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Representations of Student Activism in South Africa: A media analysis

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Abstract

The 2015-2016 student protests across the country come at a time when the supposed born frees are not happy with the pace of transformation at universities. They are contesting the inequalities and injustices that persist today 22 years into democracy in a hope to realise the life that the end of apartheid promised. This study explored the media representations of student activism in the 2015-2016 South African student protests, particularly what discourses are drawn on when marginalised students mobilise and resist their oppression. The study was conducted within a postcolonial theoretical perspective, which views the inequalities that persist today as a consequence of colonialism and apartheid. Three South African newspapers were investigated, namely the Mail & Guardian, Daily Sun and Cape Argus. The findings indicate that the media drew on discursive strategies of *violence, transformation and problem people*, when reporting on the student protests. These three discourses emerge in various ways in the articles and are interlinked to create a particular narrative about the student protests. Furthermore, these discourses do not only have resemblance with general protest discourse but are evidence of the workings of power in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords- #Rhodesmustfall, #Feesmustfall, students, protest, race

Introduction

With the advent of democracy in 1994, there was a strong focus on transformation and policies were established to ensure that universities were reflective of the South African population. Evidently, there has been increased diversity in South African universities, particularly historically white-only institutions (Cloete, 2014). However, today there is growing contention that ‘access’ and ‘integration’ of black people into these institutions is not enough transformation, as participation, retention rates and graduation rates are unsatisfactory (Cloete, 2014). In addition to that, institutional racism, financial exclusion, and a Eurocentric curriculum are issues that have been raised through the RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall campaigns. This brings us to the present moment in post-apartheid South Africa, where the ‘born frees’ are dissatisfied with the pace of transformation at their institutions and are leading the country’s student protests. The current study aims to investigate media representations of student activism in the South African 2015-2016 student protests, particularly what discourses are drawn on when marginalised students mobilise and resist their oppression. Although South Africa is now a democratic society where all who live in it are entitled to human rights and freedoms, there is no doubt that there are still inequalities that exist which are a residue of colonialism and apartheid. The distribution of power is still largely skewed in favour of a white, male, heteronormative minority, thus the study will look at the ways in which race, gender and class are used in the representation of student activists.

The politics of representation

History informs us that the body and its differences are a discursive site through which much racialised, sexist, and homophobic knowledge was produced and circulated (Green, 1984 as cited in Hall, 2001; Lewis, 2011). These differences and representations of the other are then fixed, naturalised and essentialised, working to exclude and create a hierarchy of humanity where white heterosexual men are seen as human and everyone else as subhuman (Mama, 1995). Colonialism and ethnocentrism have structured society in such a way that only a few groups have this power to re-present someone or something in a certain way (Hall, 2001). However, this symbolic power does not only limit and reduce people into these categories but it also consistently produces new kinds of knowledge, discourses, practices and institutions, so that there is never a moment where the victims and agents of representation stand outside of it. Hall (2001) makes the example of black masculinity and

how young black men find themselves trapped in this trope of representation. The violence imposed on black people through slavery and colonialism compels one to respond in ways that may confirm the stereotype for example, 'violent, troublesome, rioter'.

Representing Otherness

The coverage of protests in South Africa by the media has been problematic precisely because they do not offer nuanced accounts (Pointer, 2015; Scott, 2016; Wasserman, Bosch & Chuma, 2016). Duncan's (2014) study on Marikana titled, "It's not just the unions that are cut off from the people but the media too" illustrates this problem of the media prioritising statements from officials and dominant groups in society. The study analysed 153 newspaper articles dated 13-22 August and found that only 3% of miners independent of the trade unions were interviewed, where only one worker was quoted recalling what happened on the ground- "the police shot first" (p. 78). The rest of the miners were interviewed about their livelihoods and about reports alleging that they had used traditional medicine to defend themselves against police bullets. Duncan expresses her disbelief at how journalists failed to ask the simple question 'what happened' and instead relied on reports by trade unions, businesses and government officials. Furthermore, the miners were represented as being violent, superstitious and irrational to make such demands that eventually led to the downfall of the economy (Duncan, 2013). Consequently, we see how the other is always on the margins, and when they do get represented, it is never on their terms. Reid-Brinkley's (2012) study on US inner city black youth who were part of an Urban Debate League (UDL) shows that media representations of successful UDL students were restrictive. The reporters created a narrative of an at-risk youth who are deviant, violent and have a dysfunctional family background in order to cultivate a discourse of excellence. Thus even when the media attempts to offer more nuanced representations of racial others, they often reproduce negative representations.

The service delivery protests in South Africa in 2013 are also an example of how disadvantaged groups in society have no control over their stories. Pointer (2015) in her analysis of the media coverage of the service delivery protests between January and December 2013 discovered that most newspapers had a strong focus on action rather than the content of the protests. The war/spectacle frame which was the most dominant indicates that most protests were framed in terms of burning, chanting, barricading and stone-throwing. The law/crime frame was also dominant and this is when reporters would criminalise protestors or refer to how they were transgressing the law by quoting sections of the law. Hall (1986)

argues that the media have become very well versed in interpreting protests into the register of law and order which then neutralizes any other possible ethical, ideological or socio-political argument. Hall (1986) argues that the “media is a ventriloquist- trying to speak the language of the latter apparently through the mouths of the former” (p. 10). In other words, the media poses as a watchdog whilst in actuality they promote the values of dominant groups in society. Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) conducted a study on the representations of Muslims and Islam in print media in Victoria, Australia. They sampled news stories from September 11, 2001 until December 31, 2004. The results of the study show that there is a penchant of ignorance amongst the Australian community about Muslims and Islam. Often, news stories viewed them as a ‘race’, as a unitary category of people who are unhygienic, perverse and are social threats. These also carried with them gendered stereotypes set up against western feminism norms which portrayed men as foreign, terrorists and radicals that oppress the women. Consequently, such stereotypes which symbolically work to fix boundaries between groups of people are violent in a sense because they constrain the ability for people to construct their own subjectivities- forever fixed by the gaze of the other (Mama, 1995). Howarth’s (2004) study on Black British young people who have been excluded from school highlights how discourses and social representations pervade and create certain institutional practices. The students in the study expressed the ambivalence of experiencing ones ‘blackness’ and at the same time being invisible within a space that endorses white supremacy, described as the ‘British way of life’ (Greer & Jewkes, 2005). Similarly, Kessi and Cornell’s (2015) study on black students at a historically white university in South Africa, shows that the students feel alienated because of the racialising discourses that represent black students as undeserving of a place. Hence, not only do stigmatised representations create a particular institutional culture but these representations also have an effect on students’ sense of self-worth, in that they have the power to make people see and experience themselves as the Other (hooks, 1992).

Representations of student activists

A media analysis on Latina/o youth in the US contesting their oppression through activism shows how reporters used positive and negative language when framing the protests (Vélez, Huber, Lopez, de la Luz & Sórlozano, 2008). For example, one reporter noted how “such demonstrations are true acts of citizenship that display commitment that goes beyond voting” and yet, at the same time stated that the youth protests are “disrespectful and insulting” to many adults (Vélez et al., 2008, p. 20). Certainly, the aim of representing the

other as deviant is to maintain an idealized self (Greer & Jewkes, 2005). Indirect activism for example, staying in school, was reported positively by the newspaper articles and such stories applauded Latino youth for their 'wise' decision (Vélez et al., 2008).

Similarly, DeLuca, Lawson and Sun (2012) show how Occupy Wall Street was at first neglected by the traditional media with very little coverage. However, when there was media attention it was negative. The protestors were framed as 'hippies and flakes' and the movement itself was seen as pointless and superficial by reporters, with one newspaper headline proclaiming "Wall Street Occupiers, protesting until whenever" (DeLuca et al., 2012, p. 489). On social media however the narrative was different- the OWS movement was discussed, questioned, celebrated and attacked. Consequently, negative representations are common even on social media for example, Penny Sparrow who called black people 'monkeys' on Facebook (see Wicks, 2016).

Stereotypes and practices of inclusion and exclusion always work to maintain, restore and reproduce the 'purity' of the dominant group, so that when an outside group dares to disrupt the order, it becomes threatening. But Hall (2001, p.270) argues that "meaning can never be finally fixed", thus giving us hope that with representations there is always opportunity for contestation. Howarth (2004) argues that 're-presentation' is a better term because it signifies the relational, back and forth nature of language and so the opportunity of agency, resistance and social change. There is scant research on the media representations of marginalised groups, particularly students mobilising and resisting oppression by dominant groups in society. Thus there exists a gap within this field of representations within a South African context where historically, protests and social movements played an important role and today they continue to form part of our social fabric.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

This study aims to investigate media representations of student activism, particularly what discourses are drawn on when marginalised students mobilise and resist their oppression. This is an opportunity to uncover the stereotypical images that dominate mainstream media and to see the activism itself as an effort to dismantle such negative

stereotypes of powerless groups in society. By doing so, we are able to gain insight into how the media, as a dominant institution exercises its power over less empowered groups.

Main research question:

How are South African students represented by the print media during the nationwide protests?

Sub-Questions:

- What are the historical discourses or regimes of representation the media draws on when representing protesting students?
- How is the representation of student protestors linked with questions of power in post-apartheid South Africa?
- How do the discursive strategies employed by the media work to obfuscate, legitimate and naturalize the dominance of institutions such as universities and the government?

Theoretical Framework

This study is located within a Postcolonial theoretical framework. Postcolonial Theory focuses on the inequalities that persist in postcolonial contexts which are a consequence of colonial conditions, practices and structures (Young, 2001). The violent history of colonialism, slavery, forced migration, appropriation of land, institutionalized racism, negation of cultures and the superimposition of other cultures is re-evaluated, particularly from the perspective of those who have suffered its effects (Young, 2001). As a result Postcolonial Theory always takes the past into account when analysing the present and directs its energies on transforming the present. Therefore, although the study is a media analysis of the representations of students during the protests, the study will be conducted with the understanding that there have been some continuities and discontinuities between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, as has been argued elsewhere (Hook, 2005; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). Indeed Postcolonial Theory seeks to expose and address some of the ways in which colonial legacies continue within the post-colonial moment.

One of the criticisms of Postcolonial Theory is the difficulty with defining the postcolonial. If we take the strict definition of the postcolonial as what comes after colonialism (Young, 2001), then 1994 in South Africa would be considered as the temporal marker of postcoloniality from apartheid rule. However, as other scholars have argued, this

temporal view ignores the continued influence that the former colonizers have on the colonized countries, specifically the economic inequality that exists between the two (Ratele, 2006; Sabido, 2016). The prefix 'post' is then argued to be a shift rather than advancement, where postcoloniality is "not because of actuality but...because of a widening commitment to the desire to see such things left in the past" (Harper, 2001 as cited in Sabido, 2016). Thus the term 'postcolonial' also refers to the multidisciplinary, critical way of thinking (Ratele, 2006).

Postcolonial Theory does not just include an analysis of the material conditions of the people but also the colonial knowledge that emerged, the 'discourse of domination' (Young, 2001). Said's (1978) *Orientalism* is useful here to understand how colonialism involved epistemic violence over and above the material and physical violence (Young, 2001). Hence Postcolonial Theory is concerned with the politics of location, which critiques the privileging of academic discourse and the presumed authenticity of native accounts, and the politics of representation- which stresses that representation is production and not a reflection of reality (Macleod & Bhatia, 2008). Furthermore, Postcolonial Theory examines the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and colonized and how this is driven by essentialist ideas about the other and maintains the status quo (Bhabha, 1984). It is these colonial discourses, and the politics of representation that the study seeks to explore as they unfold, possibly in more subtle ways in post-apartheid South Africa. The research is guided by the fact that power, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical abuse, but the power to represent something or someone in a certain way is still concentrated within particular circles. The research will deconstruct and challenge the racialized, sexist and classist discourses that may underlie media discourse.

Methods

Methodological considerations

Studies of representations may run into the risk of re-inscribing, reproducing or re-affirming the stereotypes that dominate the media. Indeed, a fundamental challenge for black critical thinkers in postcolonial contexts according to hooks (1992) has been to break away from the western hegemonic modes of seeing and thinking that block our capacities to imagine ourselves differently or in emancipatory ways. Therefore research on the politics of representations should strive to go above and beyond just delivering facts but should provide an analysis of the representations (Young, 2001).

Research design

The media as a dominant institution is one of the avenues in which meaning about the world is created. It has the power to influence and to represent people in a certain way and historically, the media has represented marginalized groups in problematic ways (Lewis, 2011). Thus this study is a qualitative media analysis in order to gather information about and challenge the representations of protesting students.

Sampling strategy

In line with the research design, a purposive sampling strategy was used. This means that the object of analysis, in this case, newspapers, were not selected at random but rather were selected according to the aims of the research (Durrheim & Painter, 2006).

The study sought to sample three newspapers over the period 9th March 2015- 9th March 2016. The decision to include only three newspapers was influenced by the fact that the protest period was lengthy and a preliminary analysis on the database showed that there were 5403 articles alone with the keywords- #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall and protest. Thus, due to the time constraints of an Honours project, only three newspapers were sampled. The 9th of March is the date that a University of Cape Town student defaced the Cecil Rhodes statue and sparked conversation around the country about transformation in universities.

The Daily Sun is a South African newspaper and according to Wasserman et al. (2016) it reports extensively on protests. Indeed the tabloid does claim to deliver news stories from the perspective of the marginalized (Daily Sun, 2016). Compared to other upmarket South African newspapers, this newspaper is more critical of the democratic dispensation (Wasserman et al., 2016). It is one of the few newspapers where the sources are common citizens and has a largely black working class readership, of 5.1 million people in total (SAARF, 2015).

The Cape Argus is a daily newspaper published in Cape Town and only distributed in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape. It had a conservative readership of 215 000 in 2015 (SAARF, 2015). The paper, with a liberal ownership is known to have been very vocal in its condemnation of the National Party during apartheid (SAARF, 2015).

The Mail & Guardian is a South African weekly paper. It boasts its exclusive middle class readership of 4.6 million people, whom majority are highly educated, male and are professionals (SAARF, 2015; Mail & Guardian, 2016). This newspaper is known for having a racially diverse audience (Mail & Guardian, 2016). The choice to sample these three

newspapers (heeding the fact that two are daily papers and the other, a weekly paper) was driven by the fact that they have a different target audience.

Data collection tool and Procedure

Access to the sample of newspapers will be gained through the South African Media Database. The keywords - #Rhodesmustfall, #Feesmustfall, protests, students and race were used to generate the articles.

Data analysis

Media representations should be analysed by taking postcolonial power relations into account (Sabido, 2016). This means that we need a method of analysis that is concerned with the concept of power in postcolonial contexts and that seeks to expose oppression and the power inequalities that persist. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method of data analysis that critiques the discursive strategies used in media discourse to reproduce power and domination (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2009). Thus Postcolonial theory provides a useful theory of meaning to contextualise the application of CDA when examining discourses produced in postcolonial contexts (Sabido, 2016).

For discourse analysis in general, words do more than reflect facts about the world (Wiggins & Riley, 2010). Instead, they are a social act- they ‘do’ something and discourse analysts are interested in what that something might be. For example, the current study was interested in how things are said; which words were said and which ones were absent (Wiggins & Riley, 2010). Importantly, the focus was on the role of discourse in the reproduction and challenge of dominance. Such discourses may be used to reproduce power relations, representation, legitimation, justification or concealment of dominance and critical discourse analysts are interested in uncovering which strategies are used (van Dijk, 2001). Questions such as ‘how is the text positioned; whose interests are being served by this positioning and whose interests are negated’ were asked of the data (Janks, 1997, p.1).

CDA is primarily concerned with the *naturalization* of certain linguistic categories as they obscure certain aspects of reality by being taken for granted as natural (Couldry, 2008). In this way, they become self-producing- the role of CDA is thus to deconstruct the resulting discourses and inequalities produced.

Van Dijk (1993) considers *privileged access* to discourse and communication a social resource where the power that social groups have is directly proportional to the number of

discursive contexts that they may actively control or influence. Consequently, the lack of power is based on the lack of active access to discourse i.e. the news media. Hence, the media tends to reflect the interests of those in power by reproducing the categories and representations they promote and by drawing attention to particular issues while others receive less attention (van Dijk, 1993).

Like any other method of analysis, critical discourse analysis is not immune to criticism. There is no literature on methodological suggestions on how to do CDA thus one cannot make grand claims based on CDA (Hall, 2012). CDA has been criticized to be a subjective method where meaning can be interpreted differently depending on the researcher (Hall, 2012). As a student analysing media representations of students, there is the possibility of bias or misreading of texts. But on the other hand, being involved in the protests and having been affected by some of issues students face at universities might aid with reading and understanding the newspaper articles. It could also contextualize the analysis, which is essential to CDA (Hall, 2012). Hence, reflexivity and self-criticism are important to CDA. It has also been criticized for being too ideologically committed (Carvalho, 2008) but this is an explicit agenda of CDA, to elucidate/ unpack the ideology behind discourse that is taken for granted and naturalized (Teo, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

Although a media analysis is archival research and does not involve human participants, Tesar (2015) argues that archival research is not ethically neutral as commonly perceived. Archival documents represent people and communities thus to consider archival research in the traditional sense would negate some ethical issues. For example, privacy concerns when dealing with sensitive information and gaining consent are all ethical dilemmas that need to be considered in archival research (Tesar, 2015). However, for the current study, given the nature of the topic such issues were not a concern. Besides, this is when reflexivity is needed the most.

Reflexivity is inextricably linked to ethics, as it is the researcher reflecting on how their positionality (given the amount of power they have as the ‘scientist’) might have had an effect on the research process (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). For postcolonial research, we need to go beyond and examine the politics of location and representation. An important consideration for the current study is the issue of interpretation. The researcher needs to reflect on what the research means to them personally, their positionality and their own preconceived ideas and biases which may have an effect on the findings (Willig, 2001).

As mentioned above, doing research on media representations of student activism as a black student in a historically white-only institution has its implications; hence the need for the researcher to actively acknowledge their role in data analysis. An important consideration specifically for postcolonial research and discourse analysis is to consider how the interpretation itself is a particular construction/representation of reality (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Limitations of Study

A limitation of the research was that the sample of newspapers was relatively small. It is by no means a comprehensive picture representative of South African media. But as mentioned above, this is because the protest period was quite lengthy and the number of articles written in that period were too many for the scope of an Honours project. On the other hand, the aim of qualitative research is not to demonstrate scale but rather to highlight the dominant discourses, how they function, why and to challenge them. Thus the sample of newspapers could have been larger but the results were similar. However, a look into social media would also give us interesting insights into how these representations play themselves out in everyday life in ways that would certainly enrich the data.

Results and discussion

The newspapers had a similar thread in the stories they told about the student protests. The newspaper articles drew on discursive strategies of *violence*, *transformation* and *problem people*. In the following section, these three discourses about student activism are unpacked in the various ways they emerge in the articles and how they link together to create a particular narrative about the student protests in South Africa 2015-2016.

Violence

Media reports have often been accused of reporting on the violence of protests and social movements rather than the issues of injustice and inequality they raise (see Duncan, 2014; Pointer, 2015). In South Africa, violence is a deeply embedded part of our history and continues to pervade in certain spaces. For example, the 1976 Soweto uprising where students fought against the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction and were brutalized and killed- this event and many others is a key reminder of the violence that occurs when marginalized groups mobilize and speak against their oppression. Forty years later, students contesting similar issues in a democratic South Africa find themselves in scuffles with the

police. In the following section, the theme of violence is unpacked in the various and interlinked ways it emerged in the newspaper articles- particularly, how the discourse of violent students; police brutality; and condemnation of violence functioned to maintain the power of dominant groups in post-apartheid South Africa.

The discourse of violent students

This was a dominant and recurring theme within the newspaper articles which portrayed the student protestors and protests themselves as violent, disruptive and chaotic. Words such as ‘war’, ‘vandalism’ and ‘attack’ were pervasive. Just like the reports on the service delivery protests (Pointer, 2015) and Marikana (Duncan, 2013), the newspaper articles reported on the violent nature of the protests by noting in subsequent reports the action during the protests rather than the motivations for protest. For example it was reported: “Student’s burning tyres on the road, ordering other students to join the protests, burning school buses and throwing rocks” (Daily Sun, 2015). Another article with the headline: “Shackville chaos” (Daily Sun, 2016). The article reports that “protestors torched a bus, a security car and art on Tuesday night before stoning university guards who had pulled their protest shack down” (Daily Sun, 2016). These very descriptive accounts of the protest action portray a student movement that is aggressive and uncontrollable. The students in the above passages appear to be instigating the violence which adds to the discourse about violent black men. It paints a picture that is reminiscent of apartheid times and echoes Hall’s (2001) assertion about black men who find themselves trapped in the trope of representation when they attempt to fight against oppression and injustice. Coupled with this, are insults that criminalize the students and paint them as dangerous and rebellious as a university Vice-Chancellor commented with fury- “...the political left at Wits have been a problem in this regard, acting in an unprincipled and unstable manner. Some people have confused radical with violence, protest with tsotsi behaviour, politics with gangsterism” (Mail & Guardian, 2015). This belittles the student movement and discredits the students’ motivations for protest. The use of the words ‘confused’ and ‘unstable’ renders the protestors as intellectually inferior, which reproduces colonial stereotypes about black intellect (Lewis, 2011). Furthermore, it was reported:

“The protesting students then broke windows in some of the campus buildings, setting up burning barricades on many of the campus roads. When the Public Order Policing Unit arrived, a tense stand-off ensued before they traded volleys of rocks, stones, stun grenades, teargas canisters and rubber bullets. One student picked up a tears-gas

canister and threw it back to the police, who had to take cover as they were not wearing masks. One of the guards was beaten after protestors stripped him of his helmet and protective gear. ER24 spokesman Werner Vermak said paramedics attended to four security officials who were injured during the clash” (Cape Argus, 2015).

What is noteworthy in the above passage is that it appears to take a neutral stance by indicating that rocks, stones, stun grenades, teargas canisters and rubber bullets were exchanged by being vague- yet what this actually does it conceals the extremity of the violence police perpetrated against students by not specifying which group used which equipment. It posits the violent encounter as an equal battle ground between police and students. It also paints the police force as victims to the student movement as they report the violence enacted from the student’s side and the police as defenceless. There is no mention of police action or injured students.

The discourse of violent students reduces the protest into a spectacle. The protestors are portrayed as violent and unrestrained. However, this representation is laced with a gendered dimension where these violent acts are synonymous with hegemonic masculinity, thus the discourse reproduces the dominant culture’s stereotypical representations of black masculinity (Lewis, 2011; Fanon, 1952). Through the use of words such as tsotsis and gangsters, black men are re-inscribed within a dominant narrative about black people as criminals (Welch, 2007). This discourse works against the student movement in terms of gaining support from the public but it also reifies the dominant constructions of black men whilst at the same time concealing the present inequality and dominance of institutions.

Police brutality

In one of the newspapers, there is a picture of a cop holding a gun and the caption reads: “Cops hunt down protesting students who vandalised the Walter Sisulu University Nelson Mandela Drive campus in Mthatha” (Daily Sun, 2016). This particular picture and caption exposes the extremity of the police action towards the students as the cop holds a gun in a university setting trying to ‘hunt down’ a student who vandalised property. Similarly, it was reported that “Police fired rubber bullets and stun grenades and deployed a water canon at students at UWC” (Cape Argus, 2015). The police, as an instrument for the dominant group in society to exercise their power and control are portrayed here in numerous occasions as enacting unnecessary violence against students:

“Questions have emerged over the presence at Parliament of Public Order Police, known as riot police, who repeatedly fired volleys of stun grenades at #Feesmustfall student protestors, who were manhandled and pushed off the parliamentary precinct” (Cape Argus, 2015). The writer emphasizes ‘riot police’ as a way to show how unnecessary and extreme their presence is, that a student protest is not the place for riot police.

“Protesting students were sitting down as a scuffle broke out and at least two policemen rugby-tackled one protestor to the ground” (Cape Argus, 2015).

“The push by the riot police down Parliament Avenue continued as students sang the national anthem, many holding up their hands, others angrily shouting at police. Some students fell and on at least two occasions, those who were targeted by two or three police officers. At least one policeman was seen using pepper spray on students as they were being pushed back to the gates” (Cape Argus, 2015).

Here, the violence enacted on students by police is exposed extensively. The brutality and extremity of the violence enacted on students who are harmless and do not possess any weapons is described. These students are portrayed as victims who are trying to protest peacefully by sitting down or singing the national anthem and the police officers are depicted as disrupting this and perpetrating violence against the students for no apparent reason. This reproduces the notion about policemen as aggressive and impulsive, for example incidents such as Marikana in South Africa and Ferguson in the United States. As one writer notes: “The mere presence of these men creates tension and hostility” (Mail & Guardian, 2016). Such a discourse functions to delegitimize police as people that are meant to protect society. Furthermore, it denies them of any intellect as they use unnecessary force on students who are helpless and unarmed. With the police force constituting majority black men, this discourse exists simultaneously with the above discourse of violent students as there is a racial, gendered and even a classist undertone. Whereby working-class black men, denied of any intellect, are waging violence that is uncalled for on students. Lastly, the discourse of police brutality against students in the newspaper articles (just like the Marikana tragedy) is a simplistic account of the supposed ‘black on black violence’ which obfuscates real inequality and injustice.

In the same sentiment of reporting on the police brutality, newspaper reports seemed to justify this violence against students:

“A stand-off between private security guards and protestors ensued yesterday, which saw protestors manhandled by hired security personnel and pepper sprayed. Those who were injured were taken to hospital. Rensberg said that at least 150 workers entered the campus on Wednesday and emptied dustbins onto the campus, disrupting academic activities. They left the bathroom taps running, burnt a guard house. They even banged library doors, disrupting at least 5000 young people who were studying for the exams”. ‘Rensberg said the university had no choice but to order the removal of the protesting students by private security staff’ (Cape Argus, 2015).

“Police spokesman...said a public order policing unit had been deployed at UWC campus near Bellville after students protesting fee increases burnt tyres and blockaded Robert Sobukwe Drive” (Cape Argus, 2015).

Acting national police commissioner said in one of the reports: “We are grateful that after two weeks of being under siege, we can safely say there were no fatalities...given the attacks, police should be applauded on how they managed the situation” (Cape Argus, 2015). This passage describes the protests as a violent encounter, a warfare, something that needs to be dealt with by police with impunity and direct measure. The words ‘siege’ and ‘attack’ are war terms and they position the police as soldiers trying to protect the country from the enemy. Again, the students are portrayed as the ones who are enforcing the violence, for example “given the attacks”. This discourse works to legitimize the violence waged against students by police but more importantly by the university management who call private security and police to campus. Consequently, the authorities have reason to act with impunity because of the student’s behaviour.

Condemnation of violence

The final discourse was a condemnation of violence by university management and government officials, which carried an undertone of “you can protest but do it peacefully” (Daily Sun, 2015) throughout the newspaper articles. For example, the NSFAS director expressed his views: “While I praise the students, I condemn the violence” (Daily Sun, 2015). Similarly, it was reported that: “University management acknowledged the rights of students to take protest action on numerous occasions over the past months, provided that academic and admin functions are not disrupted” (Cape Argus, 2015). This sentiment portrays the protesting students as a wild and uncontrollable group that is ungovernable and keen on

violence. It also places government and university management in a better position as people that are willing to engage with students and listen to their grievances but this is hindered by an unruly student movement. For example, an ANC government official declared: “Transformation of universities must happen but through dialogue, not violence or intimidation” (Daily Sun, 2015). Similarly, the president expressed his views: “any shortfalls in financial aid should not be used as justification for hooliganism and vandalism” (Cape Argus, 2015).

This discourse works to maintain the status quo as it tells students how they should engage with power. This is done through the reliance on the register of law and bureaucracy, neutralizing any other ideological or socio-political argument (Hall, 1986). Thus the student protesters are portrayed as dissidents who are also impatient as the government officials express their support. Consequently, by representing the other as deviant, dominant groups in society are able to maintain and legitimate their power (Greer & Jewkes, 2005). This also resonates with the discourse about youth as incompetent and immature, resulting in their involvement in politics not valued (Such, Walker & Walker, 2005).

Problem people

The demographics of #Feesmustfall and #Rhodesmustfall are majority black, working class students, who are alienated by the institutions and are on the brink of financial exclusion. Recalling Du Bois (1903), this discursive strategy of problem people is one where the students are depicted as the problem, a burden on institutions which works to conceal the broader, structural arrangement that is responsible. Consequently, there was the discourse which portrays the student protestors as a threat to the university and an impediment to other students’ right to education, which worked to both create and expose a divide within the wider student population with regards to issues the protests are concerned about.

Protestors a threat

This discourse emerged in very subtle ways as it reported that the protestors are a danger to the university community. As one of the articles ended off with a quote, on the matter of Shackville: “They have dismissed any attempt at engagement. They refuse to speak with the executive but constantly verbally abuse and threaten us” (Daily Sun, 2016). The student protestors are seen as disruptive and a threat to the university community, and similarly they are criminalized for this as can be seen in the following:

“Student’s preparing for exams were also disrupted...the intensity of the actions by the group led to many staff and students feeling vulnerable and intimidated as some in the protest group wore balaclavas and had sticks and crowbars” (Cape Argus, 2015).

“We can’t put student’s lives at risk; no it’s not worth it. I mean, how are they going to even study when they have fears at the back of their minds that any moment someone is going to come in and disrupt” (Cape Argus, 2015). It was also reported that these students spoke to the newspaper from a ‘hide-out’. The vulnerability of non-protestors is mentioned and they are portrayed as victims and the student protestors as bullies. Similarly, “Vice-chancellor...said the university management had taken these decisions during a meeting yesterday morning to protect students and university property. ‘For the past few weeks CPUT has been held hostage by a group of students who are determined to make the university ungovernable’” (Cape Argus, 2015). Indeed we can see the authority-disorder norm playing out, where during a crisis, authority figures are used as sources to reassure the public that operations will resume soon (Boykoff, 2006) obviously in the interests of the dominant groups and non-protestors.

The student protests are seen as an impediment to university operations, a threat to non-protestors and property, in the same way the Global Justice Movement was framed (Boykoff, 2006). Thus the responsibility lies on the university to protect the ‘majority’ of the students. Here the majority is read as, white middle-class students. This discourse functions to isolate the black student protestors as they are a threat to the university community and to demonize them. This discourse is reminiscent of apartheid times when groups such as Black Consciousness, the ANC and the PAC were targeted by the government as they were seen to disrupt the apartheid project. Similar to how the university attempts to ensure the safety of non-protestors, one of the justifications the apartheid government used was to ensure the safety of the white community. Again, this racialised discourse reproduces notions about black people as dangerous and thus the need for extreme measures.

Good students and bad students

Newspaper reports also reported on the sentiments of the wider student community with regards to the protests and these carried with them an undertone of good students who want to learn and bad students who are the protestors and disrupt the other students and this created and exposed the faction within the student body about the protests as can be seen below.

UCT student said “I prepared for a test I was supposed to write this morning, only to be told that it’s been postponed. It’s really sad because the marks we are losing mean we won’t have a good DP (duly performed) to allow us to write the final exams” (Cape Argus, 2015).

“What’s irritating about the protests is that those who want to teach and those that want to learn are being prevented from doing so. It’s a scary feeling because we won’t have enough time to prepare for final exams” (Cape Argus, 2015).

A university official said “residences were booked this year as a result of the protests last year that led to the deferred exams” (Mail & Guardian, 2016).

“The issue with #Rhodesmustfall is that they only focusing on students who are on financial aid or have been academically excluded” (Mail & Guardian, 2016).

Here, the protests are the reason for students’ fears and anxieties. The faction between the student protestors and non-protestors is highlighted and an argument is implicitly made that it’s only a minority of students that are holding back other students from learning. This exposes the division between the student community and somehow weakens the effectiveness or the power of the movement itself as supposedly majority of students are not on board with the protests. The discourse of good students and bad students resonates with Vélez (et al., 2008) study on Latina/o youth but more importantly it reifies historical representations of black people as lazy and idle (hooks, 1992). Here the bad students (protestors) are not attending school and the good students are.

Transformation

With the advent of democracy in 1994, the need for transformation has been the talk since. Today, marginalized South Africans are questioning this and want to see real results in all spheres- the workplace, community and education (Duncan, 2013; Pointer, 2015; Kessi & Cornell, 2015). The newspaper articles employed the discursive strategy of transformation to sympathize with the students and to commemorate the achievements that have been made in this regard. This emerged through the following discourses: a discourse that recognises the student’s plight, i.e. redress and a celebratory discourse which spoke about how far we have come as a nation and a discourse of denial.

Discourse of redress/ Student’s plight

This discourse recognized the need for transformation at higher education institutions by noting students' personal grievances as one article notes: "Students are not looking for a free ride. For many, money is a distressing and unwelcome distraction from their studies- they just want qualifications they hope will uplift them and their families out of poverty" (Mail & Guardian, 2015). Here the writer sympathizes with students and notes their grievances by emphasizing that contrary to popular belief the protests are actually valid. The alienation that some students experience as mentioned in Kessi and Cornell's (2015) study is described in the newspaper articles:

"...is unhappy about how the university's management handled the student protests. The 21 year old lives in a back room of a family friend's house in Montshioa, about 10km from campus" (Mail & Guardian, 2016).

"A student hoisted a placard with the message reading: "Being poor cost me my future" (Cape Argus, 2015).

"We are protesting against the housing crisis and financial exclusion. We are homeless. What else can we do" (Cape Argus, 2016).

"It's unacceptable that there's a soccer match being played when students have no accommodation, when students are financially excluded, when there is no food for students" (Daily Sun, 2015).

However, what is also noteworthy is the fact that student grievances from themselves are missing, in other words, students are not quoted at length as with government or university officials, expressing their grievances or their reason for protest. Instead, the motivations for protest are summarized at best and reduced to bread and butter issues which are definitely important but negate the ideological and systemic level reasons for protest.

Celebratory discourse

Evident within the transformation discourse, was a commemorative narrative that spoke about how far we have come as a nation, specifically the higher education sector and the diversity within those spaces. This was characterised by passages which spoke about the numbers of black students in universities, language policies, inclusion and discriminatory practices.

“According to research conducted by the Law Society of South Africa (LSSA), more than 3000 first-year black students registered for LLB degrees this year compared to 761 white students...more than 2000 black and 1100 white students graduated with LLB degrees in 2014” (Mail & Guardian, 2015).

“Currently the demographic profile of the Wits student body is about 75% black and 25% white” (Mail & Guardian, 2015).

“Over 97% of the students in our residences are black (this includes 4.78% Indian and 1.80% coloured)” (Mail & Guardian, 2015).

Commemoratory discourses such as these, however true, obscure current reality in people’s imaginary. The past, the present and the future goals become distorted and there is the risk of becoming content with the present. This serves the interests of dominant groups as the continuing inequality goes unquestioned.

Discourse of denial

“In response to allegations about racism, the university official says- “according to unofficial figures, only about 10% of students in residence this year are white and the majority of applicants for housing are black. So it’s logical that the overflow we are dealing with would also be black. In 2015, 75% of the students at UCT residences were black” (Mail & Guardian, 2016).

“The main reasons for this is that some 700 beds normally released in early January, in any given year, could not be released. This was due to deferred exams, outstanding National Student Financial Aid Scheme funding and a dramatic increased call from students for assistance with accommodation” (Mail & Guardian, 2016).

Here black students are a problem again. This time they are filling up university spaces and it is their fault. This resonates with Kessi & Connell’s (2015) study on the alienation of black students at universities.

Summary and Conclusion

Most research on media representations of protests or social movements usually focuses on framing analysis. This study sought to fill that gap by attempting to do a discourse analysis

and asking how do these representations reproduce, maintain, legitimate, and obfuscate the dominance of powerful institutions.

Through the analysis of three newspapers, three major discursive strategies were identified on the protests. The most dominant and pervasive one, violence, emerged in the data in various and interconnected ways. The protests and the students themselves were portrayed as violent, disruptive and corrupt. The violence discourse reproduces the dominant stereotypical representations of black masculinity as essentially violent, dangerous and criminal. This necessitated the presence of police on campuses who acted with ‘warranted’ impunity against students in so far as it was controlled. When the police brutality became out of hand, it was condemned which delegitimized policemen. This was laced with racial, gendered and classist representations, where black working class men, this time denied of intellect are waging unnecessary violence on students. This discourse of police brutality contributes to the simplistic and otherwise uninformed discourse of ‘black on black violence’ which obfuscates real inequality and injustice. This was publicly condemned by government and university management who are of course maintaining and legitimating their power through the construction and representation of the other as deviant.

The second discursive strategy employed by newspaper articles was a portrayal of the student protestors as problem people- this resonates with Du Bois (1903) when he asks “black people, how does it feel to be a problem”. The student protestors were relegated as a threat to the university community which isolates and alienates them and justifies the police brutality. The students were also posited as bad students/dissidents in juxtaposition to the non-protesting students. Both of these discourses contribute to the discourse of people black as lazy and idle, as the cause of their demise which conceals the present inequality and injustices.

Lastly there was the discursive strategy of transformation which has pervaded South African spaces since the democratic dispensation. This consisted of a discourse in which newspaper reports recognized students’ immediate demands by capturing some of their grievances. Here, by only focusing on the immediate concerns of the students, neoliberalism is maintained and unquestioned. This is also possible through the celebratory discourse which highlighted the change that has happened in historically white-only institutions in the form of inclusion and diversity, which conceals the continued oppression. This discourse is evident through the

discourse of denial which was characterised by a denial of any issues the higher education system faces and scapegoating black students as the problem.

Overall, this research highlights the ways in which dominant intuitions (government, the media and university officials) exercise their power in post-apartheid South Africa. Specifically, it illuminated the way in which white privilege continues to prevail and go unabated. Through the invoking of the three discourses, this research has shown the response when power is contested. It is evident that historical regimes of representation, particularly of violence and problem people continue to play out in the present. Despite efforts to redistribute resources and transform spaces in South Africa to ensure that they reflect the diversity of the country, it remains clear that there has not been much institutional reform particularly at universities where students, 22 years into democracy are lamenting not only fee increases but institutional racism and symbolic exclusion. Thus the results of the study are telling of how the media as a dominant institution has contributed to the continuities and discontinuities between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. As we have seen, marginalized groups do not have the opportunity to narrate their own stories and imagine themselves in ways outside of how they have been seen. Thus the current study is important because it has highlighted precisely this- how colonial discourses still persist in South Africa today and the student activism is not just against the fees but the latent forms of colonialism that persist.

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