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Critical and Radical Social Work
#FEESMUSTFALL #DECOLONISEDEDUCATION FRONTLINE
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#FEESMUSTFALL #DECOLONISEDEDUCATION FRONTLINE

Motlalepule Nathane¹ and Linda Harms Smith

“That hope is in short supply... We have to ask ourselves questions about what is being defended so vehemently, so violently that our youngest our brightest have to be broken, criminalised, demonised, bombarded teargassed, shot thirteen times” (Prof Pumla Gqola, 2016)²

“Do you have any idea what it is like to be a teacher responsible for the lives and learning of these students and to see such violence brought down upon them, to see them in such devastation? It feels like a seismic betrayal” (Prof Kelly Gillespie, 2016, Open Letter to Pravin Ghordan³).

Arrests, curfews, shootings, teargas: who would have thought that our campus would again be characterised by words, images and sounds of war as in the 1980s’ Apartheid State of Emergency? And this time around it is for fulfilment of the promises of free education of the Freedom Charter. The battleground that serves as a place of hope and liberation through learning, the academy, has descended into a space of collective trauma and pain. It feels like a terrible betrayal.

The protests and demands for free and decolonised education unfolded during 2015 when students from across most South African Universities initiated protests labelled #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall. These protests are also representative of deep anger about broader inequalities in South Africa, which is still one of the most unequal societies in the world (The Guardian, 7 October 2016). Research shows that 10% of the population own at least 90-95% of all the assets (The Conversation, 6 October 2016).

The protests have escalated into determined demands and sometimes violent actions by students to shut down campuses, while the heavy-handed response from University managements has been the militarisation of campuses with violent repression of student activity by police and private security companies (Kamanzi, 2016). This has meant teargas, rubber bullets, stun grenades and beatings (The Daily Vox, 19 October 2016).

TRAUMA RELIVED

As an academic, a social work lecturer and social worker, responses to the events on campus and beyond, are instinctive and automatic. Hearing the inconsolable cries of students, running with hands on their heads in disbelief after shootings, tear gas and stun grenades, reawakens Apartheid-era trauma. The collective trauma of black

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