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## THE IFAA SUNDAY FORUM

# BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND FEMINISM

Report by *Michael Smith*

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**O**n 9 August 2015, the IFAA Sunday Forum invited Kealeboga Ramaru and Mbali Matandela, two students from the Rhodes Must Fall movement, to speak at Cape Town's Centre for the Book on "Black consciousness, feminism and intersectionality theory". This is a summary of their presentation.

Black consciousness has emerged on university campuses in contemporary South Africa due to the exclusionary culture of local higher education institutions. According to Ramaru and Matandela, the University of Cape Town (UCT) was founded as an exclusively white, elite male institution. For the

Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement, this university retains fragments of its colonial legacy within its institutional culture. Their task, to put it simply, is to decolonise the university.

The movement draws on the ideas of black consciousness and intersectionality in resistance to what



Mbali Matandela (centre) during the early Rhodes Must Fall protests during the Cape Epic. Photo by Xola dos Santos

they call “the exclusionary archetype of the elite white male”. This archetype was embodied by the statue of Cecil John Rhodes that was removed on 9 April 2015 due to radical protest.

RMF follows Steve Biko’s definition of “black” as a political identity that describes “those who are, by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society”. It refers to all people of colour. Black consciousness, in turn, is a mental attitude that seeks to emancipate people of colour from a racially oppressive South African society.

Intersectionality theory is used in conjunction with black consciousness thought to properly account for and counteract the numerous sites of oppression for black students. With its roots in feminist sociological theory, intersectionality attempts to describe the ways in which oppressive systems are interconnected. In light of this, Rhodes Must Fall recognises the fact that racial oppression exists alongside, and is linked to, equally oppressive systems based on gender, sexuality, able-



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bodiedness, class and mental health.

The presenters argued that the adoption of a black feminist critique of previous black consciousness movements – one that recognises black lives as multi-faceted – will lead to greater inclusivity within the Rhodes Must Fall movement. They assessed the complexity of the black narrative, emphasising the need for black feminist thought in a discourse and political ideology that silences the voices and concerns of women.

After the talk, the following issues were raised from the audience:

- the problem of using the phrase “people of colour” when referring to non-whites
- intersectionality and hierarchies of oppression: if we use class, race, gender, sexuality as different forms of oppression, can we say one is reducible to the other? What is the relationship between them?
- race as a social construction, not a biological fact
- the reasons for the exclusion of black feminist thinkers in black consciousness discourses. [NA](#)

## ABOUT THE PRESENTERS

**Kealeboga Ramaru** is a gender and transformation honours student at the University of Cape Town who identifies as a black (conscious) feminist. She completed her undergraduate degree majoring in politics, public and policy administration, and gender studies. Her activism is located within the South African Young Feminist Activists organisation as well as RMF, and she is a peer-educator for the African Gender Institute (AGI)’s Young Women’s Leadership Project on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (YWL). She is also interested in forming transnational links on black consciousness discourse.

**Mbali Matandela** is a gender and transformation honours student and a black radical intersectional feminist. Matandela completed her undergraduate degree in international relations, gender studies, and business French at UCT in 2014 and was awarded the 2014 Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship. She is an activist on various platforms, including the South African Young Feminist Activists (SAY-F), the Collective Social Movement and the AGI YWL project. Believing that activism is a lifestyle, her writing seeks to empower women through different forms of expression. She has written for the Mail and Guardian in South Africa and is a member of the writers collective at Kaleidoscopes: Diaspora Re-imagined.

## THE IFAA SUNDAY FORUM

The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) Sunday Forum is an open discussion group facilitating the democratisation of socially relevant ideas and discourses. Our forum aims to connect local postgraduate students in the social sciences with each other and with a public audience. Presentations and discussions are primarily based on topics in political philosophy, political economy and development economics and are given in a conversational and non-technical style as far as the subject permits. For new events, find “IFAA Sunday Forum” on Facebook.