). All had attended high school for either the full course or part of their studies in Khayelitsha. Table 1 provides a breakdown participants’ backgrounds collected through surveys, including information on the education and employment background of their parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher Education Institution</th>
<th>UCT: 60%</th>
<th>UWC: 17%</th>
<th>CPUT: 23%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td>Male: 56%</td>
<td>Female: 44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Age:</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Birth:</td>
<td>Eastern Cape: 22%</td>
<td>Western Cape: 68%</td>
<td>Other provinces: 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Education (Mother)</td>
<td>No Education: 10%</td>
<td>Grade 4-8: 23%</td>
<td>Grade 8-10: 26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Education (Father)*</td>
<td>No Education: 12%</td>
<td>Grade 4-8: 48%</td>
<td>Grade 8-10: 12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Common Employment (Mother)</td>
<td>Unemployed: 44%</td>
<td>Domestic Work: 38%</td>
<td>Retail/Security: 7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

While it was not possible to conduct follow-up interviews with all research participants in 2017, only one student I conducted subsequent interviews with had dropped out.
### Most Common Employment (Father)*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed:</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>Trades:</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>Transport/Driver:</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employed:</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Teacher/Nurse:</td>
<td>8%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Only 60% of participants knew the education level and profession of their father, as many had been raised in single-parent households by their mothers or other relatives.

While I was unable to interview all of their parents/guardians, those that I did lived in a mix of formal and informal housing, either RDP-style housing or backyard shacks. The majority (78%) were funded through the government’s financial aid scheme targeting financially needy and academically deserving students. Students attending UCT, in particular, were often able to access bursary funding that supplemented their NSFAS funding. The majority (63%) were the first in their family to come to attend higher education; some had followed siblings or cousins into specific higher education institutions.

**Significance of the sample group**

This group provided valuable insights into both the challenges facing working class students and the complex functions of higher education in South Africa. While the majority of students entering higher education in South Africa do not come from townships like Khayelitsha, recent years have witnessed both rising levels of demand from working class students and changing demographic patterns. To be sure, higher education institutions serve a fraction of South Africa’s population, but as a system it is itself internally differentiated. Some institutions (UCT) serve predominantly fee-paying students who attended historically advantaged schools. Others draw a high number of students from poor households, the majority of whom are funded through the government’s National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). These students are representative of both the rapid demographic changes experienced by higher education institutions over the last 20 years, as well as their ambitions to become both more representative and include students from lower income backgrounds.
Another insight provided by this sample group is that all attended high school within the township and the majority were the first in their family to attend higher education. Typically, educational mobility in South Africa is influenced by schooling migration in which learners leave the township to attend better schools and use this to enter higher education (Hunter 2010, Fataar 2009). Many, although not all, of these learners were high achieving students within township schools and as such gained access to tutoring programs that prepared them for university. Unlike others, they had worked to develop their own social and cultural capital within the township rather than through schools outside the township.

Studying the reaction of these students to the #FMF protests is valuable for two reasons. First is that the protests were frequently characterized as a form of middle class revolt (Glenn 2016). Cloete (2016) goes so far as to label the protestors a ‘petite bourgeoisie’ fighting for access to state resources against the interests of poor communities. The explanation that my respondents provided for supporting #FMF questions these interpretations. While one of the immediate victories of the #FMF movement was to expand access to financial aid for ‘middle income’ students, the degree to which these families were financially secure deserves further scrutiny. Second, categorizing the protests as ‘middle class’ misses the fact that many of these struggles occurred at working class institutions and spoke directly to issues affecting working class students. Even as some of the primary instigators of these protests could broadly be described as middle class\(^8\), the movement resonated with my respondents in important ways. Finally, the insights provided by these students also question widespread portrayals of this movement as a decolonial moment (Naidoo 2016, Langa 2017). While these ideas informed

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\(^8\) Interviews with some #FMF activists at UCT and UWC indicated that some had attended former Model C schools, although others had attended schools in townships and rural areas. As I discuss in Chapter 4, it was often shared experiences of racial oppression and ‘status incongruence’ that provided a bridge between middle and working class students.
many activists involved in the various iterations of the movement, for my research participants this was not the primary reason for supporting #FMF.

Limitations of Study

Badat (1999) has pointed out that despite its central place in the liberation struggle, there is a critical dearth of studies on student politics in South Africa. This is also true of the post-apartheid period, with some notable exceptions (Dawson 2006; Sikwebu 2008; Heffernan et al., 2016). While this project does not involve a fine-grained study of students and their organizations, it contributes to a broader analysis of youth politics in South Africa and the factors underpinning student protest. I interviewed a number of student activists who were affiliated with various organizations, but I did not interview the leaders of these organizations. My goal was not to produce an comprehensive account of a social movement, but rather a student-centric study that placed the voices and aspirations of students at the centre of these mobilizations. My rationale for doing so was also informed by a sense that the #FMF movement, and South African student politics in general, had been dominated by a handful of voices and figures, often embodying what Oxlund (2011) calls a ‘radical struggle masculinity’ of deeply gendered and performative politics. As Bank (2018) notes, leaders affiliated with student groups like the EFF or PASMA, whom he calls ‘talking crows,’ were often at the centre of these protests, urging students to take a more radical stance. This was a critique that emanated from the movement itself, that a handful of, often male figures, had been elevated to positions of leadership obscuring the work of women and LGBTQ activists.

The second key limitation of the study is that while the students’ I interviewed all spoke about their obligations to family and desires to address household poverty, few of them were contributing at that time to the household. These were anticipated obligations to kin, often
described as a ‘black tax,’ that, they imagined, would take place after graduation. Despite this, I believe that there is a value, as Brown (2013) has emphasized, in understanding how young people hope about the future and how, as Horton (2015) notes, debt is experienced temporally and spatially. My intention for future research, is to build on these interviews in by interviewing these students after they have graduated to see if their actions match their aspirations.

Finally, while I was able to interview a number of students’ household and family members, this proved to be challenging and I was unable to interview as many as I would have liked. Students who were attending UCT tended to live in campuses residences, so the only opportunity to interview members of their household occurred during the June holidays. Students who attended other institutions were more flexible, but work schedules and the fact that some of their parents were living in the Eastern Cape complicated this. In other cases, students expressed discomfort at involving their parents in the study.

Chapter Outlines:

In Chapter 1, I argue that while youth studies has emphasized the agency that young people exhibit, it is important to consider the structures that shapes this agency, particularly changes in political economy. To this end, the chapter provides a ‘long history’ of education policy changes and social struggles in South Africa. Framed around Giroux’s (1983) dialectical approach to reproduction and resistance, I suggest that education in South Africa has both been crucial to the reproduction of racialized inequalities while at the same time acting as a space in which these inequalities are challenged. From the colonial to the apartheid period, schools and universities became spaces in which segregationist policies were challenged. The massification of education in the late apartheid period produced what Nkomo (1984) described as a ‘culture of resistance’ in which schools and universities became both material and ideological spaces of
opposition. Reforms to the education system in the post-apartheid period were limited by a broadly neoliberal turn that attempted to reconcile the need for equity with fiscal austerity and human capital formation. Many of the aspects of the apartheid university system were retained, while a growing number of black middle and working-class students sought access in order to improve their livelihood prospects in a changing economy. New forms of education-based resistance have emerged in this period, but have lacked a unified focus, targeting provincial education departments, school governing bodies, university administrators and the state. Few of these forms of resistance has offered, in Giroux’s (1983) words, a ‘counter logic’ that challenges both neoliberalism and the legacies of apartheid education. Rather, given the rapid process of class formation in the post-apartheid period, they have frequently sought better terms of inclusion in a divided education system.

In Chapter 2 I analyze how working-class students from Khayelitsha develop aspirations toward higher education. I focus on their experiences within higher education institutions and their responses to an ‘aspiration-raising’ program that provided them with pathways into the university. Their aspirations, I argue, were intimately shaped by circuits of educational mobility that characterize the post-apartheid city. For youth from urban townships, higher education provided an opportunity to become mobile, escape from life in the township, and develop aspirations toward middle class lifestyles. Yet these aspirations were frequently in tension with their social backgrounds, as desires for individual mobility and success were contrasted with collective responsibilities to family back in the township. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, I suggest that aspiration raising programs allow working class students to partially transform their *habitus*. Yet in ignoring the wider structures of racialized poverty and institutional alienation that shape higher education systems, these programs produce a
destabilized habitus, in which students feel pulled in different directions; between cosmopolitan and comfortable lifestyles on campus and thoughts of their families back in the township (Bourdieu 2000). This chapter suggests that working-class students’ aspirations are deeply spatial, shaped by simultaneous desires for spatial mobility out of the township and the fixity that some experience within it.

In Chapter 3, I unpack the role debt played in the #FMF protests. I argue that declining public funding and increasing tuition costs led to rising levels of debt owed to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Debt and inadequate levels of funding provided through NSFAS were key factors behind the #FMF protests. Examining how young people spoke about debt provides insights into the complex social entanglements of debt, education and the family. Working class students expressed support for the protests by drawing on narratives of the burden that ‘future debt’ would impose on them and their families. Students expressed ambiguous, although largely negative feelings, toward debt as it was seen as facilitating access to higher education while imposing the burden of repayment on them at a time when they would be called on to support their families. Drawing on geographical and anthropological writings on debt, I emphasize the social, spatial and temporal entanglements of debt. Students experienced debt co-presently, as something that affected their lives in the present and that would shape the potential for social mobility in the future. I suggest that Harker’s (2017) notion of ‘debt ecologies’ is helpful in understanding how individuals, institutions and the state are entangled with debt, non-financialized obligations and sharing. This chapter reveals both the role that debt played in the #FMF protests and the ways that debt shapes and limits how young people imagine the future.
In Chapter 4 I examine the relationship between students and their households. I argue that young people’s experiences of higher education are intimately shaped by experiences of household poverty, unemployment and high rates of dependency. Because of this, working students often develop a utilitarian understanding of education as a mechanism to address intergenerational poverty within their families. Rather than distancing them from their backgrounds, the experience of attending higher education often reconfigures relations to kin, creating bonds of obligation that are sometimes immediate and sometimes anticipated. By examining the ways in which students anticipate financial obligations and use student loan and scholarship funding to support their families, I highlight the importance of situating students within broader social and economic systems. In a context of high unemployment, South Africa has witnessed the expansion of redistributive circuits that play a crucial role in supporting households (Ferguson 2015). Students, I argue, play an important role in these circuits. Drawing on scholarship on diverse economies and emotional geographies, I suggest that young people’s aspirations often transcend desires for individual social mobility and involve collective aspirations toward family wellbeing. In other words, students are not simply interpellated neoliberal subjects, but attach multiple meanings to higher education, including care, solidarity and responsibility to others.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I trace the emergence and trajectory of the 2015-2016 #FeesMustFall protests and examine the different manifestations of these protests at 3 different institutions. The catalyst for the initial round of protests, I argue, was a steady decline in public funding in higher education combined with inadequate resourcing of the state’s NSFAS scheme. Yet the protests extended beyond funding issues and allowed students to critique the nature of post-apartheid citizenship and the role of the state. In doing so they spoke to grievances shared
by youth both within and outside of higher education, including the lack of institutional transformation and wider racial inequalities. While it is crucial to examine student narratives and experiences from these protests, I argue that it is also crucial to understand them as an outcome of the multiple and contradictory functions of higher education in South Africa. Higher education is both aimed at reproducing skilled labour in response to changing labour demands; at the same time concerns over equity and redress have caused the state and institutions to expand the number of enrolments to non-typical students. Higher education also serves a deeply symbolic function as it is representative of the transformation of public institutions in South Africa. The #FMF protests are outcomes of these complex and contradictory functions of the higher education system in South Africa. They had the effect of hybridizing disparate social forces and class interests around both bread and butter issues and larger national questions, particularly disaffection with the ruling party, opposition to racism, and the livelihood prospects young people face.

Through these chapters, I highlight both the agency that young people have in shaping their educational trajectories and the forces that ultimately constrain this. Even as my participants were able to gain access to higher education, they struggled with funding issues, institutional alienation, and concerns for the well-being of their families. These concerns and anxieties fuelled their support for the #FMF movement. While not all were engaged in the protests (some did not attend them out of fear of getting expelled and losing their only source of social mobility), the majority were sympathetic to the protests, seeing them as an extension of the personal struggles they faced on a day-to-day basis. In structuring the dissertation in this manner, my aim is for the reader to first understand the contested terrain of education and class formation in South Africa. Moving on to a more detailed exploration of students’ experiences and aspirations, including an
analysis of debt and family bonds, I provide the reader with a socially embedded analysis of youth. In other words, I highlight how students’ agency is ultimately shaped by conditions they face in institutions, households and communities. Finally, in considering manifestations of these protests at different institutions I highlight the contradictory functions of higher education in South Africa and how protest stems from these contradictions.
Chapter 1

The Long History of Education, Reproduction and Resistance in South Africa

“Monopoly in education is—together with monopoly of ownership of land—the most fundamental basis of inequality.” – Gunnar Myrdal 1973, 99.

South Africa’s education system has been a space in which inequalities are both reproduced and challenged. Throughout the twentieth century, it has been fundamental to the production and maintenance of systems of racialized inequality while at the same time acting as a space in which ideas and identities counter to these inequalities were born. This chapter grounds contemporary struggles in South Africa’s education system in these histories, and in doing so draws connections between them. I demonstrate how education policy under apartheid both limited the relative social mobility of black South Africans, and brought students together in segregated institutions giving rise to oppositional movements that challenged segregation and wider social inequalities. Schools and universities, particularly through the 1970s and 80s, became key spaces of opposition to apartheid. While post-apartheid education policy has been deeply informed by these struggle histories, reforms have not fundamentally transformed the system allowing for the reproduction of new forms of class and race inequalities as well as new forms of resistance.

The value of this ‘long history’ approach is that it allows us to see how South Africa’s education policy was shaped by structural factors such as capital’s demand for labour, and the agency of students, teachers and parents. The educational reforms of the early 1980s, for example, were built on waves of opposition by students in schools and universities. It was this energy and idealism that informed the policy formulation process after apartheid ended. Demands for equity, redress, universal access and education for citizenship informed education
policy discussions in the early 1990s. However, these egalitarian ambitions soon confronted the grim realities of globalization in the late 1990s. The outcome has been, as education scholar Saleem Badat (2009, 465) has described it, a process of “stasis and fluidity” in education. The state has attempted to balance demands for transformation with the prerogatives of human capital formation in a globalized world economy. In this context, world class research universities coexist with indebted institutions without adequate facilities; the manicured lawns of private schools coexist with mud-walled schools without textbooks or toilets.

Since the desegregation of education and the end of apartheid, South Africa has witnessed growing demand for basic and higher education. On the surface, this seems unsurprising. Millions of black South Africans were denied the forms of social mobility enjoyed by their white counterparts. That they would want to send their children to good schools and universities seems only natural. Yet schooling cannot easily be separated from the relations shaping the rest of society. Since the end of apartheid, a sizeable black middle class has grown rapidly alongside a large and relatively impoverished black working class (Southall 2016). A recent report has shown that while the top 10% of the South African population receives a sizeable share of national income, around 79% of South Africans live in households where income per person is less than minimum wage (Schotte, Zizzamia, Leibbrandt 2017). The black middle class is heavily invested in higher education for their children as it is a guarantor of income stability in a context of rampant low-skilled unemployment. At the same time, many working class families scramble to find a place for their children in better schools in the hope that this will allow them to access some form of higher education (Msilă 2005; Hunter 2015a,

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9 These aspirations were expressed through forums like National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI 1992), which built on the people’s education movement of the 1970s and 80s and envisioned a transformed higher and basic education system.
This has given rise to a highly competitive and marketized education system in which class and geography play a significant role in determining mobility and access.

Rising demand for education has also been accompanied by new forms of resistance. Even as the South African constitution guarantees the right to basic education, this guarantee confronts the daily struggle of household poverty. Education remains a space in which aspirations toward a better life are imagined and where these aspirations confront the realities of poverty, debt and exclusion. As a result, the post-apartheid period has witnessed the rise of new student movements, political subjectivities and organizational forms that challenge the inherited weight of the past and present inequalities. The question though is whether these new forms of resistance pose a fundamental challenge to the reproduction of social inequalities or whether students and parents are merely seeking greater forms of inclusion within this system? Here, I argue, it is helpful to consider the ways in which resistance both transforms and reproduces wider forms of social inequality.

**Education, Social Reproduction and Resistance**

The history of education in South Africa is bound up with the development of a form of racialized capitalism that can be traced to the colonial period. Under colonialism, mission schooling was aimed at reproducing a small indigenous elite that could serve as intermediaries. Apartheid education, meanwhile, was aimed at meeting both the burgeoning demands of an industrial economy and maintaining racial segregation. There were, however, deep contradictions to both of these projects. As the economy changed in the postwar period, so too did capital’s labour demands. These changing demands exerted significant influence on the shape of education policy under apartheid; so too did rising tides of opposition. From the 1970s onwards, schools and universities became centres of anti-apartheid militancy, which, in turn,
affected further policy changes. Youth and students came to the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle as the ‘young lions’ of the liberation movement. Education policy then was deeply shaped by both the dictates of social reproduction and subsequent resistance. If education, as Bourdieu (1977) suggests, is key to the process of symbolic domination, it is clear that it can also foster rebellion to that domination.

The reproduction of capitalist social relations has been a key concern in the sociology of education literature. This approach was deeply influenced by structural Marxism and cultural studies in the 1970s and 80s, and produced a significant body of literature. Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) study of schooling America, for example, sought to show how working-class children are taught to be docile, obedient and compliant through rote learning and how young people attending elite schools were prepared for future professional and managerial occupations. Willis’ (1977) study of working class ‘lads’ in England demonstrated how their counter-school behaviour mirrored shop-floor culture and prepared them for manual labour. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) meanwhile argued that formal education allows dominant groups to legitimate and obscure inequalities through symbolic violence and in doing so reproduce inequalities. For Dale (1982), these approaches ignored the role of the state as the immediate provider of education. It is only, “in the analysis of the capitalist state that we may begin to understand the assumptions, intentions and outcomes of various strategies for educational change” (Dale 1982, 130). While all of these approaches reveal the multiplicity of ways in which education reproduces capitalist social relations, they have been criticized for ignoring neglecting the role of agency. Here Giroux’s critique is prescient. Reproduction theorists, he writes, have, “overemphasized the idea of domination…and failed to provide any major insights into how
teachers, students and other human agents come together within specific historical contexts in order to both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence” (Giroux 1983, 259).

Studies of education in South Africa, and political economy more broadly, have been deeply shaped by structural Marxist approaches (Wolpe 1972, Legassick 1974, Wolpe and Legassick 1976, Christie and Collins 1984). Among them, apartheid education was not merely an extension of the racial logics of apartheid, but functional to capitalism as it reproduced unskilled cheap labour power. This system entered a period of crisis in the 1980s as private business pressured the state to expand African education in order to expand the pool of skilled labour power. In short then, apartheid’s spatial ambitions of clear racial separation were not always functional to capital accumulation. The state then is not simply an executive arm of capital but works to ensure the general requirements of capital accumulation (Kallaway 1984). Educational reforms, however, opened up the state to further challenges. Students could see that their opposition had an impact, and it fuelled further rounds of protest. Attempts at reproduction then are, “never complete and always meet with partially realized elements of opposition” (Giroux 1983, 259).

While acknowledging the value of social reproduction theories, Giroux (1983) highlights the importance of resistance theories of education in which students are not merely churned out as compliant workers, but in which schools are terrains of contestation marked by contradiction and student resistance. As Kallaway (1984, 20) has noted, rather than schools and universities simply being sites of docility during apartheid, they became “Trojan horses” in which resistance

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10 Debates over the relationship between capitalism and apartheid policy generated intense debates between liberal and Marxist scholars. The key division here was between liberal historians such as Merle Lipton and Michael O’Dowd, who saw apartheid as an irrational policy imposed on markets by racist Afrikaner politicians, and Marxist historians such as Harold Wolpe, Shula Marks, Martin Legassick and Stanley Trapido who demonstrated the compatibility between segregation and capital accumulation. For a summary of these debates and the political context in which they played out see Friedman (2015).
to racial oppression condensed. Nkomo (1984, 164) suggests that there were strong influences outside the, “ideological apparatuses that intervene and produce a student consciousness or culture of resistance whose challenge to the prevailing ideology has far-reaching educational and socio-political implications.” Youth and students are undoubtedly significant actors in South Africa’s history, and to study changes in education policy from a structuralist perspective alone would miss the role that they played. As scholars of youth politics in South Africa have noted, in the 1980s and 90s urban youth were at the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement and schools and universities acted as pivotal nodes of resistance (Marks 2001, Bundy 1987, Seekings and Everatt 1994).

In short, both reproduction and resistance approaches are helpful in understanding the development of educational systems. The danger though is that both produce unhelpful dualisms of structure and agency. Giroux’s aim is to produce a dialectical model of education, reproduction and resistance. In this model, resistance can both reinforce domination and challenge it. The concept of resistance is only useful, “if it represents an element of difference, a counter-logic that must be analyzed to reveal its underlying interest in freedom” (Giroux 1983, 290).

Social Mobility and Resistance in the Colonial and Apartheid Periods

Education in colonial and apartheid-era South Africa provided opportunities for white South Africans to move into skilled jobs and professional careers, while providing more limited opportunities to Black South Africans. Yet this system also experienced significant changes over time as the state initiated reforms in response to capital’s changing labour demands and popular pressure from below. This resulted in changing opportunities for social mobility and, subsequently, changing forms of political contestation. In Table 2, I periodize significant waves
of educational reform, changing forms of social mobility, and forms of resistance and opposition within the educational sphere. I then outline the major forms of reproduction and resistance that defined education in the colonial and apartheid periods.

Table 2: The Long History of African Education, Mobility and Resistance in South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>State Educational Policy</th>
<th>Forms of Social Mobility</th>
<th>Forms of Resistance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colonial/Union Period (19th Century to 1940s)</td>
<td>- Schools run by independent missionary societies</td>
<td>- Creation of small African elite</td>
<td>- Opposition to trusteeship/paternalism, low quality food and lodging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Apartheid Education (1953-1970s)</td>
<td>- 1953: Bantu Education Act, state takes over basic education, schools segregated by race</td>
<td>- Reproduction of un- and semi-skilled labour power for white-owned industry</td>
<td>- 1968 Founding of South African Students Organization (SASO)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1959: Extension of Universities Act, higher education segregated by race/ethnicity, expansion of institutions in Bantustans</td>
<td>- Collapse of social mobility for African elite through mission education.</td>
<td>- State crackdown on student activism at Fort Hare, in particular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Increasing, although limited, higher education opportunities for non-whites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Apartheid Education (1970-1994)</td>
<td>- 1972: Expansion of urban schooling for Africans</td>
<td>- Creation of a small group of skilled workers for Bantustan civil service, schools, hospitals, etc</td>
<td>- 1976 school protests in Soweto and Cape Town</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 1979: Education and Training Act Replaces Bantu Education Act</td>
<td>- Urban and rural labour market differentiation</td>
<td>- 1973- increasing protests in HBIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1981: De Lange Commission Report</td>
<td>- Growth of small urban African middle class as education opportunities expanded and colour bar relaxed</td>
<td>- Influence of Black Consciousness thought on student activists</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 1986: Abolition of urban influx controls</td>
<td>- Rapid expansion of urban labour markets</td>
<td>- 1979 founding of Congress of South African Students (COSAS)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1991: Desegregation of schools begins</td>
<td>- Private sector investment in education for Africans</td>
<td>- 1979 founding of Azanian Students Organization (AZASO)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 1991: Group Areas Act repealed</td>
<td></td>
<td>- 1980s school boycotts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1997: Higher Education Act</td>
<td>- Educational desegregation, and affirmative action leads to expansion of African middle class</td>
<td>- 1986 founding of South African National Student Congress (SANSICO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1999: Introduction of NSFAS</td>
<td>- Rapid growth of African higher education graduates</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 2003: Higher education mergers</td>
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Colonial education in Africa served a dual purpose. First, it was part of a broader civilizing mission aimed at instilling western values in native populations. Second, it was aimed at the establishment of an elite native group that could act at the behest of the colonizer. It was frequently this elite group, however, that used education as a space to make claims for full citizenship during the anti-colonial struggle (Mamdani 1994). The education of South Africa’s African population in this period was primarily carried out through European missionary societies. By 1909, 170,000 African students were enrolled in mission schools (Hlatshwayo 2000, 30). The broad aim of mission education was political pacification and proletarianization. George Grey, governor of the Cape colony from 1854-1861, noted that: “If we leave the natives beyond our border ignorant barbarians, they will remain a race of troublesome marauders. We should try to make them...useful servants, consumers of our goods, contributors to our revenue; in short, a source of strength and wealth for this colony” (quoted in Hlatshwayo 2000, 32).

Of critical importance to the education of African elites during this period was the formation of the first institution of higher education for the African population, the South African Native College in 1916, later called the University of Fort Hare. The impetus for the foundation of Fort Hare, as well as some of its earliest funding, came from African Christian leaders educated at mission schools. While the university existed in an environment of racial segregation, it attempted to resist these practices through the integration of the student body—although it should be noted that the vast majority of its staff were white. Missionary schools and Fort Hare were crucial to the formation of the first generation of African elite leaders who would go on to form the South African Native National Congress, later the African National Congress, in 1912 (Odendaal 1984, 2012). Among the more notable graduates from Fort Hare were
political leaders like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Charles Njonjo and Robert Mugabe.

Education for white South Africans during this period expanded rapidly due to the discovery of minerals, gold and diamonds, in the late nineteenth century. In 1893 a law was passed that allowed the state to subsidize mission schools that catered to whites, and in 1905 the Cape School Board Act established the first segregated state schools (Hirson 1979, 18). From an early stage, state resources were skewed toward supporting white schools. In 1903, the state grant for a white child in a ‘first class public school’ was £3.87, for black children in state schools it was 61p per child (Hirson 1979, 20). While African students had limited opportunities to pursue higher education, a range of institutions were developed to serve the country’s white population. In the Cape colony, the University of Cape Town was established in 1829 as the South African College. Dutch and Afrikaans students could attend the Stellenbosch College founded in 1871, and in 1896 the South African School of Mines was founded in Kimberley and soon moved to Johannesburg where it became Transvaal University College. In the early years of the twentieth century, Rhodes University was established followed by the University of the Free State. The rapid expansion of higher education for white South Africans in the late 19th and early 20th coincided with an agricultural and mining revolution that led to a rapid process of elite class formation among the white population. As Terreblanche (2002, 239) describes it, this period, “built the institutional and physical infrastructure of white supremacy” and created a “racially based socio-economic and labour structure aimed at supplying foreign corporations and white farmers with a cheap and docile labour force.”

Mission education provided limited educational opportunities and, as a result, opportunities for social mobility for black South Africans. A small African-elite, primarily
located at Fort Hare, embraced forms of Christian liberalism that challenged the paternalism of mission education and allowed them to articulate broader citizenship demands. The development of capitalist agriculture and the growth of a mining economy in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century produced limited demands for skilled labour. Much of it could be met through the training of skilled white professionals, the import of technical experts and training white technicians at an expanding number of universities and colleges. By the 1920s, however, educators were suggesting that the state take over control of African education from churches and missionaries (Nkomo 1984, xvii). This demand grew louder in the post-war period as the economy experienced significant growth and capital’s demand for skilled labour increased.

Despite limited formal education opportunities available to black South Africans, this period witnessed widespread forms of resistance in the forms of school riots, boycotts and protests. Student resistance during the mission school period included opposition to paternalism, strict discipline and the low quality of food and accommodation (Jabavu 1920). The first recorded school strike took place in 1920 when students at Kilnerton training centre went on a hunger strike for more food. A few months later, students at Lovedale, one of the most prestigious missionary schools, rioted over ‘bad bread’ (Hirson 1979). At Fort Hare, students came into contact with anti-colonial and Pan-Africanist ideas that sparked growing politicization and the founding of an influential branch of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). The youth league leaders who emerged from this milieu at Fort Hare went on to play highly influential roles, pushing the ANC toward a militant ‘Program of Action,’ in the 1940s and 50s.

The election of the National Party (NP) in the 1948 brought significant changes in the country’s education policy as authority for education shifted from the church to the state. Bantu education, introduced in 1953, was based on the 1951 Eiselen Commission Report, led by the
anthropologist Werner Eiselen, which proposed a model of educational segregation along racial and tribal lines. Implicit in this were both ideals of white trusteeship but also the preservation of African cultural identities in order to prevent ‘demoralization’ (Hlatshwayo 2000, 58-59). Under the pretense of preserving forms of ethno-nationalist self-determination, Marxist scholars noted that Bantu education was aimed at ensuring both subjugation and the reproduction of semi-skilled labour power (Wolpe 1972, Wilson 2011, Christie and Collins 1984). At the same time, education opportunities were expanded for Africans, with the aim of producing a small cohort of civil servants, teachers and nurses to work in rural Bantustans (Wolpe 1972,).

Bantu education was also central to apartheid’s spatial ambitions. Hyslop (1988) suggests that rather than Bantu education simply being functional to capitalist accumulation, as Marxists suggested, it also reproduced differentiated labour markets across urban and rural space. The establishment of Bantu education was an attempt by the state at balancing capital’s desire for a stable and semi-skilled workforce in urban areas with the belief that Africans should ultimately reside in rural Bantustans. For example, the state tried to limit African urbanization by constructing schools in rural homelands and placing limits on school construction in urban townships. Students without residency rights in urban areas were frequently removed from schools (Hyslop 1988, 458). Bantu education was therefore a significant mechanism for enforcing urban influx control.

The consequence of this, however, was that Bantu education was unable to effectively reproduce an urban labour force. By 1971 there were only 20 schools for Africans in urban areas that went up to grade 12 and a ratio of one high school for 80,000 African families (Hyslop 1988, 459). Economic decline in Bantustans also made urban education more valuable as it facilitated entry into semi-skilled urban labour markets. This created increased demand for urban schooling
among the African population which resulted in high rates of overcrowding. By the early 1970s, there was an increased awareness that African schooling was in crisis, and could not meet capital’s demand for more semi-skilled labour power. This led to a series of reforms in the 70s and 80s supported by business. In 1972 the policy of restricting the expansion of secondary schools for Africans was rescinded and the budget for African education outside the homelands grew. Urban residency restrictions for Africans were also relaxed. The 1981 De Lange Report attempted to ‘modernize apartheid’ education. This involved the construction of more urban schools and a significant focus on technical training in direct response to industry concerns. The report acknowledged the, “crisis of manpower, and a need to restore the harmony between the schooling system and the labour market” (quoted in Kallaway 1984, 32). Private capital, both domestic and foreign, also made sizeable investments in education and training during this period. In his work apartheid urban labour markets, Crankshaw (1997, 79) describes the impact of these reforms as “dramatic” as they were instrumental in facilitating African advancement into semi-professional employment, particularly the nursing and teaching professions.

Apartheid policy in higher education was implemented through the 1959 Extension of Universities Act. The act established separate tertiary institutions for each of South Africa’s ‘population groups’. Black students could not attend white universities, unless special permission was granted by government—some English-language universities were designated ‘open universities’ and allowed non-white students, although they practiced what Nkomo (1984, 35) calls, “liberal laissez-faire racial segregation.” Under the act, institutions were divided along racial and ethnic lines. What this meant, in practice, is that Xhosa students had to attend the University of Fort Hare; people of Zulu and Swazi origin had to attend the university of Zululand; and people of Sotho, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga and Ndebele origin had to attend the
University of the North. The University of the Western Cape served Coloured people and Indians were to attend the University of Durban-Westville (Moulder 1975). Alongside this was a system of English-language universities that were predominantly white although non-racial in principle, and Afrikaans-language universities that had an exclusively white student body. While some English-language Universities objected to the Act, most notably the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, the numbers of non-white students enrolled was limited and attempts to hire non-white faculty frequently brought them into confrontation with the state.\(^{11}\)

The 1959 Extension of Universities Act coincided with the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act. The dual aim of these acts was to restrict African students to rural Bantustans and limit the number enrolled in white universities. The Extension Act was therefore accompanied by significant investments in higher education and training in Bantustans, earning many of these institutions to pejorative label of ‘bush colleges’.\(^{12}\) The construction of Turfloop (1959) and University of Zululand (1960) was accompanied by the construction of the University of the Western Cape (1959) and the University of Durban-Westville (1961). This racially and ethnically fragmented higher education system was also funded unevenly. White universities were funded by the national government, while institutions in the Bantustans received funding through their tribal authorities. These unequal funding regimes meant that many institutions in the Bantustans suffered from funding shortages as well as repressive internal governance

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\(^{11}\) One of the more notable cases of a university defying the act was the attempt by the University of Cape Town to hire the Cambridge-trained anthropologist Archie Mafeje. He was appointed as a senior lecturer at UCT but his appointment was later rescinded by the university council acting under pressure from the apartheid state. His removal sparked a protest on campus and an occupation of Bremner building, the same building occupied in 2015 by students during the Rhodes Must Fall movement. For more on the ‘Mafeje affair’ and the implications it had for transformation at UCT, see Ntsebeza (2014).

\(^{12}\) Students attending the University of the Western Cape still refer to themselves, and to their rugby team, as ‘Bushies,’ which describes that fact that UWC is surrounded by bushes on the Cape Flats.
structures. Because many of their students came from disadvantaged backgrounds, they often could not pay fees and student debts were high.

The growth of higher education opportunities for black South Africans at separate institutions translated into expanding enrolments. Between 1961 and 1972 there was a 471% increase in the number of African students, a 681% increase in the number of Coloured students, and a 1570% increase in the number of Indian students (Hirson 1979, 63). But by far the largest number of non-white South Africans receiving post-school training at this time were the high numbers of Africans who sought positions in teaching and nursing colleges. In 1975 there were 15,656 students enrolled at 35 teachers training colleges and 5,958 students at hospitals and training colleges for African nurses (Hirson 1979, 62). African students entering university tended to be clustered in arts and social sciences and excluded from sciences and commerce fields (Nkomo 1984). Nzimande (1991, 234) notes that in 1975, there was not one African engineering graduate in the entire country.

However, the increasing cost of higher education in the late 1980s and limited amount of funding available for black students also limited access. Facing an economic recession, growing isolation, and mass internal opposition, the apartheid state cut subsidies to higher education from 1984 onwards resulting in rising tuition costs. Critics at the time, noted that this was in an attempt to limit African student enrolment at white institutions while also stifling dissent on black campuses—UWC, for example, suffered funding cuts of 50% and 56% in 1991 and 1992 (Weekly Mail 1992). In a 1992 issue of Drum Magazine, historically aimed a black urban audience, a financial advice column titled ‘University: The Impossible Dream’ noted that “Sending children to school is a heavy burden for black families. But sending them to university is out of the question for most” (Malunga 1992). The column noted that while university tuition
fees in the early 1990s climbed at 13% per year, average salaries only increased by 8%. At the same time, funding cuts also resulted in increasing student militancy. At the University of Durban Westville, state subsidies declined from 85 to 60% in the 1980s, resulting in tuition increases of 25% per year (Weekly Mail 1992). The result was eroded infrastructure, staff shortages and increased levels of student protest each year. The rapid increase in unemployment in the early 1990s also meant that a growing number of students struggled to repay their loans to private banks (Rowley 1992).

While this strategy of confining African students to homeland higher education institutions fulfilled state desires for spatial separation and control, it too generated a range of contradictions. The early 1980s saw South Africa plunged into a protracted economic crisis, caused by a global economic downturn, domestic shortages of unskilled labour, and a limited domestic consumer market. As a result, the state introduced a series of reforms which expanded urban education and residential opportunities for Africans. Significant labour reforms such as the Wiehahn Commission Report of 1979, which granted black trade unions legal recognition, and the Riekert Commission of 1979, which recommended significant changes in influx controls, were intended to create a stable urban black middle class that would both be functional to capital’s labour requirements and act a buffer against further political unrest. Technikons for training urban workers such as Mabopane East were also constructed. Vista university was founded in 1981, a racially exclusive university serving black South Africans residing in urban townships. If the aim of apartheid policy up until the 1970s was to inhibit the growth of a black middle class, reforms of the late 1970s and 80s were aimed at expanding it in order to act as a bulwark against rising tides of political opposition.
Reforms then were not merely aimed at meeting labour requirements, they were deeply influenced by mass opposition to apartheid policies that emerged in the early 1970s. In 1973 workers in Durban went on strike which marked the resurgence of a black trade union movement. In 1976 students in high schools in Johannesburg and Cape Town launched protests in direct responses to Bantu education. High schools across the country had experienced protests over teaching and living conditions, similar to those struggles raised by students in the 1940s and 50s (Hirson 1979). As Hyslop (1986, 2) demonstrates, tactics used by students in rural mission schools in the Eastern Cape, “bequeathed a tradition of student insurgency” that made its way into urban schools in the 60s and 70s. One particular point of contention was the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction into high schools, which was vigorously opposed by both students and parents. Opposition to Afrikaans was also an external manifestation of anger against apartheid, clearly expressed by Soweto High School students in 1976, in which over 100 students were killed by police forces (Hirson 1979, 178).

The 1970s and 80s were a watershed period for youth politics in South Africa. Of particular importance was the formation of the South African Student Organization (SASO) in 1968 and the influence of Black Consciousness thought. Inspired by the pan-Africanism of groups like the PAC, Garveyist theory on black self-sufficiency, and frustration with the politics of white liberalism, the SASO constitution declared their lack of faith in multi-racial institutions to effect rapid social and political change. SASO’s first president, Steve Biko (1996, 92), described Black Consciousness in both material and psychological terms as, “an attitude of mind and a way of life” aimed at both political and mental freedom from white domination. The formation of SASO and allied organizations like the Black People’s Convention (BPC) were specifically aimed at promoting Black Consciousness among urban youth, and played a
significant role in politicizing high school students in the lead up to 1976. The banning of SASO was followed by the formation of the Azanian Students Organization (AZASO) in 1979. In the same year, high school students formed the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). In 1986 AZASO moved toward a non-racial politics in alliance with other anti-apartheid forces and was reborn at the South African National Students Congress (SANSCO). As Badat (1999, 365) has written of this period, groups like SASO and SANSCO made black higher education students, “an organized social force within the overall movement for national liberation.”

The goal of education reforms in the late apartheid period was to create and co-opt an urban black middle class. This failed as groups like SASO, SANSCO and COSAS won over a growing number of working and middle-class students to the project of national liberation. In 1984 youth allied with SANCO and COSAS came together to issue the Education Charter, which was aimed at going beyond reforms to education and call for the dismantling of apartheid. The revival of the Black Local Authorities in 1984, essentially a substitution for black representation in parliament, also caused significant opposition. Youth called for a boycott of schools, and by 1984 there were over 220,000 children absent from school across the country (SAHO 2014).

The boycotts gave rise to two broad positions concerning the relationship between education and society. First was the idea of ‘Liberation before education.’ This slogan showed that students were, “pessimistic about change in the education system while the apartheid regime still existed [and] concluded that constructive sacrifices should be made to advance the interests of the liberation struggle over and above certain gains such as certificates and degrees” (Nekhwevha 1991, 207). This approach held that a social revolution was imminent and by pushing the state through a politics of ‘ungovernability,’ students themselves could bring about the end of apartheid (Bundy 1987). Second, was the slogan ‘People’s Education for People’s
Power,’ that saw schools as spaces in which the goals of the struggle could be furthered and alternative forms of ‘education for liberation’ developed. It was this latter slogan that ruled the day and was ultimately adopted in 1986 at the National Education Coordinating Committee, a movement that brought together parents, students and teachers to break the grip of the ‘liberation before education’ position in school protests (Mathebula 2013, 5).

In one of the few comprehensive studies of student activism in this period, Nkomo (1984) argues that apartheid education generated a ‘culture of resistance’ that was frequently at odds with the ethos of schools and universities. This culture was the result of several factors, including, “the general background of deprivation and humiliation experienced by African students” outside the university (Ibid., 152). Organizations like SASO, for example, highlighted not only disparities in the education system but, “the association between socio-political privations of blacks in society at large and the conditions of black at universities” (Ibid., 153).

For example, Nkomo (1984) highlights the ways in which migrant labour systems tore African families apart and produced generational divisions between children and parents. As Badat (1999) adds, SASO activists frequently emphasized the everyday experiences of black students and particularly their shared experiences of white domination. Nkomo’s location of this ‘culture of resistance’ both within and outside the university remains prescient and highlights the relationship between schooling and the, “disharmonies of the larger system” (Nkomo 1984, 158).

It was this long ‘culture of resistance,’ rooted in decades of resistance to colonial and apartheid education policies that fuelled student and youth opposition to apartheid. By the end of the 1980s, “youth—black, male, urban youth at least—had come to symbolise the massive social movement that was derailing apartheid” (Everatt 2002, 293).

**Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa**
In its 1994 election campaign, the ANC promised that it would enable all children to realize their full potential by accessing free basic education. This was in line with one of the promises of the 1955 Freedom Charter, that “The doors of learning and of culture shall be opened!” (SAHO 2016). The first major reform was to amalgamate 17 racially and regionally segregated education systems into one department. Public funds were directed toward poorer schools primarily in rural areas and urban townships and, in 1997, the state introduced an outcomes-based education system that replaced skills development over rote learning. The reallocation of public funds to poor schools meant that the share of public funding spent on African pupils rose from about 58% in 1993 to about 79% in 1997, while the share spent on white pupils declined from 22 to 10% (Seekings and Nattrass 2015, 166). Prioritizing the education of children from poor households was accompanied by significant increases in the overall education budget. While these reforms redirected public funds to schools in poor communities, the lack of transformation in the structure of basic education allowed for the preservation of privilege among historically white schools and, as a result, generated new forms of class inequality that corresponded with racial divisions. While there was much hope in overcoming inequalities in the education system after 1994, reforms were limited by a range of competing factors.

A key piece of legislation in addressing the legacy of apartheid education was the 1996 South African Schools Act. Through the act, schools were divided into ‘quintiles,’ with poorer quintile schools receiving high per-student funding, while wealthier quintile schools received lower per-student funding. The latter schools were given the right to decide language policy and set fee levels. This right to charge fees meant that schools in wealthier areas were able to appoint additional teachers and upgrade their infrastructure—in effect preserving their privileged
position. Concerns over increasing fees and access for poor students resulted in a 2006 legislative amendment which meant poor students who attended schools in wealthy areas could apply for a fee exemption. This also led to increased funding to ‘no-fee’ schools, which today constitute the bulk of the education budget. By 2012 around 70% of schools were no-fee (Chisholm 2012, 93). The growth of no-fee schools has meant that almost every child now attends primary and secondary schooling and 62% obtain more years of schooling than their parents (Chisholm 2012; Girdwood and Leibbrandt 2009).

The outcome of this model, however, has been described by Woolman and Fleisch (2006) as an ‘unintended experiment’ in school choice. The ANC government did not wrest power from school governing bodies but instead implemented a rights-based agenda that said no child could be excluded from a school due to financial reasons. Yet the significant role that fees play in allowing schools to hire additional teachers and maintain infrastructure created incentives for them to admit certain students and exclude others. As Hunter’s (2016) work on Durban schools has shown, interacting with this ‘choice model’ are school’s efforts at attracting certain types of students. Formerly-white schools often use interviews with students and parents, and reports from feeder schools to give preference to students from higher-income families in order to preserve their fee base. Lemon and Battersby-Lennard’s (2010) research on schooling in Cape Town highlights how this model perpetuated educational inequalities as school governing bodies established new mechanisms of exclusion. Similarly, Gulson and Fataar (2011) have shown how inter-related social and spatial factors drive school choice in ways that reflect the uneven mobilities associated with post-apartheid urban geographies.
While the intention of basic education reform was to address race-based disparities, the results have been disappointing and are widely seen to have created a bifurcated education system:

…Resulting in a poorly resourced educational sector serving the poor and mainly black population, while the wealthy have access to private and semi-private schools that serve mainly whites and the new black elite, and attend ‘research’ universities. These new geographies of inequality in the schooling sector are the direct result of national policy…Government policy, such as the South African Schools Act, has allowed the middle class to secure control of the historical ex-white school sector, empowering a ‘new deracialized middle class’ to obtain semi-private education (Badat and Sayed 2014: 134).

Education researcher Nic Spaull (2013, 6) has shown that there is a small, well-performing school system that accommodates the wealthiest 20-25% of pupils and a larger system that accommodates the poorest 75-80% of the population, of which the “performance of this latter category can only be described as abysmal.” This abysmally performing system is located primarily in rural areas and urban townships, where schools are often overcrowded, lack resources, do not have textbooks and suffer from teacher shortages. Those learners who do well in school tend to come from a select number of schools. Nationally, two out of three successful candidates in the grade 12 mathematics exam came from only 7% of South African high schools (Seekings and Nattrass 2015, 168). While South African has a relatively high rate of secondary enrolment, compared to other countries on the continent, it suffers from high drop-out rates. Of every 1000 pupils entering Grade 1, 927 enter Grade 9, but only 692 enter Grade 12 (Simkins 2013, 3).

The contradiction then is that while public expenditure on education is ‘pro-poor,’ the semi-privatized structure of public education has reinforced class inequalities. This has led some to describe the education system as shaped by the neoliberal shift in governance under the ANC in the 1990s (Spreen and Vally 2006, Gulson and Fataar 2011). Seekings and Nattrass (2015),
however, argue that neoliberal policy and the lack of resourcing cannot explain poor schooling outcomes. Part of the reason, they argue, lies in poor management of schools, the policy of outcomes based education introduced after 1994, and low-quality teaching. While the state allowed for the commodification of schooling for the middle class through fees, schooling essentially became free for poor children. However, this argument ignores that fact that policies made by the ANC after it took power were deeply influenced by business demands for global competitiveness and human capital formation. The demands raised by the ‘People’s Education’ movement through various forums, conferences and policy papers, for example, had far more limited impact on the overall shape of the education policy. Preserving the privileged position of certain schools and universities was ultimately seen as necessary for ensuring economic growth and development (Chisholm, Motala and Vally 2003).

These tensions between demands for equity and the desire for economic growth were also present in higher education reforms. At the end of apartheid, the gross participation rates in South Africa’s higher education system were as follows: 9% for Africans, 13% for Coloureds, 40% for Indians and 70% for Whites (Council on Higher Education 2004, 62). The emphasis on reform was transforming these participation rates to bring them in line with South Africa’s demographic diversity. However, higher education policy since the end of apartheid has been made within a contradictory political and economic framework. While changes have been made in a number of areas, the higher education system has not undergone systematic reconfiguration and transformation. Attempts at consolidating a fragmented ethno-racial university structure were limited by the constraints of the 1994 political settlement and the direction of state economic policy after 1994. What has emerged then are new forms of stratification and race-class divisions.
The 1997 White Paper noted that any attempt to transform higher education occurred within a context of, “political democratization, economic reconstruction and development, and redistributive social policies” (Department of Education 1997, 1.7). Achieving all of these simultaneously, as Badat (2009) warned, represented significant challenges. The National Plan for Higher Education (2001, 5-6) contained similar tensions, as it sought to address past inequalities while responding to contemporary economic challenges, such as:

…the role of higher education in a knowledge driven world…human resource development…high-level skills training…production, acquisition and application of new knowledge…development of an information society…limited resources used efficiently and effectively.

In short, policy attempted to balance developmental demands with equity. Muller (2003, 1) has described this dilemma as, “salvation from the dead hand of apartheid on the one hand, and progress toward global economic competitiveness on the other. These two longings anchor the political theology of restructuring in South Africa.” On the one hand, policy has emphasized the importance of equity and expanding access to those groups who were previously marginalized by apartheid education. On the other, it has emphasized development, human capital formation and global competitiveness (Chisholm, Motala and Vally 2003).

It was this shift that significantly undermined the process of redress affecting historically disadvantaged institutions (HDI)—this included those institutions funded by Bantustan authorities and respective racial education departments. As Barnes (2005) has outlined, HBIs assumed that they would receive redress after 1994 because of historic funding inequities and the role they played in the anti-apartheid struggle. However, the redress period was short lived as the 1997 Higher Education Act, influenced by the state’s emphasis on fiscal restraint, connected funding to performance indicators. The state’s aim was not to equalize the playing field but to
create a differentiated higher education system that would meet the needs of the labour market (Barnes 2005, 217). The result was that while historically advantaged institutions were able to tap into a deep pool of funds and collect tuition fees, HBIs struggled to meet performance targets, lacked state funds and struggled to get their students to pay fees. As a result, many of these HBIs were already deeply indebted by the late 1990s.

Rather than addressing inequalities between institutions then, changing higher education policy reinforced a differentiated (and unevenly resourced) higher education system. The 2001 National Plan for Higher Education, for example, recognized the need for a system that met changing national educational needs (Barnes 2005). Key to this was the merger of a number of higher education institutions. In 1994, the new government inherited a system of 36 universities and technikons divided along class and racial lines. Through a process of mergers, 21 universities were reduced to 11, 15 technikons to 5 technikons and 6 comprehensive universities, and 150 colleges of education became 50 technical and vocational colleges (Southall 2016: 117).

Mergers radically transformed some institutions while allowing others to maintain their privileged position. First, the mergers largely affected those ‘lower-tier’ and historically black institutions while preserving the privileged position of the ‘upper tier’ historically white, universities (Cooper 2015). Changing enrolment patterns prior to the mergers are described by Cooper (2015) as a ‘partial but skewed revolution.’ African students flocked into formerly white technikons and coloured and Indian-designated universities. Historically white English-language universities experienced some demographic changes, but this was slower at Afrikaans-language institutions. After the mergers, Cooper (2015) describes a stalling of this enrolment revolution. At UCT, for example, black student enrolment went from 21% in 2000 to 23% in 2012 with white students still comprising the largest student group at 34% (Cooper 2015, 256). At the
institutions Cooper (2015) describes as ‘middle band universities,’ undergraduate focused and non-elite universities, the process of Africanization was more rapid. At the University of Johannesburg, for example, enrolments of black South African students increased from 43% in 2000 to 74% in 2012 (Ibid., 257). ‘Lower tier’ research universities, or those that did not have a high volume of research outputs and tended to be historically black, continued to have majority black student body. Interestingly, while black student enrolment numbers have increased across various types of institutions, the sharpest increases have been at historically white institutions. While this is partially due to institutional commitments to transformation, Southall (2016) also suggests it reflects black families’ perceptions of where quality lies.

Cooper (2015) suggests that South Africa’s higher education system has shifted from reproducing inequality based on race to a system that reproduces inequality based on ‘race-class position.’ Youth from middle- or upper-class African households enrolled in fee-paying schools seek entry into elite research universities like Wits and UCT. This is confirmed by these institutions, who have attempted to address both race and class disparities in enrolment. For example, in 2014 UCT approved a new admissions policy that incorporated race and socio-economic disadvantage in considering an applicant’s ‘historical disadvantage.’ The rationale for doing so, was part of an attempt to “transform the student body into one that is more diverse and representative of the population” (UCT 2014). The university reported that an increasing number of black applicants coming to UCT, “are coming out of excellent schools with very good NSC results, often from wealthy families…about half of black students at UCT are now middle-class” (UCT 2014). At the same time, the students enrolling in HBIs continue to come from poor and working-class households, and are overwhelmingly supported by the state’s student loan system.
The result of this reform process is that South Africa has a differentiated higher education system, in which some institutions have been able to maintain their privileged position while others face ongoing crises. Historically black institutions continue to enrol, overwhelmingly, students from poor and working-class households who are reliant on student loan funding. Many are unable to pay registration costs let alone full tuition amounts. In 2014, for example, the Mangosuthu University of Technology faced R104 million in unpaid fees, and in 2016 Rhodes University asked the state for support in clearing R226 million in historical debt owed to the institution (Macgregor 2016). Historically white universities were able to weather the uncertainty of the merger process by attracting research funding, private investment and raising tuition fees. Enrolment data from institutions like UCT also suggests that they are attracting an increasing number of international students, whose numbers increased around the same time black South African enrolments plateaued. For Cooper (2015, 248) higher education in South Africa then has arguably become more elitist than it was prior to 1994, “with social class acting as a major stalling force in the revolution in African enrolments.”

If access to higher education was previously shaped by race, it is now increasingly determined by class. An increasingly multi-racial middle class and elite is concentrated in historically white institutions while the student body at those historically black institutions is composed of students from poor households (Badat and Sayed 2014). Research on transitions from high school to university has shown that students who attended schools which charge tuition fees (usually formerly white schools) are four times more likely to access university than those who attend the poorest 60% of schools which charge no fees (Van Broekhuizen, Van der Berg and Hofmeyer 2016). As Cooper’s (2015) research has shown, while there has been a revolution in higher education demographics, this revolution has been highly differentiated. Part
of the reason this lies in the fact that a race-based admissions policy was simply replaced with grades based admission policy. As Wolpe (1995) has noted, most higher education institutions were simply unwilling to lower their enrolment standards to facilitate transformation in the student profile. This replacement of racial admission criteria with meritocracy did little to address the racialized legacies of apartheid education and reinforced systems of class exclusion largely along racial lines.

How then have educational shifts affected social mobility in the post-apartheid period? First it is helpful to highlight two broad trends in class formation. First is that starting in the 1980s, South Africa experienced a rapid growth in unemployment due to a combination of internal economic crises, political isolation and massive social unrest. This period also saw a shift away from key economic sectors such as agriculture and mining that employed a large number of un- and semi-skilled workers. Seekings and Nattrass (2005, 294) have described how South Africa’s ‘high skills’ growth path of the late 1990s and 2000s had the effect of putting the, “unemployed, most of whom were unskilled and inexperienced, in an objectively different relation to the productive forces.” The result was that those who went through the Bantu education system in the 1970s and 80s were ill-prepared for an economy that was rapidly shifting away from its historic demand for unskilled labour power. This, among other factors, has led to unemployment rate nearing 30% and the extensive growth of insecure and precarious work. At the same time, we have seen a black middle class, which grew somewhat during the late 1980s, expand at a rapid pace. As Southall (2016) notes, affirmative action and BEE policies have substantially increased the size as well as political and economic power of this class. By 2004, for example, the composition of the public sector was broadly reflective of the country’s racial demographics, with two-thirds of senior management positions occupied by black South
Africans (Southall 2016, 74-80). While demographic change has been slower in the private sector, the expansion of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies have allowed some, particularly those with connections to the ANC, to accumulate wealth rapidly. It is this class that has been heavily invested in improved education opportunities for their children. As research on income dynamics has shown, the children of the top 10% will remain locked into their income bracket as they become adults, but there are virtually no prospects for income mobility among children from low income families (SALDRU 2016).

In this context, it seems clear that one of the only mechanisms for achieving social mobility or preserving middle class privilege is through access to education. In a highly polarized labour market, with unemployment concentrated among those who have low levels of education, accessing higher education is a fairly decent guarantor of employment. Multiple researchers have shown that both middle and working-class families frequently make substantial investments in their children’s education or send them to better schools at some distance from where they live (Hunter 2015, 2016; Bell and McKay 2011; Fataar 2009; Gulson and Fataar 2011). The result has been little change in those 75% of schools that were designated as black under apartheid and rapid change in the other 25% (Soudien 2004). In higher education, this is reflected in the massive number of applications received by higher education institutions each year and the pressure this places on the state’s student loan system. The University of Johannesburg, for example, received 135,000 applications for 10,500 first year spaces in 2017 while Wits University received 69,000 for 6200 spaces (Seeth 2017).

In sum, educational reforms in the 1970s and 80s opened opportunities for a limited number of black South Africans to move into the middle class, particularly as white South Africans moved up the employment ladder. This occurred alongside the growth of mass
unemployment and the restructuring of labour markets directly affecting the poor and those with limited education. While educational reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s radically changed demographics in the education system, they also allowed certain schools and universities to preserve institutional privilege and the subsequent transmission of valuable forms of social and cultural capital. In effect, they allowed for the reproduction of a deracialized form of class privilege. Struggles over education as Southall (2016) suggests are frequently ‘class struggles,’ over who is allowed in and who is kept out. In effect, this has facilitated the expansion of a sizeable black middle class who hold significant political and economic power. At the same time, we have seen rising demand for higher education not just among the middle class, but among students from poorer households.

**Education-based Resistance After Apartheid**

Post-apartheid education reforms have been shaped by this long history of education-based struggle. The demand for equity, universal access and a curriculum that reflects the country’s history have been key demands. And yet, these demands have confronted both entrenched systems of privilege in the forms of elite educational institutions and demands from business for skilled workers who can contribute to economic growth. The result has been a fragmented series of reforms that have reinforced systems of privilege while producing new lines of class division. Unsurprisingly, this too has generated resistance.

The end of apartheid brought about a systematic dismantling or cooption of those student and youth structures that emerged in the 1980s. As Everatt (2002) has noted, youth and students were called to help ‘build the rainbow nation’ and as a result youth activism was simply seen as a tap to be turned on or off by ANC leadership. For Badat (1999), the formation of the South African Students Congress (SASCO) in 1991 and its close alliance with the ANC led to the
organization focusing on policy issues rather than the radical transformation of higher education. The historical link then between students and impoverished and oppressed communities grew significantly weaker as students were called on to act in alliance with the state rather than oppose it.

Nevertheless, struggles within the educational sphere have not abated. They are, however, more diffuse as students and parents no longer target an oppressive state but various facets of an unequal education system. Like the education struggles that marked the apartheid period, these too have resulted in policy shifts and new waves of politicization. While it is not possible to describe the full extent of education-based resistance after 1994, I focus on three broad areas.

First, conflicts have emerged between school governing bodies (SGBs) and provincial education departments about the regulation of school admission policies. While the 1996 Schools Act gives SGBs control over admission criteria, provincial education departments have challenged this authority on a number of occasions. One notable case stands out. In 2012, amendments to the regulations governing school admissions in Gauteng province gave the provincial education department power to set school admission policy. This allowed them to challenge SGBs exclusionary zoning policy that set a defined area for school admissions. In 2016 the Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools (FEDSAS) challenged these amendments. Not only did FEDSAS lose the case, but the Constitutional Court reaffirmed the role of the Gauteng education department in determining feeder zones for public schools and required them to determine admission zoning policies within 12 months. In a submission to the court, civil society group Equal Education noted that allowing SGBs to determine their own feeder zones perpetuated apartheid racial geographies. This was echoed by the Gauteng
education minister, who stated that the court had, “finally broken the backbone of apartheid planning” (Fredericks 2016). Forms of resistance have emerged within state structures that challenge the power awarded to schools by the Schools Act. These contestations over the role of the state in shaping education policy highlight not only the role that apartheid geographies continue to play in shaping admissions, but how attempts to overcome these legacies bring the state into conflict with middle class parents and with national government policy. It is also worth noting that school admission policies are not only challenged by state departments, but by parents themselves. Parents often fake residential or employment documents in order to enroll their students in better schools far from where they live (Southall 2016).

Second have been attempts by learners themselves to challenge the inadequate resourcing and infrastructure of schools. While this sometimes occurs directly through student organizing, it often involves intermediary civil society organizations. One notable example is the struggle of students at Philippi High in Cape Town—a case I followed with some interest while conducting fieldwork. In 2015 students from Philippi High marched to the Western Cape Education Department over lack of infrastructure at their school. Philippi high is located in a dense urban township on the Cape Flats and composed of 17 pre-fabricated containers. It has no library or sports field, and students complained of classroom overcrowding and the fact that the containers baked in the summer sun and were freezing in the winter. The initial protest was violently dispersed by local police. Students were promised a new school by the department in 2017, but by 2018 little had been done, causing students to again march to the education department to demand a response. While plans have been drafted to construct a new school in 2019, the department noted that it could do little to deal with classroom overcrowding as migration to the province had placed strain on existing teacher to learner ratios (Ntongana 2018). Struggles aimed
at calling on provincial authorities to address infrastructure inadequacies have long been the mandate of Equal Education, an education advocacy NGO. Equal Education has conducted research and led campaigns aimed at improving infrastructure, most notably sanitation and safety, in poor schools in urban townships and rural areas. While there have been rapid improvements made in upgrading school infrastructure as a direct result of their advocacy, many public schools in South Africa still lack running water and adequate sanitation.

Finally, are the attempts by students in colleges and universities to call attention to funding inadequacies and barriers that obstruct the progress of poor students. These struggles stem, overwhelmingly, from the entry of students from poor and working-class households into higher education in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006) have noted in a study of protest patterns from this period, student protests coincided with changes in state funding. Student debt increased throughout the 1990s as institutions were encouraged to admit more disadvantaged students. From 2000, as state allocations declined, institutions pursued more aggressive cost-recovery processes, encouraging students to pay up front, employing debt collectors to recoup unpaid fees, or withholding results and certificates. Student protests then often targeted financial or academic forms of exclusion, and frequently took on disruptive forms that echo the student protests of the 1980s. While these did occur at HWIs like Wits (which experienced a spike in enrolment numbers in the early 2000s), they were primarily concentrated at HBI s, often located in former Bantustans. For example, only two years after the country’s first democratic elections, students at UWC and a number of Cape Town technikons launched protests over financial exclusion (Loxton 1996). In 2008 students at UKZN-Edgewood protested because students were prevented from registering due to unpaid debts (Mercury 2008). In 2009 there were protests at Wits University, CPUT and UKZN-Edgewood and Durban Westville over
registration costs, student loan insufficiencies and accommodation shortages. These protests erupted again in 2011 and 2012 at the Durban University of Technology, the Westville and Edgewood campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the University of Fort Hare, the University of the Free State, Tshwane University of Technology, the University of Limpopo, the University of Zululand, Walter Sisulu University, the University of Venda, the Vaal University of Technology, and CPUT (Chetty 2014, 95-96).

Demand for higher education has simply not kept pace with state support. From 2000 to 2015, the share that government contributes to public universities and other tertiary institutions declined from 49% to 39% (AfricaCheck 2016). As a result, many institutions were forced to raise fees leading to higher levels of student debt. Every year around 100,000 mostly black students do not register for the following academic year as they have been excluded on financial or academic grounds or have withdrawn voluntarily, often for the same reasons (Cloete 2004). Because of this, protests in the early 2000s often targeted the NSFAS system and inadequate public support for lower income students. Widespread criticism of NSFAS resulted in a 2010 Ministerial Review, which acknowledged that NSFAS faced, “serious, systemic, structural, organizational and policy problems” (DHET 2010, xi). The review noted that in order to meet existing demand for financial aid, NSFAS would have to triple. Yet even as NSFAS funding increased over the 2000s, it could not keep pace with growing levels of demand and tuition fee increases. The result was that the 2010 review did little to curb the problem of student and institutional debt, an issue that was central to the #FMF protests of 2015 and 2016.

While these forms of resistance have exerted significant pressures on various elements of the education system, the absence of more sweeping reforms is notable. While the 1996 Schools Act is challenged periodically and reviews of higher education funding have attempted to
address funding issues affecting poor students, there have been limited attempts at addressing the inequalities that have emerged between institutions. At least part of this stems from the political and class realignment of the ANC. The rapid growth of the black middle class after 1994 is a direct outcome of ANC policy. As Southall (2016) has shown, their ascendance has been facilitated by affirmative action policies, black economic empowerment programs, and the deracialization and expansion of basic and higher education opportunities. For these reasons, the black middle class has good reason to be loyal to the ANC—in studies of voter attitudes from 1994-2009 Schulz-Herzenberg (2009) suggests that core support for the ANC is concentrated in the middle class. Among students, the largest national student organization in the country SASCO, defines its role as, “complementary to strengthening, implementing and defending the educational policies of the government” (SASCO 1996). An aspirant black middle class has little to gain then from a radically reformed education system, in which the transmission of class privilege is disrupted. Rather, it is in their interest to secure positions for their children within those relatively elite schools and universities that have emerged as, “key sites for the production and reproduction of class advantage” (Southall 2016, 202).

Conclusion:

The long history of education resistance in South Africa highlights the fundamental role students have played in giving substance and meaning to ideas of citizenship. First, as political organizations were banned and went into exile and trade unions were repressed, it was often students that came to the forefront as key instigators of political struggle in the 1970s and 80s. Many from this 1976-generation went on to play a fundamental role in the burgeoning civil society movement that opposed apartheid up until 1994. Second, these movements did not just come about solely as a result of education massification in the 1970s, but emerged from the
political, cultural and religious ideas that circulated among students during this time. Isolated from the mass struggles of the 40s and 50s, students forged their own political identities and ideas, of which Black Consciousness is a notable example. Third, the prominent role played by students in the anti-apartheid struggle meant that education itself was inextricably linked to ideas of universal and equitable citizenship. This belief in the redemptive potential of education is clearly something that still animates student protest (see Chapter 5) and the belief that education is the key to securing a dignified life (See Chapter 4).

Considering the long history of educational struggle in South Africa allows us to draw linkages between reproduction and resistance across the 20th century. The mission school system, for example, was intended to reproduce a small African elite. In doing so, however, it gave birth to the ANC and, later, to figures like Mandela who would go on to challenge the Christian liberalism of the party. The growth of African education in the Bantu education period brought middle and working-class students together in the same schools and universities creating opportunities for class alliances against apartheid. Here the growing influence of Black Consciousness made schools and universities ‘pockets of resistance’ to apartheid in the 70s and 80s. The post-apartheid period has been more complex, involving a rapid process of class formation that has redrawn lines of inclusion and exclusion. Education remains central to the reproduction of class privilege, but in its deracialized form is increasingly influenced by income, location and the prestige bestowed by certain institutions. As a result, education-based resistance has been more uneven, targeting historic inequities in the system while also being aimed at securing inclusion into the system itself.

Tracing the lineage of education reforms in South Africa reveals the importance of both reproduction and resistance perspectives in the constitution of educational systems. Yet in
considering the role of resistance, it is important, as Giroux (1983) emphasizes, to understand when resistance produces a counter logic that can lead to transformation and when it simply aids in the reproduction of social inequality. It would be inaccurate to suggest that education-based resistance after apartheid has cohered around opposition to neoliberalism, in which the aim of education is simply human capital formation. Resistance within the post-apartheid education system has not always challenged the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Rather, educational reforms have allowed a black middle class to claim some of the privileges previously enjoyed by white South Africans. At the same time, poor and working-class students and families have scrambled to find a place within these structures with the hope of assuming some degree of mobility. Struggles have cohered then around the terms of inclusion rather than opposition to the system itself. Education policy shifts then are the outcomes of competing and often contradictory social forces, some of which are aimed at transforming the overall structure of the system while others have a vested interest in maintaining it.
Chapter 2

‘This country beyond the township’: Understanding Aspiration Among Working Class Youth in Higher Education

“The most important determinant of student consciousness is physical mobility, between different subsystems of society, and [the] social mobility they experience.” — Michael Burawoy (1976, 87).

How do working class youth in South Africa develop aspirations toward higher education? In this chapter I answer this question by examining the educational trajectories of students from high schools in Khayelitsha who have entered higher education institutions in Cape Town. Their decision to pursue higher education, I argue, is intimately shaped by the circuits of educational mobility that characterize the post-apartheid city. Here I draw on Massey’s (2005) notion of ‘lived space’, which Fataar (2009, 2) has used in the South African context, to describe how, “how people live in particular sites, how they are wired into their geography, and how they transcend this geography.” For youth from urban townships, higher education provides an opportunity to become mobile, or escape from life in the township and develop aspirations toward middle class lifestyles. At the same time, they face significant barriers in doing so. Aside from financial cost, young people’s aspirations are shaped by their social background and the relations they have to family and community. In this chapter I focus on a tutoring program aimed at raising young people’s aspirations toward higher education. While the program allowed working class youth to develop aspirations toward higher education, these were often in tension with their social backgrounds, which generated feelings of alienation and isolation. While these programs allowed students to aspire toward higher education and imagine lives outside the township, they ultimately individualized educational success and failure.
Raising young people’s aspirations toward higher education also had a number of other effects. First, it reinforced the perceived value of historically white institutions (HWIs), with students who attended historically black institutions (HBIs) feeling abandoned by the program. Second, those students who attended HWIs were forced to assimilate into a hegemonic culture that was alienating and at odds with their social background. This alienation and antipathy was frequently experienced and expressed through race. These experiences generated tensions between desires for individual mobility and their commitments to family. By drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, I demonstrate how aspiration raising programs allowed students to partially transform their *habitus* and imagine themselves in higher education. At the same time, I emphasize the challenges of this transformational process, as students were not easily able to delink themselves from their social background. I highlight how the concept of *habitus* is deeply influenced by spatial factors and can help us understand working class students’ rationale for pursuing higher education.

**What is Aspirational About Higher Education?**

Aspirations toward higher education are intimately shaped by social class. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) recognized, aspirations are shaped by both the background of the students and the ways in which education systems validate this background as legitimate. Here they develop the concept of *habitus* to describe those, “durable schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action” that represent a form of cultural inheritance (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 40). For Bourdieu and Passeron, inequalities are not simply reproduced through the formal selection mechanism of grades and assessments, but through the self-selective and self-exclusionary practices that are products of our *habitus*. For students from middle class backgrounds, their upbringing and schooling allows them to develop a *habitus*, which is
recognized and reflected in institutions of higher learning. In short, they possess an internal map which allows them to navigate education institutions. For students from poor and working-class backgrounds, their *habitus* was frequently at odds with an educational field that discounted and devalued their background and experiences.

In a reflection on aspiration among the poor, Appadurai (2004) notes that the poor do not lack aspirations, what they lack is a map to navigate and realize these aspirations. They lack, “opportunities to practice this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternate futures), [they] have a more brittle horizon of aspirations” (Appadurai 2004, 69). For Appadurai, aspirations are inherently spatial. For the affluent they consist of dense pathways and nodes that allow for multiple possibilities, while for the poor these pathways are considerably thinner providing more limited choices. It is not then that the poor cannot aspire, but that aspirations are formed in the thickness of social life. The value of Appadurai’s work is that it challenges Bourdieu’s notion that class is only reproduced through the transmission of cultural norms, beliefs and values. The poor aspire, but they must develop different ‘navigational capacities’ to access opportunities such as higher education. Among my research participants, for example, only 5% had a parent who had completed some form of post-school education and 15% had a parent who had completed grade 12. It is necessary then for youth to develop ‘alternate archives’ that allow them to develop dispositions toward education. These archives are highly influenced by desires to uplift the family and forms of spatial mobility that allow them to overcome the spatial fixity of the township.

It is not only class, however, that shapes educational aspiration, but race. As highlighted in Chapter 1, South Africa’s education system was, for much of the 20th Century, racially segregated. Educational mobility for black South Africans was constrained relative to white
South Africans. *Habitus* was not only shaped by class and family background, but apartheid’s racial division of educational and, consequently, social mobility. The end of apartheid signalled the rapid desegregation of educational institutions and witnessed rapid increases in black higher education enrolment. A growing black middle class has increasingly sought access to formerly white schools and universities (Cooper & Subotzky 2001, Southall 2016). This is connected to desires to address the legacies of racial discrimination under apartheid, and aspirations toward stable middle-class lifestyles. It is important then to recognize that aspirations are not simply about securing class mobility, but also connected to desires for racial dignity and justice. Soudien (2008), for example, has argued that black students’ aspirations are about desires to counter racial stereotypes. “It is in this desire—the encounter of students’ aspirations to improve themselves—that race is significantly modified from an experience of helplessness and apathy to what one might understand as the mobilization of agency” Soudien (2008, 670).

Educational aspirations are also affected by changing economic policy. Writing in the context of the UK, Raco (2009) has shown how economic austerity has undermined expectations of future employment as the state has positioned higher education as the only guaranteed route to social mobility. In her study of youth and austerity, Pimlott-Wilson (2015, 289) notes how responsibility for education has been transferred from the state onto young people who are frequently called on to go into debt or to become ‘mobile citizen workers.’ In this same vein, Grant (2017) and Brown (2013) argue that neoliberal governance has aimed to ‘raise aspirations’ in order to privatize responsibility for higher education. Programs that raise aspirations, Grant (2017) suggests, alter how young people hope and, ultimately, what they expect from the state in the future. South Africa’s most recent development plan, for example, emphasizes life-long learning in response to changing economic demands, and the role of higher education in driving
social mobility (NDP 2012, 316-322). As Reddy (2004) explains, the emphasis in higher education policy in South Africa shifted from more humanist demands to meeting the demands of the global economy. Under this model, universities were encouraged to produce the types of graduates required by a globalized economy and students are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and take degrees in the sciences and commerce (Reddy 2004). Such a model also serves an ideological purpose as it shifts the burden of employment, education and training onto the young people themselves. Such a process individualizes educational success and failure, as young people and their families are expected to simply overcome structural obstacles and invest in their futures.

Aspirations in South Africa are also deeply spatial, and shaped by legacies of residential and educational segregation. The desegregation of schooling prompted rapid shifts in enrolment patterns. Fataar (2009) suggests that educational value is often perceived as ‘lying elsewhere,’ in schools that have maintained their privileged status in the post-apartheid period. The phenomenon of schooling migration is emblematic of this. Over 60% of children in South Africa do not attend the school closest to them (Sekete et al. 2001). Desires for better schooling, Fataar (2009) argues, are intimately shaped by mobility across the city. While many South Africans continue to live in racially segregated pockets, they send their children to school elsewhere. Schools outside the township, Fataar (2009, 3) argues, “are seen as crucial cultivating the necessary aspirant dispositions that will allow entry into formal middle-class employment and lifestyles.” This is inspired, by what Fataar (2009) calls ‘manufactured desires’ of where value lies. Value is not seen as lying in the closest school, but frequently in formerly white or coloured schools that transmit not only credentials but valuable forms of social and cultural capital. It is through their movements across the urban space that students develop new subjectivities
connected to better schooling and middle-class lifestyles. Young people’s aspirations are deeply shaped by these systems of ‘lived space’ in which desires for mobility and the acquisition of valuable forms of capital occur through movements across the city.

However, not all students are so mobile. In the case of township students, many navigate access to better schools and tutoring programs within the township. Even in these spaces imprinted with the, “negative traces of apartheid…inhabitants are establishing flexible and inventive reflexivities” (Fataar 2009, 18). In her work on youth in the township of Langa in Cape Town, Swartz (2009) describes how the lives of township youth are frequently confined not only to the township but a small section within it. In this environment, school provides a source of hope. In related research, Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy (2012) note that while deeply entrenched forms of poverty shaped young people’s lives in the township, they also aspire to some form of social inclusion. This can take the form of employing normative narratives of potential, particularly around education. There is certainly evidence that township youth, despite the circumstances they face, often remain optimistic about the future, and through education develop aspirations that transcend the township (Mosavel et al. 2015, Barbarin and Richter 2013).

Young people’s educational aspirations in post-apartheid South Africa are influenced and constrained by a multitude of factors. As De Lannoy (2007) has noted, while they have choices unavailable to their parents’ generations, these choices occur in a context of deep household poverty and fragility. As the Comaroffs (2001) have described it, young people in South Africa exist between worlds of extreme poverty and globalized youth identities built around consumption and endless opportunity. Images and symbols of conspicuous consumption dominate their lives and yet they are constantly out of reach. Aspirations in South Africa’s
townships are therefore shaped by the opportunities provided by a rapidly changing post-apartheid ‘city in motion’ as Mbembe and Nuttall (2004) describe it. Some young people are able to transcend space while others are trapped within it. As Fataar (2009, 2) notes, young people’s educational choices are, “invested with readings that draw on notions of the rapidly changing city,” while at the same time being deeply constrained by what has not changed in these cities.

Aspiration and Education Among Youth from Khayelitsha

Mbulelo is one such student whose life was both shaped by the opportunities provided by better schooling and interrupted by labour migrations beyond his control. Born in an informal settlement in the city of Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, Mbulelo is the son of a domestic worker. In grade 8 his mother got a job working for a family in East London—domestic workers frequently live with families, so his mother had to relocate. He was sent to live with an aunt in Khayelitsha. But he was there for barely a year when gangsterism caused his mother to pull him out of the school and he returned to Mthatha. There he enrolled in Khanyisa High School, a private school run by the Catholic church. Fees at the time were around R8000 and his mother made only R2000 a month. Mbulelo credits attending a better school with allowing him to gain admission to UCT in 2015:

I was living in a rural area outside of Mthatha and going to a private school in town, so the fact that I did not want to apply at UCT was because of the kind of community and the stereotype that I was living in, where they would say no there’s no one from here who can go to such positions, why do you think you’re better? So going at that high school was a bit of a challenge. It always challenged me to reach other boundaries in life which I never thought I’d reach, and my mother is basically the foundation behind everything. She is the one who would make me go to school. You now when you go to school, you see her suffering. She is going through so much, so when you go there you have a picture in your mind of your mother and her suffering. So, her taking me to the private school actually made me realize how much I need to work.

13 One of the few studies of gangsterism in Khayelitsha comes from Don Pinnock’s (2016) Gang Town. While gangsterism in Cape Town has a long and complex history, it has largely been confined to those so-called coloured areas. The rise of gang violence in Khayelitsha, and particularly the rivalry between the Vato and Vura gangs, is a relatively recent phenomenon, but has had a particularly notable impact on high schools in the community.
Mbulelo’s schooling history was shaped by his mother’s mobility as a migrant domestic worker and by the conditions in Khayelitsha schools. As he describes it, his life in an informal area outside of Mthatha and the conditions faced by his family never made him think that he could apply to UCT. It was access to better education that allowed him to develop aspirations toward higher education, and, crucially, the responsibility he felt to his mother that motivated him.

While educational mobility across cities and provinces is common in South Africa, there is also a high degree of mobility within townships. In a survey of the schooling histories of 265 high school students from Khayelitsha, Clarke (2015) shows that only 34% attended the secondary school closest to them. The majority (65%) commuted to a high school less than 2km away. Isolating learners from one part of the township, Clarke (2015) shows that students tend to migrate to schools along the railway line as this provides an accessible and relatively cheap transport option. If educational choices are, as Fataar (2009) suggests, shaped by manufactured desire for ‘the school elsewhere,’ then this certainly seems to be true within the township. Bhonco and Johnny, for example, are two twin brothers who attended a technical high school in Khayelitsha at some distance from where they live. This is how they describe their school choice:

**CW:** Why did you go to that high school?

**Johnny:** For me, it was a choice because at that time the pass rate at Sizimisele was high, so I was under the impression that teachers at that school are working hard to improve the education of children in the township. So, I went there because of their hard work.

**Bhonco:** Now, every kid wants to go to Siphamandla high school in Kuyasa because it is excelling. That’s what we look for, the pass rate.

In this case, schooling migration was influenced by an understanding of the quality of school within the township as reflected in the grade 12 pass rate. A review of the National Senior
Certificate achievement rates at Khayelitsha high schools reveals significant fluctuations year-on-year. Some schools performed well one year, with results that were as high as 90% one year, and 60% the next. Students and their families made educational decisions based on the relative and perceived quality of schools within the township. In interviews with parents, for example, these decisions were not only based on grade 12 pass rates, but the discipline enforced at certain schools, the standing of the principal in the community, or the physical appearance of the school.

Students like Nomvula practiced a different form of educational mobility. Nomvula lived with her parents in the nearby township of Nyanga and in grade 8 joined her brother at the Centre for Science and Technology (COSAT), a privately-funded STEM high school in Khayelitsha.

My brother went to COSAT, so he kind of advertised the school to me because COSAT is good in science and I knew I wanted to do science one day. Because I couldn’t afford the other schools, so if there is this good school in the township, then I’ll go to that school to improve my future.

Nomvula’s mother also worked as a domestic worker and her father is a gardener, professions which in South Africa are among the lowest paid in the country. COSAT was one of the only options available to her, and one which she credits with gaining her admission to UCT. For her, even though COSAT is located in Khayelitsha it was not seen as comparable to township high schools.

CW: Do you think you are on the same level as those students here at UCT who went to Model C high schools?

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14 The percentage of students who obtained a National Senior Certificate, or a grade 12 pass, at Sizemisele went from 61% in 2013 to 78.5% in 2015. At Siphamandla, over this same period, the achievement rate went from 76.2% to 95.4%. The achievement rate across all of Khayelitsha’s exhibits significant fluctuations, with some schools regularly achieving in the 90% range while others score in the 50s (Department of Basic Education 2015). In interviews with students’ parents, additional factors involved in school choice included school discipline, uniforms and, most frequently, how full schools were. As Fataar (2009) notes, the construction of schools in townships often lags behind housing construction, this means that students, by choice, must often move to access school. This results in some schools filling up rapidly. The Western Cape Education Department has noted that the overcrowding of schools in township areas like Khayelitsha is due to a high number of learners coming from outside the province and seeking a place in schools, often well after the start of the school year.
Nomvula: I come from COSAT and COSAT is better, so I have experienced these resources. So I don’t think that I can answer that as someone who comes from a very low standard high school.

The educational landscape within the township is highly differentiated, with students moving between schools as they develop an understanding of where value lies. While there is a high degree of schooling migration out of the township, there is also migration across and, in some cases, into the township. Sometimes these migrations are voluntary, as in the case of siblings following others or choosing schools based on grade 12 pass rates, and at other times they are shaped by systems of labour migration, extended households and care practices that move students between rural and urban spaces. Students and parents also described choosing a school simply because others were full. High rates of migration into the township from the Eastern Cape also results in better performing schools filling up fast—some schools will only accept students in grade 8 and not in upper years. The result of this is that many students simply go to a school where there is a spot available, even if this is at the other side of the township.

While Fataar (2009) suggests that students’ ‘schooling subjectivities’ are shaped by movements across the city, it is important to recognize that many township students are unable to assume this form of mobility. This is not to say that they lack aspirations for better education. In many cases these aspirations are formed in other ways, through the search for better schools within the township, or through access to tutoring and mentorship programs that allow them to imagine themselves pursuing higher education. Among the students I interviewed, most had been enrolled in programs run by local universities or NGOs aimed at improving their grade 12 exam results and providing them with guidance on university applications. In a context in which there is limited information about post-school education and careers, these programs played a crucial
role young people’s lives. Here I consider how one such program affected young people’s aspirations. I then turn to a discussion of how this program allowed students to partially transform their *habitus*, although this process provoked significant tensions between their social backgrounds and positionality in higher education institutions.

The program in question was known as 100UP, a tutoring and mentorship program run through the Schools Improvement Initiative at UCT. The program, “aims to address the problem of under-representation by targeting school learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and coaching them towards access to the university. The programme is a holistic initiative that builds intellectual, social and cultural capital” (SII 2015). 100UP was widely seen as a component part of the transformation of UCT, particularly an attempt to draw in a higher number of black students from working class backgrounds as the university recognized that its admission policies were drawing in black students from more middle-class backgrounds. Started in 2011, the program provided weekend tutoring to 100 students from 20 high schools in Khayelitsha. Students were selected based on their examination results in Grade 9, with schools selecting their top performing students from the program. Through a series of weekend tutoring sessions, holiday camps and mentorship sessions, students received additional instruction in key subject areas and were guided through the university application process. The program has had significant successes in increasing the number of students coming from Khayelitsha high schools into UCT. In 2013, only 26 students came from 20 high schools in Khayelitsha to UCT. In 2014, the first year of enrolments by 100UP students, this number had jumped to 67 (See Figure 1).

15 While 100UP is one such program operating in the township, there were many others that young people took advantage of. A notable one is Ikamva Youth, which describes itself as a program that “enable[s] disadvantaged youth to pull themselves and each other out of poverty and into tertiary education and employment.” Other programs such as Enke were aimed at developing “social and emotional competencies” among township youth. Students I interviewed regularly moved between these programs and credited them with expanding their horizons of what was possible after high school.
How then do programs like 100UP shape young people’s aspirations toward higher education? In June 2016, I attended a 100UP camp where high school students spent the weekend at UCT and were mentored by previous 100UP students currently enrolled in higher education. I asked a group of mentors how they remembered the camps:

Siya: I could say that it was some kind of good exposure because like it showed you another life. There [Khayelitsha] you are freezing, sleeping at 3 O’clock because of the cold and then when you come here you see these comfortable beds and sleeping alone, grass is all over the lawn. So, you see you are exposed to another nature. Seeing that motivated me.

Thandiwe: For me, the camps helped me see that there’s life beyond matric. Because in Khayelitsha there aren’t a lot of people that went to varsity. If there are, you don’t see them, you don’t know them. There’s just not a lot of people who motivate you that there’s life after matric. All you know is that if you pass matric you are going to work at Shoprite or something like that.

Coming to the camps allowed students to ‘get ahead’ through tutoring programs, but they also exposed them to what Siya described as ‘another life.’ Life on campus was contrasted to life back in the township, where, as Thandiwe describes it, your horizons after grade 12 were limited.

Source: Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) Data from institutions.

Figure 1: Enrolments per year at three higher education institutions from 20 Khayelitsha High Schools, 2009-2017.
to working at places like Shoprite, a budget grocery retailer. These movements from the township to the university were crucial in forging aspirant dispositions toward higher education. The program did not only provide an opportunity to ‘get ahead’ in their exams, but allowed them to develop hopes for the future that transcended life in the township.

The 100UP program was frequently described by students as allowing them to rise above their circumstances. A key component of which was exposure to life opportunities outside the township:

Akona: Being comfortable in this environment made us aspire to want to come here. So I’d say from grade 10, most people who were in the program were aspiring to be in UCT because it’s, like, even now whenever I’m home I miss coming here because it has that thing.

Siyा: That taste, that’s how you are corrupted…Not corrupted, but you know there are some places that you don’t belong in Cape Town. UCT is one. It wasn’t part of my dreams. But then when I got to grade 10, I was the top in grade 9 in the school, and I was connected to Ms. Parker and stuff, and they told me about this program 100UP.

That ‘thing,’ or ‘taste,’ meant exposure to life outside of the township. Sometimes this involved simply sleeping in dorms with showers and catered food, while at other times, it meant the expanded life choices offered by higher education and an escape from the hardships of life in the township. Unsurprisingly, most students described exposure to campus as the most valuable part of their involvement in the 100UP program. Many did not consider applying to UCT prior to coming to campus, even though they were relatively high-achieving students:

Phumla: When we were in high school, I didn’t even think of applying to UCT. When you’re from Khayelitsha, applying to UCT is like way up there on the mountain and you’re like I’m not going to apply there. So being exposed to coming to UCT, even I saw myself studying here. So coming here on weekends, it made me study harder.

Mobility between the township to the university was therefore essential in developing these students’ aspirations toward pursuing higher education. As Phumla’s comment highlight, Cape Town remains a divided city in which UCT seems far removed from life on the windswept Cape
Flats. Transcending these disparate spaces seemed insurmountable until they were enrolled in this program.

In his research on education among township youth, Fataar (2009) notes that higher education serves as a symbol of truncated desire for many young people in township high schools. It is visible to them but often out of reach. Young people develop aspirations toward it, but lack the resources, skills and information to access it. As Zanele describes it below, the space of the township itself often militates against young peoples’ aspirations and desires, or what Fataar (2009) describes as the ‘anti-aspirational geographies’ of township life.

Zanele: Sometimes living in a township, you, I will say you underestimate yourself, and you don’t see yourself as being part of the bigger picture of the country. In the township we’re not exposed, so when we get to varsity that’s where you get exposed to what is this country beyond the township. So, our biggest challenge in Khayelitsha is that we envision ourselves as only in Khayelitsha. Some of us have dreams of going out of the township, but we don’t have the right idea of what is out there in the world.

Townships themselves were designed to act as space of limited mobility and, ideally, temporary residency for black South Africans (Makhulu 2015). They were “never meant to be places of metropolitan imaginativeness,” as they were designed as spaces of control which “reproduced a spatially limited consciousness” (Fataar 2009, 11). Khayelitsha itself was initially designed as a racially segregated urban enclave for the city’s African population. While today it has schools, shopping malls and access to services, many of the features of apartheid urbanism remain; the wide streets and high mast lighting constant reminders of apartheid’s policies of spatial control (see Image 6).
Zanele’s description of life in the township reflects this sense that the township is separate from the rest of the city. Townships are spaces of fixity and constraint with opportunities lying outside their boundaries. They are spaces in which dreams and desires for a better life are frustrated and limited by the daily lived realities of poverty. This is particularly apparent in cities like Cape Town, which in recent years have been shaped by global city-style policies that have reinforced the legacies of apartheid urbanism (McDonald 2012).

While the 100UP program was aimed at improving students grades in order to allow them to meet university entrance requirements, it had a deeper psychological impact: It allowed students to imagine lives outside the township and altered how they thought about the future. “The youth think our backgrounds define or determine us,” Akona told me, “So 100UP kind of erased all of that, like it removed that heaviness, that burden that was given onto us.” A key
component of the program was making students feel comfortable in the space of the university in order to give them the sense that they belonged there. In this sense, it allowed youth like Akona to develop new aspirational identities free from the ‘burden’ of life in the township. In his study of working class youth involved in ‘aspiration raising’ program in the UK, Grant (2017) notices a similar dynamic. Programs aimed at raising aspirations often focused on ideas of spatial mobility, movement out of the community, or moving across the country to attend university. This was accompanied by negative connotations attached to ‘getting stuck’ in working class communities with few education and employment opportunities. Students comments reflected this: Khayelitsha was described as a place with “few opportunities,” one that had “no role models for the youth,” while the space of the university was one that “broadened our horizons” and “had no boundaries.”

World Class and ‘eKasi’ Universities: Understanding Higher Education Choice

The 100UP program also had the effect of reinforcing perceived differences between higher education institutions. Value was seen as residing in those HWIs, as they provided students not only with a valuable degree, but access to the social and cultural capital that would allow them to distinguish themselves from their peers. The program director explicitly directed participants to apply to their desired program at UCT, usually in sciences or commerce, and select humanities as their second option—they were also encouraged to have back up options should they not gain access to UCT. While a significant number gained access to UCT, they did not always gain access to their desired programs. The program director acknowledged that 100UP generated “huge dreams,” in which all students wanted to come to UCT, but she added, “I have to be realistic with you. Your results are a reflection of what you are capable of.”
While students’ motivations for attending UCT were shaped by exposure to campus, as described above, they were also influenced by a sense of where value lies in the higher education system. Students differentiated between universities that were ‘world class’ and those that they described as ‘eKasi universities.’ HWIs like UCT were seen as ‘world class,’ while those HBIs like UWC or CPUT were often described as eKasi universities. Ekasi is a colloquial term in isiXhosa for the township, but connotes far more than a physical space. Swartz, Harding and De Lannoy (2012) note that eKasi is a marker of youth identity that is associated with rebellion, music, fashion, violence, sex and substance abuse. Students who were accepted to UCT explained the value of a degree in relation to other institutions, which were variously described as “eKasi places,” or places for “lower types of people.”

Among those youth who gained entrance to UCT there was a clear sense that the institution offered something that others did not. Siya used a rather telling metaphor to describe how the quality of education differed between institutions:

So let me give an example, you know Woolworths? Well, it’s like UCT is Woolworths and others are like going to Shoprite. Ya bra, so my research shows that, once you graduate from UCT you will be internationally recognized. When you study at other universities, it’s like you only belong to South Africa, it’s like you have few chances to work in other parts of the world.

For Siya, UCT is the educational equivalent of South Africa’s high-end grocery chain Woolworths, which is widely seen as both an aspirational brand and one associated with middle class preferences. Other institutions, specifically CPUT and UWC, were seen as equivalents to budget grocery chains like Shoprite that cater to poor household through the provision of cheap and bulk goods. The implication then is that it is not only the type of degree offered (CPUT also

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16 In 1998 the Bureau of Market Research at the University of South Africa (UNISA) conducted a survey on lifestyles, beliefs and attitudes of the emerging African ‘middle class’ in Gauteng. The class had clear consumer preferences, favouring BMW or Mercedes cars, buying clothes from Foschini and aspiring to shop at Woolworths.
offers engineering degrees) but the value attached to these degrees. For Siya, a degree from UCT will allow him to become “internationally recognized,” expanding his horizons beyond employment in South Africa. Attending a ‘Woolworths’ university like UCT then is associated not only with middle class privilege but the ability to adopt cosmopolitan identities that transcend not only the township but the country.

One of the main reasons township youth cited for wanting to attend UCT was its ‘world class’ status. Avile, a third-year biochemistry student, summed up his decision follows:

What I know is that UCT is the best university in Africa, it’s the number one university, so I wanted to get some opportunities to study overseas because if I get a degree it’s kind of possible for me to study in Europe or Asia maybe, because they know that UCT is the best university. I applied at UCT and UWC, but what I wanted the most was UCT.

Attending an elite research university was not just about getting a degree, but opportunities and connections that opened global possibilities. This sense that UCT would allow them to become ‘global citizens’ was widespread, as students described their ambitions as: “Working for TESLA or NASA…going to Stanford…[or] working in Germany,” among other global ambitions.

Attending UCT was therefore seen as an opportunity to build global cosmopolitan identities that were absent in other institutions. Others were simply motivated by the fact that attending UCT was the surest path to a job.

Lindelwa: Why UCT? UCT because it’s easy when you are studying here to find jobs. It is a lot easier to get a job when you study here at UCT rather than studying at CPUT. It’s also easier at UWC, but when you are a UCT student you are much privileged than others.

Mbulelo was accepted to other universities around the country, including Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha, yet he decided to leave to come to UCT.

Mbulelo: The reason why I went to UCT, even though I was accepted at UWC and WSU, something told me that if I go to those other schools I won’t be able to break the pain in which my family is at. So let me try this boundary, this advanced type of thing. Let me go there and see if I can break what we are going through.
Gaining access to UCT was seen not only as a marker of privilege, an opportunity to distinguish oneself among a field of graduates, but essential to addressing poverty affecting their families (see Chapter 4). Students at other institutions, meanwhile, recognized the disadvantages they faced in not getting accepted to a school like UCT. As Zinathi, a student at UWC put it, “People go to UCT for the status, the name and the job. They check your results and they’re like UCT oh wow, or UWC red stripe!”

The belief that a degree from UCT will allow one to easily gain access to employment is not incorrect. Part of the explanation for this lies in the distinction conferred by certain institutions. Education produces what Bourdieu described as ‘acquired dispositions,’ that confer on their carriers a degree of legitimacy. At stake in the field of higher education is the accumulation of various capitals. Bourdieu describes four of them: economic, money and assets; social, affiliations and networks, family, religious and cultural heritage; cultural, forms of knowledge such as taste, aesthetic choices and language; and symbolic, things which stand for all the other forms of capital and can be exchanged for other capitals (Bourdieu 1986, Thompson 2008). Bourdieu stressed the value of cultural capital in allowing people to develop demeanors that are recognized as a legitimate by those who hold power. Students make distinctions between those institutions that will provide them with the type of capitals they need to become successful and help their families and those that do not. The distinction between ‘world class’ and ‘eKasi’ universities does not simply speak to the quality of education, but the ways in which some institutions are seen as linked to eKasi (the space and culture of the township) while the other is linked, physically and symbolically, to a larger world of opportunity beyond the township. Attending ‘world class’ universities allows these students to accumulate social and cultural
capital that allows them to develop cosmopolitan and globalized identities. This was contrasted to other universities or colleges, which as Siya put it will only “give you that mediocre life.”

While the overall level of graduate unemployment in South Africa is low, these rates are racially differentiated and can be attributed to the type of higher education institution (Van Broekhuizen 2016) A comparative study of graduates from two universities in the Eastern Cape, one HWI and one HBI, found that the unemployment rate among graduates from the HBI was almost three times higher than among graduates from the HWI (Rogan and Reynolds 2015: 9). The researchers suggest that perceptions and preferences of employers combined with a lack of appropriate social networks in the labour market are to blame for unsuccessful transition to the labour market among graduates from HBIs. In short, aspirations are also shaped by a sense of where value lies in the higher education system. Like schooling, value is often perceived as residing in those HWIs that, in the post-apartheid period, play a crucial role in the reproduction of class privilege. These institutions are seen as crucial to the acquisition of forms of social and cultural capital that will allow entry into middle class employment, careers and lifestyles. Other institutions, typically historically black institutions, were not seen as possessing the same capacity for distinction.

The distinction offered by these HWIs is reflected in changing dynamics of enrolment. Southall (2016) has suggested that, when possible, black South Africans have sought entry into those historically white institutions that are seen as conveying forms of privilege lacking elsewhere. As Cooper (2016) has also shown, more elite research universities continue to reproduce forms of class and racial privilege. Between 1988 and 1998 South Africa’s 36 higher education institutions saw an absolute increase in enrolment numbers of African students. Cooper hypothesizes that black youth, supported by their families, sought a place in higher
education in order to improve their life chances in the new South Africa. After 2000, the proportion and patterns of enrolment changes. By 2012, lower-tier, less research-intensive universities and technikons had been entirely transformed, with a majority black student body coming from poor and working-class backgrounds. The majority of upper-tier research universities, however, experienced a slowing in the proportion of their student bodies who were black. At universities like UCT, relatively few students (from all racial categories) are entering from working class or poor backgrounds—one of the reasons for the implementation of the 100UP program. The ‘stalled revolution’ he describes reveals growing divisions between a small upper-band of upper tier universities that enroll diverse students from middle class backgrounds and a larger lower-band of institutions that primarily serve poor and working-class students.

Of course, not all students who came through this program made it to UCT. While they were all told to apply, many did not meet the minimum admission criteria or failed to pass the National Benchmark Tests.\(^\text{17}\) While students did not express dismay at being accepted into other institutions, there was a sense that those who made it to UCT were better served by the program and had access to more resources.\(^\text{18}\) Students who attended UWC or CPUT also faced significant challenges living at home as they typically did not qualify for spots in university residences or additional bursary funding. Dumisa, a student at CPUT and Zakes, a student at UWC, described the challenges of being a student and living in the township:

Dumisa: When you are living in the location, I call it eKasi, there are few chances for you to study because maybe you have to wake up around 5 o’clock then maybe there are house chores you have to do and then you are coming home you have to do those things and you have to study. So you don’t have much time to study.

\(^\text{17}\) The NBTs are qualitative and quantitative literacy exams that students are required to write in Grade 12 in order to gain admission to universities like UCT.

\(^\text{18}\) This is reflected in the fact that while all students I interviewed from UWC and CPUT were funded through NSFAS, many students from UCT were funded through a combination of NSFAS and private scholarship and bursary funds.
Zakes: I do mind staying at home, it’s a disadvantage because when you’re staying at home you don’t have access to internet, you don’t have access to library at all times, you can’t study at home, there are people running in the house. There are taverns just near you. There’s your house and then there’s a tavern, so you have to study under those conditions, and you have a family, so you have no space to study!

Living at home also meant long commutes to and from campus. Students who attended CPUT and UWC were overwhelmingly funded through NSFAS and significant delays in 2016 and 2017 meant that students often did not have money to come to campus from Khayelitsha.

Johnny: Sometimes we just don’t come to school because we don’t have money to come. My mother has to pay this and she says that it’s too much for her.

CW: So NSFAS doesn’t pay for your transport?

Bhonco: No, that’s the problem. People are promised things that they do not get. That’s why some of them drop out of tertiary is because of funds.

Being a student and living in the townships posed multiple challenges to these students. Many felt abandoned by the 100UP program, complaining that those who attended UCT received all of the benefits while they were left to fend for themselves. At the same time, many of these students noted that they felt comfortable at these institutions, as they were surrounded by their peers from Khayelitsha. They took the taxi back home to Khayelitsha at the end of the day and socialized with each other in the same neighborhoods. Those students who attended UCT, however, described a more challenging process of assimilation.

‘I felt like I’m from another country’: Alienation and assimilation in higher education

Let us return for a moment to Mbulelo’s story. Mbulelo’s decision to attend UCT was shaped by his education at a private high school, his desire to help his mother and to defy

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19 Unsurprisingly, the lack of spaces in university residences was one of the key concerns of the Fees Must Fall movement at UWC. In 2015 and 2016 the ResLife coffee shop run by the university was burnt by students. Other universities have also had residence and financial aid offices targeted by protesting students. UWC has 22,000 registered students but only space for 3,302 students. In a Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training, UWC Rector Tyrone Pretorius, noted that the residence problem at UWC is a socio-economic one as students simply cannot afford to rent accommodation close to campus.
stereotypes about what a young person from a township could achieve. His experience adapting
to life at UCT has not been easy though:

They [white students] don’t care what’s happening behind at home because their parents
are rich, so the only thing they care about is having fun. For you, it’s hard to have fun
because fun means letting go of your dream and focusing on your dream too much is
killing yourself at the end of the day. You end up with nothing. You have a dream, but
what will you do with your dream? Because you have to mingle, you have to create
connections. You have to start relationships so when you start there in the workplace at
least you are able to work effectively.

This statement seems to capture many of the dilemmas experienced by black students from
working class backgrounds. First, their rationale for pursuing higher education is different from
their middle-class peers. As Mbulelo told me, he came to UCT not because he, “wants to learn
new things,” but to, “break the pain the family is living in.” This made it difficult to relate to
other more affluent, often white, students. At the same time, because he lacks the social
connections they were born with, he must interact with them. But his social background made it,
“difficult to show my true self and to engage other people because, to tell you the truth, UCT is
not accepting to everyone. It is only accepting to certain types of people.”

Mbulelo was not alone in feeling as though his rationale for attending UCT was
completely different to the more affluent students that surrounded him in class and residence.
Siya describes his first-year experience as “depressing and stressing… Although I’m from Cape
Town, I felt like I’m from another country.” He struggled to adapt to the relative comforts of life
on campus while his mother and siblings were still living in a shack in the Enkanini section of
Khayelitsha.

Siya: If you know you are really living in a place like Enkanini, you cannot just forget
about your home. For me whenever I’m being chowed by a certain course, I always think
back. When you have time to play games here, I always think what’s the difference
between what I’m doing and sleeping, and what am I bringing home? So either you think
of studying or you think of giving back to your home, so I can say to certain people from
a certain environment like Enkanini, it’s hard for them to forget about home.
Both Siya and Mbulelo describe a struggle to adapt to life on campus, as they were dogged by thoughts of their families back home. While campus life provided them with comforts, and opportunities to socialize, make connections and enjoy themselves, they struggled to balance this with thoughts of their family back in Khayelitsha. “You must discipline yourself here at UCT,” Siya told me, “You must remember that the circumstances that you are from will mould you and will make you greater person.” This statement reveals both the opportunities and the tensions of higher education for students like Siya. Coming to UCT should not make you forget where you came from; and by recognizing where you come from you will develop the resolve needed to deal with the hardships of campus life.

These tensions between the campus and township reveals the extent to which students cannot simply get rid of the ‘burden’ of their past. After all, the goal for many of them was to use their education to improve family wellbeing in the future. Many students felt torn between life on campus and the one faced by their families in the township. This recalls Fordham’s (1996) study of the ‘burden of acting white’ among African American high school students. While youth in her study wanted to achieve at school, they did not want to lose membership in community and kinship systems that were important to them. High achieving youth often ‘acted white’ but did so in order to “regain the rightful dignity of African-Americans and obtain the same opportunities and rewards as white cohorts” (Fordham 1996, 328). This resulted, she notes, in a form of double consciousness that exacted a significant psychological burden.

While student aspirations were shaped by mobility out of the township and into universities like UCT, they were also deeply influenced by the spatial fixity experienced by their families. Rather than promoting ‘thin connections’ to home, as Fataar (2009) describes it in his study of schooling migration, the experience of attending university caused many of these
students to strengthen their connections with home as they anticipated becoming providers for the family after graduation, a topic I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. Siya, for example, regularly returned to the townships on weekends to attend church with his mother. These movements between the university and the township allowed students to reconfigure bonds with family and imagine the multiple ways they would help their families overcome poverty in the future. This was critical to the construction of ‘alternate archives’ that motivated them to complete their studies.

These intimate connections to home made it difficult for students to feel comfortable on campus. These feelings of discomfort were also deeply affected by racial dynamics on campus, particularly the sense that UCT remained a culturally white university. Students coming to UCT through the 100UP program were encouraged to assimilate into the institution—hence the program’s focus on instilling social and cultural capital. Yet assimilation was not easily achieved. Vuyo described the challenge as follows:

When you come here, it’s very white for us. It doesn’t accommodate for us in any way, because we come from townships and we never been in a white environment. We’ve always been in a black environment, and there are no blacks here or even whites who accommodate us for who we are. We have to change to be like them. We have to change in order to fit in, so I can graduate feeling like I never really fit in at UCT. I have this degree, but I never fit in here.

As Vuyo’s comments reveal, black students were expected to assimilate into an institution that remained culturally white. Students had to change in order to fit in, an act that distanced them even further from their identity and attachments to home. A significant source of frustration among these students was how the issue of language marked them as outsiders within the institution.

Phumeza: The thing is when you get here, and you’re from the township, you went to black only schools and all that and Xhosa was used as your mother tongue, and you get here and it feels foreign, it feels like you’re not in Cape Town anymore. And that takes
your self-esteem away, and it decreases it. Your fluency in English, when you hear other
students questioning the lecturer, and you think OK, I can’t do this. So that lowers your
self-esteem, and then you struggle with your studies.

Phumeza’s comment highlights the relationship between language, alienation and space. The
university was not only far removed from Khayelitsha, but the city of Cape Town where students
could get-by in isiXhosa. Having to talk in English all the time deeply affected their sense of self
and place. Students like Akona recognized though that it was only through improving their
English that they could succeed, but this came at a cost: “When we get here, we abandon our
language. We abandon ourselves trying to conform to the standards of this place.”

Linguistic capital, in the South African context, is a form of cultural capital as it is
associated with better schools (with some describing it as an ‘amaModel-C accent’) and
university education. In a study of high school students, Mckinney (2007) found that youth
attach prestige to the uses of English, usually those associated former ‘Model C’ forms of
schooling. As Bourdieu (1991, 66) said of language, “Utterances are not only (save in
exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth,
intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and
obeyed.” English is widely seen as crucial to securing employment in an increasingly service
dominated economy. A report by Higher Education South Africa and the South African
Qualifications Authority found that employers regarded proficiency in English as one of the most
important competencies of recent graduates (City Press 2012). Studies also confirm the value of
English proficiency to income levels, with those who are proficient having an earnings advantage
of 55% over those who are not (Posel and Casale 2010).

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20 Formerly white schools that integrated starting in the early 1990s.
Aspiration-raising programs, Grant (2017) argues, are aimed at transforming young people’s *habitus* through pedagogy and placing higher education within their field of vision. In doing so, however, they also have a number of other effects. The 100UP program allowed students to realize their aspirations by expanding the possibilities open to them. It allowed them to develop navigational capacities that they were unable to access in the township. However, even as it raised students’ aspirations and helped them gain access to these institutions it also individualized forms of educational success and failure. Rather than addressing the causes of low rates of enrolment among students from Khayelitsha, the program provided pathways for a limited number of high achieving students in line with the university’s mandate to enrol more black students from poorer backgrounds.

In some cases, students recognized these limits, criticizing the program for inflating students’ aspirations or for providing opportunities for a limited number of students while not considering the fate of other youth from the township. Some students criticized the program for inflating students’ expectations and then not providing them with support once they got to campus.

Thandi: The university wants to attract us, which is something, to us at the end of the day I think it affects us very negatively because we come here with expectations and they don’t really deliver on these expectations and that’s kind of unfair.

In a focus group discussion, I asked students whether they thought the 100UP program was a significant contributor to transformation at UCT.

Male UCT Student: For me, UCT through 100UP, it’s them making an image to people, especially like you from Canada, that there are big transformations happening and their transformation is good and they are improving black lives. But for me that’s not true. It’s not true because there are thousands of black minds in Khayelitsha that are good, they are even brighter than I am, black students who are capable of being in this institution. And then these students come through 100UP, they are exposed and then some of them they get into UCT, but they can’t handle the stress the life at UCT and then they drop out. But you don’t hear about that.
While students recognized the value of the program to their own lives, it was also seen as a superficial form of transformation that did not address the structural barriers that limited higher education access. There is a contradictory element to these ‘aspiration raising’ programs. While they acknowledge the structural challenges faced by these students in township schools, the solutions they propose are individualized. Students themselves are encouraged to improve their individual grades and develop aspirations toward higher education. The question of whether these institutions should change their admission standards to facilitate enrolment of ‘non-traditional’ students is not considered. This is not a new dilemma. In the 1980s a small number of black students gained access to historically white institutions. In order to prepare them to meet the standards of these universities, educational development initiatives were launched aimed at providing academic support. As Boughey (2007, 7) notes, many of these programs, “were liberal in practice as they located the phenomenon of ‘unpreparedness’ or ‘disadvantage’ in factors inherent to the individual.”

In a further set of interviews, I asked students to offer their own definitions of what they thought a transformed institution would look like:

Mbulelo: A transformed UCT would be a space where if I come here I feel comfortable and I see possibilities in my dreams. I see it is possible to make my dreams come true. I don’t have to suffer and see other people better than me.

Samkelo: When you come to a place like this where literally everything is white, in your subconscious, it identifies academics with those people. So, if there could be black people there I could say oh I identify with someone there. So, I think that is what it means to me. So I can look at the institution and say, oh that’s my institution because it reflects who I am.

Vuyo: I think a transformed UCT would be a UCT that accommodates for everyone. It is a university where if you speak your language you aren’t going to be looked down on. Because now if we speak our language we are looked down on. I think that a transformed UCT is a UCT that accommodates everyone.
Students expressed desires for the institution itself to change in order to accommodate them, not requiring them to simply assimilate. They expressed desires for changes that would allow them to feel welcome and at home in the institution, these included changes to language policy but also an acknowledgment that the *habitus* that these students bring with them is quite different from their more affluent and white peers.

**Race, Space and *Habitus***

While programs like 100UP allowed working class youth to partially transform their *habitus* and imagine themselves attending higher education institutions, their experience within these institutions revealed the tensions inherent to this transformational process. The program instilled in them the value of HWIs, which they believed would allow them to transform their personal and familial circumstances. Yet in attending these institutions their backgrounds, particularly their relations to family within the township, conflicted with the new set of dispositions they were asked to embody in these institutions. As their narratives reveal, this produced deep personal conflicts, as students were torn between the cosmopolitan lifestyle of an elite university campus and their deep attachments to family and community back in the township.

This transformation process reveals both the flexibility of *habitus* and its endurance. Bourdieu (2005, 45) defines *habitus* as, “a set of acquired characteristics which are the products of social conditions.” It is possible then for *habitus* to transform, as individuals experience changes in their environment or through experiences like education and training. Working class youth may not see themselves as destined for higher education due to an array of social, financial and familial factors, but these beliefs can be altered. Because *habitus* is a product of history, it can be transformed through new experiences. Bourdieu (2005, 43) describes it as, “a system of
long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes of schemata or structures of perception, conception and action.”

In the sociology of education literature, *habitus* is primarily used to describe how education systems tend to reproduce class inequalities. For Bourdieu, individuals enter certain terrains of social relations, which he calls fields. The university, for example, is a field constituted by relations of power among individuals and the institution. In order for these fields to reproduce themselves, certain forms of *habitus* must be produced that are attuned to the field. In other words, people come into these fields either knowing the rules of the game or they learn a new set of rules. *Habitus* is shaped by social relations in these fields, but can also evolve on the basis of new experiences. Bourdieu describes this as follows:

> Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subject to new experiences and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal! (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 133).

Experiences of education, migration or rapid social change, for example, are all liable to change the nature of *habitus* within any given field. In his later work, Bourdieu (2000, 2000b, 2005) worked to distance himself from determinist readings of *habitus* in which one’s social background simply determined one’s fate in life. *Habitus*, he emphasized, is a product of history, it can be changed but it also leaves a watermark or a trace on our lives that is not easily forgotten. In *The Weight of the World*, he writes, that the attempt by marginalized populations to transform their lives, often results in “A *habitus* divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self” (Bourdieu 2000b, 511).

The case of the 100UP students provides a critical illustration of how *habitus* is both a flexible and durable set of dispositions. Through their experience in the 100UP program, these
students were able to develop aspirations toward attending higher education institutions. Once they arrived in these institutions though, they were encouraged to assimilate into a dominant culture that was distant, if not openly hostile, to their social backgrounds. This alienation was often expressed in racial terms as the institution was seen as a comfortable space for white students but not particularly welcoming to those black students who came from Khayelitsha. As a result, the process of assimilating into the hegemonic culture of a historically white university was deeply alienating. While they recognized the value of attending a historically white institution, they frequently thought of their family and peers back in the township and the lives they led. In short, their previous *habitus* came into conflict with the new social field they occupied. Even as their *habitus* was flexible and allowed them to develop aspirations toward these spaces, it did not, as Akona put it, fully remove the ‘burden’ of their past.

In a study of working class university students in the UK, Grant (2017) describes a similar phenomenon, in which neoliberal notions of individual responsibility and mobility came into conflict with working class values of solidarity and care. The tension between these two fields led students to feel as though they were being pulled in different directions, a process Bourdieu (2000) describes as a ‘destabilized *habitus*.’ In a similar vein, Pimlott-Wilson (2011) describes how young people’s career aspirations are not just the result of their social background; their aspirations toward work and education are often quite different from their parents. At the same time, connections to family still played a prominent role in shaping the possibilities available to youth.

**Conclusion**

As Appadurai (2004) emphasizes, it is not that the poor do not aspire to a better life, but that the possibilities for them to realize these aspirations occur on a much more fragile terrain,
marked by limited opportunities and connections. In these cases, they develop ‘alternate archives’ that allow them to aspire. Youth from working class townships like Khayelitsha occupy an urban space that, historically, was defined by superfluity. In the post-apartheid period, however, the township occupies a very different space. It is both a peripheral space defined by poverty, crime and informality, and one that is highly connected to the circuits of information and labour flows that characterize the post-apartheid city. Schooling migration out of the township, for example, is one of the many ways in which township residents attempt to access the connections, opportunities and resources that were previously denied to them. As Fataar (2009) emphasizes, it is through these movements across the divided city that new subjectivities attached to education and, ultimately social mobility, are built.

The narratives drawn from township students enrolled in higher education reveal the complexities of aspiration and how it is influenced by social background, race and space. The ‘alternate archives’ they construct are built through systems of spatial mobility out of the township, the opportunities provided by tutoring programs, and desires to affect change within their households. These archives allow young people to imagine futures in which they are not constrained by the township and relations therein. Space therefore played a fundamental role in developing particular subjectivities around higher education. At the same time, the space of the elite university was a constant reminder of their own backgrounds and the struggles their families endured.

Focusing on how young people develop aspirations toward higher education foregrounds the agency that they have in educational decision making. At the same time, drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* reveals how these aspirations are often in tensions with systems that reproduce social inequalities. The opportunities provided by this particular program, for
example, ultimately individualize educational struggles that limit access to the vast majority of young people from townships like Khayelitsha. It is not simply low grades and limited social capital that are causes of low rates of enrolment and drop out, but structural factors such as low quality basic education, household poverty and unemployment. It is important then to balance the agency that young people have with the structures that ultimately constrain this agency. Educational aspirations coexist with circumstances of household poverty and fragility, making it difficult for young people to simply ‘transcend their geography.’

Raising young people’s aspirations toward higher education should also been seen as a component part of a broader neoliberal policy shift, in which states are concerned with the development of human capital (Vally and Motala 2014). As Pimlott-Wilson (2015, 9) has written of students in the UK, “Contemporary neoliberal policy individualizes responsibility for structural problems…by promoting education as a route to self-improvement and social mobility without challenging the capitalist system that creates, and indeed relies on, inequality.” This downloading of responsibility onto young people is what she calls the ‘affective operation’ of neoliberal governance. In South Africa, this affective operation of neoliberal governance frequently takes the form of ‘resilience.’ Youth are praised for their resilience, for being agents of change in the face of poverty and crisis. In her reflection on young people’s hopes for the future, for example, Ramphele (2002) suggests that resilience is fundamental to the experience of black South Africans who, through the apartheid years, kept the hope of a better tomorrow alive. And yet twenty years after the end of apartheid, this celebration of resilience risks reducing the universalist impulse of the liberation struggle to individual triumphs over adversity. Amidst the decline in stable wage labour, the growth of precarious work, and inequalities that shape education access, young South Africans are frequently told to be resilient and appreciate the
opportunities that were denied to their parents. Understandably, the contrast between this rhetoric and the daily realities for millions of young South Africans is at the centre of significant anger and frustration.

Aspiration, as some scholars have described it, is the hegemonic form of hope in neoliberal society (Grant 2017). It is intended to subvert expectations of guaranteed employment or income security, and develop dispositions toward mobile and flexible futures in which students invest in themselves and their success. And yet these individualized understandings of education frequently come into conflict with the other meanings and values that young people assign to education. For students who are the first in their families to come to higher education institutions, success is not merely an individual endeavour, but tied to the future well-being of their families. Failure or exclusion impacts not just them but prospects for their family to lead a better life. Camagu sums up these realities, which we turn to in the following two chapters: “If I don’t succeed, it will be hard to eliminate poverty in my family. That pressure is on me. If I don’t, nobody will. That is what motivates me.”
Chapter 3

Asinamali\textsuperscript{21}: #FeesMustFall, Debt and the Right to Education

“Aspiration and indebtedness are intertwined.” - Deborah James (2014, 237).

In a widely played television commercial in South Africa, a six-year-old child living in a shack pens a letter to a current recipient of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS): “Dear NSFAS beneficiary,” he writes, “I am writing to you to plead with you to pay back the loan which you received from NSFAS…so that the NSFAS can assist my sister to attend tertiary institutions like you did. My sister’s future is in your hands.” With tears in her eyes, the sister later reads the letter and stares into the distance, presumably realizing that her dreams of pursuing higher education have been thwarted by a loan defaulter. This commercial was part of the organization’s effort to encourage past students to pay back some R24.2billion in loans owed by over 500,000 former students (NSFAS 2016b). Released to coincide with the second wave of the #FMF movement, the commercial reflected the state’s position at the time that the cost of education should be shared between graduates, families and the state. In their 2015/16 annual report NSFAS executives opined that an, “entrenched culture of non-repayment” was widespread among students forcing them to take additional steps to ensure loan repayment (NSFAS 2016, 26).

High levels of student indebtedness involve far more than simply a culture of non-repayment. Rising levels of student debt has coincided with rising tuition costs and a growing number of students from lower income households entering higher education. In 2017, I met up

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\textsuperscript{21} Asinamali is an isiXhosa phrase that translates as ‘we don’t have money,’ and is a widely used slogan in both student and worker mobilizations in South Africa.
with Zakes, a former NSFAS beneficiary who had recently dropped out of UWC due to financial pressures on his family (see Chapter 4). I asked him whether he was thinking of returning to school the following year, and he responded that it depends on the position his family is in. But he added, “I have been receiving those letters from NSFAS.” Those letters being requests from NSFAS to consider his loan repayment options. “I just throw those away.” Zakes had little interest in repaying his NSFAS loan in 2017. It was not that he was unaware of the debt, or that he wasn’t interested in furthering his education. But his financial obligations, at least at the time, lay elsewhere. He was unemployed and the small amounts of income he earned from tutoring students or coaching sports teams went to the household. Rather than a ‘culture of non-repayment,’ his actions reflected the complex social entanglements of debt and obligation affecting many young South Africans. Taking on NSFAS loans allowed Zakes to pursue higher education, but the debt burden inspired contradictory feelings. Was debt ‘worth it’? What forms of obligations mattered more, those owed to the state or families?

In this chapter I examine the role that debt played in the 2015-2016 #FMF protests. A common demand raised across multiple campuses was the scrapping of debts owed to the state and institutions. While this demand existed amidst many others (see Chapter 5) it could be found on the memorandum of demands at both HBIs and HWIs. I suggest that looking at how young people speak about debt provides important insights into the causes that underpinned #FMF, particularly the complex social entanglements of education, the family and the right to education. Interviews with students from working class households in Khayelitsha suggests that debt played a pivotal role in support for these protests. These students expressed support for the protests by drawing on narratives of debt and the burden that ‘future debt’ would impose on them and their families. While ‘debt’ to families was seen as moral, debt owed to the state or institutions was
not. These differing moralities around debt repayment are, I argue, political responses to the commodification of higher education and concerns that students had about their future role as breadwinners. Debt refusal and anger at the state’s proposal to simply expand the NSFAS scheme suggest that many poor and black students see education as a right; they are opposed to both further commodification and see education as something that was previously struggled for. At the same time, the continuation of protests into 2015 and 2016 caused some students to fear that the value of their education would be negatively affected by the protests. I highlight the importance of understanding debt in spatial and temporal perspective, connected to both anticipated futures and the racialized experiences of poverty in the past and present. Here I draw on Harker’s (2017) notion of ‘debt ecologies’ to describe the social entanglements of debt in students’ lives.

History of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme

NSFAS builds on the Tertiary Education Fund of South Africa (TEFSA) established in 1991. NSFAS was established in 1995 and became a statutory government agency in 1999. The goal of NSFAS was broadly in line with the state’s higher education transformation agenda, which was aimed at both reforming a fragmented system and admitting more disadvantaged students. NSFAS provides income contingent loans to financially needy and academically deserving students attending public higher education institutions. The loan is ultimately repayable but 40% of it can be converted to a bursary based on academic performance. These loans are funded through state budgetary allocations as well as donations from foreign governments, philanthropies and business. Soon after its introduction, borrower demand

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22 Students can also apply to their institution’s financial aid office for the NSFAS final-year program, where they can have their loans converted to a bursary if they pass all their final year courses and graduate.
outpaced supply. In 1996, 223,000 students applied for loans while only 70,000 could be assisted. While the state’s contribution to NSFAS increased substantially from R40million in 1995 to R2.7billion in 2010, demand continues to outpace supply of funds (De Villiers 2017, 5). Despite its limitations, NSFAS has played a significant role in transforming the demographics within higher education. By 2013, 15.9% of all undergraduate degree program students were receiving some sort of NSFAS funding (van Broekhuizen 2015, 134). The growth of black student enrolments is, in no small part, due to the fact that between 1999 and 2015, 93% of all NSFAS recipients were black (Ibid., 9).

However, the pressure of increasing enrolments has also meant that the real value of state appropriation per full time student has declined over time. As a result, institutions have raised fees resulting in NSFAS funds being stretched even further. Prior to 2016, the funding allocation formula for NSFAS used race as a proxy for disadvantage. The weighted number of disadvantaged students (WDS) at each institution was calculated using the following formula: WDS=(Full Time Equivalent Black Students x 3) + (Full Time Equivalent Coloured Students x 2) + (Full Time Equivalent Indian Students x 1). Funds were provided to institutions using this formula, and institutions themselves were then responsible for implementing a means test (using guidelines provided by NSFAS) and distributing funds according to the following formula: NSFAS award = costs – bursaries – expected family contribution. This model, however, was fraught with problems resulting in few students receiving the full amount to cover all of their costs.

First, this model relied on the administrative capacity of student financial aid offices to record and transmit information about students and their grades, a process that was time consuming and resulted in significant delays in students receiving their funding. Second, demand
continued to outpace the supply of funds available. Despite annual funding increases, the number of NSFAS students has not significantly increased since 2012 (see Table 3). In fact, the number of students funded by NSFAS dropped between 2012 and 2014 even as funding increased (NSFAS 2016, 10). Third, students are often funded inadequately which exacerbates high rates of drop out.

Up until 2016, funds were provided directly to institutions that then allocated them to a pool of financially needy students. This resulted in a practice known as ‘top-slicing,’ in which NSFAS funds were essentially spread over a pool of qualifying students resulting in many receiving less than the recommended amount. In 2005, for example, the average NSFAS loan was R10,000, a fraction of the cost of a university degree (Letseka and Maile 2008). As NSFAS themselves recognized in a submission to the Heher commission on higher education funding, “all [students] are underfunded to a greater or lesser degree” (NSFAS 2016, 6). Finally, students had to apply for NSFAS funds each year in order to qualify for funding for the following year. In interviews, students described this as “humiliating” as they were called on to prove their poverty each year, but beyond this it also meant that students sometimes did not qualify for funding in subsequent years. According to this funding model, students were ranked from the most financially needy to those who could contribute financially to their education. If household income changed (going above the R120,000 per year threshold, for example) then students would no longer qualify.

In 2010 NSFAS went through a ministerial review process where it was acknowledged that students were underfunded and that a new funding formula was needed in order to adequately support students. The report recommended funding increases that would, “progressively provide free higher education to undergraduate level for students from poor and
working class communities” (DHET 2010, 124). While government funding increased rapidly following the report, NSFAS officials noted that this had “counterintuitive effects”:

One is that we’ve actually seen that we’ve had increased funding but the increased funding hasn’t necessarily always tied into an increase in the number of students we’re funding… So they’re better funded but not necessarily more of them are funded.

While the process of top-slicing resulted in a larger pool of students being covered by NSFAS it did not mean that they were necessarily well funded. Reforms introduced by NSFAS have attempted to grapple with this and funding increases have resulted in students being provided with more funding, although this has not substantially increased the number of students receiving funding, as Table 3 highlights.

Table 3: Total Enrolment and NSFAS Supported Students in Public Universities 1996-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Enrolment (by headcount)</th>
<th>NSFAS-Supported*</th>
<th>% of NSFAS Supported Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>576 872</td>
<td>67 709</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>580 060</td>
<td>64 433</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>591 831</td>
<td>67 598</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>585 234</td>
<td>68 416</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>590 153</td>
<td>71 080</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>652 421</td>
<td>80 593</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>675 160</td>
<td>86 194</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>717 793</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>985 212</td>
<td>178 961</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Moeketsi and Maile (2008, 6); Council on Higher Education, Participation Data 2007-2013; De Villiers (2017) *Note: This includes students enrolled in South Africa’s 26 public higher education institutions and does not include NSFAS-supported students enrolled in Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges. The percentage of NSFAS supported students also varies significantly by institution.
Problems with the old model combined with pressure from students through the #FMF protests, resulted in NSFAS rolling out a ‘student centred’ model in 2016/2017. In this model students applied directly to NSFAS, with NSFAS paying tuition and accommodation funds directly to the university and, in the future, providing students with book and meal vouchers through their cell phones. While this new system was meant to address problems of inefficiencies and underfunding that characterized the old model, it was not without its own problems (See Image 7). In 2017 NSFAS had a significant backlog of loan forms from 2016 and institutions were delayed in sending final exam results due to #FMF protests. This resulted in many students not knowing whether they were funded or not well into the academic year. Delays in NSFAS funding were frequently the cause of protests on campuses around the country. In August 2018, for example, students at the University of Venda shut down the campus and refused to allow staff to reopen it until they had received their NSFAS allowances (Mathe 2018).

As Table 3 reveals, while funding increases saw an initial increase in the number of students funded between 2010 and 2012, this increase had declined by 2015.

Limited state investment and rising demand led NSFAS to view debt recovery as fundamental to its future. In their annual report the year after the #FMF protests, the NSFAS board noted that they would be forced to accelerate the collection of outstanding loans. Between 2011 and 2015 there was a 61% drop in loan recoveries (NSFAS 2016). NSFAS seconded staff from major banking houses and government to work on debt recovery, allowing NSFAS to boost loan recoveries from R14million in September 2015 to R25million in March 2016 (NSFAS 2016). Yet even as the scheme has repeatedly declared that there are insufficient funds to support students, it regularly reported surpluses. In 2017 NSFAS reported a surplus of R2.5billion (The Citizen 2017). Appearing in front of a parliamentary committee, the scheme’s CEO was
criticized for not doing enough to fund needy students and prevent further rounds of protest. An incident in which NSFAS accidently paid one student R14million was widely seen as illustrative of bureaucratic incompetence within the organization.

Aside from a ‘culture of non-repayment,’ NSFAS officials noted that, “some universities do a particularly good job of saying this is a loan it’s repayable and some universities haven’t done such a good job.” Interviews with students receiving NSFAS confirmed this.

Siya: Even in the name for NSFAS, you are confused, because it’s financial aid, but that should be substituted with loan. I think that’s a thing that they use to not scare away students, because if you are calling it a loan then most of the black students won’t come here… When I arrived in first year I was so chill, I thought NSFAS is going to do everything, and then some students told me no this is not your money, you have to pay it back.

CW: But did they tell you NSFAS was a loan?

Xolile: No, I didn’t know about that! I only knew when they told us during O-Week that this is a debt that you have to pay and I was like what? Yoh I thought it was a bursary. So I didn’t know that.

As a result, many students were simply unaware that NSFAS was something that had to be repaid, or it conflicted with other notions about the cost of education and what should be borne by the state. Yet as NSFAS officials also reported, they had done a poor job of tracing graduates and those who had dropped out of higher education making it difficult to collect debt repayments.

NSFAS official: The other big area for us in non-repayment is NSFAS not having put into place significant enough effort to trace and track debtors post-exit. So, in a sense, we have had that challenge, where if we can’t find the debtor and if they’re not employed in the formal sector, we have just lost them.

The case of Zakes described in the opening section is illustrative of this. Zakes is unemployed, working informally for small amounts of money and living with his mother. He is not registered with the South African Revenue Service and not paying any income tax or contributing to the
Unemployment Insurance Fund. While he was not making enough money yet to start repaying his loan, he was able to evade NSFAS as many others have. These tactics of evasion are a significant factor in non-repayment, causing NSFAS to use private debt collection agencies to hound students for repayment.

Conflicting viewpoints about debt emerged during the #FMF protests, as the state sought to expand access through increasing funding and eligibility for NSFAS (in line with their belief that part of the cost of higher education should be borne by individuals and families), while students simply saw NSFAS as a mechanism to pass the burden of debt on to students.

Students’ Feelings Toward NSFAS and #FMF

In the 2015 and 2016 #FMF protests, students were adamant that they were not demanding cheaper higher education or higher education through increased debt burdens, but free higher education. For this reason, many of them opposed ideas of expanding the NSFAS system or allowing the NSFAS system to work with private banks in order to offer loans to middle income students. As Palesa, a student activist at UWC put it:

They are giving us NSFAS and NSFAS is just a loan. So even though now they are saying, ok we are clearing you, you can register, what happens is that with the grant they give you, they will pay your fees from last year and you will not be fully covered this year. So you will get NSFAS but you won’t be able to buy your textbooks, so it won’t be adequate. It is never adequate. Some students are excited ok I can register for free and then then they are inside. Besides money, NSFAS pays for tuition, food, books and transport. Transport never comes out in time, so you have to find that money. Sometimes you never get your transport money. We don’t want NSFAS as a system, we should reject NSFAS wholly…

Palesa’s comments highlight multiple grievances students expressed toward NSFAS. First were frustrations with the distribution of NSFAS funds, which were often delayed or inadequate.

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23 Students start paying back their loans once they are making above R30,000 per annum. This is well below the monthly sectoral minimum wages. Media reports with former borrowers detail the ways in which private debt collection agencies go after borrowers even when they are unemployed (Malibi 2017).
Second, is that fact NSFAS is ultimately a loan, one that is ultimately repayable, at least in part, by the poorest students.

Students from Khayelitsha who were receiving funding through NSFAS had mixed feelings toward it. Students recognized that without it they would never have the money to cover their tuition fees and registration costs, at the same time, problems with the distribution of funds made studying, getting to campus, and covering other incidental costs difficult.

Alice: They give us the book allowance, so they were only paying for my tuition and travelling allowance, but they didn’t even give us the travelling allowance, just tuition. So ya the university was telling me I have to pay, I have to pay, so that was stressful.

Likho: This year I got nothing. For transport I got nothing, even last year I got nothing. They said we would get money for transport, but even last year I got nothing for transport. Even this year, they only gave me food allowance. That’s R3,700 for the whole year. It only came this year, in January, last year I didn’t get anything. This January they gave me the R3000. I’m still waiting for the money for this year. That’s CPUT for you. So we are waiting, always waiting.

The problems with the administration and distribution of funds that Alice and Likho mention resulted in the implementation of the ‘student centred model’ in 2017. However, backlogs and delayed academic results led to significant problems with students receiving their funds in a timely manner. Inadequate NSFAS funding has also been blamed for high rates of drop out among recipients. While internal NSFAS studies have shown that NSFAS-funded students tend to do better and have lower rates of drop out compared to non-NSFAS funded students, a high number still drop out. According to an OECD (2013, 79) study, in 2009 about 48% of students who had borrowed from NSFAS had dropped out without completing their studies.

Receiving NSFAS was often seen as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it allowed students like Siya to attend the top university in the country. On the other, he expressed concern that the costs of his education would catch up with both him and his family one day.
Siya: Debt is killing us. There are times when they say, you will enjoy it wena, but at the end of the day these debts, they are increasing each year…Ya so NSFAS does help us, but the whole country was telling us the fees are going to increase. So with the debt we already have, we have to ask ourselves, what about our parents bra? They are having hope in us that we will help them when we work. So ya we would like eliminate NSFAS at the end of the day, but it is motivating. Right now we should not demolish NSFAS because it helps us and gives us hope because you don’t come to UCT with nothing, with no funding.

Unlike Palesa, Siya did not want to see NSFAS abolished as without it he and his peers from Khayelitsha would not be able to attend university. “I kind of like it,” he told me referring to NSFAS, “because without it I wouldn’t be here. You can be happy, but then there’s the debts.”

His concern over NSFAS was the way in which it transferred costs onto him and his family at a later stage. Here Palesa and Siya’s concerns converged.

Palesa: The problem with NSFAS is the black tax. Sometimes we support ten other family members because of this black tax. Even myself, probably myself I’ll study with NSFAS, get that loan and then each and every year it’s another loan. You get out, and then I have black tax. I need to start building my mother a house. I need to start taking care of my siblings. I have fathers, grandfathers, I have cousins who are looking up to me and saying eh you are done studying, now you are working. They are looking to me as the messiah. Hey, help me. What time do I have for NSFAS?

While they expressed differences about the role NSFAS played, both of them were concerned that increasing levels of debt would affect their role to act as providers for the family one day (See Chapter 4). Concerns over the implementation of the NSFAS system and the ways in which it passed debt on to families were key factors shaping student support for the #FMF protests of 2015 and 2016.

In a similar vein, students’ feelings towards the #FMF protests were often framed around the impact of increasing fees and debt on their families.

CW: Why did you support Fees Must Fall?

Akona: It was about my sisters, who are going to come here. It was a family thing, because my sister is in grade 12 and she is aspiring. She wants to come here and study,
and what if she doesn’t get a bursary? What if she is under that financial debt that I will also have to contribute because she is my family, so most people don’t understand why we are protesting.

Phumeza related the protests directly to her family and the obligations she anticipates after graduation.

Phumeza: I think it was an important struggle because the fees at UCT are really high, and then with education made as an access to wealth, but how do you do that if you are from a poor community? You go to UCT and then NSFAS pays for you for all these years and then you finish and get a job and you have this big debt to pay back, and you still have to look after your family? So, for me, I’m the third child of seven kids and my parents are both uneducated and they’re both unemployed. My two older sisters are working, but they only finished matric [grade 12] and went to work. So, after this I have to look after the whole family.

Students’ reflections on #FMF frequently drew upon narratives of the family, anticipated obligations, and the heavy burden that debt imposed on them as poor students. As Thandi described it, the fee increase simply meant, “you end up paying off that debt rather than helping your family.” She adds, however, that not all students were impacted equally by fee increases.

Thandi: The main reason this movement was formed is that a lot of the people affected were black students. And it’s true, the people who have financial aid are black students and most people who can’t afford education are black students. There are some black students who are well off, but they are in the minority.

Samkelo echoed these sentiments, noting both the obligation that many first-generation students have to family and the fact that these affect primarily black students.

CW: So you were supportive of Fees Must Fall?

Samkelo: I think it’s great. One thing I think at the moment that we should understand is that even though right now I’m studying through a loan that I don’t have to worry about, but then when I leave varsity and have to start a career I’ll have this huge baggage. And as black people in this country we have this black tax, so you have all of that burden when you are done. So it sets you back a bit from your peers. You aren’t on the same level as them. So that’s what Fees Must Fall was about, at least for me.

For Thandi, Phumeza, Akona, Samkelo and Siya, the burden of debt was described in temporal, familial and racial terms. One of the defining features of debt, as Peebles (2010, 226) notes, is
“its ability to link the present to the past and the future.” Concerns around debt were not merely over rising tuition costs and the subsequent commodification of education, but the entanglements of pasts defined by racialized poverty, present struggles over access and exclusion, and imagined futures in which education would bring a better life for the family. These experiences of obligation and aspiration and the looming prospect of debt repayment motivated many students to support #FMF, whether directly through engaging in protest marches or simply by voicing support on social media.

Student descriptions of debt frequently touched upon the way in which education held promises for the future that could be affected by the disabling nature of debt. Akona, for example, noted that in high school they were told to:

…go and reach for the stars. But you are telling them to go and reach for the stars with all that debt in their name. They have to pay back that debt given to them by an education system that said to us and our parents and grandparents, we’re going to be educated for free. But now we are being imprisoned with debt.

When I asked Siya whether he has spoken to his mother about the debt he has to pay when he has finished, he responded:

You can’t go back to your parents and show them what you owe. The fact is we came here to try and change that. I don’t want to be the one who is looked after. After UCT I must be the provider, not like the other way around.

Students described debt as a ‘burden,’ a ‘prison,’ a ‘headache,’ a ‘stress’ or as something that was ‘killing them’ and ‘hanging over their heads’. Others were convinced that they would be able to turn their loans into bursaries by working hard, lessening the debt burden. Nobuhle told me that through hard work and through her belief in god she will pay less debt one day: “He’s going to come through for you in time of distress and I believe so much in him now that I have established a relationship with him, things are going to get much easier.”
Not all students, however, expressed concerns over debt or supported #FMF. Students like Victoria were confident that they would be able to find work after they graduate. Her main concern was that “NSFAS isn’t doing a good job. A lot of students are complaining, they don’t get funds from NSFAS. They are struggling to pay for fees.” Students who attended UWC paid lower tuition costs, and therefore did not accrue the same levels of debt as students who attended UCT. While she expressed frustration over NSFAS as a system, she did not support #FMF as it did not address the problems she faced.

Victoria: I don’t think FMF has helped, not at all. I see no change; things are still the way they were before. It’s even worse getting accommodation. Students are using cardboards as beds in the passages. Even students who come from Joburg it’s hard for them to find a place. They refer you to private accommodation, but that can be expensive, and sometimes NSFAS doesn’t pay.

Other students were sympathetic to #FMF but adamant that they had worked hard to get into university and obtain scholarships. “I do hear their cry,” Nomvula, a first-year student at UCT told me, “but if the fees fall, it seems that our education is going to be the one that is going to suffer.” Opposition to #FMF among some of these students was either focused on the fact that little had changed for them, or fear that the quality of their education would be affected by increasing access. While few were outwardly hostile, some questioned the result of expanding access or eliminating fees in a context in which demand for higher education was high. Nomvula continued to express her concern to me in email exchanges in 2016. Just after campus had been shut down by the second wave of protests delaying her exams, she told me she had decided to leave UCT and look internationally, asking me to send on information about scholarships in Canada.

In a reflection on key themes from #FMF protest materials, Godsell and Chikane (2016) note that the NSFAS system humiliated students, it made them prove that they were poor and
made the issue of talking about debt shameful. Rather than debt and poverty being sources of shame, students I interviewed drew on these experiences, illustrating how the protests spoke to forms of intergenerational poverty that affected their families and their desires to do something about it. Debt was a source of anxiety and concern, but it held ambiguous meanings. On the one hand the NSFAS system allowed access to thousands of poor students. In this sense, it was an investment in an education that would bring future returns. On the other, this pursuit involved taking on a significant debt burden. Even if this could be converted to a bursary, it was still seen as a hindrance to their imagined role as providers for the family. These ambiguous feelings inspired a range of reactions to the #FMF movement which drew upon their own personal and family histories. At times these were motivated by concerns over the burden of debt, while others expressed concern that #FMF would diminish the value of an education they had worked so hard to attain.

Debt, Morality and the Right to Higher Education

As anthropologists have recognized, debt has a social character and coexists with other social commitments and forms of obligation (Guyer 2004). Because of a long history of proletarianization in South Africa, debt has often taken on negative connotations of entrapment to trading stores or, more recently, through hire-purchase schemes. Yet as James (2014) has noted, the rapid increase in consumer debt in post-apartheid South Africa suggest that debt is not only considered as a form of entrapment as it coexists with rising expectations, aspirations and obligations to family. After all, the end of apartheid, “was not only [about] political liberation but also wealth, comfort and well-being that were hoped for” (James 2014, 228). Increasing

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24 By 2011 household debt as a percentage of disposable income was 76%, ratcheting up from 50% in 2002; and consumer debt stood at R1.2-trillion, up from R300-billion in 2002 (McGroarty 2012).
borrowing and indebtedness are not only due to factors of political economy, but people’s expectations of what life after apartheid should be like.

Low rates of NSFAS repayment suggest that institutional understandings of responsibility (paying back debt) confront young people’s differential understandings about wealth, time and obligation. The question of whether people are morally obligated to repay their debts has been explored by Shipton (2010) and Graeber (2011) who question the seemingly self-evident truth that people, or even nations, have a responsibility to pay back debt. The non-repayment of NSFAS debt, or anxieties associated with it, cannot only be considered in cultural relativist terms. In South Africa, debt has a political character. During the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, there was strong opposition against paying for municipal services, an impulse that became known by municipal officials as a, “culture of non-payment” (Von Schnitzler 2008, 906). This culture was informed by both opposition to the apartheid state and an understanding of citizenship rights to basic services. Indeed, recent years have seen waves of protest as poor communities demand access to services promised to them (Alexander 2010). At the same time, the post-apartheid state has embarked on a range of initiatives to encourage people to ‘be responsible’ and pay their bills and service fees (Fjeldstad 2004). James (2014) suggests that there is something of the political character of this culture of non-repayment that has remained. While NSFAS officials blamed low rates of repayment on institutions not explaining to students that this was a loan, it is entirely possible that even as student recognized this they simply considered access to higher education a right.

Students’ reflections on debt highlight the social embeddedness of debt and higher education. In his work on young people’s experiences of debt in the UK, Horton (2017) suggests that debt is becoming increasingly commonplace and normalized among young people and that
these narratives are infused with the inevitability of future debt. In research conducted before the 2008/09 financial crisis, Horton found that young people described debt as potentially enabling. In the context of austerity, however, they described debt as anticipated and inevitable. They talked about debt as a weight, a burden that affected their everyday moods, thoughts and experiences. Debt was experienced co-presently, as something that is lived with currently and anticipated in the future, and intimately, as something that affects mental health, relationships and aspirations. There are significant parallels here with South African students, who express both ambiguity around the value of debt, suggesting that it both enables access to higher education while ultimately burdening them and their families in the future. Even though debt repayments were years away, these responsibilities were lived and experienced in the present. Students anticipated obligations to family and the burden that debt would impose on them.

Primarily, antipathy toward NSFAS stemmed from the fact that the repayment of future debts coincided with anticipated obligations to family. Increasing levels of debt were imagined as impediments to their role as future providers for the family. These narratives highlight the different moralities surrounding debt: Debt owed to families (see Chapter 4) was seen as moral, or a responsibility that working-class students simply faced after graduation. Debt owed to the state through NSFAS was not seen in the same light. The state’s attempt to address these discrepancies through initiatives like the advertising campaign described in the opening of this chapter, where loan defaulters (rather than the state) were blamed for the limitations of the scheme. In this portrayal, the problems facing the higher education system was not chronic underfunding, but poor students themselves who refused to pay their fair share.

The experience of indebtedness positions young people between responsibilities to institutional actors (banks, the state) and obligations to others. For these young people, debt was
both immediate and anticipated; shaped by the intimate geographies of households and families and the responsibilities of repayment. It is important therefore to understand how young people are positioned in these debt relations. Here Harker’s (2017, 608) concept of ‘debt ecologies,’ is helpful. Debt ecologies highlight the ways in which, “banks and individuals and families are entangled with other kinds of debt, non-financialized forms of obligation and sharing.”

Considering the relationship between debt and the everyday spaces of families, communities, households, life courses and aspirations reveals the multiple and diverse roles that young people play in contemporary economic geographies. Writing in the context of Palestine, Harker (2017) notes that while debt is often considered in temporal terms, as present consumption bought with future labour, it is also spatial. Space, Harker (2017, 601) argues, “plays an active role in creating, maintaining and undermining debt relations.” He speaks of debt ecologies as, the “entanglements of topological and topographic space,” ones that are, “simultaneously financial and geopolitical, social and cultural” (Ibid).

Students’ narratives of debt and the dynamics of the #FMF protests reveal some of these complex entanglements. Students’ anxieties around debt were temporal as it was seen as affecting their future livelihoods and obligations. Yet these debt relations were also deeply spatial as poor students voiced concern over debt in relation to their families living in the township. As I describe in Chapter 2 & 4, students’ educational aspirations were frequently centred around spatial and social mobility, by helping their parents build a house outside the township, for example. Debt relations coexisted with obligations and care relations to kin that were both immediate and anticipated. Debt was also experienced co-presently, as it prevented students from registering or obtaining their degrees from various institutions. For this reason, student protests often targeted financial aid and registration offices, administration buildings or,
in some cases, government buildings (See Chapter 5). In 2016, for example, students at CPUT marched against proposed changes to the NSFAS system that would see private banks play a more central role (see Image 7). Finally, debt evasion has resulted in billions in unpaid debts owed to NSFAS. These tactics of evasion stem from the fact that it is simply difficult to trace previous borrowers who are not working for the public sector or major corporations. Students who are unemployed, or working in the informal sector, or simply working for a smaller company are incredibly difficult to trace. While these acts of evasion are not always purposeful, they illuminate Harker’s (2017) broader point that space plays an important role in both creating and undermining debt relations.

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25 NSFAS officials noted that they are able to trace previous borrowers through the public employee payroll system and they have begun working with major corporations to trace previous borrowers. While they have not yet been able to attain garnishee orders allowing for automatic payroll deductions, this was in the works in 2017.
What is missing from Harker (2017) and Horton’s (2017) analysis of debt, is the ways in which debt is potentially politicizing (See Image 8).

Among students, it was not only debt itself, but experiences with the student loan system and the prospect of academic or financial exclusion that generated anger. Parsing historical studies of student unrest in South Africa, it is evident that these concerns over debt repayments are not entirely new. In a description of the student protests at the University of the North in 1972, Heffernan (2016) describes how student leader Onkgopotse Abram Tiro denounced the university administration for refusing to give poor black students their degrees due to unpaid debts. In a Weekly Mail (1992) article describing the impact of budget cuts on black universities
in the early 90s, a reporter noted that increasing fee costs have meant that students are frequently unable to register for future years due to unpaid debts. In *Drum Magazine* the same year, a columnist lamented that while student funding was available for black students through the Tertiary Education Fund, this meant that the burden of repayment fell to the poorest students and their families (Malunga 1992). In sum, student opposition to debt and government underfunding has a long lineage in South Africa. Because debt overwhelmingly affects black students, opposition to these systems is often expressed in racial terms, as examples of the continuation of apartheid-style exploitation and control.

Higher education thus produces regimes of debt, as well as collective forms of opposition to indebtedness. The centrality of debt to these protests also speaks to the ways in which it was understood as a racialized form of accumulation and control affecting primarily black students. Debt was described as affecting ‘black students’ and contrasted to the pressures they faced paying a ‘black tax.’ As Mbembe (2015) has noted, articulations of ‘black pain’ were commonplace in these protests, and used to describe the lived experience of being both black and poor under contemporary capitalism. It is important then to extend Harker’s (2017) notion of debt ecologies to consider the ways in which racialized forms of poverty and inequality shape debt relations. As James (2014) has revealed, the end of apartheid also brought about the end of ‘credit-apartheid’ as lending to black South Africans increased rapidly, and was accompanied by the growth of predatory lending practice. This growth in indebtedness has also coincided with the widespread restructuring of labour, and the growth of unemployment and insecure work affecting the majority black population (Barchiesi 2011).

There are important parallels here with global struggles over student debt. Writing in the US context, Marez (2014, 267) writes: “Student debt teaches lessons in value and difference by
reproducing and rearticulating historical forms of racial and gendered capitalism.” In the US, a high number of lenders are people of colour and women, who are forced into taking precarious and low wage work in order to pay off their loans. Student failure, drop-out and loan default rates are also highest among those from working-class backgrounds (Deming, Goldin & Katz 2012). In the South African case, higher education continues to reflect similar social inequalities, with the graduation rate for white students more than double that of black students (Letseka and Maile 2008). On average, 70% of those who drop out of higher education come from ‘low economic status’ households (Ibid., 6). A 2016 Treasury report found that among NSFAS-funded students who registered in the 2006-2007 year, 63% had dropped out after five years and only 32% had graduated, with 5% continuing into a fifth year (Bozzoli 2016). While these numbers were contested by NSFAS officials, it is evident that the poorest students struggle to complete their qualifications. The burden then of repaying student debt in South Africa falls overwhelmingly to black students and, frequently, to those students who dropped out and must now find work to repay their debts.

Student’s reflections on debt and their aspirations toward a better life are reminiscent of Berlant’s (2011) notion of ‘cruel optimism’. Cruel optimism, “names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility” (Berlant 2011, 24). In other words, even as young people face immense challenges in their lives, they must remain attached to aspiration and invest in ideas of the good life even as there are limited opportunities for social mobility and job security. In many ways, Berlants’ critique is a response to the desires and possibilities of life under contemporary capitalism, in which the promises of social mobility through hard work coexist with conditions of precarity. As Raco (2009) has shown in the context of the UK, neoliberal rationalities have convinced many young people that higher education is the only pathway to
social mobility even as there is no guarantee of this. In this formulation debt is a necessary cost; refusing it excludes young people from the realms of social and cultural capital that may well be more valuable than their degrees. Mendick et al. (2018, 2) have described this as a condition of ‘austere meritocracy,’ or the “tension between the incitement of young people to aspire and invest in the idea of meritocracy and the dramatic erosion of possibilities for upward social mobility.” In the South African case, young people take on the burden of supporting their families in the future (see Chapter 4), yet these obligations coexist with forms of debt repayment and desires for individualized success.

Competing narratives over NSFAS and the obligation to repay debts also highlight differences between #FMF activists’ demands and the state’s position on higher education. Implicit in students’ critique of debt was the question of whether higher education is a right. While higher education after apartheid was deracialized and NSFAS has allowed more disadvantaged students access, education remains a commodity that is purchased either through tuition fees or debt repayments. While the demographics of the student body have changed substantially, some institutions have experienced more gradual changes (Cooper 2016). For activists, opposition to NSFAS was seen as opposition to the commodification of education, the costs of which were passed on to poor students and their families. Yet as the higher education minister noted in the midst of #FMF, free higher education is not government policy and was never ANC policy. Hearkening back to the 1955 Freedom Charter, the ANC noted that it contained no provisions for free higher education. The ANC’s secretary general Gwede Mantashe noted that the charter, “says higher education shall be open to all, that is the right to it. By means of state allowances and scholarships on the basis of merit” (ENCA 2016). As Hart (2014) has noted, conflicts over the meaning of foundational documents such as the freedom
charter are crucial to the maintenance of ANC hegemony, as it is able to reach into the archive of struggle in order to justify policy positions in the present. In telling students that they were misguided, the ANC was able to label many of the students as ‘entitled’ or ‘middle class’ seeking to capitalize on gains that were intended to benefit working class students. Yet in drawing on these histories, the state also opens itself to accusations of political betrayal. For example, students frequently targeted the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Blade Nzimande, calling attention to the hypocrisies of a leader of the communist party being responsible for increasing tuition fees. In 2016, for example, students at CPUT carried a coffin to parliament adorned with the photo of Dr. Nzimande (see Image 9).

![Image 9: Student protest coffin adorned with photo of higher education minister Dr. Blade Nzimande. 11 November 2016. Source: Facebook, #FeesMustFall Western Cape.](#)

This is an interesting image for a number of reasons, as it captures some of the complexities and contradictions of the #FMF protests. The coffin is adorned with an image of the higher education minister Dr. Blade Nzimande, himself a well-known and high-ranking member of the Communist Party. The coffin is also labelled with the words ‘Fees, Debt, DA.’ DA stands for the Democratic Alliance, the official opposition party and the party that governs the Western Cape province. Opposition to the DA is likely due to the fact that SRC at the time was SASCO, affiliated with the ANC. It would not have been possible for the SRC to include ANC on the coffin, as this would be going against their mother-body, even though Nzimande is himself an ANC MP. Even though the DA has little to do with the higher education budget, it served their purpose to criticize the DA while keeping the ANC out of the picture.
It should also be noted that one of the key concerns raised by students during the protests was around the position of middle class students. Popularly described as the so-called ‘missing middle,’ these students were effectively excluded from NSFAS due to their household income. At the same time, many of them noted that their parents could simply not afford the cost of tuition. Concerns raised by this missing middle led to an NSFAS 2017 pilot project in which students at 6 universities from households earning less than R600,000 per year were funded. As Zeilig (2007) has noted, the precarious position of many middle income and working-class students in Africa has allowed for shifting political alliances that reflect complex class positions and identities. It is entirely possible for student mobilization to be opposed to the ravages of austerity on higher education while at the same time be in the interests of a middle-class layer intent on retaining positions of privilege.

Conclusion

Higher education in South Africa instills in many young people desires to help their families, obligations that are informed by histories of care, extended households and family migration. Just as their families moved from rural areas to Khayelitsha to seek a better life, for many of my research participants, higher education was seen as a fulfilment of this promise. These histories of migration and hope underpinned student concerns over debt repayment and, ultimately, led many of them to support the #FMF protests. Their reflections call attention to the multiple temporalities of youth and the ways in which they both live with and work through debt. If aspirations fostered at the university are ultimately forward looking, allowing students to imagine life-paths that take them out of poverty and the township, then debt is a reminder of what lies in the past and the possibility that education is not a pathway out of poverty. Debt both shapes and limits how young people imagine the future.
Finally, there is value in reading the #FMF protests through students’ descriptions of debt in order to address criticism of this movement as essentially a middle-class revolt foisted on poor students (Jonathan Jansen quoted in Gibson 2016, 7). First, this ignores that fact that these protests occurred, and had been occurring, at historically black institutions for a number of years as students were poorly funded by NSFAS resulting in both financial exclusion and high rates of dropout and debt. Second, it ignores the extent to which students themselves are economic actors, with their position in higher education bound up with immediate and anticipated obligations to family. These obligations coexisted with higher rates of household poverty, unemployment and indebtedness. Third, discussions of #FMF have frequently centred around the issue of institutional transformation and decolonization. While these were certainly components of this movement, they were more central to mobilizations at historically white institutions. The protests at UCT, for example, reignited debates about the whiteness of campus culture and the euro-centricity of the curriculum (See Chapter 5). There is value, I suggest, in understanding these protests through the materiality of young people’s experiences and their aspirations toward a better life for them and their families. Doing so allows us to understand students as hybridized political and economic actors. The growth of NSFAS and increasing demand placed on it suggests that more and more young people from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds will enter higher education in the future. They will bring with them concerns that are not educational per se, but intimately tied to the promises that education holds.
Chapter 4

The Tithes of Education: Youth, Family and Paying the ‘Black Tax’

“Such dependence, though, is not the worst of outcomes. To be dependent on someone is to be able to make at least some limited claims on him or her. A poor person who is enmeshed in networks of dependence with other poor people thus has at least some people on whom he or she can make such claims. And the desirable alternative to such claim-making is normally not independence or autonomy.” — James Ferguson 2013, 231.

“Their hopes for the future focused on their children, and education was seen as the means whereby their children could escape to a better life. Something no one can take away from you.” — Jacklyn Cock 1984, 18.

The growth in higher education enrolment among black South Africans since the end of apartheid has been driven by desires for intergenerational mobility and a better quality of life. This growth occurs in a context in which opportunities for social mobility are limited and access to higher education is one of the few pathways for young people to escape from high rates of unemployment and dependency. South Africa has been characterized by economists as a low mobility society, with the benefits of earnings and education passed on from one generation to another (Finn, Leibbrandt and Ranchhod 2017). Investing in children’s education, whether it be sending them to a better school or saving for them to go to university is frequently seen as an investment in the future well-being of the family. Yet it is not only parents who exercise agency in this regard but their children. Young people’s rationale for pursuing higher education and their experiences therein are deeply affected by household dynamics. Many of them pursue higher education with the aim of supporting family members in the future. These imagined futures, in which reciprocal responsibilities and caregiving play a prominent role, are fundamental to many young people’s experiences in higher education.
In this chapter I suggest that young people’s educational trajectories are profoundly influenced by circumstances of household poverty and high rates of dependency (Ferguson 2013). Their experiences of higher education are shaped not only by the position they occupy in the present, but their past, and the positions they anticipate occupying in the future. The post-apartheid period has been characterized by a distributional regime that has led to expanded opportunities for those with skills and education and declining opportunities for unskilled workers (Seekings and Nattrass 2008). Attaining a degree is thus seen by many students as a pathway toward economic inclusion and, through this, the ability to address poverty within their households where their parents have limited education and work in low wage employment.

Among my research participants, few of their parents had any tertiary education and the majority worked as domestic workers, truck drivers, and gardeners, or supported the family with social grants and informal work. For them, the future lay in their children’s ability to complete their education, find work, and contribute to the household’s income. These obligations led many students to understand the value of education in instrumental terms, connected to the anticipated obligations that they had to their families after they had completed their studies. At the same time, high rates of poverty meant that many students often faced immediate family obligations and they used student loan funding to subsidize their household’s income. These immediate and anticipated obligations to family are defining aspects of the higher education experience for working class students and exact significant pressure on them.

Soudien (2008) suggests that desires for social mobility among students often reconfigure racial identities and weaken the links that black students have with their home background. My research reveals a different dynamic: Education often reconfigures bonds with family, strengthening ties with households and families through immediate and anticipated financial
obligations. While students may experience tensions between desires for social mobility and their obligations to family, as described in Chapter 2, higher education was frequently understood not as an individualized but as a collective endeavour. Young people’s belief in education as a pathway to dignity for their families also highlights the complex meanings young people attach to education. While neoliberal approaches often view education simply as an individual investment, students used education to elaborate a collective vision of families, communities, and societies. In this vision, education was seen as a potential solution to apartheid’s impact on the family. Education thus served as an imaginary through which dignified lives could be constructed.

At the same time, this reinforced the notion that the burden for addressing poverty lay on the shoulders of young people. While aspirations for mobility were collective—centred primarily around the family or in some cases the community—responsibility for achieving this mobility was ultimately individual. Even as higher education provides the potential for social mobility for a limited number of young South Africans, it is a poor tool for addressing overall rates of poverty. In fact, high private returns on education and the diversity in the quality of education, “explains a very large part of South Africa’s very high level of inequality in the distribution of income” (Seekings and Nattrass 2005, 330). In this sense, education is a contradictory resource for young people. While it provides the allure of middle class lifestyles and mobility it binds them into systems that reproduce inequality and places the burden on them for addressing poverty (Jeffrey et al. 2008).

Finally, I consider the ways in which these obligations speak to scholarly debates around the concept of ‘waithood’ in the Global South. Geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists working in a number of different national contexts have noted the impact of social and economic
change on young people’s transitions from childhood to adulthood. The concept of waithood is used to describe an extension of youth, or a liminal space that is no longer a transitory phase but a seemingly permanent condition. Rather than seeing waithood as a universal condition affecting youth everywhere, I argue that waithood is deeply influenced by young people’s family lives and how they navigate both life opportunities and responsibilities to others.

Diverse Economies and Emotional Geographies of Higher Education

Thiem (2009) has argued that geographical work on education should be ‘outward looking’, in that it should inform discussions of neoliberalism, globalization, and knowledge economy formation. It is possible to do this, I argue, by drawing on ethnographic details of students’ experiences in higher education and, in particular, examining the relationship between students and their households. Doing so reveals how broader dynamics of political economy, in this case the extent of chronic unemployment and poverty, affect young people’s experiences of education. Here I adopt Gibson-Graham’s diverse economy approach that highlights how “small facts speak to large concerns” (2014, 147). The diverse economy approach emphasizes the “rich pallet of economic practices” associated with life under contemporary capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2014, 148). This involves not only wage earning but a much wider range of social relations, “including, to name just some, trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, and environmental and social justice” (Gibson Graham 2014, 147). In resisting approaches that reduce all economic practices to capitalism, the diverse economy approach attempts to reveal the complexity of social relations and to “rethink the economy as a site of ethical interdependence” (Ibid., 152).
Such an approach is relevant in the South African case for a number of reasons. First, wage labour is by no means the only way in which people make a living. Growing unemployment and workplace restructuring has generated high levels of income insecurity and precarious livelihoods, particularly in those sectors that had previously employed large numbers of black workers (Von Holdt & Webster 2005, Barchiesi 2011, Mosoetsa 2011). As Ferguson (2015) has shown, in a context in which few are employed, new forms of distribution have emerged with a large number of people dependent on the social grants, wages, or informal earnings of other household members. In one study, for example, researchers found that a contract cleaner at a South African university used her salary to support and subsidize 21 relatives across the country (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006). Second, the extent of unemployment has made these economic arrangements crucial to the stability of many poor households, which are often based around the earnings of a single wage earner or social grant recipient (Du Toit and Neves 2014). In this context, household income dynamics are often constituted through a bricolage of activities, only some of which stem from access to wage labour (Alexander at al. 2013, Callebert 2012). Detailed ethnographic study of young people’s lives and the multiple circuits of distribution they engage in highlights the important role young people play in the constitution of economic geographies.

While not the focus of this research, it is worth noting that changing kinship structures and the impact of economic change on households has long been a focus of anthropological scholarship in Africa. Guyer’s work (1981, 1995, 2004), for example, has shown how systems of kinship and exchange were shaped by colonialism and capitalism, particularly the relationship between people and money. In South Africa, Simkins (1986) and Niehaus (1994) have noted that due to apartheid’s migratory labour policies, African households were often characterized by
marital instability, domestic disorganization, and non-nuclear structures. The deterioration of formal employment from the 1970s onwards also brought about changes in African family structure, most notably declines in marriage (Hunter 2007). The further decline of stable employment in the post-apartheid period has also transformed kinship. Ferguson’s (2013) recent work on South Africa, for example, suggests that in a context in which wage labour is increasingly scarce, people increasingly seek out forms of dependency by making claims on kin or the state. Research on family structures and dynamics in East and Southern Africa has also revealed that family relationships are often built around reciprocal obligations to provide care to older and younger generations (Collard 2000). These relations are themselves deeply affected by economic changes, particularly the prominent role of male migrant labour (Ferguson 1999). The value of these contributions is that they allow us to understand how kinship is affected by social and economic change.

These kinship relations are also underpinned by emotional attachments. Geographers’ interest in emotions has produced a rich body of research on the emotional geographies of everything from housing to teaching to water access (Davidson et al., 2012; Davidson & Milligan 2004; Sultana 2011; Hargreaves 2001). While there is growing attention to global educational migration there has been more limited attention to the role of education in the emotional geography literature (Kenway & Youdell 2011, Cheng 2016). Emotional geographies express a “concern with the spatiality and temporality of emotions, with the way they coalesce and within certain places” (Davidson et al. 2012, 3). Working in this tradition, scholars have noted that there is a tendency to treat emotions as something apart from the economic, when in fact they are intricately related (Anderson & Smith 2001). Understanding emotion in relation to workplace or education, for example, can help us understand dynamics within these spaces as
well as larger questions of political economy that often elide emotions. Education, for example, is often positioned as a purely rational pursuit aimed at social mobility, and yet it is always more than this. Education is embedded within social and cultural dynamics that link schools, households, and communities. Cheng (2016), for example, suggests that university students in Singapore are not simply neoliberal subjects, but practice forms of care and solidarity that challenge the neoliberalizing experience of higher education. In the South Africa case, as I discuss, experiences of higher education for working class students often reinforce forms of obligation, care, and responsibility between students and family. These caring practices and anticipated obligations challenge the notion that higher education is simply aimed at individual social mobility.

‘The Father is Looking Up To Us’: Education, Responsibility and the Family

In 1989 the Cape Argus published a story about Mandla Ndwalaza, an African student from Gugulethu studying at UCT (Bavuma 1989). Mandla’s life bore remarkable similarities to many of the stories I heard in 2016 from students from Khayelitsha. Born to a construction worker and a domestic worker, Mandla lived with his father in Gugulethu while his mother worked in Johannesburg. He had worked hard in high school and gained a scholarship to study at UCT. In the profile, Mandla described the struggles of being a student in the township, the long commutes to campus before dawn, the noise and distractions he faced living with his father in a men’s hostel. He also discussed his motivation and desire to succeed, and to ultimately become an accountant and support his family. However, Mandla was forced to drop out after his family went through financial difficulties and he found a job at a supermarket. Mandla’s story is emblematic of the hopes and frustrations facing many students from townships who are the first in their families to access higher education. These stories communicate more than frustrated
aspirations. They highlight the close relations between higher education and home, and the desire that many students have to use higher education to help their families escape from poverty.

Higher education provides disadvantaged students with forms of social and cultural capital that allow them to construct aspirational identities (see chapter 2). Frequently, these are centred around notions of individual success, personal mobility, and desires for individual consumption. Yet in a context in which their families experience income insecurity or poverty, these students also see education as a mechanism for addressing poverty within their families. Figure 2 reveals participant responses (n=41) to an interview question about why they value higher education. Almost half (49%) responded that it either provided a means to support family, or support family while also providing career opportunities. Students also noted that education had a number of non-financial values, such as changing stereotypes about township youth, and allowing them to become mentors to siblings and others in the community.

Figure 2: Research Participant Survey Responses to Question Regarding Value of Higher Education.

A common belief among students was that because they were often among the first in their family to attend higher education, the burden of supporting the family would one day fall on their shoulders. This was combined with a belief that a grade 12 education alone was
insufficient and would not provide access to employment that would allow them to pursue middle class lifestyles.

Camagu: We believe that education is the only way to change the situation at home. We are economically disadvantaged, so maybe if you get a good education you have a better chance of finding a good job that will pay you well. Like maybe if I succeed here, I’ll be able to send my younger brothers and sisters to a good school. So that’s why my mother has always supported me. She believes if I succeed, then we’ll be fine.

Camagu and his siblings were raised by a single mother in a rural village in the Eastern Cape near the border with Lesotho. In 2007, she brought them to Khayelitsha in order to get them a better education. This was hard, Camagu explained, because they don’t have any family in Cape Town and his mother was unemployed for some time before finding work as a cashier. His mother’s decision seemed to have paid off. Camagu was able to secure a spot at a good high school in the township and through this gain access to UCT. He believed that his ‘good education’ would lead to a ‘good job’ as a computer programmer. “If I don’t succeed,” he told me, “it will be hard to eliminate poverty in my family. That pressure is on me.” In his reflection on the value of education, Camagu highlighted his belief that higher education holds intergenerational value, allowing him to pay for his siblings’ fees in order to have them one day contribute to family income.

This belief in the transformative power of education was intimately shaped by household dynamics. Among the students I interviewed, 40% came from households where one or both parents were unemployed. Some (35%) were raised by single mothers, many of whom worked as domestic workers (38%), a notoriously insecure and low wage job in South Africa (Dinkelman & Ranchhod 2012). For these students, higher education was seen as a ladder out of poverty for the entire family. Higher education was valued not for its ability to transmit knowledge, something that was often seen as a luxury reserved for more affluent students, but the role it could play in
breaking cycles of poverty. Students were cognizant that their responsibilities to family distinguished them from other students on campus, particularly those who were white or more affluent. Reflecting on the differences between students from Khayelitsha and other students in his residence at UCT, Banele told me: “We try to show white students how we feel. And we say, you are looking up to your father, a white person looks up to the father. In our case, the father is looking up to us! So that’s what keeps you going and going.” Banele was the first in his family to come to university. Both of his parents were unemployed and his older siblings had struggled to find work after leaving grade 12. He wanted to finish his undergraduate degree and study medicine, but “that is another 7 years, I can’t change to medicine anymore because I have to support the family very soon.”

Akona described education as part of a broader struggle for financial freedom that he contrasted to the liberation struggle that his parents experienced. He described the struggle of the older generation as “colour based, white and black and all that.” The struggle now “is an economic struggle because we are finding situations where we can’t actually do stuff that we want to do because of financial constraints.” Akona’s comments reflected a widely held belief among many young black South Africans that while 1994 brought about the end of political apartheid, economic apartheid remains entrenched. While Akona came from a more stable home in Khayelitsha, the iLitha Park neighbourhood, which is an area of the township with higher average incomes and lower rates of informal households, he still felt strong obligations to support his family and particularly his mother who raised him and his siblings alone.

Akona’s comments, contrasting the struggle for political freedom with contemporary struggles for economic freedom, were revealing. For these young people, higher education brought with it the potential for social inclusion through access to labour market opportunities.
This would potentially allow them and their families to assume middle class lifestyles that were, in the past, denied to them through apartheid’s racial policies. Yet these ambitions were radically different from the universalist project of the anti-apartheid struggle which, among other things, was aimed at addressing class and racial exploitation. Akona’s comments suggested that these ambitions were individualized, with young people themselves, rather than the state, being responsible for poverty eradication. While higher education generates desires and expectations for collective social mobility, the forms that this takes are highly individualized.

‘Uplifting the family’, ‘fixing the family’, or ‘breaking the pain of the family’ were all common descriptors used to describe the value of higher education. These were frequently followed by more specific goals. Andile, for example, planned on moving his family out of Khayelitsha and into a middle-class suburb of Cape Town. Mbulelo hoped to build a house for his mother where she could retire from her career as a domestic worker. Lindelwa wanted to be a source of motivation for her two younger sisters, to pay for their fees at a better school outside Khayelitsha, and eventually their tuition at UCT. Through these ambitions, students came to imagine themselves as future providers for the family. These ambitions reflected utilitarian understandings of higher education in which the value of education was measured against the returns it would bring to their families one day.

Unsurprisingly then, students distinguished between those subjects and programs which were seen as holding the potential to address household poverty and those which would not.

Mbulelo: For us people from rural areas and Khayelitsha you don’t go to school because you want to study. You don’t go to school because you want to learn new things. You go to school because you want to work and fix the problem at home. Because most of the people who go to school they want to know more about like the human body, to us it isn’t about the human body, it is about the situation in which we live. It is about the pain we are living in, and you are trying by all means to break that pain.
As Mbulelo’s comments suggest, he did not pursue higher education for the sake of knowledge alone, but for its potential returns. Although he was studying chemistry, he admitted, “I can’t say that I studied it because I love it or I want to grasp more about it, or to understand more…There was good money attached.” In a similar vein, Akona described his first love as music, “But when I talked this out with my mother, she said no you can’t go and study music. If you study music, it’s like you are going there to waste money.” Students frequently went into fields which were seen as holding the potential to generate future financial returns. This is not to suggest that these students were uninterested in these programs, but that there was an overwhelming concern with the employment opportunities offered by different degrees. As mentioned previously, students from the 100UP program were strongly encouraged to pursue subjects in the sciences and commerce and to select humanities as a second option. Some of them did not meet the entrance requirements for sciences at UCT and found themselves at other institutions like UWC and CPUT.  

Students also described degree choices in racial terms. Often these descriptions were expressed temporally, in the sense that black students were forced into certain programs and rushed through their degrees in order to find work as fast as possible. White students, on the other hand, were seen as having the time to try subjects or spend additional time at university. For Thandi, white students at UCT had:

different pressures… That’s why you might find them doing some general things like arts or dance or drama. It’s nothing serious, not that I have anything against it, but I wouldn’t do such things that…I dunno, I want a stable career and stuff like art is not really a stable thing. And for them it doesn’t really matter if it’s not a stable thing because they’re not really worried about supporting people. They have financial security already.

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27 Among my research participants 54% were enrolled in Science/Commerce; 27% were in Humanities/Social Sciences/Law; and 19% were in Technical/Vocational degree programs.
Thandi’s choice of subject reflected her belief in the potentially transformative value of education for her family. Her mother was working as a domestic worker in North West province and her younger sister also wanted to go to university. As she told me, “Getting a tertiary education means getting a better job and provide for my family and make things more comfortable for them.” These commitments affected Thandi’s degree choice and how she viewed white students at the university.

Those students who did not make it into degree programs where there was a clear career path expressed concern over the value of their degrees in relation to future commitments. Phumla, a third-year gender studies major at UCT, described her frustrations at being unable to study further and the fact that her degree choice does not necessarily align with her family’s expectations of support:

My mom was calculating the years I have, and she says ok you’re going to work for us next year. And that is not my plan, because I want to do honours and masters, but I don’t think that will happen because everyone at home is looking at you to lift them up.

Combined with this was the fact that Phumla has chosen to pursue a degree in an area that did not necessarily lead to direct employment:

It’s true when you get here and you see your peers in science and commerce and you’re in humanities you do feel like a failure because you didn’t measure up to that standard. So that’s one thing. Because when we get to UCT we battle in our first year. You battle with the idea that you’re in humanities, you wish you were in sciences because science is glorified in Khayelitsha high schools.

While any form of higher education is a decent guarantor of employment in South Africa, degree programs outside of the science and commerce fields were often seen as holding dubious value. These values were deeply affected by relations between students and their households, and aspirations centred on addressing the poverty therein.
Students’ reflections on the value of higher education were intimately shaped by relationships with family and dynamics of poverty within their households. These reflections took on racial and temporal dimensions, as obligations to family were seen as overwhelmingly affecting black students. As Samkelo put it, these obligations made you, “rush through university because of that thing you have to pay.” That ‘thing’ was the financial obligation that many young students anticipated after they graduated. This shaped both the types of degrees that students valued and the broader value of higher education itself. Instrumentalist understandings of higher education frequently individualized the work of poverty eradication. These students came to see themselves as responsible for their parents’ retirement, building them houses, or paying school fees for their siblings.

**Anticipated Obligations: Paying the ‘Black Tax’**

In 2017 the *Huffington Post* South Africa ran a series of columns on the ‘black tax’ in partnership with the Savings Institute of South Africa. The ‘black tax’ is a colloquial term describing the responsibility placed on black professionals and wage earners to support members of extended households. Under headings like ‘Don’t become the family ATM’ and ‘Learn how to say NO’, young black South Africans were encouraged to prioritize saving rather than spending their income of extended families. In a response, writer TO Molefe (2017) argued that the series failed to understand the ‘black tax’ as a social or economic phenomenon and instead laid the responsibility for household poverty at the feet of those paying the ‘black tax’.

Commentaries on the ‘black tax’ are common in South Africa’s financial advice pages, with everyone from celebrities to doctoral students to striking workers describing the burden the ‘black tax’ has on their lives (ENCA 2015, Zeeman 2018, Dor 2018). Many of these stories
touch specifically on impact the ‘black tax’ has on the lives of students who are the first in their families to attend (Ratlebjane 2015).

Siya, for example, was the first in his family to pass grade 12 and the first to come to university. His mother was a domestic worker, although her work was infrequent and when I interviewed her, she was unemployed and supporting herself with state social grants. Siya described the hardships he and his family had faced as a source of motivation for his studies. On the mantle of their home in the Enkanini section of Khayelitsha (a particularly poor part of the township), his mother proudly displayed his high school results, athletic certificates, and letters of acceptance to university. Once Siya graduated, she told me, she planned to move back to the Eastern Cape while he worked to support the family.

Andile’s mother had similar dreams about the possibilities her son’s education held for the family. She worked as a security guard at a hospital in Cape Town. She was employed by a private company and the hours were long and the pay bad. While there were more job opportunities in Cape Town, she admitted that she would like to move back to the Eastern Cape after Andile graduated to be with her brother. Andile’s education, she said, “is important because it just helps the family and it’s going to help him, because me, I didn’t go to school, I only have grade 11, and now I’m working very hard.” Siya and Andile’s education was not only a source of pride for their mothers, who were working to support entire households, but a source of hope for future financial stability as they aged.

One evening I visited Victoria and her mother in their home in Khayelitsha. Victoria’s mother had just returned from her job as a domestic worker in Tokai, where she earned around R4000 a month—she spends around a quarter of this on transportation costs just getting to work. She has always worked as a domestic worker, and lamented the fact that her lack of education
had not allowed her to access better jobs. She was born in the Eastern Cape, dropped out of school in grade 11, got married and shortly thereafter moved to Khayelitsha because, “I wanted to get a better school for my children.” Now she was single and living in a 2 room shack with Victoria and her two siblings. As Victoria prepared supper for the family and her mother propped her feet up on a pillow to ease the swelling, I ask her how her daughter’s university degree would help the family:

Mother: It will help me a lot. The first thing, the house, the dream is to buy…

Victoria: [interjects] …a house. The dream is to buy my mom a house.

CW: Where, in Khayelitsha?

Victoria: No, somewhere out of Khayelitsha…somewhere in a good environment. Parklands,28 that’s the place.

Mother: Yes, so when she finishes, she buys the house, then I need to rest.

Victoria: Then it’s time for me to do the work.

Victoria’s plan to work for the family was deeply affected by the close relationship she had with her mother and the fact that her mother spent her limited earnings on bus tickets that allowed her daughter to get to campus in the morning. Toward the end of our conversation, her mother warned Victoria to not get distracted by men or alcohol or parties, because “education is your key, without it you work as a domestic worker like me.” Implicit in their exchange was the sense that the family’s future rested on Victoria’s shoulders. By buying them a house outside the township and paying for her siblings’ fees at a better school, Victoria could transform her family’s fortunes.

28 Parklands is a suburb in Cape Town’s northern suburbs. It is predominantly white and affluent with a growing Black and Coloured population.
Victoria, Siya and Andile all anticipated financial obligations to their families in the future. These were not distant obligations, but ones that they must meet soon after finishing their studies. These anticipated obligations were intimately shaped both by experiences of household poverty and by the close bonds between children and parents, who had often sacrificed a great deal to send their children to school and university. Feelings about these obligations varied.

While some like Samkelo described how, “having this ‘black tax’…you have all of that burden when you are done,” Siya reflected that supporting his family was, “something that I don’t even think about, I will just do it.” Feelings about paying the ‘black tax’ varied, as did the forms that this payment would take. At times students stated they would like to pay for their siblings’ tuition, while others wanted to build their family a house. With few exceptions, anticipating the ‘black tax’ was a common experience and a source of both motivation and stress.

Obligations to kin and forms of income sharing across households were not solely the concern of working class students. Lux, for example, was a student at UWC and came from, as she described it, a “more privileged black family,” but she also anticipated obligations to her family after graduation.

Unfortunately, as black people we have something called ‘black tax’, where after I graduate and start working, the first three years are actually for my family and not about me. And you find that more privileged people, who are mostly white, you get a car, you get a house, which is great when you are starting to work. And yet I have to build a home first, I have to take care of my mom, I have to take care of my sisters, and you are thinking where am I getting all this money from?

Lux’s father used to work for the ANC and while she described her background as ‘comfortable’, her anticipated obligations to family highlighted the tenuous position of many middle-class families. As Netshitenzhe (2012) has argued, while the black middle class has grown rapidly, it does not possess the historical assets or social connections of its white counterparts. In many cases its position is precarious as it bears the responsibility to support extended families and
reproduce middle class stability through forms of accumulation that frequently rely on political connections. In a reflection on the position of middle class students in the 2015 #FeesMustFall protests, Godsell et al (2016, 116) argue that there “have been many assumptions about the [middle] class’s access to capital and resources, but these assumptions are blown out of proportion.” The relative privileges enjoyed by a small but growing black middle class must therefore be viewed against both the high levels of debt they accrue in order to support their lifestyles and the obligations they have to family (James 2014).

But Lux’s comments also highlighted enduring forms of reciprocity within African families and communities. In South Africa, this is popularly described as Ubuntu, or an African worldview that places the collective interests above those of the individual. It elides easy translation, but is widely seen as a form of ‘humanness’ that emphasizes bonds and obligations to others. The principle has even informed government policy, with the 1997 White Paper on Social Welfare emphasizing the role of Ubuntu in guiding socially inclusive policy. Yet as McDonald (2010) has noted, the spirit of Ubuntu has also been used to encourage low income individuals to contribute to pay for services and contribute to the national fiscus. Even as it has been used to market neoliberal principles, MacDonald suggests that it has a wide resonance among many South Africans who still hold onto these communal principles. While Ubuntu is a pliable concept that has been used to emphasize both individual responsibility and collective well-being, it remains central to many low-income communities where forms of mutual aid, sharing, and obligations are crucial.

The ‘black tax’ is reflective of the high rates of poverty that overwhelmingly affect black households. There are significant racial disparities in the country’s poverty levels, with 9 out of every 10 poor South Africans being black (StatsSA 2015c). These disparities are mirrored in
overall unemployment rates, with 27.9% of blacks being unemployed compared to 7% of whites (AfricaCheck 2015b). Households which have a high number of dependents per wage earner are also more susceptible to poverty, with extended and multi-generational households clustered at the bottom of the income ladder (Burns, Keswell and Leibbrandt 2005). The proliferation of insecure and precarious work has also meant that a job is no guarantor against poverty, particularly when combined with high numbers of dependents per wage earner (Lilenstein, Woolard and Leibbrandt 2016). Further, and relevant to my sample group, is the fact that female headed households are also more likely to be in poverty (Armstrong et al., 2008). In this context, it is unsurprising that wage earners are called upon to support a range of dependents who are un- or under-employed.

Yet the ‘black tax’ is not shaped by high poverty rates alone, but by the family dynamics of African households which were deeply affected by apartheid policy. Apartheid policies aimed at limiting African urbanization permitted a small, temporary male urban labour force residing in mine compounds or hostels (Moodie and Ndatshe 1994). This was essential to the reproduction of cheap labour power, as the costs of familial social reproduction were borne by women in rural areas (Wolpe 1972). The result was an expanded and fragmented household form that Makhulu (2015, 29) describes in her book on migrants in Cape Town:

Influx controls dictated a household that was geographically unwieldy, dispersing and stretching budgets, labour and care across hundreds of miles from the Transkei and Ciskei homelands to the city of Cape Town.

The legacy of this history is that households in South Africa are characterized by a range of flexible and spatially extended relationships or what Spiegel (1996) calls relations of ‘domestic fluidity’. Across the country a majority of young people (15-34) live in households that are extended (55.4%) rather than nuclear (StatsSA 2015b, 32). By population group, 59.1% of young black South Africans and 47.1% of young coloured South Africans live in extended households. These numbers are almost reversed for White South Africans who live, overwhelmingly, in nuclear households (Ibid). As Russell (2003) notes in her study on changing African family structures after apartheid, the spread of familial responsibility among a wide group has, in part, been a response to new economic demands, declining marriage rates, the impact of HIV-AIDS and children raised by single mothers or maternal kin (Seekings 2009, Hunter 2010b, Bray et al. 2011). It is common practice for children to be raised partially by grandparents, aunts, or uncles in rural areas and then sent to urban areas when children reach school-going age.

High rates of poverty, extended household forms, and cultural expectations have resulted in many young black South Africans anticipating kinship claims on their future financial earnings. Drawing on data from the Cape Area Panel Survey (CAPS), which included over 3000 youth in the Cape Town area, Harper and Seekings (2010, 1) found that young black adults report many prospective obligations to diverse kin, including more distant kin. In the CAPS data, 40% of black men and women acknowledge obligations to two or more categories of kin compared to 2-3% of white and coloured respondents:

Put another way, what distinguishes black from white or coloured young adults is not the number of kin on whom they could claim, but rather the number of kin who could be expected to make claims on young adults. Young black men and women live in a world of anticipated obligation, not one characterized by distinctive opportunities for exercising claims oneself (Harper and Seekings 2010, 11).
Anticipated obligations to kin play a crucial role in the lives of many young South Africans, particularly those who are the first in their family to attend higher education. While they may aspire to individual forms of social mobility, discourses around the ‘black tax’ suggest that many young people understand it as a form of solidarity and mutuality in the context of economic hardship. In a context in which few are permanently employed, complex forms of distribution characterize household survival strategies as wages, state social grants, and earnings from informal activity are spread across household members. Ferguson (2013) has suggested that because of this, many poor South Africans aspire to forms of dependence on those who can gain access to income. While education presents the potential of future income for families, it also provides immediate income in the form of the state’s student loan system NSFAS.

‘I for one have responsibilities when I go home’: Immediate Obligations

In June 2016, I attended a tutoring camp at UCT where students from Khayelitsha high schools were mentored by current UCT students from the township. When I asked them why they signed up each year, the first response was “money.”

Akona: We might come from different circumstances, but one of the reasons why we do this is I for one have responsibilities when I go home. When I go back home, there is the question of food and putting food on the table. There might be an idea that we are shallow, that we are doing this thing for the money, but money makes you able to do multiple things, especially for your family.

To nods of agreement from other students, Akona went on to describe how he planned to use the money to help his younger sister attend the matric ball. While Akona’s ambitions are modest, students repeatedly acknowledged that higher education gave them access to funds that were used to support their family in a variety of ways. The distribution of these funds at the household

29 Grade 12 prom.
level highlighted both the widespread circuits of distribution that young people engaged in and their role in the shaping of economic geographies. It also revealed how higher education for them involved not anticipated obligations, but often immediate obligations to their families.

In 2015, before Siya came to UCT, he worked part time at a warehouse to supplement his mother’s social grant income, which was the only income she was receiving at the time. In 2016, he entered UCT and was funded through NSFAS. While NSFAS provided students with a limited amount of cash, students at UCT received R100 a month for toiletry expenses and meal vouchers that could be utilized at restaurants on and around campus. “What I do is I sacrifice my lunch,” he told me. “I can take a meal voucher, and that meal voucher I convert it into money in any shop there on campus.” Through this he was able to collect around R60 a week, which he would take back to his mother on Sunday when he went home to attend church. “You just can’t leave your house empty. Even though you will be studying freely, you will always have those images of when you left home they were hungry.” In his second year, Siya was able to get a bursary from a private company, which increased his monthly allowance to R1000. This dramatically increased the amount he could use to support his family each month. “Even though I’m in school,” he said, “I’m working, basically. So I can say, I make sure that she doesn’t suffer, so she’s fine I’m providing her with funds.” While Siya’s goal was to work as an engineer and support his family, being at university provided him with access to funds that allowed him to begin supporting his family well before graduation.

Among other students, the redistribution of NSFAS funds across the household were commonplace. At UWC, Victoria was provided with a transport allowance in cash, a book allowance (deposited onto a card redeemable at the bookstore on campus), and two R2000 gift cards to grocery retailer Pick n Pay each semester. She described complex budgeting routines in
which some money was set aside for personal expenses while the rest was used to provide groceries for the family. Book allowances were used to buy school supplies for her younger siblings. The grocery allowance was divided in two, with R1000 set aside each semester to cover her own food expenses and transport to her job on the weekends. The rest she gave to her mother to buy food for the family. Xoliswa also used her NSFAS funding to buy groceries for her family. At the same time, she worked on weekends for a promotions company. “That money is for me and my mom. If I get paid R1500, I usually give R500 to my mom.” Students did not merely use their student loan funding to finance their education, but frequently used it for a variety of other purposes. This was frequently combined with other forms of income earned through part-time jobs, which was shared among other household members. These arrangements were particularly common among students who attended CPUT and UWC and lived at home. Proximity to, and the immediate demands of, family members often caused students to use this money for a variety of purposes other than their education. It should also be noted that students frequently complained about the inadequacy of these funds. Food vouchers of R2000 a semester, for example, did not go very far in large households. Transport allowances of R4200 were meant to cover transportation to campus for the year, yet bus passes for the week came to R123.

The multiple uses of NSFAS funding speak to numerous broad issues, including the crisis of social reproduction affecting many African households. Low wages and high rates of dependency per wage earner overwhelmingly affect African households (Lilenstein, Woolard and Leibbrandt 2016). It is unsurprising, then, that students would use whatever income they have to subsidise household income. These circuits of NSFAS funding highlight the ways in which post-apartheid social economies are characterized by high rates of distribution and income sharing (Bähre 2011). It is also important to note that many of these students, prior to turning 18,
were contributors to household income through South Africa’s Child Social Grant. Once they turned 18, however, this pool of household income disappeared. Thus, admission to university allows thousands of young people to access a form of social welfare. In a reflection on student protests in 1997, Van Onselen (1997) described support for poor students as providing a crucial welfare function as it allowed these students to gain access to income and accommodation while at the same time supporting their families. It also allowed them to avoid conditions of unemployment and relative deprivation affecting many of their peers in townships and rural areas. For students from places like Khayelitsha, admission to university allows for a modicum of income security for a few years and, for some, the ability to use some of this to contribute to family income.

These ties to poorer family members are not unique to South Africa. In a study of student politics in Zambia in the 1970s, Burawoy (1976, 92) notes that ties to poorer family members often “conflict with student aspirations to the life style and values of an upper class.” Even as students considered themselves ‘modern’ and looked down on poorer workers, they went to great lengths to support and provide for poorer family members. It was experiences of present and anticipated deprivation that gave rise to a political consciousness among these students. Similarly, following structural adjustment in Zimbabwe, many university students supported family members who had been laid off due to cuts and restructuring, using their student stipends to support households (Zeilig 2007, 78).

These obligations to family can also exact significant pressure on students, resulting in high rates of drop out. High attrition rates (upwards of 50%) are shaped by a range of factors, including life and family crises experienced by students (Bokana 2010). Zakes’ story is illustrative of this. Zakes enrolled in a computer programming degree at UWC in 2016. By the
end of the year he had decided to drop out. In late 2016, his mother had her hours cut at work and she was only working 3 days a week as a domestic worker. Throughout 2016, he had been using some of his NSFAS funding to provide for the family. This soon ran out though, as he exchanged some of his food vouchers for cash in order to buy clothes and a laptop. He also ran out of transport money early in the semester making it difficult to get to campus. The situation at home was dire and he had difficulty focusing on his studies when he thought about the circumstances at home.

You know the struggles, man, and you find yourself feeling so hopeless, you want to do something for the family, man. There are some bills and stuff, so you want to quickly make sure that everything is balanced because when the situation is not good here that can’t motivate me to stay focused at school because, like, I’m there, but my brain is not there, it’s here at home. I’m asking, what am I having for dinner, what is going on next week? So it’s hard even to focus, so you lose some of those good marks. So then you begin to fail, and there comes another stress. So your brain is messed up because there isn’t that support structure that you need, like you know mom is working a stable job because when she works, she’s only working 3 days now and when she works 3 days I gotta have transport money, there’s nothing to eat.

The space of the university acted as a reminder of the realities of life in the township. “I know I’m good at school,” he told me, but “I don’t want to come to campus and see other people and feel sorry for myself.

In January 2017, Zakes got a job at a call centre in Cape Town. The work was hard, but he liked the job and his manager was very encouraging. The major problem was the commute to get to work. In order to get to work on time he had to wake up at 5am each morning to catch the train. Once he got to work, he would work through his lunch break in order to catch the earlier train home at 5pm. Cape Town’s trains are notoriously slow, overcrowded, and liable to break down, which often meant that he was late getting to work or late getting home. Eventually, the hours and the commute ground him down. He quit in April and decided to focus on starting a business. Yet by late 2017 he was still unemployed and looking for work. He wouldn’t return to
school, he said, until he was able to give his family a “comfortable life.” While this responsibility was deeply gendered, it was also shaped by the deep bond Zakes’ had with his mother and his desire to be seen as responsible for her and his sisters. His story highlights the fact that pathways through higher education in South Africa are often interrupted by household crises, in this case declines in household income. Obligations to family often take precedence over the pursuit of higher education, yet fulfilling these is no small task.

**Waithood, Dependency, and Responsibility**

Contemporary scholarship on youth in the Global South has emphasized the impact of social and economic change on young people’s transitions from childhood to adulthood (Singerman 2007, Mains 2007, Honwana 2012, Locke and Te Lintelo 2012, Jeffrey et al. 2008, Jeffrey 2010; 2012). Honwana (2012, 3) suggests that the majority of young people in Africa “live in a liminal, neither-here-nor-there state; they are no longer children who require care, yet they are not considered mature social adults.” The collapse of a national developmental project, neoliberal policies, and structural adjustment programs have limited young people’s ability to assume independent adult lives. “Waithood,” then, “represents a contradiction of modernity, in which young people’s expectations and opportunities are simultaneously broadened and constrained” (Honwana 2012, 4). Rather than waithood being a temporary state, she argues, it is becoming a permanent condition and not confined to the Global South, but increasingly a global condition. In a more nuanced reflection on these themes, Jeffrey (2010b) has suggested that linear accounts of youth transitions fail to capture the complexity of young people’s lives. He writes of unemployed youth experiencing ‘timepass’, or spatial and temporal delays of adulthood, but these experiences are themselves shaped by changes in education, economy, and society. Rather than young people simply being trapped in a condition of waithood, Jeffrey
(2010b) suggests that they experience ‘moments of possibility’ that open spaces for transformation. Higher education provides one such possibility for transformation, and yet this occurs in a context in which young people are deeply affected by social and economic shifts.

Waithood manifests in a variety of ways, but framing it as a general condition affecting youth in Africa misses the ways in which young people move in and out of waithood and the forces that affect their lives. One key factor shaping young people’s educational trajectories are household dynamics. In a study of young people’s caring responsibilities in Zambia, for example, Day and Evans (2015) emphasize that young people’s life transitions are embedded in their social relations with family, other household members, relatives, peers, and other adults in the community. In Zambia, education is prized as it is seen as facilitating a transition to adulthood. Yet despite this, many young people find it difficult to further their education as it conflicts with caregiving responsibilities to family, affecting young women in particular. It is worth noting that the impact of the HIV-AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa has frequently redefined household responsibilities, with young people often becoming de facto household heads. Transitions, then, are not linear, but it is important to acknowledge the multiple factors, including household dynamics, affect the ‘moments of possibility’ that Jeffrey (2010b) describes.

In the case of the young people I interviewed, waithood was not a moment of spatial or temporal fixity, but a period in which young people waited to assume some degree of social mobility in order to provide for their families. This was shaped by simultaneous desires for independence and a reconfiguration of family responsibilities. Witness, for example, this conversation I had with Zakes and Mzi, two students from Khayelitsha attending UWC and CPUT respectively.

CW: What does independence mean to you?
Zakes: You have money in your account, you are driving your own car. We have our own belongings, our own things.

Mzi: Standing for yourself, you don’t need anything from someone else at home. But you give to them, you don’t take from them.

Higher education was critical in that it allowed these young people to move toward adult status. Yet rather than this simply being a rejection of dependency, it reconfigured household and family dynamics in that others could now be dependent on them. Ferguson (2013) has suggested that high rates of unemployment, the diminishing prospects of stable waged employment, and the extension of state cash transfer programs have generated desires for dependence on others across Southern Africa. Rather than seeking some form of economic independence, people seek to make claims on others or the state that allow them to survive. A key transitional moment in young people’s lives, however, is their ability to claim some degree of independence from others. At the same time, education also allowed for the potential reconfiguration of these ‘declarations of dependence,’ as young people transition from being dependent on others to having others become dependent on them.

However, these desires to act as providers for others occur in a context of significant uncertainty. Higher education, as Jeffrey et al.’s (2008) work in India highlights, often provides only the allure of social mobility. As Day and Evans’ (2015) research in Zambia also reveals, educational credentials do not necessarily equal employment. While higher education provides a ‘moment of possibility’ for young people to assume adulthood, it is also fraught with risk. Studies have discussed waithood as a protracted life stage, but it is perhaps more helpful to consider young people’s shifting relationships to others, particularly family members, as they move down complex pathways toward adulthood.

Conclusion
The cases described above highlight the importance of studying higher education as embedded within particular social dynamics. Students do not enter higher education as atomized individuals, but bring with them a range of attachments, hopes, and desires. Drawing on Gibson Graham’s (2014) diverse economies approach and recognizing the emotional geographies that are implicit within higher education, it is possible to go beyond understandings of education as simply functional to the reproduction of capitalist social relations, and examine how education is connected to a broader world of economic relations and exchanges. In its attempt to make ‘small facts speak to large concerns,’ ethnographic detail allows us to see how higher education does more than simply reproduce capitalist social relations. It reveals how students are differentially positioned in relation to systems of higher education, and how they respond to circumstances of household poverty. Examining the flows of NSFAS money, for example, reveals both a crisis of household social reproduction and how forms of sharing, love, and reciprocity are central to household economies. It reveals how household economies are characterized by multiple forms of distribution between parents and children, as well as anticipated forms of distribution in which children take over as primary income earners.

While the pursuit of higher education often allows young working-class people to envisage forms of middle class mobility, it also involves obligations to family that are both immediate and anticipated. As Grant (2017) and Pimlott-Wilson (2015) have noted in their studies on student aspirations in the UK, desires for individual social mobility often confront values of collective responsibility and care. Young people’s aspirations are not merely focused on social mobility or financial success, but future emotional well-being for themselves and their families (Brown 2011, Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011). As the South African case reveals, students’ motivations for pursuing higher education were connected to desires for social and
spatial mobility, out of poverty and, in some cases, out of life in the township. The hope attached to higher education was not merely informed by neoliberal notions in which higher education is a pathway to social mobility, but by desires for dignity and security for previous and future generations.

Young peoples’ time in higher education is thus deeply shaped by the emotional geographies that connect campuses and households. As Pimlott-Wilson (2015) has noted, while neoliberal education policy is aimed at inculcating individual mobility, young people have strong spatial attachments to those who inhabit their social and emotional lives. Yet as she reminds us, these emotional attachments themselves are crucial to neoliberalism’s affective governance, as they offload the burden of dealing with poverty onto the shoulders of young people. Young people come to see higher education as a panacea to poverty, when in reality it is a key driver of inequality and a poor mechanism for addressing high rates of poverty. Higher education is frequently seen as necessary to the production of competitive human capital which will drive economic growth and resolve poverty, yet this ignores the structural nature of unemployment in South Africa (Vally and Motala 2014). Higher education, as Jeffrey et al. (2008) have noted in India, is a contradictory resource for young people. It allows a limited number of working class students to overcome intergenerational poverty while also drawing them into structures that replicate wider inequalities.
Chapter 5

#FeesMustFall, Citizenship, and the Contradictory Functions of Higher Education in South Africa

“…for twenty years, there was consensus in South Africa that the settlement we reached in 1994 was the right one. That is now open to question in ways it has not been before, on the streets and in the lives of ordinary people, especially the young and aspirant” – Jonny Steinberg (2015).

In March 2015, UCT student Chumani Maxwele travelled to Khayelitsha to collect a container of human waste from the blue portable toilets scattered throughout the township. Returning to campus, he hurled the contents of the bucket at a statue of British colonist Cecil Rhodes on the university’s upper campus. The notorious ‘poo protest’ that kicked off the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement employed a tactic that had been used by residents of townships around Cape Town for some time. In Khayelitsha and Maxwele’s home community of Delft, thousands are subject to the daily indignities of using filthy portable toilets. In 2013, activists dumped human waste outside the Cape Town airport and on the steps of the provincial legislature.

Anthropologist Steve Robins (2014) has noted that these acts “dragged the stench from the shantytowns to Cape Town’s centres of political and economic power.” These protests disrupted the post-apartheid socio-spatial order by bringing the everyday indignities of township life into spaces of affluence and power in the aspirant ‘global city’. These disruptive acts are an increasingly common feature of everyday life in South Africa, often described as ‘service delivery protests’ in which poor communities draw on protest repertoires from the anti-apartheid struggle to make citizenship claims in the post-apartheid present. These tactics hit colleges and universities across South Africa in 2015 and extended into 2016 and 2017. Dubbed the #FeesMustFall (#FMF) movement, students across the country mobilized against tuition fee
increases, advocated for free higher education, and pushed for the decolonization of higher education institutions.

Parsing material and reports on the #FMF movement reveals a range of heterogeneous demands and grievances. Some students called for the decolonization of curricula, others called for the abolition of registration fees, while still others called for an end to sexism and homophobia (Naidoo 2016, Booysen 2016). Some of these demands emerged from educational struggles and motivations highlighted in the previous chapters: A growing number of students from working class households were entering higher education institutions in order to secure a decent life for themselves and their families. Once they entered these institutions, however, they frequently found themselves facing an array of obstacles, including registration costs that they could not afford, a shortage of accommodation, exclusion due to unpaid debts, institutional racism, and, at the end of it all, precarious employment prospects. At the same time, #FMF went beyond these material concerns, as it brought together a range of political currents that saw higher education as a space to challenge wider inequalities, particularly racial ones, that endured in the post-apartheid period. The racial scripts that emerged from the protests signal the endurance of racial subjectivities in the post-apartheid period, and provide an opportunity to think through the complex relationship between race and class.

My argument in this chapter is that #FMF provided a broad platform to articulate a politics of impatience at the outcomes of post-apartheid citizenship. In this sense, it shares something with the forms of insurgent citizenship that have characterized South Africa’s second decade of democracy (Satgar 2016, Brown 2015). It also highlights the contradictory functions of higher education in South Africa, which is aimed at both addressing historic inequities and generating human capital for a globalizing knowledge economy. It is the tension between these
two functions, rather than rising tuition fees alone, that can help us understand and situate these protests in the broader political landscape.

I begin by providing a broad sketch of the #FMF movement from 2015 through to 2016. I then focus on the content of these protests by examining three different institutions in Cape Town. I suggest that the first wave of protests in 2015 were a direct outcome of significant shortfalls in higher education funding, increasing tuition costs and rising levels of student debt. While the initial round of fee increases allowed students to form broad-based forms of solidarity (across race and class lines), I suggest that unity in the second round of protests was more ambiguous. Differences between student groups became apparent and factional politics tied to parties resulted in significant fragmentation. By drawing out some of the grievances from these different institutional struggles, I demonstrate how the protests were based both around material concerns over social mobility and debt, as well as broader frustrations at the endurance of racialized inequality and poverty. Finally, I suggest that while the narratives and experiences of students themselves are crucial in understanding the diverse motivations underpinning these protests, it is also essential to examine how these emerge from the multiple and contradictory functions of higher education systems. Drawing on Hart’s (2014) concept of de- and re-nationalization, I suggest it is also helpful to think through these protests as outcomes of South Africa’s passive revolution.

The Fees Must Fall Movement/Moment 2015-2016

The 2015-2016 wave of protest was prefaced by a long history of student protest that has occurred in popcorn-like fashion throughout the post-apartheid period. As I highlight in Chapter 1, these stem, principally, from students being unable to pay registration costs, accommodation
shortages, exclusion due to unpaid debt, and rising tuition costs. These protests occurred, overwhelmingly, at historically disadvantaged institutions such as those located in former Bantustans. The 2015 #FMF protests were a more recent iteration of these struggles, notable in that they occurred on a far larger scale and drew more widespread public attention. The 2015-2016 wave began with dual movements at historically white institutions: UCT in Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Students at UCT had been organizing for some time around the lack of transformation on campus, institutional racism, and the continued presence of symbols venerating colonial leaders (Godsell and Chikane 2016). The incident described in the opening paragraph of this chapter was a catalyst for what became the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) movement, which included the occupation of administrative buildings and campus debates and forums about race and transformation on campus. Due to its elite status and global connections, the movement received widespread attention and has since become a reference point for scholars working on decolonizing the university (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nişancıoğlu 2018). Around the same time, students at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg organized a ‘1month1million’ fundraising campaign that brought national attention to the higher education funding crisis and the lack of support for poor students. This was accompanied by protests at Wits over campus worker outsourcing, which built on a longer legacy of struggles over worker outsourcing (Kenny & Clarke 2000).

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30 It is interesting to note that while this movement started at UCT, it was taken up by students in the UK in efforts to decolonize their institutions. The movement at Oriel College, Oxford, for example, called for the removal of a statue of Rhodes and institutional reflection on the linkages between the university and empire. A recently released book titled Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonize the Racist Heart of Empire features reflections on this movement in the UK and US, however there is more limited attention to the movement in South Africa.
In October 2015, students at institutions across the country faced looming fee increases of between 10 and 10.5% for the following academic year (Booysen 2016). The fee increase was the latest in a series of increases that reflected declining and uneven state funding. State contributions to the higher education budget declined from 49% in 2000 to 40% in 2012, while the burden on students in the form of tuition fees increased from 24% to 31% over the same period (PWC 2015). The increase was particularly sharp between 2010 and 2012 when tuition fees increased by 27%, while enrolment increased by only 7%. This resulted in a 31% increase in student debt over two years (PWC 2015). While funding for financially needy students had increased, and state funding of the student loan scheme NSFAS accounted for around R10billion a year, this was insufficient to meet demand and fully fund students. More students from poor and working-class households were admitted into higher education, with insufficient funding, rising fees and, as a result, rising levels of debt (DHET 2010).

On October 14, students at Wits commenced a shutdown of campus against the fee increase led, primarily, by Student Representative Council (SRC) leaders from the Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA), a student group affiliated with the ANC. In the same week, students at UCT commenced protests, many of them involving leaders from the #RMF movement who came to play a prominent role in the #FMF movement in Cape Town. On October 20, the minister of Higher Education met with university vice chancellors and announced a 6% cap on fee increases across the country. This was rejected by student leaders at UCT, Wits and, by this stage, student leadership at CPUT, UWC, UJ, RU, TUT and UP.\textsuperscript{31} The following day, approximately 5000 students in Cape Town marched to parliament to oppose the 6% increase. They momentarily

\textsuperscript{31} Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University of the Western Cape, University of Johannesburg, Rhodes University, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Pretoria.
gained access to the parliamentary precinct, only to be driven back with tear gas and stun
grenades.32

On October 22, students in Johannesburg (from both Wits and UJ) marched to Luthuli
House, the ANC’s headquarters, forcing ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe to address
them and receive their memorandum of demands, which included:

1. Immediately release the funds to ensure a 0% fee increase for 2016 without
   universities imposing austerity measures.
2. Urgently put forward a specific plan of action to realize free, quality higher
   education.
3. Ensure it provides the resources to end outsourcing of workers immediately at
   institutions of higher learning.

The following day, student and university leaders were invited to meet with the President in
Pretoria, where it was announced that there would be no fee increases for 2016 (see Image 10).

Outside the meeting thousands of students gathered to await the announcement. In Durban, 6000
students marched to City Hall and proceeded from there to ANC headquarters. On the same day,
students at the University of the Western Cape marched down Robert Sobukwe Road to the Cape
Town airport.

32 The dynamics of these protests cannot fully be analyzed here, although a number of other commentators have
done so elsewhere. Laterza & Manqoyi (2015), for example, have analyzed the dynamics of these protests as
‘crowds’, pointing to the fact that they rejected attempts by leaders and organizations to impose vertical hierarchies
and favoured spontaneous organizing. Marchers often made decisions on the spot about routes or what to target.
Energy was maintained through singing protests songs, particularly those that venerated struggle heroes such as MK
veteran Solomon Mahlangu. While these observations mirror my own experiences of these protests, they ignore the
extent to which student organizations such as EFF, PYA, SASCO and PASMA were integral in planning and
leading some of these protests. While the structure that emerged after the protests was non-partisan and involved an
array of student organizations affiliated to various political parties, it was clear that distinct student leaders in these
protests had affiliations with various political parties. It is no accident that figures like the EFF’s Vuyani Pambo or
PYA’s Nompendulo Mkhathsha were closely identified with this movement as they were central characters in
protest marches and occupations. It is certainly the case, as Satgar (2016) notes, that much of the organizing between
campuses was done through WhatsApp groups. The use of the hashtag before the movement title also speaks to its
significant online presence.
A collection of posters printed in South Africa’s Mail and Guardian newspaper from this period capture both the diversity of this movement’s grievances and demands:

1. Education is not just for the elite #fuckclassism  
2. #occupy Luthuli house$^{34}$ – Daddy, please don’t shoot! We are coming home, we just want to LEARN!!!  
3. The formerly oppressed has now become the oppressor #ApartheidTactics  
4. We are students, not customers  
5. Free education in our lifetime  
6. Open Access = No (Zero!) Financial Exclusion!  
7. My mom is too single for these fees #Uprising  
8. Joining youths of 1976 in fighting for change #FeesMustFall  
9. All I ever did wrong was be black  
10. Too black to pay your 6%  
11. Stop misallocating funds Blade–Put the money where the minds are (Mail and Guardian 2015)  
12. Too “Rich” for NSFAS. Too Poor for Fees #FeesMustFall

Everatt (2016) notes that while the #FMF movement only lasted around 2 weeks, it managed to unite students across class and racial lines and draw widespread public support. Students drew

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$^{33}$ Poppy Mathobela Twitter Account. URL: https://twitter.com/PopMathobela/status/657513869997424640/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E657513869997424640&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmemeburn.com%2F2015%2F10%2F26-incredible-photos-from-the-feesmustfall-march-on-the-union-buildings%2F

$^{34}$ Luthuli house is the headquarters of the ANC in Johannesburg.
attention not only to lack of state support for higher education but the circumstances faced by poor students. The victory caused the state to pledge a further R6.9 billion to the higher education budget, R2.3 billion of which was intended to offset the no fee increase (SAHO 2016b).

Yet the move also divided students. Shortly after the presidential announcement, the president of the Wits Student Representative Council Shaeera Kalla wrote on Facebook, “The government has addressed 0%. Let it be known that we are not satisfied with it. We are still waiting to be addressed on ending outsourcing at universities and on free education.” At the same time, members of the Wits SRC meet with PYA leaders in a controversial meeting where it is alleged they ‘sold out #FMF’ to the ANC (DailyVox 2015). The SRC announced that classes would resume the following week, a move opposed by some students who continued protests toward the goal of free higher education. Fractures emerged during this period, with groups affiliated with the EFF and PAC arguing for an extension of the struggle until free higher education was achieved. The youth and student wings of the ANC, on the other hand, blamed ongoing protest on the EFF and accused ‘foreign’, ‘imperialist’, and ‘third force’ elements of hijacking the movement.35 Divisions also emerged in the movement along gender lines, as students at Rhodes and Wits launched protests against sexual assault on campus, and criticized men for dominating the movement at the expense of women and queer activists.

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35 In early 2016 the president of the ANC Youth League called for the state security agency to investigate the #FMF movement as they were being funded by ‘foreign agents’ intent on overthrowing the government. I heard this charge repeated by ANC-aligned youth activists on a number of occasions. In some cases student activists I interviewed would only agree to meet off campus or in places on campus where they could not be surveilled by members of the ANC who, they believed, were sent to campus to spy on student activists.
From early on, it appeared that the ANC looked set to take advantage of the momentum generated by the #FMF protests and in doing so co-opt what began as a non-partisan movement. After the 0% increase had been announced, the ANC released the following statement:

"Today, young people of South Africa once again made history. Emulating the courageous and fearless generation of 1976, they stood as a united force and presented to government their unequivocal demands for accessible, quality education. These demands echoed those that South Africans, united in their diversity, have made in the Freedom Charter, the Reconstruction and Development Plan, resolutions of successive ANC conferences and now consolidated in government's long term plan towards 2030, the National Development Plan (ANC 2015)."

Not only does the ANC draw a seamless connection between student struggles of the past and the #FMF movement, but suggests that students were simply calling for the implementation of existing ANC policy. This veneration of the protests was, however, short lived. By late October 2015, the higher education minister encouraged parents to tell their children to stop protesting and go back to class so exams could resume (Evans 2015).

By mid-2016, fee increases were back on the table and fresh rounds of protest resumed. In August, the Council on Higher Education issued a report on short term funding options for higher education, which recommended increases in line with the consumer price index of around 6%. The effect of no net increases, they warned, would threaten the sustainability of the higher education system. The minister for higher education pledged additional funding for NSFAS, intended to offset any increases incurred by lower income students, yet the exact level of fee increases was to be determined at the institutional level. The announcement triggered a second wave of protests across the country. Students embarked on protests, blockades, building occupations, and burnt buildings and cars at UKZN and the Durban University of Technology. UCT shut down campus in anticipation of the fee announcement and students blockaded campus for a number of weeks. By October 2016, Wits, UCT, CPUT, NMMU, UWC, TUT, UP and UJ
had all suspended classes in the face of ongoing protests. This protest wave was characterized by a lack of consensus over political demands, with some groups calling for ‘free education for all’, others calling for ‘free education for the poor’, while still others simply called for decolonized education. Once again, protests were frequently characterized by disruptive and violent tactics that drew a heavy-handed response from private security. By October 2016, 567 students had been arrested in protests across the country, with many facing expulsion from institutions and lengthy sentences (Herman 2016).

This second wave of #FMF saw protests become increasingly violent. Students targeted university property and universities increasingly employed private security who freely used rubber bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades on students. At NWU, a science centre and administrative building were burnt. Clashes erupted between EFF and Afriforum youth at UP. Students at UCT firebombed the vice chancellor’s office and set a campus vehicle alight. An empty lecture hall at Wits was also set on fire. At UJ, arson destroyed an auditorium and a computer centre, and at UFS clashes began after protestors stormed a rugby match. By 2018, the damage caused by protests was estimated at R800 million (Daniel 2018). The dynamics of this protest wave were different in that they were composed of smaller groups, they included alliances between students and outsourced campus workers (with students often challenging official unions on campus), and were dominated by youth political organizations such as the EFF-Student Command (EFF-SC) and Pan-African Student Movement of Azania (PASMA). At UWC, violent protests broke out after the 0% announcement as students demanded the university write off historic debt of more than R270 million (Gqirana 2015). Protests were also frequently delinked from SRC structures and smaller groups of radical students accused SRC leaders of selling out to state officials or university leadership.
The 2016 protests did not stem from tuition fee increases alone, but an array of interconnected issues that had motivated student activism for some time. As students returned to campus in 2016, many faced accommodation shortages as the success of the movement had led to an increase in applications and admissions at many institutions. While the government pledged an additional R4.582 billion for NSFAS and R2.453 billion to settle outstanding debts and registration costs, the system was beset by a range of problems, most notably payment delays. While historic debts were scrapped and registration fees waived at some institutions, institutional and technical problems that had dogged the system for years remained. Payment delays at the institutional level often resulted from administrative delays in the transmission of academic results. By July 2016, some students still had not received their NSFAS payments. This meant that they did not receive money to cover food, transportation books, or accommodation costs. Students from the so-called ‘missing middle’, those who came from households above the NSFAS income threshold, also demanded inclusion, noting that their parents could hardly afford the high costs of tuition.

The second wave of protests highlighted the heterogeneous demands guiding student activists across the country. While the first round was largely centred on opposing fee increases, the second round raised critiques of the purpose and content of the higher education system itself. At a gathering of student leaders after the protests of 2015, participants agreed to six broad goals guiding the direction of the student movement, including:

1. Free, quality, decolonized education from the cradle to the grave
2. An end to outsourcing and labour broking
3. The decriminalization of protests and protestors
4. An end to debt
5. A reformulation of governance structures to promote participatory rather than representative democracy
6. An end to all oppressive systems including racism, exploitation, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and ableism, among others (Naidoo 2016, 188).
Naidoo (2016) suggests that students were guided by a range of political traditions, including Black Consciousness, feminism and Pan-Africanism, and what began as protests over bread and butter student issues became a wider critique of both the role of the university and the endurance of racial inequality. A student active in the protests at UWC described this as follows:

This movement has tapped a deep and powerful anger felt by millions of young black South Africans. They are not merely angry at the cost of tuition, but at the indignities experienced by their parents as they work for a pittance for contracting companies; as they try and study for exams by paraffin lamps in one-room shacks; as they hustle to find money to reach campus each morning from far-flung townships. These daily indignities of everyday life have been repeatedly emphasized by students as a form of ‘black pain’ that they must endure. It is apparent that university administrators, politicians, the police, white South Africans and those from the middle and upper class are barely cognizant of this (Amandla Magazine 2016).

In an overview of these protests, Naidoo (2016, 189) argues that they were “the single most significant movement to have woken government from its growing estrangement from the demands and needs of the people.” As Booysen (2016) adds, they were also the most successful example of a post-apartheid social movement, as they convinced the state, in a relatively short period of time, to boost higher education budgets by billions and launch a presidential commission into higher education funding. Beyond this, the movement played a valuable discursive function as it placed a discussion about the limitations of the ANC’s transformation project and the position of young people on the national stage.

#FMF at Three Institutions

**CPUT:** CPUT is a university of technology with 32,000 students spread across five campuses in Cape Town. It was formed in 2005 following the merger of the historically white Cape Technikon and the historically coloured Peninsula Technikon. The majority of students come from working class coloured and black townships on the Cape Flats as well as from the
Eastern Cape. Student politics at CPUT are characterized by the dominance of three main political formations: the EFF-Student Command (affiliated with the EFF), SASCO (affiliated with the ANC) and PASMA (affiliated with the PAC). Although there has been rivalry between these formations, interviews with student leaders suggested that they worked closely together and tended to avoid factional politics during the 2015 protests.

Protests at CPUT’s campuses across Cape Town occurred long before the 2015, as students had been protesting problems with NSFAS payments, accommodation shortages, and conditions faced by outsourced campus workers for some time. A SASCO activist at CPUT noted that student leaders at CPUT “took the momentum that was given by these liberal institutions [Wits and UCT] that have the advantage of media,” and used this to “advance issues that had been pressing us for a long time, the issues of fees, outsourcing workers…” In early 2013 and 2014, for example, students at CPUT protested against the underfunding of the NSFAS system and its failure to meet the growing demand for higher education (Sapa 2014). Lower admission criteria, tuition fees, and relative proximity to many working class communities meant that a high number of students were funded through NSFAS. In 2016, 30% of students enrolled at CPUT were funded through NSFAS (CPUT 2016). Between 2009 and 2016, enrolment grew by 12% while the amount of tuition-based income received by the institution increased by 65%. Over the same period the institution witnessed declines in government income as a funding source (CHET 2016).
The grievances raised by CPUT students in 2015-2016 were reflective of the socio-economic profile of its student body (see Image 11). Two key concerns repeatedly raised by students in protests from 2013 onwards were student debt and the insourcing of campus workers. Students noted that they could not progress further in their degrees without paying outstanding debts and often could not collect certificates of completion (Ndelu 2017). In an open letter to parents and the public published in the Cape Times in 2015, students at CPUT described the adverse impact of debt:

At CPUT, you suffer and become a victim of the following: You do not get your final results which are needed in order to apply for a job. You do not get to register the next year unless your debt is fully cleared... When you graduate with debt, you do not obtain your certificate and academic records to prove that you are qualified. It becomes impossible to find a job to pay off your loans.

Paul, a student leader affiliated with SASCO, described the impact of debt on CPUT students as follows:

The reason we demanded the scrapping of debts is because as leaders, we know that debts are the main reason we will find our black brothers and sisters not able to access institutions of higher learning, especially in January with the returning students. We find that students come back the following year and they are owing R35,000 and told by the institution you must pay...So it’s debt that has a very big influence on the high number of dropouts in the institution of higher learning.
Student demands for debt clearance were a key component of these protests—on one occasion protestors even set the financial aid office alight. Student activists described ‘institutionalizing’ the struggle after 2015 by not relying on mass marches involving students from other campuses, but developing a list of demands that were responsive to the interests of CPUT students. A key demand opposed the ways in which debt functioned to both exclude students from registering and from collecting their degrees.

Student opposition to debt made a demonstrable difference to many CPUT students. On October 30, 2015 CPUT council took a decision to clear student debt, allowing students who were unable to register due to unpaid debts from 2013/2014/2015 to return to classes. Students funded through the NSFAS system were exempt from paying registration costs. This was also made possible by increased state funding directly to institutions that allowed them to scrap debts and eliminate registration costs for NSFAS students. In 2016, students who were unable to receive their certificates due to unpaid fees were allowed to return to campus and collect their degrees.

In Ndelu’s (2017, 21) analysis, the protests at CPUT emerged from grievances affecting primarily working class students:

Many hail from homes built on the earnings of unskilled or semi-skilled workers from the black and coloured townships of the Western Cape and the former ‘homelands’ of the Eastern Cape. Their acceptance into university is a lifeline for their families.

As campus activists involved in the initial rounds of mobilization described, protest demands were outcomes of the conditions facing poor students.

Sechaba: We as students come from the townships, and those struggles in the townships, we know them, we grew up with them. So that’s why we were easily able to capture them because we know them…I would say most of the students here, we come from poor backgrounds. I don’t have proper stats, but I would say that 60 to 80 percent come from working class backgrounds.
For example, one of the key student leaders at CPUT went by the name Propaganda. In a newspaper profile, Propaganda described how he had previously worked on construction sites to save up the money to pay his registration cost:

> Being poor is a great motivator of many things, including anger, and I refuse to understand why people must be poor and excluded in things that would actually assist in the upliftment of their situations, in this case education (Sokanyile 2015).

Central to the student mobilizations at CPUT was the struggle over outsourced cleaning and grounds workers. The basis of student and worker solidarity at CPUT was shared experiences of poverty and deprivation. These shared experiences led students to describe the outsourced workers as ‘our parents’, connecting the inability of many parents to pay registration costs with the low wages they often make.

Paul: Most of us here are black students from townships, these are our parents directly. Even if it’s not my mother who is a cleaner here, my mother is a cleaner somewhere else and the same system is victimizing my mother there. So we related to the struggle of workers because us, as students, we are the students of the poor and working class.

Lubabalo: It wasn’t even solidarity, but a deep connected issue. We have parents who work in security or as cleaners, so we understand how cleaners suffer. So there’s something that clicks in your mind, that this is something being faced by our parents.

While conducting field research on campus, I observed that this solidarity often took the form of students advocating for workers at disciplinary tribunals and at the labour court, or organizing support during strikes.

Despite initial unity among different political groups at CPUT, factionalism emerged in 2016 and students described a fragmenting of the movement. Paul, a student allied with SASCO acknowledged that after the no fee increase was announced in 2015, “the momentum was slowly degenerating because of the different views between different groups.” While initial mobilization in 2015 involved alliances between different groups on campus, protests in 2015 and 2016
descended into further rounds of violence. Students were often mistrustful of SRC structures and protests often focused on having arrest charges against student leaders dropped.

**UWC:** UWC is a historically coloured university built on the urban periphery of Cape Town with a long history of political activism. It was known in the 1980s, under the tenure of VC Jakes Gerwel, as the “intellectual home of the democratic left” and was central to student political opposition to apartheid (Jacobs 2012). In 2012, its student body was 46% coloured and 36% black African, with many students coming from surrounding working-class communities (Cooper 2016). Student politics at UWC were dominated by SASCO for a number of years, with EFF and PASMA becoming increasingly popular in recent years. SASCO’s affiliation with the ANC was also impetus for students to affiliate with the EFF or PASMA, groups which spoke to broader issues of land, inequality, and decolonization. As Maringira and Gukurume (2017) point out, the vast majority of those students actively involved in the #FMF at UWC were black students, and reports from student activists highlighted a political divide between black and coloured students.

Students at UWC joined other students in Cape Town in opposing the 10% tuition hike by marching with them to parliament. On October 24, 2015, around 6000 students from CPUT and UWC marched down Robert Sobukwe Road toward the Cape Town airport where they were stopped by police and many students were arrested. In a reflection on that march, one student activist noted:

> UWC students faced rubber bullets, stun grenades, water cannon, tear gas, and fled into the nearby Bishop Lavis community to seek refuge. It is important to note that the UWC SASCO-led SRC was not present in that march following a political instruction they received from the ANC.

In 2015, the SRC at UWC was led by SASCO, in elections that were seen by many student activists as rigged—SASCO declared themselves the winner of student elections with 100% of
the vote. Opposition to SASCO and support for #FMF translated into a number of students seeking a political home in organizations like the EFF and PASMA, groups which were seen to embody the ethos of the #FMF struggle and articulate a more radical politics. Following #FMF, SASCO was voted out and PASMA representatives were elected to the SRC. As Maringira and Gukurume (2017, 34) note, PASMA was popular because it was opposed to SASCO which was identified with the ANC and because it “spoke to the black student population, not only around the ‘fees falling’ but more broadly around issues such as access to land and free decolonized quality education to emancipate black people.”

![Image 12: Students and workers gather in UWC’s central quad for a meeting to oppose outsourcing. February 21, 2016. Source: Personal photograph.](image)

Like students at CPUT, the demands raised by student protestors at UWC came to reflect the particular challenges they experienced within their institution. A 27 September 2016 list of grievances and demands provided by the ‘UWC Fees Will Fall Movement’ to the university provides a sense of the key issues faced by students (#UWCFeesWillFall 2016). First on the list was, “the defiance from government and all relevant stakeholders to provide free, quality, black-
centred decolonized education.” The second, third, and fourth grievances focused specifically on issues of debt and exclusion, particularly exclusion of students from “middle income families that do not have bursaries.” Students demanded the “scrapping/clearing of all student debts and the end of paying of registration fees” as well as “no student shall be prevented from graduation and receiving their certificates because of outstanding fees.”

Interviews with student activists at UWC also foreground the role of debt as a key factor in the protests of 2015 and 2016.

Sihle: Every year when you register, it’s a debt. You are accumulating debt, and then when it’s your final year they tell you ok you have to pay some of this debt and then you can’t and you drop out without a degree and then you have to start paying off your NSFAS. I have seen people dropping out because of this…Even for myself, I have debt to pay and so how am I supposed to go and look for a job if I can’t pay off that debt and can’t get my degree and then can’t find a job.

It was not only the accumulation of debt over the course of one’s degree, but the ways in which the institutional practice of ‘top slicing’ described in Chapter 3 created multiple financial hardships for students:

Palesa: NSFAS is just a loan. They are saying, ok now we are clearing you, you can register, what happens is that with the grant they give you, they will pay for your fees from last year and you will not be fully covered this year. So you will get NSFAS but you won’t be able to buy your textbooks, so it won’t be adequate. It is never adequate…Sometimes you never get your transport money. We don’t want NSFAS as a system. So you see what’s happening, when you’re black you can’t get a job and then how do you pay back that money?

Palesa was an activist with the EFF at UWC and her comments highlighted the differences between student demands and what the state was willing to offer. While NSFAS allowed thousands of students from low income households to attend university and played a significant role in changing the demographics of the overall student body, Palesa and other students opposed it because it was seen simply as a loan that involved future debt owed to the state.
Additional concerns raised in UWC #FMF memoranda spoke to the living conditions faced by poor and working-class students. They called for an extension of transport services to nearby townships, as students had to rely on inadequate and unsafe train and taxi services. The spatial design of apartheid university campuses means that many students still travel long distances to get to campus, often returning home late at night, which makes them vulnerable to crime. Demands for on-campus accommodation are often driven by safety concerns off campus, in communities which lack police resources and have poorly maintained lighting infrastructure (Nel 2016). Another significant issue affecting UWC students was hunger. In an undergraduate thesis on this issue, Mogatosi (2015, 52) found that over half of the students living on campus in his survey (n=119) struggled to afford food on a month-to-month basis. Hunger fluctuated depending on the time of year, as many students were reliant on food vouchers provided by NSFAS, which were often delayed.

A crucial point regarding access, and a likely contributor to unrest at UWC, can be found in changing enrolment patterns at the institution. Between 1988 and 1998 there was a rapid increase in black student enrolment at UWC—from 13% of student enrolments to 58% (Cooper 2016). By the late 1990s, black students became a significant majority of the student body at UWC. Yet these increases almost reversed in the 2000s, with black students making up only 36% of enrolments in 2012. Cooper (2016) suggests that as fees and registration costs have risen, many black working class students have found it increasingly difficult to access universities like UWC, while coloured students from middle class backgrounds have been able to gain admission. An analysis of enrolment data from 2008 to 2017 confirms this. Of the top ten feeder schools for UWC from this period, all had a majority coloured student body aside from one. And all, aside from one, were located in majority coloured communities or former white working-class areas.
The average annual fees for these schools in 2016 were R10,360. During this same period, fees at UWC were rising above the level of inflation each year (from R16,684 in 2009 to R32,440 in 2016). While these changing class-race enrolment dynamics cannot be said to be direct drivers of the protests, admission challenges faced by black students were likely contributing factors.

The issue of worker outsourcing (see Image 12) was also a key component of the UWC protests. At the entrance to UWC’s central quad is a sculpture by the artist David Hlongwane of a cleaner holding a broom in one hand and the hand of her child in convocation regalia in the other. The statue symbolizes the university’s historic connection to working class struggles and aspirations of intergenerational mobility. Unsurprisingly, then, the struggle to end worker outsourcing was key element of student demands at UWC.

Palesa: The workers who are outsourced are our parents. We see their pain each and every day…It resonates with all of us because even if your mother is not a cleaner here, she is probably a cleaner somewhere else.

As one activist at UWC noted, the workers “were clearly animated by the 2015 student rebellion” and used it to advance demands for insourcing. On November 2, 2015, cleaning and landscaping workers were joined by students in a march to demand insourcing. These marches occurred well into 2016 as workers and union representatives negotiated with the university council over insourcing. In 2017, the university maintained that insourcing was unaffordable and would bankrupt the institution. Expressions of solidarity between students and workers were also deeply spatial, as students who attended UWC frequently commuted from nearby townships, and shared transportation (and the frustration over transportation) with campus workers.

While student grievances often reflected the class position of many students at UWC, these grievances also drew on Black Consciousness and Pan-Africanist thought that centred the experiences of black students. Through groups like PASMA and the EFF, students moved from a
critique of rising fees, debt, and outsourcing to a critique of the racial inequalities that characterize South African society. The shift from fees to a focus on decolonization and wider political questions was evident in student meetings, marches, and placards throughout this period, which emphasized not only the cost but the content of higher education. The popularity of political groups like PASMA and the EFF were described by students in a variety of ways. One EFF student activist noted that growing up she was told to believe in and vote for the ANC because of their history, but “we ask ourselves, what is the ANC doing now?” Another student aligned with PASMA explained that PASMA took the concerns of poor students seriously, fighting with the administration in cases where students did not gain admission to programs. As Maringira and Gukurume’s (2017) interviews with PASMA activists highlight, these students were angry with the ANC and the compromises they made in 1994, which were seen as preserving the privilege and wealth of white South Africans. “These students experienced blackness in South Africa as a site of perpetual suffering, oppression and dispossession, and understood a decolonised education as being about a struggle to repossess what has been taken from the majority of blacks” (Maringira and Gukurume 2017, 40).

Yet the framing of the struggle at UWC through the lens of Black Consciousness raised a number of contradictions. As student activists noted, the movement at UWC was dominated by black African students, even as the majority of the student body was coloured. In observing #FMF gatherings and meetings with workers, it was apparent that black students were the driving force behind campus organizing. As Maringira and Gukurume (2017) note, student activists used the term ‘Black,’ drawing on Steve Biko’s work, to refer to those who experienced apartheid oppression and discrimination and thus included Indian and Coloured South Africans. Yet, in interviews, black African student activists complained specifically about the high number
of coloured academic faculty and staff: “Where are black lecturers, black non-academic staff? You move from one office to another, from one class to another, all you find is either a white or coloured lecturer” (Maringira and Gukurume 2017, 33). Demands and grievances emphasized the need for ‘black centred’ and ‘Afro-centric’ education, and students frequently spray painted the names of African liberation figures like Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon on campus buildings. While the issue of representation was central to many of these movements, the position of Coloured students and academics at UWC remained unclear.

**UCT:** UCT is a historically white university located in Cape Town’s affluent southern suburbs. It is surrounded by a number of elite public and private schools, from which the university continues to draw a high number of students. While the university has made strides in diversifying its student body, Cooper (2016) notes that the enrolment of black students peaked in 2000 and then declined. In roughly the same period, fees at UCT increased by an average of 11% per year, from 2009 to 2015, before declining by 1.3% in 2016 (CHET 2016b). The university pushed back against some aspects of apartheid policy—it successfully challenged the ministerial permit system that barred black students from enrolling in white universities earning it the title ‘Moscow on the Hill’—but it has never had a particularly militant student body. Today, campus politics are dominated by a variety of party and non-affiliated student organizations, with the liberal Democratic Alliance’s student wing (DASO) and the PYA allied with the ANC playing a particularly prominent role. Students allied with PASMA and the EFF were, however, frequently at the forefront of both the #RMF and #FMF protests. Throughout 2015 and 2016 there was a

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36 Here the popularity of Fanon’s writing within these movements was undoubtedly an inspiration for these Manichean imaginaries. In mid-2016 during a strike of outsourced workers at UWC, students erected a banner outside the university, proclaiming it the ‘University of Frantz Fanon’. While symbolic, the banner reflected the resurgent popularity of Fanon’s writings among student activists in South Africa, particularly in those university spaces that are in dire need of institutional transformation. Yet as Pithouse (2016) warns, there has been a deep misreading of Fanon in South Africa, in which his writings are used to justify hyper-masculine forms of violence that contradict Fanon’s universalist humanism.
high degree of mistrust between those who led the protests and elected SRC leaders, with activists refusing the recognize the legitimacy of the SRC or accusing them of selling out to the university administration.


The #RMF movement at UCT emerged in March 2015 around a range of demands and culminated in the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the university’s upper campus and a lengthy occupation of university buildings by student activists (see image 13). The #RMF protests went beyond the removal of colonial symbols and articulated demands for the transformation and decolonization of the institution. This included the hiring of more black faculty, challenging Eurocentric curricula, confronting white privilege in the form of language policy, calls for insourcing of workers, and addressing the struggles poor black students faced in

37 In a symbolic move, the first occupation in the #RMF protests took place in the Archie Mafeje room in the Bremner Building, later renamed Azania House by students. Mafeje, a leading South African anthropologist, was denied a permanent position at UCT after the administration conceded to pressure from the apartheid government not to hire black faculty.
accessing the university. In many ways, the movement resurrected an earlier debate about the transformation of UCT. Dubbed the ‘Mamdani affair,’ this involved the university hiring Mahmood Mamdani in 1996 to teach African studies only to suspend him the following year after departmental pushback against his redesign of the African history curriculum (Mamdani 2002).

Yet even as debates around decolonization drew international attention and resurrected old discussions about the culture of the institution, students involved in the initial round of #RMF articulated diverse motivations.

Student 1: It’s about the overall imbalances that UCT provides for us here. There are a number of students who are being financially excluded, not myself, but I know them personally. So a lot of my friends have been sort of kicked out and they go into debt at an early age, they’re not working, and it’s sort of keeps the cycle of poverty going.

Student 2: There are subtle modes of oppression here. Something like language. English is the primary language here, but not everyone that comes here speaks English as their first language. You have to learn a new language and accent. Students will say I can’t go to this guy with an African accent’s lecture, but as soon as it’s a French or German accent they are ok with it. These small subtle things, you must be aware of them. The goal is to be aware of that privilege, and by becoming aware of it you can change certain small things.

These brief reflections reveal an array of concerns beyond colonial symbolism, often centred around the issue of financial exclusions affecting students from poorer households. As Student 2 noted, the oppression students faced on campus was often more subtle than overt, connected to language policies and the privileging of whiteness. The #RMF protests allowed student activists to highlight a range of grievances faced, principally, by black students at the institution. As one #RMF activist described it, the statue protest “was definitely a catalyst which pushed students to challenge institutional racism and alienation at the institution and to discuss the pain that black students have at the institution around this alienation and marginalization.” As Jansen (2017) described it, the #RMF mobilization was an outcome of the second order challenges of
institutional transformation. While historically white institutions had enabled access for more black students over the years, they have remained culturally and symbolically white.

In a book reflecting on #RMF and its connection to the nature of post-apartheid citizenship, Nyamnjo (2016, 78) notes that students’ narratives of ‘black pain’ reflected both racial wounds and hope for a different future: “Yet if such hope is repeatedly frustrated, even as freedom is celebrated, one is entitled to pinch oneself every now and again with the question, ‘Are you free or are you dumb’?” In the untransformed elite university, the politics of this pain were both material (in the sense that students from poor households do struggle to meet entrance requirements) and deeply affective. For Nyanmnjoh (2016, 89), black pain and white privilege are “two sides of the same coin. Both are the result of particular encounters in a hierarchized world shaped by ideologies around factors such as race, place, gender, education, cultivation and civilization.”

While Naidoo (2016) suggests that the move from #RMF to #FMF involved a shift from race to class, issues of institutional racism were never far from the surface at UCT. This is likely due to the fact that many of the student leaders involved in #RMF assumed a leadership role in #FMF mobilizations. As one student activist put it:

Alex: I wouldn’t see Fees Must Fall as necessarily a movement. For us it’s a campaign that is a part of Rhodes Must Fall…The coordination of the shack at UCT was done by Rhodes Must Fall… the success and mass mobilization of #FMF is different to the radical decolonial politics of #RMF, because there was no politics to #FMF. In the sense that explicitly, we want explicitly only for black people, they [#FMF] were more broad demands for free education.

As Alex’s comment highlighted, many #RMF activists injected their own politics into the #FMF movement. These were, as Naidoo (2016) notes, informed by ideas derived from Black Consciousness, Pan-Africanism and intersectionality. Surveying social media material produced by students during this period, it is also clear that these students were animated by African
American politics, black feminism, and theory emerging from the Black Lives Matter movement and Afro-pessimist thought (Wilderson 2015).

A list of demands produced by UCT #FMF activists during the 2016 wave of #FMF protests provides some insights into the ways in which student demands reflected these dynamics:

- Adopt an admission policy that explicitly uses race as a proxy for disadvantage prioritizing black applicants.
- The removal of violent policies and processes that require students to perform their poverty and/or illness in order to receive concessions.
- Remove all statues and plaques on campus celebrating white supremacists. Rename buildings and roads from names commemorating only white people, to names of either black historical figures, or to names that contribute to this university taking seriously its African positionality.
- An urgent review of the current residence culture that perpetuates and reinforces all forms of social and financial exclusion.
- No financial exclusion of any student at the institution – Free, quality, decolonial education.
- Degrees which are withheld by the university due to fees outstanding must be released.
- Implement a curriculum which critically centres Africa and the subaltern.

This list of demands was released after student activists erected a shack on the university’s upper campus in a performative protest called ‘shackville’ aimed at calling attention to the challenges black students face in accessing accommodation. Activists accused the university of prioritizing white and foreign students in university residences, and accommodating black students in temporary housing far from campus. The ‘shackville’ protest came to a head as students burnt a car, a bus, and university artworks.

The particularities of the #FMF movement at UCT are due to its institutional history as a centre of white liberalism, and the fact that it does not suffer from the same material challenges
affecting other institutions. Funding for disadvantaged students is generous compared to other institutions, with students who receive NSFAS often gaining access to private bursaries and scholarships. This is not to diminish the financial challenges that many students face, but to acknowledge that UCT is better positioned than others to support these students. While accommodation was an issue in 2016 protests, UCT admissions policy gives strong preference to students who receive financial aid, with more than 75% of rooms allocated for black students (City Press 2016).

**Fallism and the Politics of Race and Class**

#FeesMustFall was an inchoate, fluid, and fragmented movement that brought together a diverse set of actors around a similarly diverse list of grievances and demands. In many ways, it reflected inequalities between and within institutions and the failure of the higher education reforms of the early 2000s. While some institutions have experienced rapid demographic changes and increasingly draw a student body from poor and working-class households, other, relatively elite institutions, have experienced far more limited changes. The result is that at historically black universities, like CPUT and UWC, demands reflected the everyday hardships of student life: long commutes from the township, NSFAS funding delays, lack of food and accommodation, and increasing debt levels. At historically white universities like UCT these concerns were present, but often surpassed by demands for institutional transformation.

The case studies above highlight some of these divergences. At CPUT, grievances were focused on delays with NSFAS payments, debt, and poverty experienced by students and workers. At UWC, debt and admission challenges were factors, but racial issues played a more central role, with activism highlighting the challenges of black students and workers in
particular. The protests at UCT reveal yet another layer: struggles against institutional racism, the absence of more sweeping demographic changes, and cultural whiteness. It is challenging, then, to speak of #FMF as a unified movement. It is more helpful, I argue, to uncover how its multiple strands speak to the diverse experiences of young South Africans and the contradictory functions of higher education.

The issue of fee increases provided, for a limited time, a potential bridge between the interests of middle-class students, intent on maintaining their position, and working-class students who saw education as the only pathway toward social mobility. This ‘class unity’ was, however, often expressed in racial terms, as students used the language of ‘black pain’ or ‘black suffering’ to describe the challenge their parents faced in financing their education or in seeing their children excluded from institutions. As Posel (2013) has argued, despite the end of racial rule, the language of race in South Africa remains powerful, with economic questions, wealth, status, and economic power tied to race. Everatt (2016) offers another possible explanation for this, as he suggests that both middle and working class black youth share experiences of ‘status incongruence’. This causes them to draw connections between the apartheid past and the post-apartheid present:

Emancipation was not accompanied by rupture: business as usual appeared to be the order of the day. Home life for many remained mired in poverty and debt, where apartheid spatial planning ensured that home was miles away from university; incessantly rising fees were the norm, often followed by financial exclusion for the poor; and the university itself remained a very white, middle-class, Eurocentric institution, even as the demographics of the student body changed quite dramatically (albeit unevenly across different universities) (Everatt 2016, 133).

Everatt (2016) describes this status incongruence as part of a wider critique of post-apartheid citizenship by young people. The end of apartheid brought about widespread expectations of rapid and sweeping reforms and yet the realities have been far more limited. For the black
middle class, it was assumed that the end of racial rule would provide access to social, symbolic and financial capital. And yet, as Gibson (2016, 6) adds, “rather than being free from psychological hang-ups, there is a profound experience of alienation, of not being at home in universities that are promoted as post-racial.”

The rapid desegregation of public institutions and spaces has been a notable success of the post-apartheid period. Whereas white and black South Africans previously ‘lived apart’, the post-apartheid period has witnessed a significant degree of racial mixing in schools, workplaces, and in spaces of consumption. Much of this has been facilitated by the de-racialization of inequality, as a mobile and aspirant black middle class has moved into those schools and neighbourhoods that were once the purview of white South Africans. Why then do racial scripts and subjectivities still play such a prominent role in South African life and in these protests in particular?

The relationship between race and class under apartheid was the source of significant debates, chiefly among Marxist and liberal scholars. The former theorized racism as largely functional to the requirements of capital accumulation, while the latter saw it as a potential impediment. Here Harold Wolpe’s work stands out as one of the more complex theorizations of race and class. His ‘cheap labour power’ thesis suggested that apartheid was an attempt to maintain systems of labour exploitation that placed the costs of social reproduction onto African households in rural Bantustans (Wolpe 1972). Yet these accounts caused many black Marxist scholars to accuse white Marxists of simply reducing racial discrimination to functional component of capital accumulation (Magubane 2007). While Wolpe (1976) later recognized that classes engage in forms of struggle not simply because of their class position but because of racial, religious, or political factors, his work struggled to explain this relation without lapsing
The endurance of racial subjectivities and discourse after the end of apartheid highlights the urgency of interrogating the relationship between race and class without resorting to reductionist explanations.

The desegregation of education provides a potential opportunity to think through these complex relations. The desegregation of schools, for example, has been rapid and uneven. Formerly white schools have become crucial to the reproduction of class privilege while formerly black schools, particularly those in townships and rural areas, are often seen as holding less distinction and value. One could argue that racial apartheid in education has simply been replaced by class apartheid, in which the ability to pay school or university fees significantly guarantees access. But this is only a partial explanation. The fact that formerly white institutions are still seen as holding value suggests that race remains a critical framework for assessing value and privilege. Goldberg (2011) suggests that even as public policy has been ‘deracialized’ this has had the effect of reinforcing rather than eliminating race. Post-apartheid sociality, he suggests, is increasingly about choice, but “less the choice of freedom than the freedom of choice, this latter liberty is all about affordability” (Goldberg 2011, 72). He describes this as ‘racial neoliberalism’ in which one is ‘free’ to choose as determined by one’s income, networks, education, class, and gender. Of course, these are all inscribed by race. In this way, even as race is no longer a feature of state domination, “its impressions, structural imprints, and its threats continue to have social force” (Goldberg 2011, 73). In a similar vein, Durrheim et al (2011) use the concept of ‘race trouble’ to describe how certain features and dynamics of social life are informed by race. Racism, they suggest, does not adequately capture the way in which racial subjectivities in South Africa are produced by participating in different racialized forms of life.
The use of racial scripts in these protests can thus be read as examples of how racial subjectivities in South Africa are produced and maintained within educational spaces. It is important to understand that these have a material basis, often based around debt or poverty experienced by black families that limit access, but they also transcend this. In higher education, there is an imprint left by the 1959 Extension of Universities Act that divided institutions along racial and ethnic lines. As Cooper (2015) has shown, change in the higher education landscape has been highly uneven. A small number of historically white institutions have become more diverse, although they reproduce class inequalities by drawing in primarily middle class students. Even as these institutions have undergone significant desegregation, they are still read as white. While there are no longer racial barriers to access, entry is still seen as shaped by networks of privilege that are associated with whiteness. For this reason, student demands frequently targeted a whiteness that was seen as embodied in the culture and functioning of these institutions.

Experiences of racism, household poverty, and frustrations at both the state and institutions gave rise to a political position that was popularly described in the media, and by students themselves, as ‘Fallism’. Fallism rejected the ‘rainbow nation’ discourses of reconciliation that have characterized the post-apartheid period, and called for more sweeping and rapid social change. In the words of one student activist, “Fallism implies immediacy—it means abandoning the politics of gradualism and the primacy of the ‘commission of inquiry’ and embracing fast and wide-ranging immediate changes to landscapes, demographics, financial models and curricula” (Mpofu-Walsh 2016, 84). As another student activist noted, it also sought to dispel the myth that young people were politically apathetic and that youth were the primary beneficiaries of the ‘rainbow nation’ (Abdulla 2017). Mbembe (2015) described this as a politics of impatience, in which “the old politics of waiting” was challenged as students called for
sweeping reforms. Fallism can broadly be seen as a set of frustrations with the limitations of post-apartheid citizenship. While these frustrations were frequently class issues linked, for example, to issues of upward mobility and debt, they were often expressed in racial terms.

The experience of paying the ‘black tax’ and reciprocal obligations to family, for example, are experiences that are shared by both working and middle-class black South Africans. As discussed in previous chapters, black middle class students themselves face pressures of debt and family obligations. Because they did not qualify for any financial assistance from the state, fee increases threatened their relative privilege and placed an additional burden on their families. As one protest sign noted, they were “Too ‘Rich’ for NSFAS. Too Poor for Fees.” For working class students, like those I interviewed, the protests were understood primarily through concerns over social mobility and debt. Increasing fees threatened the tenuous grasp they had and posed an additional burden on future earnings. Yet these more mundane aspects of student experience were largely lost in a movement that was portrayed as violent and seeking to upend the post-apartheid social contract. Similarly, student support for outsourced workers struggles were often motivated by deep emotional bonds and attachments, in which workers were referred to as ‘our parents’. Very often, then, there was a materiality to these racial subjectivities that was linked to financial hardships experienced by individuals and families. This is not to suggest that race is always reducible to class, but that one informs and shapes the other.

In their tactics and demands for rapid change, #FMF resonated with the diverse forms of protest action that have characterized South Africa’s second decade of democracy. Satgar (2016), for example, has suggested that #FMF was part of a wave of anti-systemic movements that targeted both the ruling party and neoliberal policy. Described by others as a ‘rebellion of the poor’ or ‘violent democracy,’ these protests frequently called attention to continuities with the
apartheid past, expressed frustration at the absence of transformative change, and evoked repertoires of protest that characterized the struggle against apartheid, with youth often at the forefront of these protests (Alexander 2010, Von Holdt 2013). While some have suggested that these were simply demands for improved service delivery from local government, others have characterized them as struggles over the experience of citizenship (Booysen 2007). Barchiesi (2011), for example has shown that even as the ANC implemented labour reforms aimed at protecting workers, work remained precarious and insecure. In the education sector, Hammett and Staeheli (2013) have shown that even as education reforms were intended to promote ideals of democratic citizenship, these were undermined by entrenched forms of privilege and power and structural forms of poverty and inequality. In other words, it is important to pay attention to the actual experiences of citizenship rather than constitutional rights (Robins, Cornwall & Von Lieres 2008). Doing so can reveal how student anger was not only grounded in opposition to abstract forces of neoliberalism, but in the experience of education itself. Opposition to debt, for example, was both grounded in experiences of financial exclusion and anxieties over future repayment, and the sense that the poor should not have to pay for services that they had a right to.

This politics of impatience also speaks to broader dynamics of youth waithood described by Honwana (2012). Waithood is not merely a condition, but often generates demands for social change. The Arab Spring and uprisings in North Africa, Mozambique and elsewhere, she argues, were led by youth who organized in diverse and flexible forms, both on- and offline. A central component of the #FMF protests was a criticism of the transition from apartheid itself. Many young people accused the previous generation of selling out, of not being radical enough in dismantling the legacies of apartheid. At the same time, they also suggested that little had
changed since 1994, comparing their lives with those of their parents and the struggles they still endured. In this sense, the resurrection of figures such as Steve Biko or Frantz Fanon made perfect sense, as they allowed students to critique the limitations of nationalism and the politics of non-racialism that are embodied in the ANC. In drawing on Fanon, for example, they could show how the new nationalist elite simply reproduced colonial forms of governance. In Biko, they found a voice that critiqued the compromises made with white liberalism, particularly the politics of reconciliation that rendered apartheid’s crimes as individual rather than systemic. Yet the types of politics that emerge from this experience of waithood can go in multiple directions. As Jeffrey (2008, 957) warns in the Indian case, “situations of waiting can precipitate multiple forms of politics, some of them deeply pernicious and reactionary.” Certainly, the forms of political protest that are associated with South Africa’s service delivery protests include both redistributive demands and xenophobic violence (Von Holdt et al., 2011).

The Contradictory Functions of Higher Education

While it is important to consider students’ voices and experiences within these protests, explaining their occurrence and appeal also requires a more structural explanation. Under apartheid, higher education reproduced a highly stratified racial capitalism that provided mobility for white South Africans while limiting the relative educational and employment prospects of Black South Africans. In doing so, it gave rise to a ‘culture of resistance’ that challenged not only the higher education system but the apartheid state (Nkomo 1984). After apartheid, higher education was seen as crucial to the construction of a non-racial, non-sexist, and unified South Africa. The deracialization of public institutions were an essential part of the national imagination in which the post-apartheid nation was formed (Bawa 2012). At the same time, the
prerogatives of globalization exerted significant influence on the higher education system as it was seen as crucial to the production of valuable human capital. This imposed limits on transformation, resulting in a higher education system that continues to reproduce historic forms of advantage and disadvantage. In other words, South Africa’s higher education system tries to perform multiple functions, yet these are frequently in conflict and tension with one another.

The contradictory functions of higher education in Africa have been noted by a number of scholars, and it is worth mentioning them both for their insights and to avoid South African exceptionalism. Burawoy’s (1976) study of the student movement in Zambia suggests that universities, particularly in postcolonial Africa, emerge as sites of political opposition because they serve multiple and contradictory functions. In Zambia, the university performed intrinsic, symbolic and solidary functions. It trained students to run a modern state, supported dominant political organs, and symbolized the status of nationhood. Yet conflicts between students and the state rapidly revealed that the university could not easily perform all of these functions. Students found themselves in conflict with the state when they spoke out against it, or when they were unable to remain students while their families lived in poverty. Conflicts between students and the state also emerged in other African countries, where students’ relative privilege was threatened by funding cuts. Zeilig (2007) suggests that in the immediate post-colonial period, higher education generated expectations of social mobility. Very soon though, students saw these expectations and privileges collapse as universities were starved of funds. In Cameroon, students mockingly referred to the university as a ‘bachelor’s cemetery’ as the crisis of the university coincided with a crisis of unemployment (Konings 2002). In Senegal students used the term *cartouchard* to describe those who repeated the same subjects, year after year, without the prospect of advancement or employment (Federici, Caffentzis and Alidou 2000). Students
emerged as political actors in the 80s and 90s, Zeilig (2007) suggests, precisely because their interests began to align with popular classes who were affected by neoliberal policies. These students did not always occupy a privileged position as they increasingly came from poor households with the expectation that education would provide a route out of poverty.

The emergence of #FMF was also an outcome of contradictory processes shaping South Africa’s higher education system. It highlighted the simultaneous attempts by the post-apartheid state to preserve dominant forms of capital accumulation while employing egalitarian and emancipatory discourses. For example, while student enrolment skyrocketed, public funding remained stagnant or declined. Between 2000 and 2013, the headcount enrolment in public higher education increased by 76% (Bunting et al., 2010; CHE 2016). While public funding increased in absolute terms, the increases did not kept pace with student numbers. State funding per full time student decreased by 36% in universities and 43% in technikons between 1987 and 2005. This trend continued between 2000 and 2009, when state funding decreased by 1.1% per year (De Villiers 2017). A 2013 ministerial review of higher education funding found that “funding is not sufficient to meet the needs of the public university system.” In a reflection on the 2015 protests, the Council on Higher Education acknowledged that they were direct outcomes of the: “pressures of worsening underfunding in the context of enrolment growth, and increasing student expectations and frustrations with respect to access and financial aid” (CHE 2016). However, it is not possible to locate the genesis of #FMF in funding structures alone, but in the ways in which different functions of higher education led to rising forms of discontent among young people and new forms of political consciousness. Three key contradictions define South Africa’s higher education system.
First, higher education serves an intrinsic function in any capitalist society; it is necessary for the reproduction of labour subject to capital’s changing skill demands. In South Africa, there was a marked shift in the late 1990s away from education as a tool of reconstruction, informed by the People’s Education movement that grew out of the anti-apartheid struggle, to education as functional to the needs of a globalized knowledge economy. This was in line with the ANC’s high skills growth path, principally under the neoliberal GEAR program, and pressure from capital to fill a skills deficit (Seekings and Nattrass 2008). Domestic policy shifts were also in line with international trends in higher education, most notably massification. Yet even as student numbers increased, public funding declined. Institutions welcomed in an increasing number of students who were poorly serviced by a basic education system, resulting in high rates of drop out. Increasing student enrolment has not kept pace with staffing levels, resulting in high student-staff ratios. The push toward global knowledge production has also benefitted some institutions over others, with some universities climbing international rankings and attracting international students while others are placed under government administration. While the state’s National Development Plan anticipates even further enrolment growth toward 2030, without subsequent funding increases, it is difficult to imagine how institutions will cope without further raising fees.

Second, higher education in South Africa serves an equity function as it is widely imagined as playing a crucial role in the process of historical redress (Bawa 2012). The 1997 government white paper *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* states: “In South Africa today, the challenge is to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities” (Department of Education 1997). Massification has been driven
by the goal of transforming the demographics in order to make higher education institutions more representative. In this regard, significant strides have been made, with an 80% growth in the number of African students between 1994 and 2014. This has been facilitated by the expansion of NSFAS. At the same time, participation rates for black students are well below those of white students and access to better schooling, particularly those that charge fees, is increasingly important to higher education success. Even as NSFAS has increased from R1.3 billion in 1996 to R9 billion in 2014, the average amount per student is well below the cost of study (CHE 2017). This has led to students being unable to register due to unpaid debts, graduating without being able to collect their certificates, or dropping out entirely because they are simply not adequately supported. Rising demand and underfunding of the NSFAS system has manifested in yearly protests, of which #FMF is a recent variant.

Finally, higher education in South Africa has a deeply symbolic function. Universities are not only spaces in which skilled labour power is reproduced, but spaces in which cultures of resistance cohere (Badat 1999). Because of the role they played both in the maintenance of the apartheid order and in opposition to it, universities in South Africa have assumed a critical position within wider discourses of transformation. Higher education policy has therefore emphasized the transformation of a segregated and fragmented higher education system alongside changes in staff and faculty demographics. However, despite these reforms, the legacy of apartheid continues to influence the sector. Historically advantaged institutions have been able to position themselves in global knowledge production circuits attracting top-tier talent and research funds while historically disadvantaged institutions have often lurched from crisis to crisis. Further, while some historically advantaged institutions have made great strides in transforming the demographics of their student body, they retain many of the cultural and
symbolic elements of the apartheid university. As #FMF indicates, students have become critical of the state’s transformation project as it seems intent on retain forms of privilege while doing little to affect more radical and sweeping changes. This has led to the growing popularity of groups like the EFF and PASMA among students as these groups are seen as challenging the ANC and committed to a more transformative political project. Finally, while the symbolic aim of higher education transformation is to address historic inequalities in society, the country has witnessed increasing levels of intra-racial inequality since 1994 (Seekings and Nattrass 2008). The role of higher education in addressing inequality is therefore highly ambiguous, and in the absence of other forms of training, job creation, and expanded social protection, it is likely to exacerbate inequality rather than ameliorate it.

Hart (2014) has suggested that key to understanding the South African crisis is to examine how South Africa’s passive revolution since 1994 has been shaped by dual practices of de- and re-nationalization. Drawing on Gramsci, Hart describes the passive revolution as a condition of rupture in which processes of revolution are partially fulfilled and displaced. De-nationalization involved those political and economic practices that have maintained capitalist profitability while generating ongoing inequality and surplus populations. This included the rapid flight of capital, the disciplining of labour, and the maintenance of conditions that promote profitability. Re-nationalization involved discourses of transformation, reconciliation, the invocation of symbols of liberation, and memories of racialized dispossession. It is not enough, she argues, to simply say that the South African state after 1996 became neoliberal. Neoliberal policies coexisted with a range of other maneuvers that were aimed at remaking the nation. This process of re- and de-nationalization is therefore crucial in understanding the ANC’s hegemonic project, but also the ways in which this is a fragile hegemony and has generated a range of
political responses in the form of service delivery protests and the #FMF movement. For example, students often drew on the 1955 Freedom Charter, a foundational document for the ANC, to advance their demands for free education. Students also used the protests to critique the lack of institutional transformation and structures that continued to benefit a white minority; these discourses had widespread appeal as they drew on a popular history that links dispossession with race. While narratives drawn from the liberation struggle had widespread appeal and allowed students to link past struggles with historic injustices, it is questionable whether they ultimately challenged the ANC’s hegemony.
Conclusion

“In short, youth stand for many things at once: for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future.” – John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff 2006, 268.

“The crisis in education both reflects and reflects back on the larger crisis in which this system is encoiled politically, economically and ideologically.” – Neville Alexander 1990, 29.

On December 16, 2017 Jacob Zuma made his final speech as ANC president. Mired in corruption charges and facing pressure to resign, Zuma began the day with a blockbuster announcement: Fee-free higher education for poor and working-class students, a move that would increase spending on higher education to 1% of GDP. The announcement came as shock to policy observers and those within the higher education sector. After all, a recent presidential inquiry into higher education funding had found that fee-free higher education was not financially feasible. Ignoring the report and warnings from the treasury, Zuma announced his own plan to fully subsidize first year students from households with a combined income of under R350,000 a year. In his budget speech, the country’s Finance Minister noted that the plan would be funded by redirecting provincial and municipal transfer payments, educational infrastructure spending, and human settlements and road maintenance budgets. Justifying the move, he stated: “This is an important step forward in breaking the cycle of poverty and confronting youth unemployment, as labour statistics show that unemployment is lowest for tertiary graduates” (Tshwane 2018).

As commentators noted, the move could hardly be rationalized as in the interests of the poor (Muller 2018). Future funding commitments could potentially result in funding cuts for much needed anti-poverty initiatives like social grants and basic education. The move, and the finance minister’s comments, highlighted an entrenched belief in the social mobility function of higher education and how the ANC’s hegemony rested on its articulation with past and present
struggles (Hart 2007, 2014). Zuma’s announcement was an attempt to capture the energy of #FMF and use it to bolster his tattered legacy. At the same time as the announcement was made, however, South Africa’s economy lurched into yet another recession. The idea that expanded access to higher education would resolve the problem of youth unemployment was not only profoundly flawed, but, once again, allowed the state to transfer the burden of resolving structural problems onto the shoulders of youth, the poor, and the unemployed.

The announcement was treated by skepticism by some student activists, particularly those associated with rival political parties, but upheld by ANC-aligned activists as a fulfilment of the promises of #FMF. The transition to this ‘fee-free’ model has not, however, been smooth. Protests continued to erupt in 2018 over late NSFAS payments and accommodation issues. The ANC’s embrace of #FMF demands is ultimately an attempt at creating a seamless lineage of youth resistance starting with the rise of the ANC-youth league at Fort Hare in the 1940s and culminating in the realization of the freedom charter’s promise in 2018. In doing so, the ANC is able to illustrate that it is at the vanguard of progressive change in South Africa, and that it prioritizes the interests of the poor and working class. It is able to challenge leftist accusations, principally by groups like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), that it has abandoned young people and claim to be progressively fulfilling the National Democratic Revolution. This strategy is in keeping with the ANC’s approach to youth politics since 1994: Politics outside the alliance must either be contained or channelled into policy (Everatt 2002).

The announcement will do little to address the deep cleavages of race, class, gender, and geography that continue to shape South Africa’s education system. Access to higher education on the basis of merit alone, no matter how well funded, will not address inequalities that continue to affect the basic education system and are replicated within higher education. Moreover,
increasing enrolment even further will not resolve the seemingly intractable problem of youth unemployment. Simply inflating enrolment numbers without the prospects of employment growth risks replicating the ‘degrees without freedom phenomenon’ Jeffrey et al. (2008) describe in India, in which large cohorts of youth have attained higher education with little prospect of employment. At the same time, in the absence of job-creation policy, it is understandable that young people will continue to see higher education as holding the promise of a better life. For youth from Khayelitsha, higher education provides a potential exit from conditions of ‘wageless life’ that affect their peers and families (Denning 2010).

This research has revealed some of the factors that contributed to the #FMF protests and how working class students responded to these protests. Working class students tended to support the protests because they resonated with experiences of household poverty and their aspirations toward social mobility. The protests allowed students to express concerns and anxieties about their families’ future as they placed significant hope in the economically redemptive power of higher education. In effect, they allowed students to connect campus struggles with those experienced by their family members in the township. Their investment in higher education as solution to household poverty also generated concern about the impact of these protests on the value of their education. As I discuss in Chapter 2, many students sought out HWIs for the valuable symbolic capital they held in the labour market, even as this generated significant alienation. This generated deep personal conflicts when it came to supporting or being involved the protests. Students expressed concern that the value of their degrees would be diminished by ongoing unrest and delayed exams, or through the influx of more students into higher education. “If,” one student wondered aloud, “we’re not supposed to pay for fees, then, how can I put this, the standard of education will decrease.”
While the protests resonated with these students, the prospects of a radically transformed or decolonized education system provoked uncertainty. In one telling example, Zuko, a student at UCT, questioned whose interests the #FMF protests ultimately served. In 2015, Zuko was overwhelmingly supportive of #RMF and later the #FMF protests, attending meetings and marches. In 2016, however, he saw a video circulating of some students beating up a security guard during the protests, and his position changed.

Zuko: When I saw the security guards face who they were beating, it was like this old man. And it made me remember, when I was going to high school I used to use the train and I still use it now. Some of those old guys in the train, most of them, if you use the train you see these guys who are working as security guards. Ya, so I can’t come here and act like I don’t know those people. This guy was a very old timer. Because those people who get those jobs, they don’t have money and qualifications, they have no choice. They have to do that job to live. We come here and we act like we don’t know those things. We act like we don’t know what that means, but we come from the townships and these are the people that we used to ride on the trains with, and now when we come here we are going to kick them when they are down? That’s when I stopped going to the protests, I don’t care who says what. That was a turning point for me.

For Zuko the protests were supposed to serve the interests of working class students like himself, but who was being served, he wondered, by targeting security guards who came from the same townships he called home? The protests revealed to Zuko the different interests at stake, and who had more to lose. In this regard, one of the first casualties of the #FMF movement at UCT was the 100UP program itself, which had its planned expansion restricted due to the university opting not to raise tuition costs. These contradictions caused some students to express private support for the protests, but refrain from attending meetings and marches. Even as working class students understood the inequalities within the higher education system, they recognized the benefits it conferred on them.

Young people’s motivations for pursuing higher education in South Africa were intimately tied to anticipated obligations to family and kin, particularly in a context of household
economic insecurity. For working class youth from township communities, space also played a critical role in shaping these aspirations. The pursuit of higher education was seen as liberating as it allowed them to transcend the township and develop aspirations to socially and spatially mobile lives. These aspirations, as I discuss in Chapter 2, were intimately shaped by circuits of educational mobility that characterize the post-apartheid city, in which quality education was frequently seen as lying elsewhere, often in HWIs. Focusing on one program that aimed to raise young people’s aspirations toward higher education, I reveal how these programs allow marginalized youth to partially transform their *habitus* and develop aspirant dispositions. At the same time, these programs frequently ignored the structural barriers that limit student access and success.

In effect, higher education reconfigured bonds with family; it allowed young people to imagine themselves as future providers for the family, paying what they described as a ‘black tax’. Rather than a personal investment in their own mobility, higher education was primarily seen as a tool to address poverty in extended families and households. In short, working class students developed alternative understandings of the value of education, connected to desires for social mobility for their families and an ethics of care and reciprocity. Rather than simply being interpellated as neoliberal subjects, who view education as an individual investment, working class youth attached complex meanings to higher education often centred around care, reciprocity, and solidarity. This shaped the types of degrees students selected, the institutions they choose to go to and, ultimately, how they imagined the future. Studying these bonds, simultaneously financial and emotional, allows us to understand how young people are economic actors, often supporting households through redistributive arrangements or anticipating their role
as future providers for the family. Understanding these diverse economic practices are crucial to understanding young people’s role in the constitution of everyday economic geographies.

Debt also played a central role in these protests and in the lives of young working-class students. Students rejected the state’s extension of NSFAS as a solution to the protests as this was seen as burdening black working-class students with debt. This burden limited their potential social mobility and their ability to support their families. Debt owed to the state and institutions conflicted with other forms of anticipated obligation, and was seen as an erosion of the value that higher education held. Drawing on Harker’s (2017) notion of debt ecologies, I highlight how these narratives of debt revealed the complex entanglements between individuals, institutions, families, and other non-financialized forms of obligation and sharing. Importantly, debt was not only described in class terms. Students described debt as a form of ‘black pain’ that conflicted with their obligations to pay a ‘black tax’ to their families. Debt was seen as a racialized form of accumulation and control that constrained the lives and mobility of black youth. If higher education was seen as emancipatory, debt was a reminder of the poverty and hardships experienced by their families. These racialized readings of debt provide an important opportunity to understanding the materiality of race in South Africa. As James (2014) has revealed, while debt is often viewed in a negative light (as trapping the borrower), in South Africa it must also be understood in relation to long histories of labour exploitation and credit apartheid that denied black families dignity and pathways toward a better life. In this context, higher education and the costs involved represents more than simply aspirations to social mobility, but a restoration of dignity and a demand for social inclusion.

Foregrounding debt also reveals the differential moralities that ground systems of obligation, repayment and, ultimately, the right to education. Debt coexisted with immediate and
anticipated obligations to family and the sense that higher education was a right for the poor. Drawing from geographical and anthropological scholarship, I emphasize that debt was understood as temporal, spatial, and political. Debt was entangled with other obligations, both immediate and anticipated, and linked students, households, institutions, and the state. At the same time, it conflicted with an understanding of education as a right, something that had been fought for during the anti-apartheid struggle. These conflicting moralities surrounding debt reveal some of the complex causes underpinning these protests and the relationship between race, class, and youth.

The fact that students saw higher education as the only pathway toward social mobility also speaks to changes in South Africa’s political economy. As scholars like Raco (2009) and Pimlott-Wilson (2015) have demonstrated, neoliberal policies in the Global North have emphasized a shift away from a labour market expectations and toward a politics of aspiration; youth should no longer expect a job but rather invest in education appropriate to labour market demands. In South Africa, popular understandings of the value of education have been deeply affected by economic and labour market shifts. Cape Town, like many urban centres in South Africa, has experienced a sharp decline in manufacturing employment and trades-based employment (Barchiesi 2011). This has been accompanied by the rapid growth of employment in post-Fordist sectors such as retail, service, finance, tourism, and logistics. Inclusion in these sectors usually requires more than a grade 12 certificate. Rather than investing in job creation strategies, the state regards the continued massification of higher education as meeting a ‘skills deficit’, which will generate employment and reduce poverty. Yet there is little evidence that simply increasing the number of students in higher education will address the structural nature of youth unemployment (Allais 2012).
Understanding the multiple causes underpinning #FMF can also help us understand some of the dynamics behind rising levels of social protest in South Africa. Scholars have suggested that political action has shifted from organized social movements to poor communities, as ‘service delivery’ struggles in poor urban townships have targeted the lack of infrastructure, low quality public services, local corruption, and unemployment (Alexander 2010). These struggles have often been theorized using Chatterjee’s (2004) notion of political society, as forms of subaltern action outside of elite civil society, where claims and benefits on the state can be made, often through illegal means (Reddy 2018). These protests frequently draw on the militant protest repertoires of the anti-apartheid struggle, in which violence was an frequent component. The #FMF protests complicate these descriptions, as institutions of higher learning and their associated student bodies are very much within the realm of civil society. Yet the tactics and forms that these protests took mirrored those of political society, as illegal protests, blockades and occupations were widely used. Like service delivery struggles, however, they simultaneously challenged the state while reasserting its hegemony by calling on it to fix a wide range of social problems. As Booysen (2007) has pointed out, people frequently vote with both the ballot and the brick in South Africa, challenging the ANC to deliver services in their communities while continuing to vote them into power. As such, #FMF provides an important example of how resistance can often allow the state to reassert its hegemonic role even as it faces multiple challenges.

Finally, I argue that #FMF cannot simply be seen as opposition to neoliberal education policy, but as an outcome of the contradictory functions and meanings of higher education. Higher education in South Africa is both aimed at reproducing labour power for a capitalist economy and addressing historic inequities through demographic and institutional
transformation. These functions have had the effect of reproducing class and race inequalities, while at the same time giving rise to new oppositional ideologies. Universities have, once again, become spaces in which a ‘culture of resistance,’ to borrow Nkomo’s (1984) term, has arisen. This resistance targets the state’s lack of support for students, institutional racism, colonial symbolism, and the endurance of racial inequalities. In this sense, #FMF united disparate social forces around a broad array of concerns stemming from South Africa’s incomplete transition from apartheid, or what Hart (2014), borrowing from Gramsci, describes as its ‘passive revolution.’ Drawing on Hart’s work, I suggest that one way of understanding these protests is through the tensions between the processes of de- and re-nationalization. Since the end of apartheid, the South African state has attempted to maintain business profitability and capital accumulation, a process she describes as ‘de-nationalization’. In doing so, it has preserved a significant degree of privilege enjoyed by a white minority while facilitating the growth of surplus populations. At the same time, its hegemony has rested on its ability to construct the nation through discourses of transformation, reconciliation, and liberation, what she calls ‘re-nationalization’. These discourses draw on powerful histories of racialized dispossession and the demands for sweeping social change contained in liberation struggle discourses. It is the tension between these dual processes that has given rise to proliferating social struggles in South Africa, from service delivery protests to the #FMF movement.

#FMF and the limits of student protest:

Throughout my research, I attended panel sessions and discussions about the possibilities for the #FMF movement to connect with the wider sphere of social struggles occurring in South Africa. These included a protracted wave of worker strikes and the rise of independent trade unions, as well as community struggles aimed at securing service delivery (Sinwell & Mbatha
Yet, aside from linkages with campus workers, these connections were limited. It appeared that students, despite their rhetoric of sweeping social change, were simply in it for themselves. In other African contexts, scholars have suggested that an erosion of living standards due to neoliberal restructuring prompted an alliance between students and popular classes, yet such an alliance never truly materialized in South Africa (Zeilig 2008; Federici, Caffentzis, and Alidou 2000).

This phenomenon is hardly unique to South Africa. As Sukarieh and Tannock (2014) argue in an overview of global student protests, student demands tend to be conservative, focusing on preserving current systems rather than transforming them. Very few have focused on radically transforming higher education systems. Most simply call for a return to a previous welfarist version of higher education or reinforce the notion that higher education is the best tool for ensuring social mobility. Some scholars have argued that the limitations of student demands are often due to a lack of historical memory among youth and an increasingly individualized way of looking at the world (Aitchison and Gilbert 2012, Mason 2012). “Rather than being a radical rejection of the contemporary model of education in society,” Sukarieh and Tannock (2014, 128) write, these movements are “better understood as both its ultimate realization and demonstration of its inherent contradictions.” As Brown (2013) has argued in the UK, student protests both reveal the success of policy interventions aimed at raising students’ aspirations and the limitations of aspiration. The majority of student protests do not fundamentally challenge the education as social mobility model, but those structural obstacles that threaten this mobility.

In this regard #FMF is just as guilty as other student movements. In arguing for expanded access, it did little to challenge the neoliberal notion that a skills deficit is ultimately what is responsible for poverty and unemployment, rather than the structural nature of capitalism. At the
same time, it did provide some critical openings to discuss the meaning and purpose of higher education in a divided society. Debates about decolonization, for example, prompted discussions around curricula reform, symbolism, and faculty demographics, particularly at historically white institutions (Nyamnjoh 2016). It remained unclear, however, what decolonization meant at those historically black or coloured institutions which were themselves once hotbeds of anti-apartheid resistance. Invocations to decolonize universities provoked widespread discussion but few answers. How would this decolonization be achieved and how would this affect students’ view of higher education as functional to social mobility? The popularity of Fanon in these movements raised the crucial question of whether it is possible for decolonization to occur within those institutions that are fundamental to the reproduction of the national bourgeoisie? In short, the question of decolonization from above and from below remains an open one.

A second critique involved the relationship between the movement and the ruling party. While students accused the ANC of betraying the promises of the Freedom Charter, they also drew on discourses and symbols that were themselves integral to the ANC’s hegemonic project. Invocations of race, as Hart (2007) has suggested, tap into histories and memories of dispossession and struggle that are powerful motivators for collective action. Everatt (2016) criticized the protests for moving away from a focus on the state to an ambiguous institutional whiteness. These narratives had popular appeal, but they also fit rather well with the ANC’s project of invoking liberation narratives from the past to explain the lack of transformation in the present (Booysen 2016). Students’ call to decolonize historically white institutions, for example, was largely in line with the ANC’s theory of social transformation, the National Democratic Revolution. Their demand for expanding access to the poor also corresponded to the ANC’s own position on higher education adopted at the 52\textsuperscript{nd} and 53\textsuperscript{rd} party conferences. While #FMF
criticized the ANC, it did little to challenge its hegemony. As a result, the ANC was able to capture some of the momentum from the #FMF protests and, by early 2018, declare that providing free higher education for the poor had been fulfilled by the party.

While the #FMF movement was widely seen as a youthful rupture with the politics of waiting that have defined the post-apartheid moment, it is questionable whether students will continue to hold the same politics once they begin working and supporting their families. After all, many will be direct beneficiaries of the ANC’s Black Economic Empowerment and Affirmative Action policies. As Sindile, an ANC-aligned activist at CPUT told me when I asked him why he continues to support the ANC even in the face of fee increases,

Sindile: There are some people who say the ANC is useless. But it is the ANC who is paying for your fees, because NSFAS was started by ANC! Now if you are saying no you hate ANC or they have never done anything for you, well they are the ones paying for your fees.

Sindile told me the ANC had done a lot for him and his family. He expressed frustration, though, at a generational divide in which young people feel they cannot speak without permission of elders, without those who were around during the anti-apartheid struggle. These sentiments were expressed by other ANC-aligned activists who described themselves as being strangled by the leadership of the ANC and unable to voice their concerns. There is thus both disillusionment and consent among young people toward the ANC. The ANC is blamed for increasing tuition costs but also praised for scrapping them and delivering free education to the poor.

#FMF raised important questions then about what has changed and what has remained the same in South African politics since the end of apartheid. On the one hand, the protests can be read as emblematic of a wider politics of impatience with the ANC and the glacial pace of social and economic reform. In this reading, students were driven by a militant politics that challenged the linearity of the liberation era narrative and called attention to the endurance of
racialized and gendered inequalities. In this sense, the discontent they expressed was hardly new. It can be found in those social movement and service delivery struggles that have marked the post-apartheid period. As I have suggested though, while the protests resonated with the concerns of working class students, they ultimately did little to challenge the hegemony of the ANC.

Another important development related to the protests, however, was the rise of the Economic Freedom Fighters. The EFF’s campus chapters grew significantly through #FMF and, in a number of cases, they won SRC elections. The EFF emerged as a splinter group from the ANC-Youth League, and is frequently associated with its bombastic leader Julius Malema. Broadly speaking, the EFF’s aim has been to challenge the ANC to implement more radical economic and social policy (nationalization of the mines and land reform being the two key components), and to challenge the former president Jacob Zuma. Yet their appeal also lies in their own lavish and cosmopolitan lifestyles—a Gucci-shoed Marxism that captures the complexities of aspiration, consumption and militant politics in South Africa. For all the EFF’s exuberance, however, they have offered limited progressive policy options aside from warmed-over nationalist slogans. Falling back on militant gestures and identity politics has won them support but done little to advance an understanding of how to address South Africa’s glaring racialized inequalities. In this, there are clear parallels with the politics of protest that characterized the #FMF movement. While based on clear grievances with the status quo and experiences of poverty and indignity, it offered a limited set of solutions for complex social problems.

Towards a Radical Critique of Education in South Africa
The limitations of student protest in driving structural change calls for a broader understanding of education in relation to the economy and society. By highlighting the position of working class students within South Africa’s higher education system, I have endeavoured to show how factors external to the education process often shape and impede their educational trajectories. This is critical because even as South Africa’s constitution guarantees access to basic education and enshrines principles of equity in access, these are often limited by other socio-economic factors such as household poverty. As Giroux (1984) emphasized, dual processes of reproduction and resistance shape education, but it is only when resistance develops a ‘counter logic’ that challenges the reproduction of capitalist social relations that significant change occurs. What are prospects then for a counter-logic to emerge in South Africa?

Here it is important to turn again to the dynamics that shaped the transition from apartheid. Vally (2007) has suggested that the negotiated settlement and the influence of business on public policy ruptured any possibility of a more emancipatory education policy. The people’s education movement that emerged from trade unions and the anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and 80s conceived of education beyond capital’s labour demands. Education was seen as fundamental to reconstructing a divided nation and realizing collective well-being. People’s education, Vally (2007, 41) argues, “promised liberation from an authoritarian and unequal education system to one that could provide an alternative and a basis for a future democratic system.” The value of the people’s education movement in South Africa is that it was not only about changing pedagogy, but imagining a better world and developing an understanding of education that went beyond the classroom and into workplaces, trade unions, and civil society. In doing so, it was able to see education beyond credentialism and the race for human capital, but part of a long-term struggle to transform an unequal society.
Yet these radical views were quickly eclipsed in the lead up to the negotiations between the ANC and the apartheid government. In 1992, the National Education Conference (NEC) and the subsequent National Education Policy Investigation Report (NEPI) attempted to drive education policy toward people’s education principles. The following year, however, the National Education Training Forum (NETF) emerged, with interests more aligned to business and the old order. Very quickly, even trade unions abandoned radical practices of shop floor education for technocratic approaches to training. The ANC encouraged unions in this regard as this was seen as part of the compromise between business, labour, and the state. Within schools and universities, the NETF approach simply translated into, “conventional human capital approaches in which knowledge is valued according to its potential economic outcomes, and education becomes purely instrumental to economic production and growth” (Vally 2007, 48). These policies limited a more fundamental restructuring of education as they were aimed primarily at ensuring economic competitiveness and growth.

What is the legacy of people’s education in South Africa and is it possible to rekindle this spirit in the face of a far more dynamic global capitalism? Vally (2007) suggests that some of this spirit has been kept alive by social movements that emerged in the early 2000s. Groups like the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Landless People’s Movement, and Abahlali baseMjondolo drew on this tradition in their community education work. The emergence of the Education Rights Project (ERP) is another example of how social movements came together, along with critical academics and researchers, to forge and broad-based education movement. The ERP had significant success, forcing the government to initiate a ministerial review of basic education funding. However, by the mid 2010s, social movements in South Africa were in decline and there is little evidence that the People’s Education tradition is being kept alive. As Vally (2007)
notes, there has been a legalistic turn in social justice struggles in South Africa as NGOs and social movements increasingly turn to the courts to confront the challenges created by inequality.

The lessons of the people’s education project for building an education movement in South Africa are manifold. First, it suggests that the ability to transform educational systems takes more than student activism. It requires a movement that involves students, parents, social movements, cultural and religious organizations, and workers. Second, it highlights the importance of understanding ‘quality education’ beyond the classroom. In a country with high rates of high school drop-out and a limited adult education infrastructure, it is critical to rethink the spaces of education. Third, it requires radically re-conceptualizing the purpose of education in society. This involves moving away from dominant human capital approaches in which education is simply seen as functional to economic growth and capitalist profitability, and towards a ‘counter logic’ that links education to societal well-being. If neoliberal education policy individualizes the returns to higher education, then a radical approach links it to collective forms of mobility, solidarity, and care.

In this sense, a radical critique of education is implicit, I believe, in students’ narratives about the emancipatory potential of education for their families and communities. Even as students developed instrumentalist understandings of education in which degrees were equated with jobs, education provoked an imaginary in which it provided collective forms of wellbeing. This cannot simply be read as an outcome of neoliberal interpellation. In his work on labour after apartheid, Barchiesi (2011) has suggested that a belief in the redemptive power of wage labour was crucial to imagine dignified forms of citizenship. Yet the equation of worker and citizen is ultimately regressive in a context of high unemployment. Education, however, holds the prospect for expanding the vocabulary of citizenship beyond the market and connecting it to an array of
broader concerns focused on communities, households, and families. Education can either reproduce the status quo, or it can become, “a practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world” (Thompson 1980, 26).

Future Research:

This project provides a number of avenues for future research into youth, aspirations, higher education, and debt. First, the announcement of ‘fee-free’ higher education in early 2018 raises a range of questions about the future of student debt in South Africa. At this stage, it is unclear whether NSFAS is still pursuing past debtors or whether debt will be progressively forgiven over time. This raises an additional question about the role of the private banking sector in the provision of educational loans. While students from households below R350,000 now qualify for free education, those above this level receive more limited support. Future research should consider the debt burden of middle-income families and youth, and whether this is similarly seen as a threat to future income stability. While there is a growing literature on the black middle class in South Africa, there is a need to study, at a finer level of detail, how families become and remain middle class (Southall 2016, Melber 2016).

Second, if higher education engenders aspirations toward collective social mobility for their families, then there is a need to examine whether students act on these aspirations in the future. My research suggests that even as higher education reconfigures bonds of obligation between students and family members, it also creates desires for individual social mobility. Whether students are able to, or choose to, support family members in the future will shed further light on the distributive arrangements that characterize South African households.
Third, despite its frequent use in popular media, there has been limited academic interest in the phenomenon of the ‘black tax’. While there are certainly studies of the diverse economic arrangements that shape poor South African households, there are no studies of income sharing that specifically consider the role of young people or recent graduates. While I have attempted to describe how the ‘black tax’ shapes educational decisions and experiences, additional research should pay attention to the economic relations between young professionals and households and how these relations change over time. Media reports on the ‘black tax’ describe it in both positive and negative terms, as a burden on young graduates and as a responsibility that binds African families together. It is worth investigating further how young people rationalize these obligations with their own desires for independence.

Third, Badat (1999, 2016) has noted that studies of student politics in South Africa are limited, both historically and in the contemporary period. As Bank (2018) notes, both the EFF and PASMA played a central role in the #FMF protests, challenging both ANC-aligned activists and the Democratic Alliance. While PASMA is largely confined to student politics, as its mother-body, the PAC, is largely irrelevant in South African politics, the EFF has emerged as a significant political force in recent years. As Hart (2014) has noted, it draws its popularity both from its charismatic leadership and its ability to synthesize an array of political traditions from Fanonian theory to Black Consciousness to Marxism-Leninism. The popularity of this movement among young people deserves further attention. Its rhetoric speaks both to the hopes and frustrations embodied by young people, and a deeply problematic politics in which struggle masculinities and xenophobia play a prominent role (Hart 2014). It will be interesting, for example, to examine the political trajectory of particularly EFF student leaders active in the #FMF protests. Previous waves of student unrest (1976 in particular) led to many student leaders
joining political parties and trade unions. It remains to be seen whether #FMF had such a generational impact.

Finally, despite the popularity of the term, there is still much work to be done on the meaning and practice of decolonization in South African higher education—work is currently underway in this regard through frameworks adopted at UCT and Stellenbosch University. While scholars like Biko (1996) and Fanon (2007, 2008) provide important reference points in decolonial debates, there is a sense that their insights do not quite measure up to challenges currently facing higher education systems. What is the role of decolonization, for example, in a neoliberal context? What does decolonization mean in a context in which higher education is increasingly globalized? Reflecting on these debates in South Africa, Mbembe (2016) argues that there is a need for South African institutions to resist both the western academic model, its epistemic underpinnings, and the forces of global capital shaping higher education policy. Yet Mbembe’s solution is bewildering: South African universities should denationalize, he argues, and become diasporic spaces of educational exchange like China. It is difficult to see how this solution would resolve problems facing students described in this dissertation, or how it would challenge the reproduction of national and trans-national elites who are already invested in such a globalized education project.

At a more prosaic level, decolonizing South Africa’s higher education sector should address the legacies of the apartheid’s ethno-racial university structure and imbalances between institutions. In its current form, historically white institutions continue to play a role in the reproduction of elite privilege while historically black universities suffer from financial crisis, debt, and high rates of drop out. Addressing these imbalances seems a good place to start. Changing curricula, renaming buildings, and hiring more diverse faculty are not trivial matters,
but as Tuck and Yang (2012) have argued, decolonization is not a metaphor. Epistemic concerns should not replace more fundamental concerns of decolonial praxis, such as addressing structural inequalities related to colonial conquest. These cannot be resolved by reforms in higher education alone, but these institutions can play a pivotal role in driving forms of inquiry, innovation and radical democratic citizenship that allow South Africans to address these structural problems.
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