

## BOOK REVIEW

***#FeesMustFall and its aftermath: Violence, wellbeing and the student movement in South Africa* by T. M. Luescher, A. Wilson Fadiji, K. G. Morwe, A. Erasmus, T. S. Letsoalo & S. B. Mokhema (2022). Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.**

Reviewed by Relebohile Moletsane\*

In a period where university management and the public have labelled students and student activists as violent and not focused on their studies, the book *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath: Violence, Wellbeing and the Student Movement in South Africa* (Luescher et al., 2022) is not only significant, but it is also timely. *#FeesMustFall* and other student campaigns in 2015 and 2016 across South Africa's higher education institutions reminded the university system of the need for relevance in programming, including curriculum and research. The book contributes to deepening our understanding of who our students are and what has shaped and continues to shape their experiences and outcomes in our institutions. The found poem below synthesises some of the themes and issues covered in *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath*. Located within the broad area of poetic enquiry in which words from research transcripts or fieldnotes are used, a found poem uses the actual words of research participants to highlight the various messages or themes communicated in the piece (SAGE Research Methods, 2017). The poem is comprised of captions and comments from interviews with the participants cited in *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath*.

*Protest*

*The battle of liberty or the epitome of violence?*

*No retreat, no surrender*

*No VIP in the revolution*

*A betrayal of hope*

*The calm before the storm*

*Spirit of unwanted peace*

*Strategic*

*Conscientize and mobilize*

*Walk for a just cause*

*Mobilise, educate and strive*

*For our wellbeing*

\* Relebohile Moletsane is professor and the JL Dube Chair in Rural Education in the School of Education and Pro Vice Chancellor: Social Cohesion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: Moletsaner@ukzn.ac.za.

*Escape to safe spaces*  
*Spaces of strength*  
*Joyful rebellion*  
*(Re)Chillaxing!*

Presented in the form of a photo essay (Angelo et al., 2021), *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* is organised into 18 chapters that tell a story of “35 student activists from five South African universities and their experiences of violence and wellbeing in relation to their involvement in the student movement” (Luescher et al., 2022, p. 9). Hence, the book is a form of visual storytelling, made up of photographs that “operate as a form of collage... [of images that] aim not only to construct a comprehensible narrative and to communicate information, but also to achieve visual and emotional impact through editing and design” (Sutherland, 2016, p. 116). As the found poem above suggests, the photo essay presented in *#FeesMustFall and its aftermath* is made up of three sections, which the authors describe as three sets of exhibitions, each made up of several chapters.

In the first section, Chapter 1 introduces the notion of student well-being as a precondition for learning and success in university, especially for those students from poorly resourced communities and schools. The chapter locates the idea of student well-being within the broader decolonisation imperatives and debates currently occupying curricular and institutional reforms in South Africa. Chapter 2 introduces the project and the book, providing the rationale for its focus on violence, well-being, and the use of photovoice “as a mode of inquiry and representation, and as a mode of dissemination and engagement” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 5). The project and the book use the participants’ photographs as both the methodology (Pink, 2001) and the subject of analysis, including their production and interpretation (Margolis, 2004). Concluding this section is Chapter 3, which focuses on the history of struggle in South Africa, juxtaposing the *#FeesMustFall* and *#RhodesMustFall* movements with the 1976 student protests against apartheid education legislation in South Africa.

The second section is made up of nine chapters (chapters 4–12) which document, through photovoice, poetry, and dialogue, the students’ experiences of violence and its aftermath in the context of the 2015/16 *#FeesMustFall* protests. The issues documented range from oppressive spaces in and around universities or the geographies of the violence in the various universities (Chapter 4), the violence within the institutions (Chapter 5), and the students’ activism in terms of conscientizing and mobilising others to act (Chapter 6). Chapter 8 analyses the *#FeesMustFall* protest and its links to violence, which notably contrasted with earlier movements that saw participants resort to stone/rock throwing (1976 anti-apartheid movement), littering (the late 1990s and early 2000s), and fire setting (burning buildings and other structures) as weapons. Chapter 9 outlines the project’s methodology and mode of dissemination, focusing on the book as a photo essay and the travelling exhibition, in which the photographs produced by the students are curated and exhibited to raise awareness and facilitate dialogue in various universities across the country.

*#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* makes a critical methodological contribution. The book draws from a research tradition which aims to study the world (of South African higher education) from the perspectives of students as a group most impacted by the phenomenon (Maclure, 1990), viewing them as knowers and actors in their own lives (Oakley, 1994). To do this, the project on which the book is based used participatory visual methodology (PVM) with 35 students across five South African universities to investigate their experiences and perspectives of “violence on university campuses and the impact this has on student wellbeing ... and to create awareness in the public, in government and among higher education policymakers and university leaders to ensure that student grievances are taken seriously without the need for protesting” (Luescher, et al., 2022, p. 16). Located within community-based participatory research, PVM uses the visual artefact, in this case, photographs, produced by participants, in this case, university students, to co-construct knowledge, including around difficult and controversial topics such as violence and marginalisation safely, and together, imagine alternatives to the social phenomena negatively impacting their lives. Its basic assumption is that the people who experience the problem are in the best position to describe and analyse the issues or conduct research on the subject. This is based on the understanding that to improve the lives of marginal groups, such as students in universities, researchers must enlist alternative research paradigms, drawing on the participants’ insights (Maclure, 1990). Importantly, with participatory research often functioning as an intervention, it makes it possible for researchers, working with participants to influence social change (Schatz & Walker, 1995).

Specifically, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* and the project on which it is based use photovoice as a participatory visual method. Photovoice is often traced back to Paulo Freire’s work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and Caroline Wang’s work which investigates the experiences of Chinese peasants working in rice paddies (Wang & Burris, 1997). Wang et al (2004, p. 911) argue that as “a participatory-action research methodology based on the understanding that people are experts on their own lives”, photovoice involves placing cameras in the hands of the participants, particularly those who are often not listened to, such as students. The aim is to document their experiences and the influence of social phenomena (e.g. violence linked to student protests) in their lives. This enables them to tell stories that were “previously rejected, silenced, or overlooked ... [with] the photograph’s narrative becom[ing] a participatory site for wider storytelling, spurring community members to reflect, discuss, and analyse the issues that confront them” (Singhal & Devi, 2003, p. 7).

Therefore, using photovoice (and other arts-based methods such as poetry), the project and the book, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath*, aim to open up democratic spaces for participants and other students who bear witness through the exhibitions and the dialogues linked to them, and extend participant students agency through the process of telling their own stories as students in higher education institutions in South Africa. In the hope that policy- and decision makers at universities are compelled to confront these issues, since ignoring them when they are visually (through the images) in their

faces is harder to do. Thus, the book challenges higher education institutions to think seriously and creatively about what to do about violence, including structural, symbolic, and physical violence in and around institutions and the interventions needed to ensure the well-being and success of the students these institutions enrol. As Caroline Wang, pioneer of photo-voice, concluded,

Images contribute to how the participants see themselves, how they define and relate to the world, and what they see as significant to address or change. The lesson an image teaches does not reside in its physical structures but rather in how people interpret the image in question. (Wang, 1999, p. 186)

Other chapters in the section include a focus on gender (and gender-based violence) within the student movement (Chapter 10), the fear and trauma instigated by intimidation, police (and private security company) brutality against protesting students (Chapter 11), and the negative outcomes of protests (Chapter 12).

The third section of the book responds to Schratz and Walker's (1995) notion of research as social change. Chapters in this section document how student activists and their allies advocated for change (Chapter 13), how they developed unity and solidarity among themselves and other students (Chapter 14), how they sought and nurtured their own and others' well-being (Chapter 15), and how they found escape from the violence and safe spaces to cope with its aftermath (Chapter 16). Challenging the widespread belief that student protests are simply violent undertakings with no real purpose and that students engage in them because they are not serious about their education, Chapter 17 documents the student movement as purposeful and students as active knowers and actors focused on achieving success in education and contributing to their own and others' well-being in the process.

Chapter 18 concludes the book and foregrounds the volume's contribution to scholarship, activism and social change in the South African higher education system. Using photovoice and other participatory research methods, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* highlights the nature and manifestations of violence within the student protest movement in South Africa and its negative impacts on student well-being and success in their studies. Importantly, it is a call to action for student activists to find alternative ways of protest that do not involve violence, and for university and higher education system policymakers to understand, from the perspectives of the students themselves, the nature and influence of violence and strategies needed for social and curricular change, including the decolonisation of the university and its programmes. Through the images or the various sets of exhibitions and captions it presents, as a photo essay, the book "open[s] up dialogue and asks questions about the numerous forms of [violence] materiality and altered landscapes that the authors have chronicled" (Angelo et al., 2021, p. 154).

Finally, *#FeesMustFall and its Aftermath* raises the bar on methodological relevance and rigour in investigating students' experiences of violence and well-being in universities. The book generatively and creatively draws on and contributes to contemporary

theoretical thinking and empirical work on violence and student well-being in higher education institutions, such as the book, *Studying While Black*, by Swartz, Mahali et al. (2017), and their documentary, *Ready or Not! Black Students' Experiences of South African Universities*. Swartz and her colleagues also used photovoice and other arts-based methods (storytelling, video documentary) to document the experiences of black students in eight universities in South Africa. Their study concluded that skills and systemic change are needed to address inequality, including disparities among students linked to socio-economic class, race, gender and other markers of identity, and the exclusion, violence and exploitation many students experience in universities.

As such, it is a welcome contribution to the scholarship on student activism and violence and strategies needed to address its aftermath.

### References

- Angelo, D., Britt, K., Brown, M. L., & Camp, S. L. (2021). Private struggles in public spaces. *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 8(1), 154-184. <https://doi.org/10.1558/JCA.43379>.
- Maclure, R. (1990). The challenge of participatory research and its implications for funding agencies. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 10(3), 1-19.
- Margolis, E. (2004). Looking at discipline, looking at labour: Photographic representations of Indian boarding schools. *Visual Studies*, 19, 72-96.
- Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. SAGE.
- Moletsane, R. (2018). 'Stop the war on women's bodies': Facilitating a girl-led march against sexual violence in a rural community in South Africa. *Studies in Social Justice*, 12(2), 235-250. DOI: 10.26522/ssj.v12i2.1655.
- Oakley, A. (1994). Women and children first and last. Parallels and differences between children's and women's studies. In B. Mayall (Ed.), *Children's childhoods observed and experienced* (pp. 13-27). Falmer Press.
- Pink, S. (2007). *Doing visual ethnography*. (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- SAGE Research Methods. (2017). *Lynn Butler-Kisber defines poetic inquiry* [Video]. SAGE Research Methods. <https://methods.sagepub.com/video/lynn-butler-kisber-defines-poetic-inquiry>.
- Schatz, M., & Walker, R. (1995). *Research as social change: New opportunities for qualitative research*. Routledge.
- Sutherland, P. (2016). The photo essay. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 32(2), 115-121.
- Swartz, S., Mahali, A., Moletsane, R., Arogundade, E., Khalema, E.N., Cooper, A., & Groenewald, C. (2018). *Studying while black: Race, education and emancipation in South African universities*. HSRC Press.
- Wang, C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health*, 8(2), 185-192.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behaviour*, 24(3), 369-387.
- Wang, C., Morrel-Samuels, S., Hutchison, P., Bell, L., & Pestronk, R. (2004). Flint photovoice: Community building among youths, adults, and policymakers. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94(6), 911-913. DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.94.6.911.

***How to cite:***

Moletsane, R. (2022). Review of *#FeesMustFall and its aftermath: Violence, wellbeing and the student movement in South Africa* by T. M. Luescher, A. Wilson Fadiji, K. G. Morwe, A. Erasmus, T. S. Letsoalo & S. B. Mokhema. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 10(2), 239-244. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v10i2.4371