

## Too Rich to Care?

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DOI:

[10.1080/03057070.2022.2018837](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2018837)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Tagliabue, VV 2022, 'Too Rich to Care? Southern African (SADC) International Students Navigating Transnationalism and Class at South African Universities', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 5-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2018837>

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# Too Rich to Care? Southern African (SADC) International Students Navigating Transnationalism and Class at South African Universities

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To cite this article: Veera V. Tagliabue (2022) Too Rich to Care? Southern African (SADC) International Students Navigating Transnationalism and Class at South African Universities, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 48:1, 5-21, DOI: [10.1080/03057070.2022.2018837](https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2018837)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2022.2018837>



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# *Too Rich to Care? Southern African (SADC) International Students Navigating Transnationalism and Class at South African Universities*

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The 2015–16 fallist student protests across South African university campuses highlighted the shortcomings of the post-apartheid political system in resolving persistent inequalities based on race, class and gender. However, the experiences of Southern African Development Community (SADC) international students at South African universities have received little attention. Using qualitative interviews with SADC students studying at Rhodes University in Makhanda during the campus protests, this article argues that the protests also created new forms of exclusion. The protest movements adopted identity politics that attacked all perceived forms of privilege, and SADC students on South African campuses felt excluded from the protests because they were described by the protesters as ‘too rich to care’. SADC students themselves rejected this assumption and instead emphasised their specific challenges regarding their status as immigrants, and the precariousness of the middle classes in southern Africa. By drawing together the concepts of migration, social class and higher education, this article addresses the important subject of transformation at South African universities through the intersections of transnationalism and class.

**Keywords:** South Africa; SADC; higher education; fallism; migration; identity; transnationalism; social class

## Introduction

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, abolishing inequalities based on race, class and gender has become the ‘Fanonian moment’<sup>1</sup> for the so-called born free generation in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Tertiary education has been prominent in this pursuit, both in terms of government priorities and as a site of struggle towards transformation. The plight of South African students gained global recognition during the fallist campus movements of 2015–16,<sup>3</sup> which demanded

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1 This refers to the anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon’s phrase: ‘each generation must ... discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it’. F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Press, 1968), p. 209.

2 N.C. Gibson, ‘The Specter of Fanon: The Student Movements and the Rationality of Revolt in South Africa’, *Social Identities*, 23, 5 (2017), pp. 579–99.

3 The best-known fallist movements were #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall.

affordable and decolonised university education. At historically white universities, these demands were especially associated with the ways in which institutional cultures had not adapted to changing student demographics, making many black students feel increasingly alienated.<sup>4</sup> Deriving from students' experiences of black pain,<sup>5</sup> the protests put a discourse of identity, intersectionality and belonging firmly at the heart of South African higher education. However, the transformation debate has often neglected international students on South African campuses.

This article gives voice to students from the Southern African Development Community (SADC)<sup>6</sup> who studied at the formerly whites-only Rhodes University, Makhanda,<sup>7</sup> during the fallist protests. During May–June 2018, I conducted qualitative interviews with 25 students from Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.<sup>8</sup> The majority of SADC students at Rhodes are Zimbabwean,<sup>9</sup> and this was also the case in my interviews. I focus on Rhodes University because it hosts one of highest proportions of international students in South African universities,<sup>10</sup> with rates of 16–20 per cent during 2014–19.<sup>11</sup> SADC students are looked at specifically because they form 85 per cent of international students at Rhodes.<sup>12</sup> As stipulated by the *SADC Protocol on Education and Training*, they are treated as home students in terms of fees and accommodation.<sup>13</sup> This, and the fact that SADC students live in a relatively economically and culturally integrated region dominated by South African influence,<sup>14</sup> makes their experiences of misrecognition all the more interesting.

Although African international students make up almost 90 per cent of all international students in South Africa,<sup>15</sup> their perspective has thus far not been adequately accounted for in academia or in the media, especially in the context of the fallist protests. While Ahmed<sup>16</sup> and Isdahl<sup>17</sup> have discussed students' experiences of exclusion during the protests, neither speaks specifically of international students. Kasembeli,<sup>18</sup> Majee<sup>19</sup> and Raghuram *et al.*<sup>20</sup>

4 See P. Tabensky and S. Matthews (eds), *Being at Home. Race, Institutional Culture and Transformation at South African Higher Education Institutions* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015).

5 A. Ngoasheng and D. Gachago, 'Dreaming Up a New Grid: Two Lecturers' Reflections on Challenging Traditional Notions of Identity and Privilege in a South African Classroom', *Education as Change*, 21, 2 (2017), p. 188.

6 SADC currently comprises 16 member states: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

7 Formerly Grahamstown.

8 All names of students in this article are pseudonyms. Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling. The seven key interviews used for quotations in this article were selected to represent themes that most interviewees agreed on.

9 In 2019, Zimbabwean students constituted 55 per cent of all SADC students at Rhodes. Rhodes University, *Digest of Statistics 2019*, p. C7.

10 International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), *Study South Africa, 18th edition* (Pretoria, IEASA, 2019), pp. 26–7.

11 Rhodes University, *Digest of Statistics 2019*, p. C7.

12 *Ibid.*

13 SADC, *Protocol on Education and Training* (Gaborone, SADC, 1997), p. 11.

14 See A. Saurombe, 'The Role of South Africa in SADC Regional Integration: The Making or Breaking of the Organization', *Journal of International Commercial Law and Technology*, 5, 3 (2010), pp. 124–31.

15 Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), cited in U.S. Majee, 'Beyond the Local–Global Binaries of Higher Education Internationalization in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 24, 1 (2020), p. 133.

16 A.K. Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism: #RhodesMustFall and the Movement to Decolonize the University* (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2019), pp. 117–18.

17 L. Isdahl, 'Student Protests at UCT: An Analysis of UCT Community's Perspectives of Tactics Used in the Fallist Movement', *SIT Graduate Institute Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection 2365* (2016).

18 S.N. Kasembeli, 'The South African Student #Fallist Movements: Xenophobia and the Impossibility of Including the African "Other"', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 32, 3 (2020), pp. 316–31.

19 Majee, 'Beyond the Local–Global Binaries'.

20 P. Raghuram, M.R. Breines and A. Gunter, 'Beyond #FeesMustFall: International Students, Fees and Everyday Agency in the Era of Decolonisation', *Geoforum*, 109 (2020), pp. 95–105.

have addressed the position of African international students in South African higher education in terms of tuition fees, xenophobia and the tension between transformation and internationalisation. However, none of these studies focuses on the lived experience of international students through interview data.

Institutional diversity strategies within higher education often concentrate on the ‘big three’ of class, gender and race identities, whereas transnationalism is more commonly neglected.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, research on international student identities typically focuses on nationality without considering students’ other intersecting identities.<sup>22</sup> Referring specifically to the considerable Zimbabwean community at Rhodes University, Goga identifies a need to further explore the intersection of race and class with nationality.<sup>23</sup> This article will take on that challenge.

The 2015–16 fallist protests were an example of hardening identity boundaries among students, which led to new forms of othering at South African universities. Students who did not participate in the protests – including many SADC students – were marginalised because they were assumed not to support the fallist objectives. Although SADC students mainly explained their non-participation with reasons related to their precarious immigration status, they often faced accusations of being ‘too rich to care’ about rising fees. While identity politics can be useful in challenging dominant structures and questioning prevailing silences at South African universities, it can also create divisions between students who claim – or indeed, are ascribed – certain identities.<sup>24</sup>

This article maintains that contentious identity politics on South African campuses result from conflicting appeals for recognition.<sup>25</sup> The fallist protesters’ objectives were to gain recognition for the plight of poor black students and to encourage others to recognise their own privilege.<sup>26</sup> SADC students, on the other hand, were uneasy about being potentially misrecognised as more privileged than they believed themselves to be. This study explores these fissures, beginning with a discussion of why and how SADC students felt marginalised by the identity politics of the fallist protests. I then examine how concepts of identity and intersectionality have been deployed in the context of protest discourse at South African universities. I then move on to problematise SADC students’ narratives by illustrating how they also contributed to the argumentative climate during the fallist protests. By highlighting the concerns of both these groups, this article illuminates the intersections of transnationalism, race and class in South Africa and the SADC region.

## **‘The Struggle is Yours but Not Really Yours’ – How Campus Protests Marginalised SADC Students**

Most SADC students interviewed for this article considered economic inequality and insufficient state support for the poorest students as a legitimate rationale for the

21 J. Hearn and J. Louvrier, ‘Theories of Difference, Diversity, and Intersectionality: What Do They Bring to Diversity Management?’, in R. Bendler, I. Bleijenbergh, E. Henttonen and A.J. Mills (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Diversity in Organizations* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 67, 70.

22 See for instance J. Carnine, ‘The Impact on National Identity of Transnational Relationships During International Student Mobility’, *Journal of International Mobility*, 1, 3 (2015), pp. 11–30.

23 S. Goga, *The Silencing of Race at Rhodes: Ritual and Anti-Politics on a Post-Apartheid Campus* (MA dissertation, Rhodes University, 2008), pp. 80–81.

24 F. Kamsteeg, ‘Transformation and Self-Identity: Student Narratives in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Transformation in Higher Education*, 1, 1 (2016), pp. 1–10.

25 See C. Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–73; H. Englund and F.B. Nyamnjoh (eds), *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa* (London, Zed Books, 2004).

26 F.B. Nyamnjoh, #RhodesMustFall. Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa (Bamenda, Langaa RPCIG, 2016), pp. 77–8, 202.

#FeesMustFall protest. As mainly black Africans, they also understood the reasoning of the #RhodesMustFall demand for universities to make reparations for their colonial past because it was making the increasingly diverse student body uncomfortable and resentful. Concerns for gender equality and women's safety were also taken seriously, and the anti-rape campaign #RUReferenceList<sup>27</sup> had the support of several SADC students. Still, most of them did not actually participate in any of the protests, as conveyed by two female SADC students:

It was my first experience of a protest. The thing is, being Zimbabwean and having gone through the 2008 period [of unrest], you don't engage, you don't say anything. You don't go out in the street because you might get into trouble, you disappear... I was too scared. Any time I heard singing, I felt anxious... Coming to a place where you could really express yourself publicly was mind boggling and scary.<sup>28</sup>

I felt helpless. I had never seen a protest in my life, never in my years before had I seen guns or such violence, people, students throwing stuff, things burning. In the mornings, I go jogging and I would see on the roads that tyres had been burning and stuff. It was very overwhelming, and I didn't know what to do.<sup>29</sup>

As evidenced by these narratives, some SADC students felt anxious when protests broke out at Rhodes University during 2015–16. The danger of violence was either all too familiar or completely alien to them, but in both cases avoiding engagement with the protests seemed to be the preferred response. This issue may not have been fully understood by South African students, who had grown up in a country where risk and sacrifice related to protest were historically important narrative tropes as mass mobilisation eventually helped to terminate apartheid rule.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, South African protesters' rights were – at least in theory – protected by the Constitution.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the bewilderment generated by South African protest culture, SADC students were also apprehensive due to their precarious immigration status, as the following testimony reveals:

I couldn't do anything... [S]ometimes people would get arrested if you walk to the library and haven't done anything. If you get arrested, you go to jail, and if that happened to me, I wouldn't be able to come back and study in South Africa, so that's already my education gone. So, I had to consider that.<sup>32</sup>

These SADC students feared that getting a criminal record would mean an effective ban from higher education in South Africa. Given the increasingly strict immigration regulations in many countries worldwide, obtaining a visa anywhere would also likely become more difficult for someone holding a criminal record. Although still scarce, some scholarship has emerged linking international students' non-participation in the fallist movements to fears of encountering xenophobia.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, news reports from 2015–16 confirm that many

<sup>27</sup> In April 2016, a list of male students accused of sexual violence at Rhodes University was circulated on social media, instigating an anti-rape campaign known as #RUReferenceList. J. Jansen, *As by Fire. The End of the South African University* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2017), pp. 94–5.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Sherry from Zimbabwe, 14 May 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Busisiwe from Eswatini, 11 May 2018.

<sup>30</sup> K.R. Chance, 'Sacrifice after Mandela: Liberalism and Liberation among South Africa's First Post-Apartheid Generation', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 88, 4 (2015), pp. 857–79.

<sup>31</sup> However, South Africans' trust in the protection of law has eroded since the Marikana massacre of 2012, in which 34 protesting miners were shot dead by the police. W. Gumede, 'Marikana: A Crisis of Legitimacy in the Institutions that Form the Foundations of South Africa's 1994 Post-apartheid Political Settlement', *Social Dynamics*, 41, 2 (2015), pp. 327–43.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Busisiwe from Eswatini, 11 May 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Kasembeli, 'The South African Student #Fallist Movements', pp. 11–15.

international students across South Africa were concerned about the additional financial cost and visa problems caused by protest interruptions to their study, and uneasy about the protesters' violent strategy and seeming lack of respect for authority.<sup>34</sup> Finishing their degrees was thus often the highest priority for SADC students who had strict visa timelines for completing their studies, as a Zimbabwean student succinctly articulated:

[T]he struggle is yours but not really yours... As a foreigner, you have so many things weighed against you, and you have deadlines to meet! You can't be toyi-toying on the road for eight hours when you have a thesis that is waiting to be done.<sup>35</sup>

The greatest objection for the majority of SADC students, however, was the violent means of the protests, and there was simply no sympathy for destructive action. Another Zimbabwean student argued: '[Y]ou can't campaign for free education and then go trash one of the buildings. In other universities, they burned down uni buses, they burned down a Law library. I mean gosh, you guys just literally shot yourself in the foot.'<sup>36</sup>

As conveyed by the above comments, SADC students had manifold reasons for their non-participation in campus protests. Although many local students were also affected by the disruption caused by the protests,<sup>37</sup> this article illustrates that international students shared some specific concerns. Raghuram et al argue that, despite common assumptions, 'not all international students are privileged' and in fact they often face an extra financial burden due to foreign levies and unfavourable economic circumstances in their home countries.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Majee explains that the contradiction between local transformation pressures and global trends of internationalisation restricts SADC students' ability to claim belonging in South African higher education as they fall between the binary of local and global.<sup>39</sup>

Building on the idea of belonging and claim-making, I suggest that the genuine concerns of SADC students have generally been misrecognised in the struggle for transformation in South African higher education, which otherwise has attracted a lot of attention in academic and other writing. However, I also argue that some of the SADC students' grievances stem from the divergent ways in which they and the fallist protesters identified themselves. Indeed, students were not excluded on the grounds of their nationality or class *per se* but based on how they were perceived to be positioned within the fallist discourse.

SADC students' non-participation in the protests irritated some protesters because they assumed that SADC students were too wealthy to relate to the problems faced by poor students or to be concerned about rising fees. SADC students themselves were insulted by these allegations and felt that the motives for their non-participation had been misunderstood. Unable to make their voices heard, SADC students withdrew from the protest action and the reasons for their non-participation were left unrecognised.

SADC students' experience of misrecognition was partly related to the transnational nature of their identity. SADC students are not a visible group in South Africa, and they are even considered home students in terms of fees and accommodation.<sup>40</sup> South Africa to them

<sup>34</sup> D. da Silva, 'What Happens to International Students During Fees Must Fall?', *Daily Vox*, Johannesburg, 17 October 2016, available at <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/happens-international-students-fees-must-fall/>, retrieved 13 January 2021; C. Johnson, 'Wits International Students Worry About Possible Loss of Academic Year', *GroundUp*, Cape Town, 6 October 2016, available at <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/wits-international-students-worry-academic-year-jeopardy/>, retrieved 13 January 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Fadzai from Zimbabwe, 10 May 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Scott from Zimbabwe, 17 May 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Nyamnjoh, #RhodesMustFall, pp. 202–3.

<sup>38</sup> Raghuram et al., 'Beyond #FeesMustFall', pp. 98, 101–2.

<sup>39</sup> Majee, 'Beyond the Local–Global Binaries', pp. 142.

<sup>40</sup> SADC, *Protocol on Education and Training*, p. 11.

is not an exotic destination but a place to go shopping or attend boarding school. Although SADC students generally identified according to their nationality, their lived experience was characteristically transnational.<sup>41</sup> This was reflected in SADC students' self-identification. I argue that with its 'processual and in-becoming character',<sup>42</sup> transnationalism rather than internationalism best describes these young adults who use their cross-border connections to build their identities and thus to confront the prevailing 'local-global dichotomy'.<sup>43</sup>

However, in South Africa, this dichotomy was sometimes difficult to escape as the pressure to prioritise the needs of disadvantaged South Africans was immense. Most SADC students interviewed for this article emphasised that they were just as affected by the deficiencies of South African higher education as local students. Instead of being entitled and unconcerned, they were restricted by both their specific position as international students and the harsh attitudes of the protesters. This left SADC students feeling misunderstood and unfairly victimised, as poignantly expressed by a Zimbabwean female student:

The onset [sic] was that they were only fighting for free education for South Africans and international students don't have a say. 'If they're here, they can afford it.' And I was thinking, you don't know what my parents have to go through [for me] to be here... In terms of social class, it placed us on a pedestal that wasn't necessarily true and reflective of where we actually stood.<sup>44</sup>

Isdahl has identified feelings of exclusion and non-belonging based on gender, language, race and national origin as reasons for some students' non-participation in the #RhodesMustFall protest.<sup>45</sup> She concludes that the movement 'has certain characteristics that make up its reputation of who belongs. For those who do not match this description, it is a time of grappling with questions of belonging, understanding, and support'.<sup>46</sup> According to Ahmed, this hardening of group identity boundaries within #RhodesMustFall happened partly due to internal fragmentation.<sup>47</sup> I argue that this was further reflected in the movement's worsening relationship with non-participating students, and that this pattern was also repeated during #FeesMustFall and #RUReferenceList.

Despite pan-Africanist rhetoric within fallist thought, international students were never fully included in the movements.<sup>48</sup> This contradiction suggests that the fallist protesters adopted a characteristically South African form of pan-Africanism that was more focused on a socialist struggle at a national level and solidarity with the rest of the continent rather than on transnational African unity.<sup>49</sup> Following this tradition, pan-Africanist thought within the fallist movements was centred around local South African problems like land redistribution and persistent black poverty.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, it appears that the transnational ideals of pan-Africanism in fallist rhetoric were often only referenced in terms of the decolonial theories

<sup>41</sup> For a more detailed discussion on transnationalism, see M. Tedeschi, E. Vorobeva and J.S. Jauhainen, 'Transnationalism: Current Debates and New Perspectives', *GeoJournal* (published online 9 August 2020), pp. 1–17.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> See Majee, 'Beyond the Local–Global Binaries'.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Sherry from Zimbabwe, 14 May 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Isdahl, 'Student Protests at UCT', pp. 16–21.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism*, pp. 117–18.

<sup>48</sup> Kasembeli, 'The South African Student #Fallist Movements'.

<sup>49</sup> See K. Kondlo, *In the Twilight of the Revolution: The Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (South Africa) 1959–1994* (Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009), pp. 49–50.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance G. Maringira and S. Gukurume, 'Being Black in #FeesMustFall and #FreeDecolonisedEducation: Student Protests at the University of the Western Cape', in M. Langa (ed.), *#Hashtag. An Analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African Universities* (Johannesburg, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2016), p. 37, 40.

of Frantz Fanon and Ngūgī wa Thiong'o – both non-South Africans – and interpreting Steve Biko's Black Consciousness as 'universal blackness'.

But while international students were largely ignored in the fallist movements, some argue that they were also actively victimised. Despite the efforts by some pan-Africanists within the fallist movements to include international students in the struggle, 'there [wa]s [also] a lot of Afrophobia and xenophobia'.<sup>51</sup> The 2015–16 student protests coincided with xenophobic attacks in Makhanda and across South Africa, and some students became victims of xenophobic violence.<sup>52</sup> Even within fallist rhetoric, foreigners were occasionally seen to be taking jobs and scholarships from locals.<sup>53</sup> Despite their general non-participation in the protests, international students were thus caught in the middle of the fallist politics of identity and belonging.

## Protests and Identity Politics at South African Universities

Identity politics was a central motif in the South African campus protests of 2015–16. But how did identity politics become such a force behind the fallist protests? And why does a particular type of identity politics make sense to some students at South African universities?

Many people identify themselves according to such categories as nationality, race and gender, and may feel a strong connection to some of them. They may do this in order to understand 'how they differ from others'<sup>54</sup> or to feel part of a 'shared culture'.<sup>55</sup> This, in turn, can help create a sense of 'permanence amidst manifest change, and of unity amidst manifest diversity'.<sup>56</sup> However, identity is a fluid and unstable phenomenon: as situations change, some identifications may become more important than others. Even the categories themselves are not fixed but constantly reinvented.<sup>57</sup> Identity, therefore, is '[n]ot an essence but a positioning'.<sup>58</sup>

Universities are settings in which young people attempt to find their place among their peers, which occasionally generates rivalry and antagonism.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Bourdieu has described higher education settings as 'fields of struggle' in which participants compete for 'symbolic mastery'.<sup>60</sup> They are also sites in which students are 'exposed to new knowledge, skills and ideologies that evoke a sense of consciousness'.<sup>61</sup> In post-apartheid South Africa, a discourse on identity has become pronounced due to apartheid legacies of inequality and discrimination.<sup>62</sup> Because higher education in general is expected to be a site of upward

51 Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism*, pp. 137–8.

52 Kasembeli, 'The South African Student #Fallist Movements', p. 11.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 12; Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism*, p. 137.

54 R. Brubaker and F. Cooper, 'Beyond Identity', *Theory and Society*, 29, 1 (2000), p. 4.

55 S. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p. 223.

56 Brubaker and Cooper, 'Beyond Identity', p. 2.

57 Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 224.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 226.

59 See, for example, H. Cowie and C-A. Myers, 'Bullying Amongst University Students in the UK', *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 6, 1 (2014), pp. 66–75.

60 P. Bourdieu, cited in V. Loveday, 'Embodying Deficiency Through "Affective Practice": Shame, Relationality, and the Lived Experience of Social Class and Gender in Higher Education', *Sociology*, 50, 6 (2015), p. 1, 142.

61 L. Hewlett, N. Mukadah, K. Kouakou and H. Zandamela, 'Learning from Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa', in S. Booyse (ed.), *Fees Must Fall. Student Revolt, Decolonisation and Governance in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2016), p. 152.

62 S. Bazana and O.P. Mogotsi, 'Social Identities and Racial Integration in Historically White Universities: A Literature Review of the Experiences of Black Students', *Transformation in Higher Education*, 2, a25 (2017), p. 2; Ngoasheng and Gachago, 'Dreaming Up a New Grid', p. 189.

social mobility – and in South Africa, often a ‘way out of poverty’<sup>63</sup> – universities can also be places where ‘the experience of being the abject is most pronounced’.<sup>64</sup> This experience of marginalisation has politicised the identities of many South African students, and mobilised them to challenge prevailing injustices. South African universities are therefore especially fertile grounds for identity politics, as they are simultaneously sites of institutional and societal change as well as sites of personal transitions from childhood to adulthood.<sup>65</sup>

Identity politics can be seen as young people’s meaning-making of themselves and the surrounding realities.<sup>66</sup> On South African campuses, this meaning-making has sometimes been expressed in an openly frustrated manner, which was especially visible during the 2015–16 protests. The fallist protests are often seen as a part of a worldwide tradition of student movements<sup>67</sup> as well as a continuation of the anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa – especially the 1976 Soweto uprising.<sup>68</sup> Writing in 2004, Johnson and Jacobs noted that the ‘discussion of the content of democratic rights has only just begun’ and thus predicted growing ‘demands pressing historical claims and... collective rights’.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the end of apartheid in 1994 was ‘the opening of the door, not an achievement in its own right’ and the fallist protests therefore represented a logical next step in the process of democratisation.<sup>70</sup> This ‘unfinished business’ was underlined, for example, when students invoked anti-apartheid discourse through songs of struggle.<sup>71</sup>

For protesting students, the question of democratic rights translated into a lived experience of identity misrecognition. Declining state funding for higher education has resulted in rising tuition fees, which make attending university in South Africa unaffordable for a large part of the population.<sup>72</sup> Students are therefore often assumed to come from middle-class backgrounds. In reality, however, the student profile has changed significantly since the end of apartheid following governmental massification policies and support initiatives such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).<sup>73</sup> Despite their growing numbers, many students from poorer backgrounds feel that their experiences are neither understood nor valued – in other words, their existence in higher education institutions is not recognised. This phenomenon, in which disadvantaged students become more expressive about their exclusion when their presence increases, is known as a ‘paradox of integration’.<sup>74</sup> Experiences of lack of recognition within

<sup>63</sup> Jansen, *As by Fire*, p. 32.

<sup>64</sup> J. Steyn Kotze, ‘On Decolonisation and Revolution: A Kristevaian Reading on the Hashtags Student Movements and Fallism’, *Politikon*, 45, 1 (2018), p. 123.

<sup>65</sup> V. Franchi and T.M. Swart, ‘From Apartheid to Affirmative Action: The Use of “Racial” Markers in Past, Present and Future Articulations of Identity Among South African Students’, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 27, 2 (2003), pp. 212, 229.

<sup>66</sup> Bazana and Mogotsi, ‘Social Identities and Racial Integration’, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> Hewlett, ‘Learning from Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa’, p. 148; Jansen, *As by Fire*, p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> S. Booysen, ‘Two Weeks in October: Changing Governance in South Africa’, in Booysen (ed.), *Fees Must Fall*, pp. 14, 16.

<sup>69</sup> K. Johnson and S. Jacobs, ‘Democratization and the Rhetoric of Rights: Contradictions and Debate in Post-apartheid South Africa’, in Englund and Nyamnjoh (eds), *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*, pp. 90.

<sup>70</sup> Booysen, ‘Two Weeks in October’, pp. 10, 23.

<sup>71</sup> G. Godsell, R. Lepere, S. Mafoko and A. Nase, ‘Documenting the Revolution’, in Booysen (ed.), *Fees Must Fall*, pp. 113–14.

<sup>72</sup> E. Bitzer and E. de Jager, ‘The Views of Commerce Students Regarding “Free” Higher Education in South Africa’, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32, 4 (2018), pp. 17–18.

<sup>73</sup> R.O. Mabokela, ‘The Evolution of Admissions and Retention Policies at an Historically White South African University’, *Journal of Negro Education*, 66, 4 (1997), p. 425.

<sup>74</sup> Jansen, *As by Fire*, p. 65.

institutions can amplify students' craving for a 'right to identity', which then often results in identity politics.<sup>75</sup>

The fallist protests employed theories of black radical feminism, Black Consciousness and pan-Africanism as building blocks of their collective identity.<sup>76</sup> The protesters related their experience to Fanon's idea of colonialism as structural violence, which could only be resolved by counterviolence – such as that of the protests.<sup>77</sup> Biko's Black Consciousness, on the other hand, inspired the protesters to lead their own grassroots emancipation struggle rather than relying on conventional politics or channels within white institutions.<sup>78</sup> The focus on identity politics and intersectionality came from radical feminists such as the Combahee River Collective, who had famously stated in 1977 that 'the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come out of our own identity, rather than working to end someone else's oppression'.<sup>79</sup>

The idea of interlocking oppressions appealed to the born free generation in South Africa, where economic deprivation and cultural disadvantage were connected to intersecting race, class and gender identities. This feeling of marginalisation also explains the magnitude of antagonism that identity politics induced during the fallist protests. Cunha has argued that 'peaceful protest is a privilege of those safely in the mainstream culture',<sup>80</sup> which raises the question of whether 'only non-violent protests [are] valid and moral'.<sup>81</sup> Just as decolonisation struggles across the world encouraged feelings of 'shared culture' and 'oneness' for nation-building purposes,<sup>82</sup> the born free generation in South Africa used identity politics to create what they hoped to be a united moral position against the persistent legacy of apartheid.

Yet this unity was not realised within the fallist movements. Identity politics has long been accused of accommodating totalising tendencies and relying on invented primordiality,<sup>83</sup> and the fallist protests were no exception. The black pain-derived identity politics relied on two rather ambivalent and contested identities: blackness and social class. Blackness had different interpretations and 'grades' within the movements<sup>84</sup> and, class-wise, the protesting students represented a range of economic conditions.<sup>85</sup> From an essentialist point of view, this raises the question of whether it was more important to be black or to be poor. The movements' existence depended on a collective identity, but due to the diversity of the protesters, this was difficult to achieve. It thus became important to consolidate group boundaries – even if that meant some had to be excluded.

While the fallist protests have often been understood as post-class politics focusing largely on racial identity, this approach neglects the complicated class relations within the

<sup>75</sup> H. Englund, 'Introduction: Recognizing Identities, Imagining Alternatives', in Englund and Nyamnjoh (eds), *Rights and the Politics of Recognition in Africa*, p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism*.

<sup>77</sup> This interpretation became heatedly contested during the protests; see, for instance, R. Pithouse, 'Violence: What Fanon Really Said', *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, 7 April 2016, available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-04-07-violence-what-fanon-really-said/>, retrieved 13 January 2021.

<sup>78</sup> F.N. Ntloedibe, 'Where Are Our Heroes and Ancestors? The Spectre of Steve Biko's Ideas in Rhodes Must Fall and the Transformation of South African Universities', *African Identities*, 17, 1 (2019), pp. 64–79.

<sup>79</sup> Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), cited in K-Y. Taylor (ed.), *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2007), p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> D. Cunha, cited in Godsell *et al.*, 'Documenting the Revolution', p. 115.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>82</sup> Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 223.

<sup>83</sup> On national identity, see, for instance, C. Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2007), pp. 45–7.

<sup>84</sup> Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism*, pp. 118, 151.

<sup>85</sup> C. Webb, *Liberating the Family: Education, Aspiration and Resistance Among South African University Students* (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2019), pp. 7–8.

student body.<sup>86</sup> Along with a large number of deprived students, the protests also attracted some white students<sup>87</sup> as well as many so-called ‘missing middle’ students<sup>88</sup> who are excluded from financial support when their parents’ earnings exceed a certain threshold, even though they are clearly unable to pay the high fees charged by South African universities.<sup>89</sup> Overall, indebtedness of students has been increasing sharply.<sup>90</sup> Some of the ‘missing middle’ students have been especially radical in demonstrating their solidarity with poor black students, which has given the fallist protests a middle-class image.<sup>91</sup>

This article maintains that while the class identities of the fallist protesters were complex and diverse, a poor black identity came to dominate the discourse. The accounts of SADC students interviewed for this article indicate that identity boundaries at Rhodes University are often drawn between ‘authentic’ blacks and those deemed middle class – often derogatively referred to as ‘coconuts’.<sup>92</sup> Similar findings regarding this politics of ‘are you black enough?’ have been made in studies about Rhodes University<sup>93</sup> and other South African higher education institutions,<sup>94</sup> as well as in discussions beyond higher education.<sup>95</sup>

The experience of being poor and black was thus a central theme in the fallist protests, raising the dual imperatives of addressing the issue of poverty and harnessing one’s identity and agency in order to do so. The question of who has the right to speak for the poor thus became the context in which a poor black identity took centre stage as it had the best claim to authenticity.<sup>96</sup> This meant that white and middle-class students had to be relegated to an assisting role and even that was conditional on their acknowledgement of their own privilege.<sup>97</sup>

Interestingly, South African students from middle-class backgrounds were occasionally able to tap into the discourse of poor black identity, whereas SADC students generally were not. This may be explained by the fact that South African middle-class students shared with their poorer black counterparts an intergenerational memory of apartheid and the frustration of being part of the born free generation. Rising fees, inadequate funding opportunities and the ensuing indebtedness in particular had likely rendered the idea of being middle class meaningless to them.<sup>98</sup> Middle-class South Africans were therefore able to recognise their

<sup>86</sup> V. Satgar, ‘Bringing Class Back In: Against Outsourcing During #FeesMustFall at Wits’, in Booyse (ed.), *Fees Must Fall*, p. 214.

<sup>87</sup> Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall*, p. 201.

<sup>88</sup> Jansen, *As by Fire*, p. 33.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> D. James, *Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015); S. Mpofu-Walsh, ‘The Game’s the Same: “Mustfall” Moves to Euro-America’, in Booyse (ed.), *Fees Must Fall*, p. 78.

<sup>91</sup> Jansen, *As by Fire*, pp. 32–4.

<sup>92</sup> Coconut is a denigratory term referring to a black person who is considered to be ‘white on the inside’, a sell-out.

<sup>93</sup> See A.K.M. Barroso, *A Critical Fanonian Understanding of Black Student Identities at Rhodes University, South Africa* (MA dissertation, Rhodes University, 2015); A. Daki, *Understanding the Experiences of Zimbabwean Students as Foreign Students at Rhodes University* (MA dissertation, Rhodes University, 2018); Goga, *The Silencing of Race at Rhodes*.

<sup>94</sup> See R. Pattman, ‘Student Identities, and Researching These, in a Newly “Racially” Merged University in South Africa’, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 10, 4 (2007), pp. 473–92; T. Singh and D. Bhana, ‘Shifting Race and Class in Student Construction of Identities at a South African University’, *African Identities*, 13, 3 (2015), pp. 199–210.

<sup>95</sup> See, for instance, P. Chigumadzi, *Why I Call Myself a “Coconut” to Claim My Place in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Ruth First Lecture, 17 August 2015, University of the Witwatersrand, available at <http://wits.journalism.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Ruth-First-Lecture-by-Panashe-Chigumadzi-2015.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> See Taylor, ‘Politics of Recognition’, p. 25.

<sup>97</sup> Nyamnjoh, *#RhodesMustFall*, pp. 201–2.

<sup>98</sup> C. Webb, ‘Astinamali: Aspiration, Debt and Citizenship in South Africa’s #FeesMustFall Protests’, *Area*, 51, 4 (2018), p. 5.

privilege while at the same time pointing out that the post-apartheid state had failed the born free generation collectively. Most importantly, they were taking a risk by participating in the protests.

By affirming their desire to abolish all inequalities, protesting South African middle-class students refused to identify with the self-interested post-colonial bourgeoisie that Fanon had cautioned about.<sup>99</sup> Compared to SADC students, they were also more familiar with the prevailing moral discourse in the country, especially in terms of the rhetoric of race equality and social justice. This meant that they could, for example, use linguistic code-switching<sup>100</sup> to downplay their class advantage and to affirm their solidarity with ‘authentic’ poor black students. These code-switching opportunities were often more limited for SADC students, who lacked familiarity with South Africa-specific cultural codes.

According to Ahmed, ‘the formation of a collective black identity [was] a helpful way of articulating the feelings of isolation that black students encountered’.<sup>101</sup> However, this collective identity was used in a way that also alienated many students. Although social categorisation is something that we all tend to do, it can sometimes lead to groupist thinking and flat stereotyping.<sup>102</sup> More than any political agenda or self-identification, the paramount divisive feature of the fallist protests seemed to stem precisely from this groupism, which then resulted in identity politics that were violent and retaliatory.

Although seemingly its antithesis, groupism emanates from a flat form of individualism that tends to treat groups ‘as collective individuals, and as collections of individuals’.<sup>103</sup> Polarisation in political discourse pushes individuals to form groups of like-minded people which then skews their social interactions<sup>104</sup> and produces further group polarisation.<sup>105</sup> Interacting within these political ‘echo chambers’ can encourage virtue signalling and moral grandstanding,<sup>106</sup> through which like-minded people wish to advertise how well they represent the shared values and virtues of the group, or hope to convince outsiders of their group’s moral superiority.<sup>107</sup>

The fallist movements dealt with the fundamentally ethical issue of social justice. The contentious identity politics that the protests evoked was thus both a cause and effect of political polarisation, virtue signalling and moral grandstanding. I will now move on to analyse more closely how this moral discourse was experienced and deployed by SADC students at Rhodes University as they navigated their racial and class identities within the South African framework.

## ‘Coconuts’ and ‘Authentic Blacks’ – SADC Students, Race and Class

The narratives of SADC students interviewed for this article portrayed South African understandings of race and class as different from those they had been used to in their

<sup>99</sup> See Gibson, ‘The Specter of Fanon’, p. 583.

<sup>100</sup> See M. Motinyane, ‘A Textual Analysis of the African Language Expressions Used During the #RhodesMustFall Campaign’, *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 36, 1 (2018), pp. 37–48.

<sup>101</sup> Ahmed, *The Rise of Fallism*, p. 118.

<sup>102</sup> D.M. Merolla, ‘Reflected Appraisals and Stereotype Threat’, in J.E. Stets and R.T. Serpe (eds), *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 420–21.

<sup>103</sup> R. Brubaker, ‘Neither Individualism nor “Groupism”: A Reply to Craig Calhoun’, *Ethnicities*, 3, 4 (2003), p. 555.

<sup>104</sup> T. Bosch, ‘Twitter Activism and Youth in South Africa: The Case of #RhodesMustFall’, *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 2 (2017), p. 230.

<sup>105</sup> J. Tosi and B. Warmke, ‘Moral Grandstanding’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 44, 3 (2016), p. 211.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*; E. Wallace, I. Buil and L. de Chernatony, ‘“Consuming Good” on Social Media: What Can Conspicuous Virtue Signalling on Facebook Tell Us About Prosocial and Unethical Intentions?’, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 162, 3 (2020), pp. 577–92.

<sup>107</sup> Tosi and Warmke, ‘Moral Grandstanding’, p. 201; Wallace *et al.*, ‘“Consuming Good”’, p. 578.

home countries. Some SADC students claimed that coming to study in South Africa was the first time that they had to encounter issues of race and racism. For black students from township or missionary school backgrounds, race had not been a tangible concern in what they described as rather racially homogeneous social circles. On the other hand, those students (from all races) who had been introduced to multiracial life at private schools felt that race had never been a decisive – or divisive – factor. Remarkably, some students seemed to have had a sudden realisation of their own race when arriving in South Africa: ‘[M]oving to [South Africa] was actually the first time when I was like, oh my goodness, I am black’.<sup>108</sup> Students’ narratives often had a romanticised tone in which they positioned ‘racialised’ South Africa as the antithesis of their home countries, as conveyed by a Zimbabwean student:

It’s only when I’m here that I’m constantly reminded on a daily basis that I’m a black woman in a space where I’m not necessarily supposed to be, or welcome. It only happens here. When I go home, no, we are one with the people, we are happy.<sup>109</sup>

Similar claims of non-racialism have been reported in Pierre’s study among Ghanaians, who did not consider race and blackness as important issues in a country that never had a large settler presence.<sup>110</sup> However, Pierre demonstrates that race does matter in all post-colonial societies through the way in which colonialism racialised black people into ‘native subjects’ rather than full citizens and therefore tied their experiences to the racist structures of ‘global white supremacy’.<sup>111</sup> Ironically, many of the SADC students who described their home countries as colour-blind dreamlands were talking about Zimbabwe – a country previously ruled by a racist settler government. This suggests that while SADC students’ shock about the prominence of race in South Africa must be taken seriously, their perspective is influenced by prior experiences and patriotic identity politics.

For SADC students, class identities and differences at Rhodes University also appeared more pronounced than back home. Many described having not had much contact with people from outside their own social class while growing up in their home countries. The additional cost of studying abroad and the shortage of bursaries available for SADC students meant that South African universities were often out of bounds for less well-off SADC citizens. Coming to university in South Africa, many therefore identified themselves as middle class. However, they felt that this was often mistranslated by their South African peers as being rich or privileged – an assumption that SADC students themselves firmly rejected. Instead, they emphasised that their families had valued education and made financial sacrifices to send their children to South Africa. Just like many South Africans,<sup>112</sup> families of SADC students had pooled their resources, sold livestock or taken loans. Furthermore, unfavourable economic conditions in countries like Zimbabwe meant that, at home, these middle-class students often found themselves washing out of buckets and had little hope of finding a paid job after graduation.

While these accounts reflected SADC students’ pain of misrecognition, they were also moral narratives through which SADC students were hoping to de-emphasise any potential unearned privilege they may have had. But however morally justified their emphasis on resilience and upward mobility may have been, SADC students could not claim black

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Natsai from Zimbabwe, 25 May 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Fadzai from Zimbabwe, 10 May 2018.

<sup>110</sup> J. Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. xi.

<sup>111</sup> Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness*.

<sup>112</sup> See James, *Money from Nothing*; Webb, ‘Asinamali’, pp. 1–8.

authenticity in South Africa. Whatever the lived reality of SADC students was back home, at Rhodes they were often seen as bourgeois. Being identified as middle class came with baggage, as the fallist movements adopted Fanon's idea that the post-colonial bourgeoisie would maintain colonial inequalities by becoming an 'internalised master' that promotes its own class interest over the emancipation of the entire nation.<sup>113</sup>

Factors such as flying home instead of taking the bus during vacations or having the exchange rate on their side were frequently mentioned by SADC students to explain why they felt they were seen as better-off than local South African students. However, one of the most commonly accepted indicators of class privilege was language. A majority of the interviewed SADC students were unable to speak locally dominant African languages and therefore mainly relied on English, which they often spoke with an unmistakable private school accent. Nyamnjoh argues that language has become an important marker of belonging or non-belonging in South Africa<sup>114</sup> through what Taylor might call an appeal for recognition.<sup>115</sup> Many immigrants in South Africa therefore do their best to learn a local language in order to avoid harassment from the authorities, who often target foreigners.<sup>116</sup>

For SADC students, this language politics undermined their experience and reminded them of their non-belonging in South Africa. Indeed, speaking English in public rather than a non-local African language was sometimes seen as the lesser of two evils if the choice was between Afrophobic discrimination and being called a coconut. Treated as a measure of one's blackness, language was thus used to exclude those who could not fit into the very limited race-class bracket in which 'local' translated as 'poor but authentic', while 'non-local' indicated either a 'rich coconut' or 'poor' in a negative, xenophobic sense.

Taylor argues that the ideal of authenticity is connected to our right to recognition because we need the recognition of others to validate our authenticity.<sup>117</sup> In a university setting with conflicting expectations of authenticity, class identity becomes a performance that students can – and sometimes have to – adjust according to the situation in order to circumnavigate the polarisation between being authentic blacks and coconuts.<sup>118</sup> However, this article has explained that SADC students were for the most part denied a way out of antagonistic identity politics during the fallist protests because their identification options were limited by others' perceptions of them.

## 'They Breathe Snowflakes' – SADC Students and Moral Boundary-Making

In addition to remarking on their different understandings of race and class, SADC students at Rhodes University highlighted how unfamiliar they were with the ways in which moral discourse was deployed in South Africa. They described South Africa as having a climate of belligerence, as exemplified by this observation by a student from Eswatini:

[T]he society, it's very different. It's a joke that I always make, but it's quite serious, that every child in South Africa has a right. So, if you do something, 'I'm going to go to court, I'm going to sue my parents.' In Swazi[land], if you go like, 'I have a right in my house,' your father will go like, 'a right in whose house?'<sup>119</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Gibson, 'The Specter of Fanon', p. 583; A. Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University: New Directions', *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 15, 1 (2016), p. 33.

<sup>114</sup> F.B. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (London, Zed Books, 2006).

<sup>115</sup> Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition'.

<sup>116</sup> Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders*, pp. 76–7.

<sup>117</sup> Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', p. 25.

<sup>118</sup> See Merolla, 'Reflected Appraisals and Stereotype Threat', p. 425.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Busisiwe from Eswatini, 11 May 2018.

Witnessing crime, poverty and inequality in Makhanda had helped SADC students understand the roots of their South African peers' anger, which they located in the legacy of apartheid. But despite their awareness of the persistent problems in post-apartheid South Africa, SADC students did not accept the violence of the anger that these arduous conditions had created. Rather than the post-apartheid inequality crisis itself, SADC students often interpreted the belligerent climate at Rhodes University as a result of totalising identity politics. Comments like 'South Africans are entitled' and 'South Africans need anger management' were regularly repeated phrases with which SADC students underlined their dislike of what they perceived as South African students' lack of manners and sensitive, self-absorbed outlook. Another Eswatini student declared that these South African students were people who 'breathe snowflakes', adding:

People critique everything ... Like, I have a problem with this, you know, I'm sitting here and I'm looking at your green dress, and I'm looking at the colour green and the colour green reminds me of the time when I experienced this emotion, and you know ... It's a place that, I would say, can easily swallow people.<sup>120</sup>

In talking about their experiences of race, class and moral discourse in South Africa, SADC students often underlined their outside-ness. They implied that identity politics is something only happening among South African students and something that they – as outsiders – condemn. By attacking South African students' perceived overreaction and lack of manners, SADC students themselves were thus also contributing to an antagonistic identity politics at Rhodes.

Essentialising identity politics is not just a South African problem but a global phenomenon that feeds on the sense of marginalisation and resentment of many groups around the world that have not benefited from the post-Cold War world order.<sup>121</sup> Throughout post-colonial Africa, the move to liberal democratic models has also aided the rise of identity-based politics.<sup>122</sup> Many increasingly experience formal political channels as ineffective, which has diminished conventional forms of participation and given rise to 'contentious politics',<sup>123</sup> especially among younger generations.<sup>124</sup> The aggressive identity politics at Rhodes University reflects this contemporary political environment, which therefore cannot be assumed to pertain only to South African students.

The struggles for equality and affordability in South African higher education relate to the historical marginalisation of black South Africans. The ascent of divisive identity politics during the campus protests was thus connected to the moral discourse of enduring social injustice. Despite largely agreeing with the goals of the fallist movements, SADC students disapproved of the protest tactics because they did not fit their ideas of mannerliness. Their response was therefore characterised by moral grandstanding. The notion of respectability is a key aspect of performing middle-class distinction in Southern Africa,<sup>125</sup> which SADC students reiterated when they claimed that 'South Africans are entitled' and 'South Africans need anger management'. This paradox of criticising others' moral discourse through one's

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Daniela from Eswatini, 16 May 2018.

<sup>121</sup> F. Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London, Profile Books, 2018), pp. 3–11.

<sup>122</sup> Englund, 'Introduction: Recognizing Identities, Imagining Alternatives', p. 2.

<sup>123</sup> R. Baragwanath, 'Social Media and Contentious Politics in South Africa', *Communication and the Public*, 1, 3 (2016), p. 362.

<sup>124</sup> Bosch, 'Twitter Activism and Youth in South Africa', p. 223.

<sup>125</sup> See, for example, J. Pauli, 'Celebrating Distinctions: Common and Conspicuous Weddings in Rural Namibia', *Ethnology*, 50, 2 (2011), pp. 153–67; M.O. West, *Rise of an African Middle Class: Colonial Zimbabwe, 1898–1965* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002).

own was possible because SADC students saw themselves as outsiders and this enabled them to deflect the heated question of potential class advantage.

SADC students' claims of their outside-ness contradicts the southern African region's distinctive dependency on South Africa going back at least two centuries.<sup>126</sup> The expansion of South Africa's economic influence over its neighbours has been seen as political soft power<sup>127</sup> and even 'regional imperialism'.<sup>128</sup> These unequal regional relations are also manifested in the form of regional migration to South Africa, which remains prevalent despite the shift from systematic labour migration to more casual movements.<sup>129</sup> It was not uncommon for SADC students to have relatives living in South Africa. Some had even done their schooling in South Africa or followed the South African curriculum in their home countries. At home, they had watched South African TV and listened to South African music, testifying to South Africa's cultural influence in the region.

Considering the close economic and cultural ties between South Africa and the students' home countries, SADC students' assertions of their outside-ness indicate a degree of conscious boundary-making. SADC students' lives in South Africa are located in a context of encounters with unfamiliar practices, especially in terms of morally imbued expressions of race and class. When identifications based on race and class became highly contested during the fallist protests, SADC students seemed to rely on the one distinction that the protesters could not deny: the fact that they were not South African.

Indeed, SADC students consciously built their identities in contrast to rather than within a South African framework. This strategy must be understood in conjunction with their positionality with respect to race, class and transnational frameworks. However, it is important to ask whether SADC students have in fact accepted the fallist challenge of recognising their own privileges or used the assertion of outside-ness to evade the issue altogether.

## Conclusions

The way in which the fallist protests employed the ideas of black pain and poor black identity illustrates how intersectionality between race and class has become a central device of distinction in South African higher education. Students identifying as poor black take ownership of the struggle, which often denies those students who position themselves as middle class the chance to have an input into the transformation discourse if they lack the ability to tap into the shared moral discourse of the prominent majority. As fittingly expressed by a Zimbabwean student:

Rhodes doesn't allow people to grow. There's a certain norm, and if you don't fit in that norm, if you don't tick those boxes, you're marginalised... I think international students are very marginalised in this space and we are not included in the discussions. There's this tyranny of majority where you have to cater for the most people. You can't talk about some things... International students don't have a voice in this space.<sup>130</sup>

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126 Saurombe, 'The Role of South Africa in SADC Regional Integration', pp. 124–31.

127 O. Ogunnubi and O.B. Amao, 'South Africa's Emerging "Soft Power" Influence in Africa and its Impending Limitations: Will the Giant Be Able to Weather the Storm?', *African Security*, 9, 4 (2016), pp. 299–319.

128 I. Taylor, 'South African "Imperialism" in a Region Lacking Regionalism: A Critique', *Third World Quarterly*, 32, 7 (2011), pp. 1, 233–53.

129 J.A. Johnson, 'After the Mines: The Changing Social and Economic Landscape of Malawi–South Africa Migration', *Review of African Political Economy*, 44, 152 (2017), pp. 237–51.

130 Interview with Brenda from Zimbabwe, 11 May 2018.

Acknowledging these feelings of SADC students, this article has pointed out the often-neglected experiential aspect of international student life at South African universities. Taking into account their specific challenges as immigrants and their different moral understandings of race and class, it is clear that SADC students had their reasons not to participate in the fallist protests. Considering the mismatch between their self-understanding and the class identities ascribed by others, it is reasonable that SADC students felt marginalised by the protest movements. I do not aim to undervalue that experience. Nevertheless, antagonistic identity politics during the protests implicated even those SADC students who made conscious efforts to avoid any involvement. Identity politics has been a recognisable force in the fight for social justice within the South African higher education system, but the narratives of SADC students have illustrated that it has also led to further othering and animosity within the student community.

Identity is, as Vincent points out, ‘not only something we construct ourselves but is also constructed in the eyes of others’.<sup>131</sup> When confronted with these external perceptions and expectations, our response can be either to reject them or remould ourselves accordingly.<sup>132</sup> This article has explained why these options have been restricted for many students in South African higher education. Many disadvantaged students in South Africa are seeking a sense of belonging within the ‘foreign’ institutional culture of formerly white universities. This environment narrows down their identity options, often making the perceived authenticity of poor black identification the only positive option available. Using authenticity as the essence of their identity, disadvantaged students can take ownership of their identity definition. However, through this logic, they may also narrow the identity options available to others, as happened to SADC students during the fallist protests at Rhodes University.

In 2002, Chipkin argued that the notion of blackness in post-apartheid South Africa had been radically remodelled or ‘displaced’, as it turned from representing the liberation struggle to becoming a symbol of patriotism and national sovereignty.<sup>133</sup> Since then, it has likely been reconstructed once again as the country has faced serious challenges, from the Marikana massacre to the spectre of state capture.<sup>134</sup> In this context, it is important to ask how changing ideas of blackness were reflected in the fallist protests, and how they affect the ways in which immigrants in the country are recognised. South African universities are one of the sites in which new ideas of blackness – and other identities – are emerging. SADC students are a minority that may not have a huge influence on the mainstream narrative regarding university transformation, but their role as ‘inbetweeners’ certainly highlights the importance of linking debates on post-apartheid social justice to questions of xenophobia and belonging.<sup>135</sup>

The fallist protests at South African universities indicate that the transformation of higher education discourse is centred on national issues, notably poverty and inequality. South African students live in a reality of ‘fragile nationhood filled with contradictions. [They are] integrated, yet separated... united, yet unreconciled... free, yet oppressed... equal, yet unequal... non-racial, yet live in a racist political reality’.<sup>136</sup> When universities settle for

<sup>131</sup> L. Vincent, “‘Just a Little Thing Like the Colour of Their Skin Ruined Everything’: Facing Race at Rhodes Ten Years After”, *African Sociological Review*, 9, 1 (2005), p. 114.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>133</sup> I. Chipkin, ‘The Sublime Object of Blackness’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, 167, (2002), pp. 569–84.

<sup>134</sup> State capture refers to a corruption scandal revealed in 2016 involving the then South African president, Jacob Zuma, and the influential Gupta family. See M.E. Martin and H. Solomon, ‘Understanding the Phenomenon of “State Capture” in South Africa’, *Southern African Peace and Security Studies*, 5, 1 (2016), pp. 21–34.

<sup>135</sup> See Nyamnjoh, #RhodesMustFall.

<sup>136</sup> J. Steyn Kotze and G. Prevost, ‘Born (Un)Free: The Construction of Citizenship of South Africa’s First Post-Apartheid Generation – Views of University Students’, *Representation*, 52, 4 (2016), p. 291.

Africanisation rather than striving for genuine transformation, unfair advantages are merely transferred from one group to another rather than being fundamentally rejected or reconfigured.<sup>137</sup> At Rhodes University, this has led to the racial, classist and xenophobic antagonism described by SADC students in this article. Local students may have benefited to some extent from a more Africanised curriculum, but the institutional culture remains predominantly white and, ultimately, foreign. Furthermore, some SADC students complain that their South African lecturers and peers have little awareness of what is happening in the wider continent. For them, Africanisation has mainly implied South Africanisation.

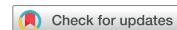
One's existence at home can never be fully replicated in a foreign country. Having migrated to South Africa with a different set of cultural and moral codes, SADC students have displaced their familiar class positions. SADC students' frustration with identity politics on South African campuses can therefore be understood as an appeal for recognition of their particular position within an environment that does not easily accept one's right *not* to have an identity.<sup>138</sup> However, the realisation of this recognition will likely depend on how South African higher education can first recognise the demands of local students and accordingly deal with the urgent need for transformation at the national level. This article suggests that more research on the lived experience of international students is required to better understand the challenges and consequences arising from transformation pursuits, especially regarding the complex reality of intersections between transnationalism, race and class.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editor Rebekah Lee and two anonymous readers for their constructive comments and suggestions, which greatly improved my manuscript. I would also like to thank Kate Skinner, Jessica Johnson and Maxim Bolt for their help and support in drafting this article, and Sally Matthews for assisting and supporting me throughout my field research. Finally, I would like to thank my research participants for their invaluable contributions. This research has been supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number 1770684).

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<sup>137</sup> Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University', p. 33.

<sup>138</sup> See Hylland Eriksen, cited in Englund, 'Introduction: Recognizing Identities, Imagining Alternatives', p. 12 (emphasis in original).