


# A white theologian learning how to *fall upward*

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As a theologian coming from Europe, a 'postcolonial import' into South Africa, it is my white privilege in particular that continues to *queer* my understanding of a *social revolution* on which our future, as a people, may depend. In this article, I seek to turn my personal experience of grappling with my whiteness into the source of my reflection. Drawing inspiration from fallism – a recent student movement that inscribes itself into a larger decolonial 'struggle against the globalised system of racist capitalism' – I ponder what it could mean, in the South African context, for whiteness to *fall upward* (Rohr). Here, the metaphor of 'falling upward' as a *kenosis* of whiteness is considered specifically with regard to a white theologian's (my own) attempt to open spaces that could be filled with blackness.

**Contribution:** This auto-ethnographic essay inscribes itself into a transdisciplinary study of theology and race from both socio-cultural and religiospiritual perspectives. The author's personal reflections, inspired by his own engagement with the fallist narratives and his ever-evolving attitude towards the blackness–whiteness binary, as experienced in the South African social and academic contexts, are shared as a means to crack open the societal and theological (notably Christian) imagination, both of which appear to suffer from a serious crisis.

**Keywords:** whiteness; blackness; race; fallism; theology; South Africa; *kenosis*.

## Introduction

I dream of the intellectual who incessantly displaces themselves, who doesn't know for sure either where they will be or what they will think tomorrow, because they are too attentive to the present ... [*who*] contributes to the posing of the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth it, and what kind of revolution it is and what it is worth, it being understood that only those who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about can reply. (Foucault 2001:268–269; as quoted in Kelly 2012:137–138)

Commenting on Foucault's words cited above, Kelly (2012) posited that:

[T]he role of the intellectual is not to play the role of an armchair general, nor to pontificate about the future, but to analyze the present *on behalf of those* who might actually opt to militate at the risk of their own existence. (p. 138; *author's own emphasis*)

In the South African context, which has become *mine* over the past 12 years, black students who have been at the forefront of #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall, #OpenStellenbosh and similar campaigns may appear as an emblem of all those who risk their lives to bring about a revolutionary change. I am not one of them – not because I do not believe a revolution is needed, but because I enjoy my current lifestyle too much (secured by my white privilege) and lack the courage to 'militate at the risk of my own existence'. Thus, I have no right to talk *on behalf of* those who choose to put their lives at stake. And yet, I find Foucault's vision profoundly compelling. Could I, as a white theologian in today's South Africa, become the kind of intellectual who is so attentive to the present that I can incessantly displace myself and thus contribute to preparing the way for a revolution by asking the right questions about my own role in it? If so, what is the *present* to which I should yield my undivided attention, and how can it shape my response, *vis-à-vis* the racialised social landscape that I inhabit?

## Locating my voice within the fallist landscape of South Africa

Already in 2015, Achille Mbembe spoke about the 'politics of impatience', pointing out that 'South Africa is fast approaching its *Fanonian moment* [as] the mass of structurally disenfranchised people have the feeling of being treated as "foreigners" on their own land'. The 'Fanonian moment' to

**Note:** Special Collection: VukaniBantuTsohangBatho: Spirituality of Black Liberation, sub-edited by Fundiswa Kobo and Rothney Tshaka (University of South Africa).

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which Mbembe (2015) alludes relates to the necrophiliac power structure that totalises black life as fungibility and accumulation that is emblematised by whiteness. Not unrelatedly, the recurring attacks on African nationals demonstrate how easily the frustration and anger of South Africans – for which there is no justification, but there appears to be a multifaceted explanation (Durokifa & Ijeoma 2017; Masuku 2019) – can be subjected to a scapegoat mechanism. Stemming from structural xenophobia, such outbursts of Afrophobic violence on the part of South African black people, who seem to ‘believe they are the whitest of all the Blacks of Africa’ (Maluleke 2016), bear witness to the fact that post-1994 South Africa continues to grapple with its own relationship with the rest of the continent. But they also reflect the extent to which ‘parochial Afrocentrism’ and the resulting xenophobic crime, like virtually any issue in the South African social life 28 years into democracy, are entangled with racial polarisation within South Africa itself. Slogans recurring in the media, such as ‘the white monopoly capital planting self-hate among black people’, ‘politicians playing to their base (white and middle-class fear or populist racism)’, or ‘a need to direct xenophobic anger at wealthy whites’, speak for themselves.

Without engaging here in an in-depth analysis of racial dynamics in South Africa today,<sup>1</sup> suffice it to say that the binary of blackness and whiteness remains at the centre of most socio-economic tensions. There is no doubt that many black South Africans are susceptible to the old, colonially rooted tendency of cultural ‘whitening’. But this tendency is radically challenged by the growing movement of reclaiming both blackness and Africanness.<sup>2</sup> Currently this dynamic is most tangible, it seems to me, in the various #MustFall youth formations which have significantly shaped the trajectory of the decolonial project in our region.

In his recent book *Breaking a Rainbow, Building the Nation*, a young South African activist and a self-designated ‘revolutionary coconut’, Rekgotsofetse Chikane, described the politics behind #MustFall movements.<sup>3</sup> Chikane (2018) focused on the South African students’ disillusionment with the rainbow nation myth and their fight against:

[A post-1994] *status quo* that entrenched the belief that we are all equal, but some are ‘more’ equal than others. A *status quo* that assumes the double consciousness that took hold in our country to be unassailable. (p. 2)

A subset of #MustFall politics and its ideological driver, fallism appears as ‘the ideological nexus of Black Consciousness, radical black feminism and Pan-Africanism working in conjunction with a protest culture informed by radical civil disobedience’ (Chikane 2018:2267 of 4730). The

1. For such an analysis, see for example Houston, Kanyane and Davids (eds. 2022), Seekings (2008:1–25) and Farred (2006:226–248).

2. For some insights into the relationship between blackness and Africanness, see Urbaniak (2019b:7–10).

3. Other noteworthy analyses of the movement based on the voices of the activists who have been personally engaged in it include Langa (ed. 2017) and Booyens (ed. 2018).

most frequently recurring demands of the protesting students across the country include: (1) free, decolonised education for all; (2) the immediate clearance of historical student debt and (3) #EndOutsourcing of allied university workers. But the meaning and sociopolitical impact of fallism go far beyond the students’ demand for a free, decolonised education. From the broader social perspective, it would be more apt to describe fallism as a multifaceted movement that is ‘part of a larger struggle against the globalised system of racist capitalism’ (Ndelu 2017:21). Not surprisingly, as a ‘collection of institutionalised norms that guide our day-to-day interactions ... [by creating] perverse inequalities that benefit people who just happen to be white’ (Chikane 2018:2252 of 4730), whiteness and white privilege are seen in this context as an emblem of the *status quo* that the fallists seek to challenge. And yet, talking about ‘a darker side to #MustFall politics’, Chikane (2018) pointed to the ambivalent role of whiteness:

For all its effort to change our society, its underbelly is riven with untenable relationships. Compromises. [...] #MustFall politics actively excludes 1652s [*the maintainers of the subjugation of the other by whiteness*] but makes room for certain *wypipo* [*fallist slang for ‘white people’*] to become allies. (pp. 4692–4700 of 4730)<sup>4</sup>

The #MustFall movements have received a great deal of criticism from the white and middle-class establishment (Crouse 2017), as well as some black intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> The most common objections range from it being merely a form of vandalism to it lacking a solid theoretical and political grounding. Rather than offering yet another critical assessment of fallism, my aim in this essay is to share my personal reflections inspired by my own engagement with the fallist narratives. This is why my voice and my story form part of this reflection. The international readership should be made aware that, insofar as the South African social reality is concerned, my comments are those of a cultural *outsider*, a ‘post-colonial import’ into South Africa, who found a home and, unlike so many others these days, has been welcomed in this country, not least because of his whiteness.

Since 2010, when I was sent to South Africa as a volunteer by a French nongovernmental organisation, I have been through a number of shifts concerning my attitude towards whiteness and blackness. For the sake of this essay, it will be sufficient to signal five (often overlapping and not necessarily chronological) stages or tendencies that marked this journey. If these were to become chapters in my autobiography, they could be entitled thus:

#### 1. ‘Scared of and fascinated by blackness’

For me, as a Pole, a direct encounter with blackness and sudden exposure to the diverse universe of African cultures was both wonderful and overwhelming. During the first months after

4. In *Black Souls, White Skins*, Steve Biko elaborates on the issue of white allyship. He holds that, as part of the institutionalised violence that has the sole power to judge its own laws, white people can never be allies in the struggle for liberation because they do not possess the correct ‘grammar of suffering’ and lived experience. The ‘white ally’ is thus caught in this peculiar ouroboros unless they commit ‘racial suicide’ (Biko 1987:19–26).

5. See, for example, the views of Barney Pitso as summarised in Sikhosana (2017:19–20, 38–39).

arriving in the country, I was completely overtaken by my experience of *the new* and *the other*.

2. 'Most of my friends are black; that's where I belong'  
This came with the sense of pride often nourished by comments made by my African friends like: 'You are so different from white South Africans'; 'You are black inside'; 'You are African at heart'. Fetishising blackness has been part of this experience, something of which my black romantic partners made me aware.
3. 'I am ashamed to be white'  
This crisis of identity stemmed from my increasing awareness of both the historical role that 'my people' played in the structural sins of racism, from slavery and colonialism to apartheid – pre- and post-1994 alike, as well as my own, frighteningly real share, here and now, in what I began to recognise as a white privilege permeating institutional structures and the socio-economic life in the country.
4. 'It's not just about me; the entire system must fall'  
My further engagement with the black theology of liberation and various forms of social activism galvanised me into shifting my focus from an individualistic search for personal fulfilment and belonging to denouncing and challenging, notably in my teaching and research, power structures that shape – among other things – South African processes of identification and racial hierarchisation.
5. 'What could it mean for me, as a white man and a European-bred theologian living in South Africa, to *fall*?'  
While listening to the voices of the protesting students, the fallists, I started realising that it is, first and foremost, my own whiteness that must fall and that perhaps *falling* is the most vital contribution I can make with regards to prophetically challenging the imperial structures of injustice in our social context. At the same time, the call to *fall* presented itself to me as an invitation to grow spiritually by, paradoxically, at once transcending and embracing my racial identity and social location. This is why I am referring to it – after Rohr (2004) – as 'falling upward'.

So profoundly marked by the binary of blackness and whiteness, this journey of grappling with my *enraced existence* in South Africa continues every day; by no means do I deem it concluded. But this essay stems from my desire to share and flesh out particularly its latest (current) stage. It is not a coincidence that the title I gave it takes the form of question. I do not seek to make any recommendations here, either to my fellow white people living in South Africa or anyone else. My intentions are far more modest. To paraphrase Foucault, this auto-ethnographic reflection of mine is shared with the hope that it may stimulate those concerned to pose the question of knowing what kind of revolution is needed for South Africans today, as a people, to heal; and in particular, what role should white people play in that revolution.

### Three musings on *falling upward* as a *kenosis* of whiteness

What follows are the three musings which revolve around various images and meanings of *falling upward* as a metaphor for the *kenosis* of whiteness in a present-day South Africa. I put them forward as a means to crack open our societal and

theological (notably Christian) imagination, both of which appear to suffer from a serious crisis.

As far as the phrase 'falling upward' is concerned, I borrowed it from Richard Rohr (2004), an American Franciscan and spiritual teacher, who used it as the title of one of his bestselling books, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Drawing on Carl Jung, Rohr distinguishes two major tasks proper to the 'two halves of life'. While the first half is about finding one's identity and significance in the world and creating ego boundaries, the search for meaning is the task of the second half, which always entails *falling*, that is, a failure through some form of transgression or humiliation or defeat (the necessary suffering). Speaking about the paradox of 'growing by falling down', Rohr observes that, 'if you can find grace or freedom in and through that falling, you find that it moves you forward, upward, broader, deeper, better – to growth' (*Falling upward* [book synopsis]). It is precisely this paradoxical dynamic inherent in finding new possibilities through accepting and embracing one's brokenness that the phrase 'falling upward' seeks to capture.

### #RhodesMustFall: Opening spaces to be filled with blackness

The first time I remember being personally touched and inspired by the image of the fall was in 2016 when I watched the Baxter Theatre production titled *The Fall*, in which seven recent Drama graduates of the University of Cape Town share their experiences during the #RhodesMustFall and subsequent student campaigns. Enraged with the 'iconography of whiteness' filling public spaces, including universities, the students began the protests aimed, among other things, at decommissioning the offensive colonial and apartheid symbols on their campuses. The statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the 'perfect embodiment of black alienation and disempowerment at the hands of UCT's institutional culture' (#RhodesMustFall Mission Statement, as quoted in Chikane 2018:1698 of 4730), became an emblem of such an exclusionary iconography. The actual removal of the statue took place on 9 April 2015. In the play, a young woman named Qhawekazi, a #RhodesMustFall activist and an eyewitness of this historic event, gives an account of her personal experience (Conrad et al. 2017):

I remember looking at the place where the statue had been and I noticed a tiny hole filled with ash and burnt paper. I remember thinking, 'We have to fill that space with us'. Things, shapes, people we can recognise. Now the real work of decolonising starts. (p. 50)

This image of young black South Africans filling the emptied spaces with things, shapes and people they can recognise has captured my imagination and stayed with me ever since. What followed was the realisation that, for decolonisation (understood as opening or emptying the spaces) and Africanisation (understood as filling them with blackness) to happen, something first has to *fall*. Unlike Rhodes' statue, whiteness does not have to be coerced into falling – or at least, so I hope. But this does not mean that the falling of whiteness can or

should happen quietly, as a private matter. An analogy to the fall of Rhodes' statue may be illuminating (Chikane 2018):

If we had simply allowed UCT [University of Cape Town] to remove the statue on their own terms – a process which without our intervention would have taken years – the change would have happened within the context of the score of the university. It would have been a change made under the guise of transformation. A change that would deny the institution the opportunity to reimagine itself and those who walk through its halls. (pp. 1675–1688 of 4730)

While one needs to remain vigilant against what McKenzie (2015) aptly described as an 'ally theatre', the revolutionary potential inherent in the symbolism of the *fall of whiteness* must not be underestimated either. For the entire society to radically change, whiteness should be falling *publicly and remarkably*, before the eyes of black people who, for centuries, have been subjected to its exploitative tactics and those white people who still cling to their privilege. Perhaps even more significantly, whiteness must fall in direct response to the black voices, not least those of the fallists, who seek to denounce and dismantle it. Here is another tension worth noting. As white people, we have no right to expect black people to tell us how we must change. But at the same time, it is only by listening to black narratives and genuinely striving to understand the mutual correlation between our privilege and the discrimination and exploitation of black people, that we can adequately address racism infused in our social and institutional structures.

Once I become aware of my complicity, as a white person, in the racist *status quo* of post-1994 South Africa, can I (and should I) simply renounce my whiteness? Would that imply that I cease to identify as 'white'? I thought so. Or to be more precise, this is what I strongly desired at one stage. I don't anymore. For me as a white person to *fall upward* entails, I believe, becoming increasingly aware of both the *provisional* nature of whiteness as such and, at the same time, of the very *real* and *concrete* ways in which my whiteness, when *enacted*, poisons our social fabric. Let me explain; from the viewpoint of the major contemporary theories of race, whiteness – like all racial categories – appears as (Matthews 2015):

A product of European colonialist expansion and oppression and emerged as part of attempts to justify the domination of some over others [...]. The category 'white' describes a particular social and political *position* in a divided and oppressive society, rather than a cultural or ethnic identity or a biological or natural category [...] membership of some clearly defined 'sub-species' of humanity [...] [or] particular set of physical characteristics (light skin, straight hair, or the like) [...]. It refers most saliently to the occupation of a *particular societal position*. (pp. 116, 117, 118)

As MacMullan (2009:54) argued; rather than being 'a real, received, and antecedent racial group', the white race was 'slowly created through violence, legislation, and other practices of exclusion and privilege'. In the same vein, Joel

Olson posited that 'it is more useful to understand whiteness as a form of power rather than as a culture' (Olson 2004:113). Analogically, Mills speaks of white supremacy as 'a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties' (Mills 1997:3).<sup>6</sup> Put simply, race is something that we *do*, rather than something that we *are* (Matthews 2015:124). And yet, this does not imply that it is a purely *contingent activity* that one can simply choose to abandon. As a sort of location or context, whiteness inevitably conditions our subjectivity and – what must be emphasised here – has a very real impact on the 'racial other', that is, black people (Monahan 2011:204). This is the flip side of the coin. That white South African household incomes are on average more than five times higher than those of black South African households (Statistics South Africa 2012:4) or that white people (less than 10% of the population) own 72% of farms and agricultural land in the country (Rural Development and Land Reform 2017) is not a coincidence, nor is it merely a result of historic injustice. The fact that racial cleavages in our stratified society continue to be so stark reflects the systemic and persisting capacity of whiteness to hide, maintain and defend itself. Thus, even though it is *merely* a social construct, white supremacy is as real as it can be insofar as its socio-politico-economic, as well as cultural and religious, grip on people's lives is concerned.

In the light of this ambivalent nature of whiteness, the extreme attitudes towards it – renouncing one's racial identity altogether on the one hand, and fully and uncritically embracing it on the other hand – both appear untenable, although for different reasons. Leaving white supremacy unchallenged cannot be an option for anyone who has seen it for what it is. As for the second attitude, indeed, some scholars like Naomi Zack (1993) and Kwame Appiah (1985) have opted for abolishing all racial categories, removing 'the *entire* taxonomy of race' (Matthews 2015:119). For me, relocating to South Africa implied becoming aware and, soon after that, ashamed of being a white person. The fact that, at one point, I wished to deny my whiteness and take on an alternative identity reflects my desperate attempt to escape the guilt and shame which I started associating with my whiteness (Matthews 2015:124). Today I realise that pretending that I am anything else than 'a white person' (perhaps 'African' or 'raceless' or 'just human') in a context like ours would be deeply problematic for at least three reasons. Firstly, since I am exercising my white privilege principally through unconscious action, rather than through conscious intent, eschewing my conscious identification with whiteness would be counterproductive in terms of eroding my actual racist behaviours (Matthews 2015:119–120). Secondly, it would likely render the identification of racial inequalities in our society more difficult. Once again, as white people we seldom explicitly try to claim privileges *because we are white*. The more common problem in contemporary postsegregationist

6. To realise the provisional and tentative character of whiteness as a racial category, suffice it to say that the Afrikaners were at times not regarded by the English colonialists as 'properly' white people. Similar examples could be multiplied (see e.g. Steyn 2001:26).

societies like South Africa is that most of us *do not* recognise how we benefit from our whiteness (MacMullan 2009:155). As demonstrated by Matthews' account of the case of Ernst Roets, the current deputy CEO of AfriForum, claiming another identity (such as 'African'), while enjoying and defending white privilege, may be used as a strategy to maintain white domination rather than being part of the process of dismantling racism (Matthews 2015:114, 123). Thirdly, and relatedly, racial categories are necessary for any form of racial redress – be it affirmative action or broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) – to be implemented (Matthews 2015:120).

Some scholars have argued that there is a 'middle way' which consists in developing 'a positive and yet anti-racist white identity' (Matthews 2015:115; see also Giroux 1998:44). This is not what I envisage when I talk about whiteness *falling upward* either. As proven by the history of Black Consciousness, among other liberationist movements, racial mobilisation can certainly be used for emancipative purposes (Matthews 2015:120). However, it is hard to imagine just how whiteness could 'be injected with positive content in a way that is sufficiently cautious of the dangers of white supremacy' (Matthews 2015:125). Matthews (2015) rightly pointed out that:

If being white is principally about unjustly occupying a dominant position in a hierarchically structured and oppressive society, rather than about having a particular culture or essence, then it is difficult to see how one can remake whiteness in a way that refuses to accept the tenets of white supremacy, but still leaves white people feeling good *about being white*. (p. 125; *author's own emphasis*)

For whiteness to *fall upward*, we, white people, need to consciously open and empty spaces which we unjustly occupy and let those spaces be filled by black people, on black people's terms, without interfering (unless we are explicitly asked to contribute). Conducive to the erosion of existing racial hierarchies, such a process presumes recognising on our part the power but also the ambiguity and contestedness of our racial identity. Only in such a way can we become 'creolizing subjects' (Matthews 2015:126; see also Monahan 2011:203), that is, people who acknowledge that we have been and continue to be shaped by our whiteness but who also take responsibility for shifting and eroding it (Matthews 2015:126). In Matthews's (2015) words:

[W]hite people can be understood to be creolizing subjects when they are working towards becoming something else (perhaps Africans) and working to undo whiteness as a way of being in the world, but doing so in a way that recognises that they inevitably come at this process from a particular place and interact with others 'within a shared communicative field that is inescapably conditioned by race'. (p. 126; see also Monahan 2011:203)

### The pedagogy of open spaces: Ridding classrooms of the toxic impact of whiteness

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni posited that the students across South Africa are up in arms because of the impact that the combination of coloniality, patriarchy and corporatisation

has had on higher education in the country – and, indeed, all over the globe (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017:73–75). If we, as educators, are genuinely committed to the mission of making *universities in Africa* into *African universities*, we need to engage both urgently and passionately in the process of 'learning to unlearn in order to re-learn' (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012). Decolonising our ways of knowing is not equivalent to shifting from Eurocentrism to some sort of 'parochial Afrocentrism' (Maluleke 2016).<sup>7</sup> Rather than debunking the Western system of knowledge, the aim is to acknowledge its limits and open spaces for subversive voices (other than those contingent on the theories coined by *dead white men*). Thus, as an integral component of the decolonial project, 'to rethink thinking itself' entails the recovery, restoration and reappropriation of subaltern modes of knowledge (primarily, by the African people themselves), with pluriversity and democracy or ecologies of knowledges in view as the ultimate goal of the process (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018:40).

While the institutional aspect of decolonising and Africanising our universities cannot be underestimated (neither should it be reduced to mechanically replacing white academics with black academics), decolonising education in Africa begins, Ndlovu-Gatsheni holds, through the personal journeys of those who are the products of the Western-type academy, be it in the Global North or back home (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017:77). No amount of policies and regulations can substitute the conscientisation and commitment on the part of those who form and sustain the current system, that is, the South African university professors, of whom in 2015, 66% were still white people (Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education, as quoted in Ramoupi 2017).

Realising a myriad of ways in which my whiteness may (and does) play out in the classroom has been an ongoing process for me since I started teaching at St Augustine College, a small Catholic university in Johannesburg. This included everything from my course design to the most subtle aspects of my communication with the students (approximately 95% of whom were black people). Allow me to use the Master's module in Philosophy of Religion, which I have taught six times between 2010 and 2020, as an illustration. I have been redesigning this course continuously over the past 12 years. The most evident changes could be observed in its contents. As I have become increasingly sensitised to the biography and the geography of knowledge that I sought to pass on, the (originally nonexistent) section on 'Philosophy and Religion in Africa' has been gradually expanded to become – in the most recent version of the course – one of its core thematic components. More significantly, my initially Eurocentric perspective, with regard to all topics covered in the module, has evolved into an Afrocentric one, as the postcolonial critique and decolonial discourse have over time informed

<sup>7</sup>This should be seen as distinct from Afrocentrism that is a natural correlate of decolonisation and, as such, stands in stark contrast to the humanity-devoid Eurocentrism. For example, Molefi Asante presented a view of Afrocentrism (or Afrocentricity) as 'the natural outgrowth of the postmodern decentering of Europe and the deflation of Western pretensions to objectivity, to neutrality, to the capacity to judge with context-independent universal validity' (Scott & Franklin 2006:103; see also Asante 1990).

and reshaped my methodological approach. In 2020, I still taught about Western arguments for God's existence, theodicy, etc. I acknowledge that, while dominant knowledge is *exhausted*, it is not altogether *useless*. I have therefore been seeking to distil what is irrelevant from what may be useful, indeed transformative, for us living in South Africa today. This meant that, while (re)designing and teaching this module over the years, I have likely learned *more* than my students – not only when preparing it, but also as I interacted with them in the classroom.

And yet, I do not consider it a *success story*; at best, it is a story of some desirable progress. Personally, I will not claim educational 'success' until I see one of my former African students replacing me and delivering this (or any other) course with similar or greater consideration for the context in which we live. There have been, however, moments in my relatively short journey as a teacher which infused me with a sense of hope, insofar as my *fallen* and *falling* whiteness is concerned. Recently, upon the completion of the Philosophy of Religion module, one of my black students – a Christian who received *ubizo* from her ancestors (that is, a calling into *ukuthwasa*, to become a healer) – thanked me for the 'most amazing course' she has ever attended. When I asked her what she appreciated most about it, she replied (I am loosely paraphrasing):

[T]he way in which you've been listening to us, your curiosity and openness. I have never felt like that in a classroom, and especially with the white person teaching [...] that I could be really myself.

I have no doubts that my whiteness continues to have a negative impact on my teaching and on interactions with my students. But *falling upward*, opening and emptying spaces, talking less and listening more, becoming increasingly comfortable with 'not knowing', allowing responses to emerge through mutual engagement and dialog and being respectful of each person, experience and viewpoint – all this can make a difference; of that I am also certain.

### Debating the causes, falling in love with bodies<sup>8</sup>: On the tension between the prophetic and the mystical

Attending the 2018 conference on religion and racial justice in Kliptown, Soweto, was for me both a wonderful and a challenging experience on a number of counts. Among other things, this gathering gave me yet another opportunity to experience the tension of *belonging* (reimagining racial justice with mostly like-minded South Africans and North Americans) and *not belonging* (being *surrounded* by black bodies whose location – geographical, cultural and socio-

economic – is so different from mine). If the experience of belonging was primarily of an intellectual nature, that of not belonging seemed more embodied and manifested itself through a range of emotions.

As the conference sessions went on and my mind was continuously stimulated by penetrating ideas, analyses and theories, I have become increasingly aware of a deepening void in my heart. On an emotional level, I could describe it as something between sadness and sulkiness undergirded by a sense of alienation and loneliness. Upon introspection, I realised that it was particularly the sense of being estranged from our shared humanity, those present in the room – black people and white people – that was at the root of my unanticipated emotional state. On a bodily level, it manifested itself in a quite overpowering feeling that I could best articulate thus: 'Could someone please hug me? Preferably a black person [...]'. Together with that realisation, a sense of embarrassment fell upon me:

[H]ow can I possibly think in a way which is so unashamedly universalist (cf. shared humanity) and childish (cf. hugging business)! How do I dare to shed my 'white tears' in the midst of this *prophetic gathering*!

Despite self-flagellation, my emotional state and bodily sensations persisted until, one evening after the sessions, I shared my experience with my African sister Nontando. As always with her, I was given space to befriend my feelings rather than analyse them. I even got a much-desired hug. The following day, I experienced a similar relief during a long and heart-warming conversation with Jason, a newly met American friend. With Jason, it was probably our shared queerness – certainly not whiteness – that helped us encounter one another on a more human and not merely intellectual level.

What do I do with this unprecedented emotional roller coaster now, a few years after our gathering in Kliptown? Essentially, I believe that through participating in several critical engagements concerning racial issues, I have reached some sort of personal limit with regard to my intellectual capacity to carry out this dialog *purely on the level of a dualistic mind*. While my theological and social imagination had been saturated with *prophetic thinking*, which interprets reality in terms of 'either-or', blackness *or* whiteness, liberation *or* oppression, etc., in the depths of my being I craved some form of *mystical integration* capable of reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable, of embracing a paradox. Thus, I lacked balance between the prophetic and the mystical dimensions of my personal journey, which, on an experiential level, expressed itself in a twofold manner. Firstly, it manifested itself through my emotional resistance *vis-à-vis* racial polarisation inherent in a certain kind of prophetic, liberationist discourse about blackness and whiteness. Secondly, it came to the surface through my visceral yearning for human proximity and embodied presence or perhaps even some form of a ritual, whereby the colour of the skin

8. Following the trend initiated by some social scientists, I use the term 'black bodies' with a view to highlighting that it is black people, among other marginalised groups ('gendered bodies', 'queer bodies', 'enslaved bodies', etc.), that have been – and often continue to be – treated as objects or commodities, not as individuals. On the flip side, the term has been increasingly reappropriated and given a new positive meaning by a number of black authors whose objective is to *reclaim* the beauty and the blackness of their bodies and subversively announce that black people, who for so long were treated like *nobodies*, are now occupying a place in space through their *embodied presence* (see Mothoagae 2016:62–83).

would not matter (even though on another level I *knew* all too well that it always does).

Still in the process of befriending this uninvited experience, I sense it has revealed something about the trajectory that I am on with regard to grappling with my whiteness. And here lies the final meaning of my *falling upward* that I wish to share with the reader. Voiding whiteness of its toxic impact must certainly entail debating the causes and factors behind its particular cultural and social manifestations, distilling what is right from what is wrong, making clear epistemic and ethical distinctions and, not least, adopting a prophetic attitude toward all forms of white supremacy. At the same time, however, I believe we need (Urbaniak 2019a):

[A] *mystical awareness* of all being one flesh, and all somehow sharing in the brokenness of this flesh, that may enable us to join the ‘universal struggle’ without becoming what we fight against, that is, without turning into the agents of the same Empire, just under new auspices. (p. 796)

Thus, while we are *debating the causes*, we must not become immune to our capacity, indeed our propensity to *fall in love with bodies*. As Fr Pedro Arrupe famously proclaimed, ‘What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. [...] Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything’ (Arrupe 2004:8).

Arranged marriages aside, no one can be truly coerced into loving the other. But perhaps ‘falling in love with black bodies’ could still mean something to my fellow white people – as an invitation, as a metaphor ... An invitation to what, and a metaphor of what exactly? I am not sure. I can only share what I know. Personally, I fell in love with black (some)bodies, in the most literal sense of the word, more than once, and I am currently in an interracial relationship, married to a black man, which obviously makes all the difference in terms of my *falling upward* as a white person, in terms of discerning and negotiating the boundaries and the meanings of my, and my partner’s, racial and sexual identities and the ways in which we enact them. But there certainly are different levels and forms of *falling in love* with blackness embodied. Recent studies report that more than half of South Africans say that they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ socialise with people of other races (Wale 2013:33). Is that not the underbelly of our stratified social fabric? Is there anything we can do, for instance, as a nation, as religious believers, as educators and academics to rekindle the most basic sense of *curiosity* among us, white people – a curiosity about our black neighbours: their cultures, their family structures, their languages, their food, their music, their liturgies, without reducing those to mere folklore or a touristic resource? Divisions within our society – along with racial, tribal, gender and other lines – as well as the fact that our politicians can so easily manipulate ethnicity and incite violence against fellow Africans for nefarious, short-term ends – all this reveals deep levels of self-hate and exposes South Africans, black people and white people alike, as a wounded people at war with ourselves. In the light of that, I wonder whether it is too idealistic and

naïve to claim that we need to *fall in love* with one another, especially across the most tenuous demarcation lines running between black people and white people.

## Reimagining the contours of a mature spirituality in a racialised social context

To close the loop, I want to suggest that – as significant and necessary as the prophetic challenge *vis-à-vis* white supremacy must be considered – *falling upward* as a *kenosis* of whiteness appears also as a matter of mature spirituality, a spirituality for ‘the second half of life’, to use Jung’s and Rohr’s phrase – perhaps, in our social context, a spirituality for the second 25 years of our democracy. While our prophetic quest, which must not stop until God’s reign can be experienced tangibly by all, requires that we speak truth to power and denounce the sinful, exclusionary structures wherever we find them, the internal logic of mature spirituality is to ‘transcend and include’. *Falling upward* as a *kenosis* of whiteness presumes the prophetic approach, but it goes beyond it. Comfortable with a paradox, those imbued with a mystical awareness seek to transcend the personal and institutional tendency to maintain and defend the racist system which serves one racial group at the expense of all the others. At the same time, however, they have the capacity to include, embrace and nourish the humanity of white perpetrators in such a way that their *falling* does not have to mean the final failure and a dead end anymore, but it can now lead them *upward* towards a new kind of growth.

Ultimately whiteness has to be denounced and voided on the institutional level, for this is where it preserves and reinforces itself (Chikane 2018:205 of 4730). But in my experience, all too often white people who ‘want to make a difference’ find themselves helpless, almost paralysed, when confronted with the enormity and complexity of institutional racism and its capacity to *hide*. How often do I hear my white students asking, ‘But what can I do about it?’ The answer to that question can very easily focus on practical solutions reduced to ‘small changes’ in one’s lifestyle or isolated *heroic acts*. The danger here is that one can easily *re-settle* in complacency, or even self-righteousness, without actually addressing the core issue of white privilege. Usually, as white people, we talk about superficial remedies of this kind in terms of becoming more generous, compassionate or charitable. A couple of years ago, our social media witnessed a vivid example of such a misguided attempt to *harvest goodness* out of white folks when my compatriot and billionaire businesswoman Magda Wierzycka suggested in her tweet that every household in the country (implicitly, every white household) could contribute to uplifting black people by hiring a ‘cleaning lady or gardener’.<sup>9</sup>

Until and unless our thinking shifts from the ‘logic of generosity’ to the ‘logic of justice’, we remain part of the

<sup>9</sup>Wierzycka deleted the tweet after swift backlash, saying she thought it was a ‘practical short-term solution to the serious problem of people living on social grants’ (Cowan 2018).

problem, rather than part of the solution. Thus, as much as transforming the racist structures should be our ultimate goal, the radical shift in awareness is the first and indispensable step in the process of voiding our whiteness of its destructive force. And this amounts to nothing less than confronting the extent to which our racial identities 'have been shaped through asymmetrical power relations, both internally within South Africa, and globally through enmeshment within Western historical processes and ideologies' (Matthews 2015:113; see also Steyn 2001:xxxii). Put simply, to voluntarily open or empty social, cultural, economic and ecclesial spaces that I am occupying as a white person living in South Africa, I have to first become aware *that* I am occupying them, *why* it is possible for me to occupy them (often without any conscious effort) and *how*, by occupying them, I am depriving black people living next to me of the air to breathe, resources to thrive and the right to be who they are. That is basically what I understand by becoming aware of and thereby (at least tentatively) disarming and emptying my white privilege.

But for such a shift in awareness to be effective and have a lasting impact on our attitude and behaviour, it cannot be reduced to a purely intellectual realisation. Rather, it needs to encompass the emotional, bodily and, not least, relational dimensions of our grappling with our racial identities. For that to happen, we need to unleash our imaginary potential as a people. As Christians, we are confronted with the enormous task of reimagining our shared future and infusing the symbols of our faith with new meanings conducive to reaching that future *together*. In 2016, Forster wrote about a civil religion that emerged in popular culture in South Africa after the euphoria of the peaceful transition to democratic political rule in 1994; with the first democratic election as its founding miracle, Nelson Mandela as its messiah, Desmond Tutu as its high priest, 'rainbow nation' as its metanarrative, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as its ritual penitentiary act and the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as its sacred texts (Forster 2016). Perhaps a key 'component' that has been missing from that civil religion is the rite of passage, a symbolic and communal initiation into this new mode of co-existence. For us, white people living in South Africa today, the most appropriate rite of passage, I believe, would be one that could facilitate a radical shift in our awareness and initiate us into a mature spirituality of *falling upward*.

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