"We have to ask for permission to become"
Young Women's Voices, Gendered Violence and Mediated Spaces in South Africa
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“We Have to Ask for Permission to Become”:
Young Women’s Voices, Violence, and Mediated
Space in South Africa

We are a nation that doesn’t afford women that kind of agency, especially young black women. We don’t believe that they can actually do this by themselves, without having a third force. That’s the culture that we have. We always have to ask permission to become, to be who we are, to tell our stories.
—Naledi Chirwa (eNCA 2016)

Naledi Chirwa is one of four young female activists who participated in the #RememberKhwezi protest on August 6, 2016. The date marked the ten-year anniversary of the acquittal of South African president Jacob Zuma on charges that he had raped Fezekele Kuzwayo, nicknamed “Khwezi,” the daughter of an antiapartheid comrade and close friend of Zuma’s. At the time of the trial, the problem for the general public was less that Zuma had forced himself on Kuzwayo but that he had sex with someone seen, culturally, as his daughter. The #RememberKhwezi protest sought to remind South Africans of Zuma’s record on women’s issues at the start of National Women’s Month. During a speech by Zuma that was broadcast live during the Independent Electoral Commission media conference, Chirwa and her fellow protestors stood up, positioning themselves between Zuma and the cameras. Facing the cameras together, they each held up a simple piece of white paper with a message handwritten in red, intended to remind viewers and the world of Zuma’s past, the continued problem of violence against women in South Africa, and institutionalized state complicity.

The opening quote from Chirwa, taken from an interview that aired on Checkpoint, a weekly investigative current affairs TV show on the eNCA channel following the protest, eloquently addresses an accusation made by the African National Congress Women’s League, which suggested the protesters were acting at the behest of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF),

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a political party opposed to Zuma’s ruling African National Congress (ANC). The ANC Women’s League stated that the young women’s protest was a manifestation of EFF’s desire to embarrass Zuma rather than an indication of the protestors’ political engagement or concern with gendered violence (Kekana 2016). Two days after the #RememberKhwezi protest, Chirwa, who was also the legal and transformation officer for the EFF’s Student Command, attempted to set the record straight in an interview published on Sowetan Live. She stated that the protest had nothing to do with EFF but emerged instead from the women being fed up with the failure to make gendered violence a central focus of the student protests in which they were all also engaged. Chirwa explained: “The culture of rape has been our conversation for a long time. We have been saying that this conversation needs another platform because we have been protesting against rape in universities. But people still don’t want to listen” (in Sifile 2016).

In this article, we focus on what might be described as protests within protests: activism, both on- and offline, led by young feminists, that challenges institutional and societal norms of gendered violence at work in different forms of political protest in South Africa. Not insignificantly, these protests were among those that received the most media attention in 2015 and 2016, shaping ongoing public discourse against sexual violence in the country. In addition to being associated with offline protest events, the three digital protests we examine—#RapeAtAzania, #RUReferencelist, and #RememberKhwezi—were also organized around Twitter hashtags, showing that young South African feminists are increasingly turning to social media for organizational, informational, and activist purposes.

Focusing on online newspaper articles that reported on these hashtags, we analyze how young feminists are speaking out against sexual violence in South Africa today, as well as against institutionalized silences that help perpetuate it. We ask: How might these new types of actions interact with existing antiviolence and feminist movements in South Africa? Is this a new form of feminist activism indicative of an effort to redefine the boundaries of feminist activism among members of the postapartheid generation? Although sexual violence has long plagued South African society, young feminists today are engaging and identifying with this highly politicized issue on personal grounds, echoing the feminist rallying cry “the personal is political,” often heard in the 1960s. By using social media to share their own encounters with sexual violence and to organize against it, they question the implicit acceptance of the gendered status quo among politically powerful women of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations, while also questioning the continued institutionalization of silence around gendered violence in educational, legal, and political domains. Increasingly in South
Africa, as elsewhere in the world, social media is providing platforms to challenge the code of silence protecting perpetrators of gendered and sexual violence.

The #RememberKhwezi protest illustrates the protestors’ media savvy, as they not only cleverly inserted themselves between the camera and the president, creating a spectacle, they also included a hashtag symbol among the five signs they held, inviting viewers to weigh in on social media where “#RememberKhwezi” was born.

In addition to #RememberKhwezi, we also examine two other digital protests. The first, #RapeAtAzania, began trending on Twitter on November 16, 2015, to rally support for Zola Shokane, a gender studies student at the University of Cape Town who reported that she had been raped by a fellow member of the #RhodesMustFall movement (a protest by University of Cape Town student activists calling for the removal of the statue commemorating the colonial icon Cecil John Rhodes). According to reports, the suspected rapist was named, and his picture was circulated by Shokane’s supporters, counter to South African law, which protects a suspect’s identity until their plea arraignment. The second, #RUReferencelist, began trending on social media on April 17, 2016, immediately after the release of a “reference list” of alleged rapists at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Based on various accounts, the list, which included current and past students who had been accused of rape and/or sexual assault but never punished, began circulating with the hashtag #RUReferenceList via various social media platforms after being first posted on the Facebook page “RU Queer Confessions, Questions and Crushes” and then reposted on the Rhodes Student Representative Council’s Facebook page.

Situating contemporary feminist action in South Africa

The rise of digital activism has transformed political protest in many parts of the world (Harlow and Johnson 2011; Khondker 2011). In South Africa, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have not only changed how protests are organized but have also become spaces for activists to voice support for other struggles and to express dissent, too. This has been the case for educated young black women who have employed social media to call for solidarity with other South African feminists and to align themselves with related international digital movements. Although South Africa has consistently recorded some of the highest numbers of reported rapes per capita in the world (Britton 2006), until recently there has been surprisingly little activism around gendered violence. This move to digital protest thus might be seen as a turning point for feminist activism in South Africa.
To make sense of the silence around gendered violence in South Africa, we draw extensively on the work of Pumla Gqola (2001, 2007), the country’s foremost expert on the topic. According to Gqola (2007, 116), the silence is linked to how violence has been made invisible via postapartheid politics and history: women are constantly being told that they are empowered legislatively via South Africa’s famously progressive constitution, yet they do not feel safe at home or in the streets. The invisibility is exacerbated by contemporary histories of South Africa, which, Gqola points out, conveniently omit critical examples of gendered violence and gang rape that were enmeshed in the antiapartheid struggle (2007, 120). In this article, we argue that the project of confronting and speaking out about gendered violence is necessarily entwined with confronting the silences of the past and the silences kept by older generations.

To fully situate today’s gendered antiviolence protests, it is important to note that they are simultaneously feminist protests and student protests. The most recent student protests in South Africa, known generally by the motto “Fees Must Fall” and associated with a hashtag of the same name, began in October 2015 with a call to simultaneously end the domination of Eurocentric worldviews in the higher education curriculum and make tertiary education affordable in South Africa. As with any large-scale political movement, the demands are diverse and marked by internal disagreements. Gendered violence has been an area of concern within the movement, as has the fact that the movement’s mostly male leaders have generally failed to include gender equality as a demand.

Historically, student protests played a significant role in the antiapartheid struggle, with Stephen Biko, the founder of the South African Student Organization, as the most well-known figure. This organization was committed to uniting and empowering nonwhites in South Africa to speak for themselves at a time when student organizations were exclusively led by whites and limited nonwhite membership. For all of the brilliance of Biko’s organizing, it must be recognized that it gave little attention to gender inequality. Recent research on student antiapartheid protests shows “that struggles against apartheid education were also struggles amongst young men (and their teachers) for control of young women, and of young women to control their own bodies” (Healy-Clancy 2017, 6). Today’s student protests must be located within this longer history of student movements in South Africa. To better understand this struggle, a quick overview of women’s role in both the apartheid struggle and postapartheid movements is needed.

South African women have historically mobilized and participated in protests, with the 1913/14 anti-pass campaign in Bloemfontein and the 1956 women’s march taking center stage. During the early stages of the struggle,
women’s protests were often overlooked (Walker 1982, 75). In the lead-up to the 1956 women’s march, when twenty thousand women marched under the banner of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) to protest a law requiring black women to carry passes, their political engagement could no longer be ignored. Yet resistance to women’s involvement in the struggle persisted among men (Hassim 2014, 38). In April 1954 FEDSAW held its inaugural conference, creating a national women’s organization and a women’s charter that outlined the political role of women. The charter addressed the tensions of mobilizing for both national and women’s liberation, emphasizing that the national struggle should take precedence over women’s political issues (Walker 1982, 153–56).

Gendered violence emerged as a concrete point of contention when many antiapartheid political parties were banned and forced to go underground or into exile, including the Women’s Section of the ANC. The 1960s witnessed an unprecedented number of young people joining the armed struggle in exile, with the Women’s Section tasked with the maternal roles of looking after them and resolving personal and relationship problems (Hassim 2014, 46). The Women’s Section observed that violence against women was widespread in the movement, noting the numerous acts of abuse reported and documented. Although it was common practice for women to report experiences of gendered violence to the Women’s Section, the silencing of such attacks afterward enabled perpetrators to continue violating others. Aware of how significant and common this issue was in the ANC movement, the Women’s Section made several unsuccessful attempts to tackle this problem. Acts of violence against women engaged in political actions persisted throughout the entire period of exile and continue in the present.

The inclusion of sexual and gender rights in the drawing up of the 1996 South African Constitution resulted from negotiations between leaders of the women’s movement (some belonging to the ANC Women’s League) and the male leadership of the ANC (Hassim 2009, 61). A concerted effort was made to build alliances between women inside and outside the state and to craft policy that benefited women (Gouws 2016, 404). However, under Thabo Mbeki’s presidency (1999–2008), many “femocrats” (state bureaucrats claiming feminist roots) left their government positions to protest Mbeki’s intolerance toward criticism, such as that relating to his denial of the link between the HIV virus and AIDS (Gouws 2016, 404).

The divide between women engaged in political activism and those engaged in state politics was further exacerbated during the 2006 rape trial of then–Deputy President Zuma. During the trial, ANC Women’s League members remained steadfast in their support of him, publicly berating Fezekele Kuzwayo, the rape survivor. Although Zuma was acquitted due to lack of
evidence, the ANC Women’s League’s behavior demonstrated that politics had won at the expense of women’s struggle against gendered violence (Gouws 2016). According to Amanda Gouws, “ANCWL support for him was an act of symbolic politics that denied the link between power of the law and of men in important political positions and rape” (2016, 404).

Today’s ANC Women’s League publicly claims to be fighting against gendered violence but continues to ensure that some men are protected and certain silences are maintained. The ANC Women’s League has also been vocal about their rejection of feminism, disputing claims that the league is a “feminist organization” and that it is “hostile” to male leaders (du Plessis 2012; Gouws 2016). According to Gouws (2016, 409), “A typical response of the ANCWL is that [gender-based violence] is a moral issue and that moral restoration and the restoration of family values will diminish violence.” ANC Women’s League leaders do attend bail hearings and court cases of alleged rapists, holding banners that read “rapists must rot in jail,” but Gouws argues that this is a political strategy to show the public that they care about women and that some rapists must be punished. Following Lindiwe Makhungu’s framing of “palliative” and “performative” care (2014), Gouws argues that such court appearances are like putting a plaster (Band-Aid) on a broken arm.

Today’s protests are not only shaped by this historical context but also by contemporary global digital activism. In May 2014, the hashtag #YesAllWomen exploded on Twitter, drawing attention to a global campaign to highlight the pervasiveness of sexism, misogyny, and violence against women (Rodino-Colocino 2014, 1113). Hester Baer (2016, 18) notes that the platform enabled women to post individual stories of discrimination, harassment, and fear, which when shared, emphasized that “yes, all women” are susceptible to sexual violence. Similar hashtag campaigns have followed, including #BeingFemaleinNigeria, which initiated a conversation among Nigerian women (including in the diaspora) about everyday experiences of sexism (Ajayi 2018). This hashtag inspired the formation of a Facebook group that is used by women based in over seventeen countries to share stories of harassment and violence. More recent is the #MeToo hashtag that “went viral” in 2017, being retweeted seventeen thousand times in the twenty-four hours following the first tweet (Gersen 2017, 1). The virality of #MeToo added another dimension to women’s activism by making visible both the enormity of the issue and the enormity of the response.

The use of digital media to call attention to the struggles of young women to retain control over their bodies is a relatively recent phenomenon. This kind of organizing can be seen, as Baer (2016, 18) writes, as a departure from “conventional modes of doing feminist politics. . . . It represents a new moment or a turning point in feminism in a number of ways.” Baer enumerates
the ways this is new: “Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly dissemi- 

crating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and 

sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes 

of protest to emerge” (18). Echoing Baer, Michelle Rodino-Colocino (2014, 

1114) writes: “#YesAllWomen is a key moment in the genealogy of femi-

nism that underscores the old-in-the-new.” The same can be said about 

the hashtags #RUFerenceList, #RapeAtAzania, and #RememberKhwezi 

in terms of their online platforms. However, both #RUReferenceList and 

#RememberKhwezi were also accompanied by more traditional offline forms 

of protest, suggesting that these young women were not only trying to con-

nect to other younger people but also to a wider segment of society.

Method

Our primary source of material for this article is online newspaper articles 

(see table 1 below) that reported on the three hashtags under study. Because 

of our interest in understanding how a social media platform such as Twitter 

impacts mainstream media reporting, we performed a Google search using 

the three hashtags to identify online newspaper articles published in the 

weeks after each hashtag began trending. For example, #RememberKhwezi 

began trending on August 6, 2016, so all articles published in the month of 

August were reviewed. Although there were some articles published after 

August, we decided to exclude those to narrow the number of articles for 

analysis. We also included articles from online magazines and blogs and seg-

ments from radio programs. Although online articles from mainstream news-

papers are still the main source of news online in South Africa, many people 

also access information via alternative forms of online media. The articles 

analyzed were selected based on their reporting or engagement with the 

three hashtags because our method was to follow the hashtags and see where 

they led us during the month in which that particular hashtag was trending.

Many hashtags begin as a response to a situation and are then circulated 

on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter and beyond (e.g., blogs, YouTube, and 

offline protest paraphernalia). As of 2018, 16 million South Africans are us-

ing Facebook, while about 8 million are on Twitter (BusinessTech 2017). 

Facebook has been able to widen its reach to all segments of society through 

its stripped-down app, Facebook Lite. Twitter, on the other hand, remains 

a popular site for engaging in public discourse in South Africa (BusinessTech 

2017). This is further affirmed by the 2015 report “How Africa Tweets,” 

which found that discussions on politics account for about 10 percent of all 

tweets, which is much higher when compared to the United States and the 

United Kingdom, where political discussions only account for 1–2 percent
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date of Publication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman Allegedly Raped at UCT</td>
<td>IOL</td>
<td>November 16, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCT Rape Allegation Investigated</td>
<td>The New Age</td>
<td>November 16, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Hunts Down “Rapist” at UCT</td>
<td>The Citizen</td>
<td>November 17, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#RapeAtAzania: Black Students Find Rapist of #FeesMustFall Protester</td>
<td>Blacktwittertrends</td>
<td>November 17, 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>#RapeAtAzania: What Our Response Is Telling of Us</td>
<td>Vanguard</td>
<td>November 18, 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>When Comrades Rape Comrades</td>
<td>Mail and Guardian</td>
<td>November 27, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#RUREferenceList: Shifting the Shame to Rape Perpetrators</td>
<td>ThisIsAfrica</td>
<td>April 19, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topless Protest over #RUREferenceList</td>
<td>IOL</td>
<td>April 20, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>#RUREferenceList: When the Victim Is Victimized</td>
<td>Jacaranda FM</td>
<td>April 21, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>The #RUREferenceList Is Testimony to the Failures of the Justice System for Rape Survivors</td>
<td>Daily Vox</td>
<td>April 21, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naked Protest Held at Rhodes in Response to #RUREferenceList</td>
<td>Marie Claire</td>
<td>April 20, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africans Stand with #RememberKhwezi Protesters</td>
<td>Eyewitness News</td>
<td>August 6, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuma Speech Upstaged by “#RememberKhwezi Activists”</td>
<td>Daily Vox</td>
<td>August 6, 2016</td>
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<td>“It Was the Right Time to Protest about Rape”</td>
<td>Sowetan Live</td>
<td>August 8, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#RememberKhwezi: “It Worked like a Beautiful Theatre Piece”</td>
<td>Daily Maverick</td>
<td>August 8, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEC Must Apologise for #RememberKhwezi Protest</td>
<td>IOL</td>
<td>August 8, 2016</td>
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### Articles selected for secondary analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alleged UCT “Rapist” Hands Himself to Police</td>
<td>The New Age</td>
<td>November 17, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#FeesMustFall: Patriarchy and the Azania Hall Rape Case</td>
<td>Women24</td>
<td>November 19, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#RapeAtAzania Accused Appears in Court</td>
<td>Jacaranda FM</td>
<td>November 19, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protesters Demand Reform following Release of #RUReferenceList</td>
<td>Mail and Guardian</td>
<td>April 19, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#RUReferenceList: A Man’s Problem</td>
<td>Women24</td>
<td>April 26, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Remember Khwezi Protest Has Shone a Spotlight on Our Society’s Patriarchal Nature</td>
<td>MSG Thoughtleader</td>
<td>August 11, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why You Cannot Reduce the #RememberKhwezi Protestors to Their EFF Membership</td>
<td>Marie Claire</td>
<td>August 18, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Citizen, Sowetan Live, Times Live, and Mail and Guardian, are established newspapers with a print and online presence. Sowetan Live and Times Live follow a tabloid format aimed at young readers. Mail and Guardian is a weekly newspaper that takes a critical approach to politics, arts, and current affairs. IOL, as one of South Africa’s largest news portals with approximately 3 million readers, is owned by Independent Media, which publishes fifteen national and regional newspapers. Daily Maverick is a newly established online newspaper founded in 2009, focusing on news, information, analysis, and opinion. Women24 is a niche-marketed website focusing specifically on women. Jacaranda FM is a radio station that broadcasts in both English and Afrikaans with a listening audience of 2 million and a digital community of 1.1 million per month. ThisIsAfrica, Daily Vox, Vanguard, and Blacktwittertrends are all digital media platforms that seek to add alternative voices to the mainstream media landscape. The New Age was a South African national daily newspaper that has now closed down. Marie Claire SA published its last issue in 2019.
of the hashtags (Mungai 2016). The majority (53 percent) of users on Twitter are aged between 25 and 44, with those aged between 16 and 24 following closely at 29 percent (Bremmen 2015), revealing social media’s popularity with young people.

The content analyzed is a combination of news reporting, opinion pieces, and Twitter posts. In our study, most of the tweets are primarily in English. Although it is now common to find tweets in isiZulu or isiXhosa (for some examples, see https://twitter.com/UnathiKondile), while others mix languages (https://twitter.com/Enghumbhini), English is the dominant language used on Twitter in Africa. Increasingly, social media platforms such as Twitter are used by journalists as “technological infrastructure” to “monitor (and imitate) both each other and each other’s sources” (Paulussen and Harder 2014, 544). It is becoming common for journalists to use Twitter posts in their articles as sources, with many of the same sources recycled through different media channels and thereby replicating and reinforcing certain views and perspectives (Paulussen and Harder 2014, 544). All three hashtags discussed here circulated on both Facebook and Twitter and had thousands of tweets. However, only a handful of those made it onto online publications, underscoring the need to analyze which voices are emphasized.

Findings
This section offers a detailed analysis of all the articles related to the three hashtags. Each hashtag is analyzed separately because, although all the hashtags share gendered violence as a common theme, they relate to distinct events and situations.

#RapeAtAzania
The hashtag #RapeAtAzania triggered a Twitter storm on November 16, 2015, when a University of Cape Town student who was also a member of the #RhodesMustFall student movement posted a message on her Facebook page describing being raped the night before by a #RhodesMustFall comrade. The incident occurred at Azania House, the university administration building that protesters had occupied, calling for the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue from campus. Student protests are not a new phenomenon in contemporary South Africa, particularly at historically black universities. However, due to a lack of media coverage they had largely been ignored until Chumani Maxwele’s decisive act to throw human excrement at the Rhodes statue initiated the #RhodesMustFall movement (Mpemnyama 2015). As the movement spread to other universities, students at Rhodes started calling for their university’s name to be changed, using the hashtag
#UCKAR (University Currently Known as Rhodes), while the hashtags #TransformWits and #OpenStellenbosch underscored students’ experiences of alienation at their institutions (Mpemnyama 2015; Kotze 2018). Following tuition hikes in 2015, students at the University of Witwatersrand responded with the hashtag #FeesMustFall, which quickly spread to other universities. As this self-described “leaderless movement” gained momentum, the word *Fallism* emerged as a collective noun to describe all the student movements at South African universities using the “Must Fall” hashtag (Ahmed 2019). With students from all walks of life participating in these movements, Steve Biko’s ideology of black consciousness dominated Fallism, resulting in the “collective struggles and articulations to flow from black voices” (Mathibela and Dlakavu 2016). It also became clear that deliberate organizing by students and university workers, including some faculty, had taken place behind the scenes in preparation (Molefe 2016, 31). According to T. O. Molefe, “despite being at institutions separated by geography, racial composition, socio-economics, and quality, they’d been gradually building the networks to coordinate a movement that spoke not as one, not even in the same pitch, but with a singularity of purpose” (2016, 31–32).

With the media’s attention on the various Fallist efforts, the #RapeAtAzania incident was immediately picked up by several outlets and widely reported. The original Facebook post regarding the rape was deleted, but according to various media outlets (*News24*, *CapeTimes*, *IOL*), the post read as follows: “I was sleeping and then I wake up to feel fingers up my vagina. I then wake up to go cry in the bathroom and try to wake up the men in this space. It takes moments of pleading and eventually me tipping over tables and fucking shit up before n*****s are able to wake up and come to the point of addressing the fact that a whole womyn body has been violated in the darkness of the night.” Instead of reporting the incident to campus police, the person shared it on Facebook with a much larger audience and where it was likely to bring media attention. In posting the message, she initiated a public discussion about rape within the student movement and was able to control her story, telling what had happened in her own words. She describes in detail exactly what took place, what her sexual assault experience was like—information usually reserved for the authorities—and what she did afterward, detailing how she went to the bathroom to cry and how she refused to be shamed, forcing the men present to address the sexual assault.

With the use of the word “womyn,” which in South Africa is used interchangeably with “womxn” and viewed as a recognition of all experiences of womanhood, inclusive of queer and trans women, she challenges and complicates the way the audience receives her story. She shifts the focus from gendered violence, as something that happens when men violate women
or vice versa, to a more complex story of men violating the subordinate other. The subordinate others invited to identify with her story are not only heterosexual female rape survivors but also trans, lesbian, and gay people. In this way, she alludes to forms of violence in South Africa that are rarely configured as gendered violence (Muholi 2004). This was also highlighted in a Vanguard article titled “#RapeAtAzania: What Our Response Is Telling of Us”: “Womxn rest, march and eat alongside patriarchs; queer bodies dine and protest with homophobes; and trans* people sit, mobilise and occupy along with transphobes all under the same name, fighting for supposedly the same cause” (Dlamini 2015).

The accuser’s use of the word “body” in her Facebook post resonates with its appearance in other tweets, suggesting that being a subordinate other is connected to being a body that can be claimed and used. As indicated by this tweet cited in the online newspaper The New Age (2015b), “Black women’s bodies are the sites of pain. Everyone wants to stick their flags deep in the soil and claim it as their territory” #RapeAtAzania (1:45 p.m.; 16 Nov. 2015). The body is thus framed as an object that can be claimed and used for sexual gratification without consent (Gqola 2007). This aligns with nationalist claims that have historically prevailed in South Africa, positioning women’s bodies as spaces to pleasure and care for men (Samuelson 2005, 2). Resistance to this positioning was common in related tweets, as in this one featured by Blacktwittertrends (November 17, 2016; see fig. 1). Wanelisa Xaba’s tweet highlights similar responses of both men and women when confronted with incidents of gendered violence. Not only do men routinely advise women to take precautions so as not to be violated, but the perpetrator is not even mentioned. Here we see that silencing operates

Figure 1 A screen shot of a tweet by Walenisa Xaba, retweeted by Malebo Sephodi in reference to #RapeAtAzania on November 17, 2015. A color version of this figure is available online.
in different ways. When women are told to be more responsible, they end up blaming themselves for falling victim to rape and may not report the crime. Moreover, the man’s presumption that he has the right to tell women how to dress suggests a societal belief that the body of the subordinate other can not only be sexually violated but can also be regulated.

The women who were told to dress appropriately chose to respond to patriarchal authority by doing the opposite. These young women are not only calling out specific men for their silence but also challenging societal beliefs and norms. Many of their tweets go beyond sharing stories of victimization by detailing how they fight back, illustrating that they do not necessarily see themselves as victims. Indeed, by sharing this incident on a social media platform, the young womyn who levied the original accusation deviated from the usual procedure of filing a complaint with local university or state authorities. Her choice to go public suggests an awareness of the possibilities offered by social media when it comes to issues like gendered violence. It also suggests a lack of trust in the justice and legal process. Both *The New Age* and *IOL* published articles that noted this turn of events: “The alleged suspect’s image and identity has been rotating on social media, with students urging people to provide information about him” (*The New Age* 2015b); “She identified the man, and his name and photograph have since been shared widely on social media. Some posts have asked for his address, saying he was wanted by police for questioning” (Geach 2015).

Although the accuser gained much support on social media, there was also a strong focus on the legal ramifications of circulating the name and picture of the perpetrator. This underscored how gendered violence is usually discussed in South Africa, where the focus shifts from the issue at hand to emphasizing aspects that question or accuse the victim and justify or protect the perpetrator. Interestingly, rather than questioning why the student would feel more inclined to share her story on Facebook than report it to campus or local police, the university administration responded in the newspapers by condemning social media: “We are aware that allegations are being levelled against a particular individual who allegedly was involved in the sexual assault of a female student. The accused in the case must be treated according to fair and appropriate legal process. It is for the justice system, not social media, to find the person guilty or innocent, after due process” (*The Citizen* 2015). Here we see a discussion on sexual violence shifting to focus on protecting the perpetrator rather than questioning the systems and institutions that facilitate sexual violence. On Twitter, however, people resisted attempts to shift the focus. For example, a tweet posted on Blacktwittertrends stated: “UCT: ‘allegations of the alleged sexual assault’ Damn, we get it. You don’t believe her” (#RapeAtAzania, November 17, 2015).
Students and others who stood in solidarity with the womyn who reported the rape used social media to question the university’s response. Legal language used in the press release the university shared with major news outlets on November 16, 2015, such as “allegations” and “alleged,” were called into question, understood as another means of silencing the rape survivor. Twitter allowed students to respond directly to the institution, which was viewed as having a history of silencing rape survivors. Bringing this issue to social media created awareness within the student movement across different universities, drawing attention to how endemic both gendered violence and the silencing of victims are. Although the Facebook post did not state where the sexual assault took place, Azania House was mentioned in the news articles that reported the story. Although it was reported as remarkable that such an incident had occurred at Azania house—the epicenter of “decolonial thought” after it was occupied by the Rhodes Must Fall movement—many tweeting their support for the young womyn did not find it surprising. Patriarchal attitudes held by some male counterparts in the movement were noted when, during a protest, male activists refused to be given instructions by Nompendulo Mkhatshwa, Student Representative Council president at the University of the Witwatersrand, responding with “We won’t be told [what to do] by a woman!” and “feminism must voetsek [go away]” (Pilane 2015).

Similar patriarchal attitudes were experienced by female activists during the apartheid struggle, with some members of the Women’s Section highlighting the difficulties they faced when trying to raise women’s issues in the movement (Hassim 2014, 72). The members pointed out that they were berated for being difficult, not understanding, and diverting the movement while their commitment to the national liberation was questioned. The way members of the Women’s Section were silenced seems to be eerily echoed by the current experience of young female activists in the Fallist movement. These young women, then, are not only speaking out about contemporary issues but revisiting debates about patriarchy that have long been silenced in the liberation movement.

Concerns about the safety of women in the Fallist movement had been raised before. A tweet posted on Blacktwittertrends made it clear that the rape was not an isolated incident: “The #RapeAtAzania is doubly tragic because women in the movement have BEEN saying they feel unsafe since the statue came down. Since forever” (Blacktwittertrends 2015). Following the incident, the rape survivor had to plead, trip over tables, and “fuck shit up” to get men in Azania House to notice she had been assaulted. This resonates with other women’s experiences in “RhodesMustFall who suggested that
they were treated differently than men: when they tried to raise issues pertaining to their interests and well-being, they were not always listened to, nor were those points taken up as part of the political agenda. As one female RMF member asks: “Who are we liberating at Azania? How then [can] we call this an intersectional space by tokenising certain bodies?” (Dlamini 2015).

These questions also recall the challenges women faced within the liberation struggle during apartheid. Women’s involvement was seen as critical, but only as far as it gave the struggle the numbers it needed to fight apartheid. The inclusion of women was especially strategic within trade unions because their bargaining power depended on them having 51 percent of workers; since women made up a sizable proportion of the workforce, it was important for unions to recruit women (Meer 2005, 37). Although liberation movements of the past were willing to “accept” women, and in turn accept some of their demands for gender equality, there was also resistance to women’s participation when women challenged men about their sexual behavior or their assumption of leadership roles (Meer 2005, 39). Similarly, today there are proportionally more women enrolled at South African universities than men. For the student movement to gain traction, the participation of women is vital, yet their demands and their safety are expected to take a back seat to the concerns of the male leadership.

A call to dismantle patriarchy within #RhodesMustFall (#Patriarchymustfall) gained momentum, and women began comparing what was happening in the present with past Marxist and nationalist liberation struggles, in which some had argued that including women’s rights would divert and weaken such struggles. In an article titled “Patriarchy Must Fall,” Pontsho Pilane (2015) states: “I don’t know what is worse, experiencing overt sexism or just being systematically sidelined by the already patriarchal political environment. Either way, I think it is time that we seriously talk about the erasure and silencing of black women in this student movement and many others like it. Those who believe that black women will put their womanhood at the altar of sacrifice in the name of the ‘collective struggle’ are blinded by their male privilege and will indeed feel like this is an attack on their person.” The use of the #Patriarchymustfall hashtag directly and publicly challenged patriarchy within social justice movements, differentiating these young women from their forebears. Although women involved in the antiapartheid struggle pushed for gender equality and vocalized their experiences of oppression beyond apartheid (Meer 2005, 36), their discussion was contained within the movement. Through social media, young women today are engaging with various public audiences, drawing attention to patriarchy and its consequences within contemporary liberation movements.
On April 17, 2016, a “reference list” was released with the names of alleged rapists at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. This list was posted on the “RU Queer Confessions, Questions and Crushes” Facebook page and quickly began circulating online. The hashtag #RUReferenceList went viral on Twitter. According to an essay on the opinion forum site ThisIsAfrica, titled “#RUReferenceList: Shifting the Shame to Rape Perpetrators,” posting the list broke the culture of silence pervading current gendered violence narratives (2016). The posting of the list was a direct reaction to university management taking down posters that were part of a protest organized around Chapter 2.12, a section of the South African Constitution that guarantees every person the right to safety and security. The Chapter 2.12 protest was organized by members of the Gender Action Project with the support of Naledi Mashishi, the student representative officer for activism and transformation. One of the posters read: “You are more likely to be excluded for plagiarism than you are for rape.” The posters were taken down twice by university management; as reported in The Journalist, on April 14 protestors responded by putting a sign up in the library that read: “WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED” (Haith 2016). A few days later, the reference list was posted.

Following the circulation of the list, female students held a naked protest on campus. Their list of demands centered on changing university policy regarding sexual assault charges. Similar to #RapeAtAzania, students at Rhodes also named and shamed the perpetrators so as to expose university policies that failed to effectively address gendered violence on campus. Through the naming and shaming of perpetrators via social media, there is continuity of strategies and a borrowing of ideas and inspiration, which has become evident with feminist hashtags such as #TimesUp building their momentum on the effectiveness of the #MeToo movement.

The #RUReferenceList protest, however, still differed from the #RapeAtAzania hashtag in that it involved multiple cases (past and present) of rape that the university had not handled properly. According to the student protestors, this repeated failure is what prompted them to take their protest to social media. Many of the trending tweets that accompanied the #RUReferenceList hashtag, as noted in ThisIsAfrica (2016), commented on the fact that rape survivors are always expected to consider the perpetrator’s future.

Geohoedrologist @NthabiWabi

Victims are always responsible for thinking of the futures and livelihoods of rapists, somehow.

#RUReferenceList (12:08 a.m.; 18 April 2016)
Gladiator @Khanyi_T_
"Respect his privacy."
"You’ll ruin his future."
"We’ll conduct a private investigation."
"Your case will not be pursued."
#RUReferenceList (11:58 p.m.; 17 April 2016)

The silencing of rape survivors as practiced by Rhodes University management is neither new nor specific to South Africa. The “Voices of Diversity” study, which was carried out at four universities across the United States, highlights the need to pay attention to “the difficulties women experience in considering whether or not to report such attacks, as well as the disappointing responses they often receive if they do make reports” (Clift 2012, 7). Another study conducted at a university in South Africa has reported that “participants reveal the importance of speaking out and reporting incidences that occur in university residences. However, this speaking out is constrained by their distrust of university services, the reported lack of support from university security guards, and the idea that sexuality is a private and personal matter that should not be articulated in public, and that the female sexual experience is shameful, even when it is not chosen” (Gordon and Collins 2013, 103).

What is interesting and often ignored in this discussion is the hypocrisy of universities that use institutional funds to create centers for women with a focus on gendered violence but then further victimize rape survivors by counseling them to think about the future of the perpetrator. By having centers on campus that deal exclusively with rape, universities present an appearance of taking gendered violence seriously. Yet, when rape is reported, the perpetrator becomes the victim who needs to be protected, and the rape is silenced. Others appending the #RUReferenceList hashtag drew attention to these institutional contradictions beyond Rhodes, as well as the frustration of protesting without being heard.

Melikhaya @kingkhaya_x
“What’s happening at Rhodes should happen everywhere, let the rapists feel the shame not the survivors.”
#RUReferenceList (ThisIsAfrica 2016)

uscabha ghel-oysisitabane @uThenjiwe_Igama
“The silent protest is NOT enough. We are tired of wearing survivor t-shirts as our perpetrators wear solidarity t-shirts.”
#RUReferenceList (12:36 a.m.; 18 April 2016 [ThisIsAfrica 2016])
The #RUReferenceList hashtag created a digital space for young women to vocalize their frustration with how rape survivors are portrayed as disrupters while perpetrators are protected. According to DailyVox (2016a), students at Rhodes perceive that perpetrators are protected when women who report rape are told “don’t go and get drunk and walk home alone or else you’ll get raped.” By holding naked protests, naming perpetrators, and discussing these issues on Twitter, young women challenged the societal norms concealed in everyday safety guidelines for women. These guidelines shift blame to the victims, reinforcing the view that, “as women, we are so stupid, so passive and beaten down that we can only wear short skirts, revealing or tight clothes, get drunk, wear kandas, smoke cigarettes, or do drugs, do anything to signal to men that we are aroused and are asking for it. It is a strange country we live in where women are so ostensibly empowered and yet cannot communicate what they want sexually” (Gqola 2007, 117).

While others viewed the naked protests as indecent (The Citizen 2016), many on Twitter defended the naked protesters. Women have been deploying naked protests as a form of subversion throughout history in Africa, with the Women’s War of 1929 (Van Allen 1972; Matera, Bastian, and Kent 2012) an important example or, more recently, Stella Nyanzi’s naked protest at Makerere Institute of Social Research (Tamale 2016). It is argued that these naked protests are a strategy used to resist and subvert “dominant scripts engraved on women’s bodies—scripts of subordination, passivity, sexuality, subservience, vulnerability, etc.” (Tamale 2016, 79). For the #RUReferenceList protesters, this act was intended to challenge the societal norms that govern and control women’s bodies by engaging in a process that re-scripted and reconfigured them:

**Malebo Sephodi @malebosephodi**

“Our bodies belong to us. We don’t need a guideline or a ‘to do’ book from you to assist us in this regard.”

(pic.twitter.com/HEmcSYUSz, Marie Claire 2016)

This tweet does not mention who the “you” being addressed is, but one can surmise that society at large is being addressed through the figure of the university. This is echoed in an article by Laila Majet (2016), who underlines: “What a woman wears and how much she chooses to drink is not the problem. Rapists are. How did society convince us to protect ourselves from rape instead of convincing men to respect a woman when she says no? This issue matters.”

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1 See https://twitter.com/hashtag/NakedProtests.
As Zethu Matebeni (2015) has suggested, this is an ongoing issue that is used every day to remind young women that “certain spaces do not belong to women; that their bodies, or body parts, do not belong to them; and that the university campus is a hetero-patriarchal male space. Its aggressive masculinity colludes with its suffocating whiteness. . . . For many women, speaking out is not an option. It is a must, even when their voices are shaking.” This hashtag and the naked protest that followed highlighted how young women used this platform to claim their bodies.

#RememberKhwezi

The #RememberKhwezi hashtag began trending on Twitter on August 6, 2016, when four young women held up placards in a silent protest against President Zuma as he took the stage to deliver a speech during the live broadcast organized by the Independent Electoral Commission to announce the 2016 local election results. Standing silently and with serious bearing, they made it impossible to ignore their placards: “Remember Khwezi,” “10 yrs later,” “Khanga,” and “I am 1 in 3.” The placards were referring to the Zuma rape trial where his accuser was wearing a *khanga* (a decorated cotton fabric that people drape around themselves) before the rape. Zuma had testified that he had viewed the dress as invitation that she wanted him. The holder of the last placard, which refers to the ratio of women in South Africa who have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime, held an additional placard with only a hashtag on it signaling their intention for this protest to become a trending topic online. This timely protest was staged during South Africa’s Women’s Month and three days before Women’s Day. The month of August commemorates the historic 1956 Women’s March (South African History Online n.d.). As with the 1956 protest, the #RememberKhwezi protest was directed against the state. In 1956 women protested against the apartheid state; sixty years later, in 2016, they protested against an ANC-led state, against Zuma as the head of state, and also against female ANC politicians complicit with state-supported violence against women. The symbolic gesture of taking the nation’s most powerful female leaders to task during Women’s Month was not lost on the South African public.

True to form and to no one’s surprise, the state called on the ANC’s Women’s League to lead the state’s official response. They responded quickly, calling into question the motivation of the young women who quietly reminded the public of an event the state would prefer to forget. An online *IOL* article (Makhafola 2016), which was published within hours of the protest, quoted ANC Women’s League President Bathabile Dlamini as saying, “It is such a pity that young women in the EFF are being used to advance and fight battles of patriarchy. We observed in the past few days how young women
in the EFF were made to run around bringing water, making tea and none of them spoke or represented their party during its press conferences or in any election structures.” Interestingly, Dlamini’s comment regarding the actions of the Remember Kwezi protester echoes a familiar critique regarding the role that women held in the ANC previously, when they were expected to prepare the catering services and entertainment at ANC meetings and conferences (Walker 1982, 33), which is what Dlamini is alluding to when referring to role of young women in the EFF.

The argument made by Dlamini and other ANC Women’s League protesters may also have some merit, considering that EFF’s record on gender justice has come under scrutiny. Women in EFF leadership positions are represented in public meetings clad in domestic worker attire, while male leaders wear red overalls to symbolize solidarity with the working classes. Raymond Suttner (2015) suggests that EFF meetings are decidedly male spaces where metaphors, self-representation, and political engagements reaffirm masculinity. Similarly, Siphokazi Magadla (2014) asks, “is it a coincidence that some promising female voices have already exited the EFF while the male voices are seemingly thriving?”

Nevertheless, in their statement against the protesters, the ANC Women’s League failed to recognize the possibility of autonomy among the young activists, regardless of their party affiliation. Naledi Chirwa’s statement, with which we began this article, demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the way young black female activists are imagined and discursively constructed in the press, by the opposition, and sometimes even by their own comrades. It also highlights a tension between women of Chirwa’s generation and the (often older) female leaders of the ANC Women’s League, which resonates with other tensions between young female activists and the (often male) leaders of recent student protests in South Africa. Simamkele Dlakavu (2017), the other member of EFF who took part in the #RememberKhwezi protest, underlines this point in her article “On the EFF and Gender,” in which she argues that the foregrounding of race and class oppression in their “radical, leftist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist” character has marginalized gender oppression to the extent that EFF continued to support male student leaders of the Fallist movement accused of rape.

Instead of focusing on the issues highlighted by the protesters, Dlamini argues, the protest was motivated and orchestrated by male leaders of the EFF opposition party, and the young female protestors were unable to act on their own. While demonstrating their role as gatekeepers of patriarchy, the ANC Women’s League’s reaction also underlined their unwavering support for Zuma in the face of rape accusations. Ironically, what the ANC Women’s League accused the protesters of doing—supporting politically
motivated patriarchy—seems to be exactly what they have been doing since the Zuma rape trial. In addition to the official statement, several other news outlets also published stories focusing on the complicity of the female ANC leaders present at the time of the protest:

As the protest was occurring, ANC Ministers Lindiwe Zulu, Nomvula Mokonyane and Bathabile Dlamini attempted to have security remove the activists and reportedly argued with Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula over the “security breach.” (Nicolson 2016)

Speaking shortly after the IEC’s guests had left for a gala dinner following the declaration of the results, Bathabile Dlamini demanded an apology from the electoral commission. “No head of state should be treated like this,” she said. “We demand that the chairperson of the IEC apologises to the president and it must be done with immediate effect.” (DailyVox 2016b)

In subsequent interviews, Dlamini also said that the protest “trivialised” gender-based violence (Ferreira 2016)

Although there were male ANC ministers present at the event, remarkably, it was female ministers who were the most vocal, demanding that the activists be removed and that the event organizers offer an apology to the president. The ANC Women’s League’s response demonstrates that the silencing of gendered violence does not always come from men. Their response should be read as a double silencing, given that the female protesters were trying to “unsilence” the Zuma rape trial by inviting the public to remember the young woman who accused him on the ten-year anniversary of his acquittal.

Following the trial, Khwezi became the brave face of gender violence activists in South Africa, remembered as someone who dared to speak out and someone who paid heavily as a result. Attempts to silence the #Remember-Khwezi protesters were a continuation of attempts to silence Khwezi and her supporters, to erase her story, to conform to the state narrative. From a historical perspective, we should not see the ANC Women’s League’s response as surprising. The male leaders of the antiapartheid struggle relied upon female leaders to support the cause first, often at the expense of women’s issues. In the postapartheid era, the state has continued to work in concert with some women to promote a patriarchal society that continues to sideline feminist dissent. Although some prominent ANC members like Thenjiwe Mtintso have praised the rise of young activists in the country and lamented the lack of participation and engagement by women in the ANC (Collison 2017), such voices have been marginalized within the ANC to support the dominant voice of the ANC Women’s League. In an article
published in *Marie Claire* soon after the #RememberKhwezi protest, Pumla Gqola, a professor, activist, and long-time Khwezi supporter, declared, “History has airbrushed the other successful women’s marches that predated 9 August 1956 out of view. Women’s world-changing collective political organising is inconvenient to national history. This year, however, the self-induced women’s month love-fest was punctured by an inconvenient reminder that could not be brushed aside” (2017). In suggesting that Women’s Month celebrates a state-backed historical fiction of women’s equality in South Africa, Gqola draws our attention to the fact that the ANC Women’s League has appointed itself the authority regarding official state narratives about women’s activism and empowerment and, further, that it uses this power to silence and erase voices of women who challenge that narrative, branding them as disloyal and disruptive.

We might ask, why is it so important for the ANC Women’s League to create the perception that they speak on behalf of all South African women? Could it be that these young women’s activism challenges the ANC Women’s League’s self-proclaimed position “as the women’s movement in South Africa” and no longer allows them to assert their status as “the vanguard organization” (Hassim 2014, 9)? Could it be that in denying the young activists’ ability to raise issues of gendered violence, the ANC Women’s League is attempting to maintain their authority and control over the state narrative of gendered violence? Although the ANC Women’s League’s Dlamini did not tweet her views, the hashtag gave people the opportunity to respond to Dlamini via various media, including Twitter and mainstream media:

> It is painful to see these strong, powerful women twisting themselves into knots in defence of a man who has shown such contempt for his country’s mothers, sisters, daughters. Whoever they might be marching for this Women’s Day, they do not march for us. (Ferreira 2016)

> Let them say what they want. This is not about them. The biggest humiliation here was not on Zuma, but Khwezi who was being disrespected. (Sifile 2016)

Twitter allows people with varying degrees of power to speak back to the politicians who attempt to dictate public discourse on the state’s position regarding violence against women. This marks a shift in how narratives about gendered violence and other topics of public interest are being shaped in South Africa. For many people, the ANC Women’s League’s choice to protect Zuma demonstrated their erasure and silencing not only of Khwezi but of other rape survivors in South Africa as well. The tweet stating, “this is not about them” (not about the ANC Women’s League) underscores the point...
that in silencing rape survivors, the state effectively sanctions violence against women.

The young women involved in the silent Khwezi protest were all feminist activists involved in various movements at their respective universities. They had also witnessed how effective socially mediated protests against rape could be, both globally, for example the contemporaneous protests against Bill Cosby, and nationally with the #RUFreferenceList and #RapeAtAzania protests, which predated the #RememberKhwezi protest (Nicolson 2016). They wanted to engage with the citizens directly, putting themselves between the state and the public via traditional and social media. Speaking about the form of the silent protest, one of the protesters, Dlakavu, claimed, “This is another black feminist protest strategy, of silence” (Nicolson 2016).

The hashtag gained momentum even as the protest was occurring, simultaneous with the live television broadcast, creating a multilayered, mediated protest that blurred the lines between on- and offline activism. Many Twitter users participated in the silent protest as it occurred, voicing their support 140 characters at a time, without having to be there in person. In a seeming counter to Gil Scott-Heron’s 1970 poem, the revolution was not only televised, it was live-tweeted. This hashtag received extensive coverage in the traditional media not only because it was bold, courageous, and disruptive in its form but also because it exposed one of the major challenges related to gendered violence in South Africa: state complicity in silencing rape survivors to protect the reputations of individual perpetrators and the state’s image as progressive on gender and sexual rights.

As the hashtag began trending, many people on Twitter asked about Khwezi and who she was, revealing just how effective the state’s silencing of her story had been. Only ten years after the infamous trial, the story of Khwezi was well on its way to being erased from South African history. Younger women, who had been girls at the time of the trial, seemed especially outraged at their own ignorance and questioned the institutional forces behind it. Given the extensive media coverage the Zuma rape trial received at the time, one might have assumed that most South Africans not only knew who Khwezi was but also remembered the details of the trial. However, Twitter revealed that many, both nationally and internationally, had no idea who she was.

That silent protest was so powerful. The fact that people (including myself) are asking who Khwezi is proves the need to #RememberKhwezi—MiB (@MibHatesUsAll) August 6, 2016 (DailyVox 2016b)

What is #RememberKhwezi about?
“pic.twitter.com/QV8kUP1BbZ,” ChoccyWoccyDoDa OMG (@TheMADJoker1) August 6, 2016 (Theletsane 2016)
Do you #RememberKhwezi or you still #Awunavolo Jesus has brought her back.

“pic.twitter.com/6jPDO0O29v,” Terri Noxolo Stander (@Terri-Stander), August 6, 2016 (Theletsane 2016)

Social media allowed protesters—the four women who stood in front of Zuma and the camera, and those who protested online—to make visible an event and an issue that many South Africans would have liked to forget. For people who were still young during the rape trial or who might have missed the coverage, #RememberKhwezi invited the public to find out who Khwezi was and learn more about the trial. It also added to the narrative of the rape trial, as those encountering the protest were forced not only to ask who Khwezi was but also to question why she had been forgotten. To those who knew the story and how it been silenced, this hashtag was indicative of a broader societal silence around violence against women, especially black women, in South Africa. As one of the protesters articulated in an interview with the Daily Maverick: “Khwezi is all of us. She is a representative of all of us. She is a failure of the justice system. Any black women can protest” (Nicolson 2016).

Interviews with the protestors following the event made it clear that the protest was well thought out. As feminists and experienced activists, they had a strategy to link their own silent protest to the broader silencing of violence against women and to the historical silencing of the Zuma rape trial and Khwezi’s story. The protest explicitly called on South Africans to remember what they already knew, to remember what absolutely must not be forgotten if rape and violence against women are to be taken seriously by society. A call to remember Khwezi was a call to remember all rape survivors, especially those courageous enough to speak out, and a reminder of the extent to which the state had been complicit in their silencing.

**Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated the transformative potential of social media for young women’s activism in South Africa. Evident in all three hashtag campaigns is how Twitter and Facebook can create spaces for activists and other women to share personal experiences and views on gendered violence, making visible stories that might have otherwise been ignored. We argue that these hashtags, as with other hashtags (e.g., #Metoo, #YesAllWomen, #MenareTrash) expose the different forms of silences that accompany rape, simultaneously calling for an unforgetting.

Women speaking out via social media reach a large audience of fellow rape survivors, enacting bell hooks’s (1989, 18) statement that, “when we
end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence.” In using social media to connect with others who live in silence, such actions also highlight the transformative potential of these spaces for many women and some men. Similar to what Rodino-Colociono has argued about the #MeToo movement founded by Tarana Burke, we suggest that beyond the hashtag, collective speaking out advances a transformative empathy, which creates “space for anger and rage that victim-survivors feel” (2018, 98).

What was notable in some of the tweets associated with these protests was the emphasis on exposing the silencing that often take place after survivors speak out, highlighting the extent to which silence occurs within a context that is varied and multidimensional (see hooks 1989, 8). This not only signals the need to pay attention to silence at different moments (before and after speaking out) but also draws attention to the different silencing techniques that emerge in response to survivors and their supporters speaking out.

Still, these young activists utilized social media to shift and shape public discourses. The three hashtags highlight different mechanisms that work to silence experiences of gendered violence, speaking back to narratives that attempt to justify rape in the media, on Twitter, and in everyday talk. By strategically choosing to report cases of rape on social media as was done in #RapeAtAzania and #RUReferenceList, and by initiating #RememberKhwezi, they also highlight the lack of trust in institutions meant to support rape survivors. In vocalizing their frustrations, they draw attention to how silence operates in South Africa: it is not that gendered violence is not discussed but that public discourse consistently shifts responsibility from the perpetrator to the survivor. Public silencing is especially poignant because it implicates society at large and facilitates gendered violence.

These young activists also questioned the normative positioning of heterosexual women as the only victims of gendered violence, making visible other bodies that have been subjected to violence and creating space for the gendered experiences of trans, lesbian, and gay people. The unforgetting of such rape survivors also shifts the public discourse toward a more complex discussion of how particular bodies are discursively imagined, regulated, and silenced in public discussions about gendered violence.

Combining social media activism with offline protests, these young activists underscored the limitations of social media activism in South Africa because in order to highlight this issue to the rest of society, they needed to employ a form of political engagement that is recognizable and yet provocative. Through the naked protests, these young activists were able to emphasize the gravity of the situation facing women in the country while at the same
time connecting to other activists who had employed similar strategies of protest in other parts of Africa and the rest of the world. As with social media activism, offline protests, although responding to specific manifestations of gendered violence in South Africa, derive their ideas from the past and from protests in other countries, showing the continuity of the process within which these protests are taking place. Additionally, through #RememberKhwezi aimed directly at the state, they challenged institutions such as the ANC Women’s League that claim to speak out against gendered violence, pointing out differences among politically active black women/womxn in South Africa. In challenging the ANC Women’s League, they also underlined the similarities faced by women in movements that fail to incorporate gender justice as one of the core areas of their organizing. As shown in both the apartheid struggle and the Fallist movement, patriarchy inevitably rears its ugly head, with women as the victims.

But are these new forms of activism calling for a diversity of feminisms, or are they simply jockeying for power? Does the way they speak out also silence other young activists who speak in a different register or who are silent on social media altogether? All of this poses interesting questions about dominant voices, who has the authority to speak for whom, and the current state of the feminist movement in South Africa. As many of the young female activists are university students, it is easy to assume that those engaged in activism represent a particular class in society, which echoes much of the literature on the digital divide (see Molawa 2010). As indicated through the #FeesMustFall movement, many of these young activists do not come from middle-class families, but they have better access to the internet due to their education levels (Fin24 2017).

These protests have had far-reaching implications, shaping activism that is now spreading to wider segments of society. This can be seen in the #menaretrash campaign, which began trending in response to the killing of a young woman by her boyfriend. Soon a new hashtag, #notallmen, followed, and a few days later, the hashtag #notinmyname, which was accompanied by a men’s march to the union building in Pretoria to speak out against abuse of women and children (Sekhotho 2017).

Not long after, the hashtag #Rhodeswar also emerged as a response to the expulsion of two female students from Rhodes University for their participation in the #RUReferencelist protest. As recently as August 2018, a coordinated women’s march across the country and beyond, going as far as Lesotho and Namibia, with the moniker #Totalshutdown was organized by some of the women who had participated in many of these hashtags with the slogan “my body: not your crime scene.” The continued
use of digital activism to express outrage, mobilize, and ignite offline protests as a mode of breaking silence on the issue of gendered violence not only challenges the notion of social media protests as ephemeral but also highlights a strong connection to the grassroots activism in the past, when women’s major demonstrations were always preceded by multiple protests (Walker 1982).

If current public discourse relies on policing and shaming rape survivors, these young activists, through a combination of online and offline activism, have forced society to think retrospectively about how institutions fail rape survivors. Hashtags and hashtag activism may not be able to eradicate the patriarchy embedded in South African institutions, but they do question and challenge it, unsilence it, and force it into the public domain. More than ten years ago Gqola (2007, 116) argued, “we are not speaking these truths, and until we are able to address them as well as the long histories we come from, we will continue to live with the scourge of gender based violence.” Today’s young feminists are beginning to speak these truths and, by doing so in the public domain, they are able to highlight contradictions in gender equality in contemporary South Africa. When activists such as Naledi Chirwa lament that they “have to ask for permission to become,” they remind us that their becoming is often viewed through feminist lenses that limit the scope of what feminism itself can become.

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