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An Exploration of the Role of *Twitter* in the Discourse Around Race in South Africa

Using the #Feesmustfall Movement as a Pivot for Discussion

Suzanne Beukes

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing protest against fee increases at the University of Witwatersrand is not about the whim and fancy of students who feel entitled to a free ride. It is about the ongoing struggle of black youth to secure a future unencumbered by the burdens of a history of disadvantage.¹

In a highly political post-apartheid South Africa, the promise of a truly, non-racialized society remains largely unrealized (Haffajee 2015: 11). After 22 years of democracy, South Africans are facing a multitude of socio-economic and political challenges. These include a depressed economy, a growing lack of confidence in the political liberation party of the African National Congress party (ANC) as well as a large youth population demanding better access to their basic rights and jobs (Malala 2015: 11). In addition, as Jan Hofmeyr and Rajen Govender (2016: 1) illustrate in the South African Reconciliation Barometer—measuring reconciliation, social cohesion, transformation and democratic governance—there is a growing distrust among racial groups.

As a result, there is a heightened intensity to the discourse around race, inequality, and transformation in South Africa; and to, what is described by interviewees participating in this research as, a “shift in consciousness” or a “psychic purge.”

Over the past two years, *Twitter* has increasingly become a platform for previously marginalized groups such as young black South Africans; serving

1 | The Daily Vox (2015): “Special editorial: The Wits protest is not just about university fees.” <http://www.thedailyvox.co.za/special-editorial-the-wits-protest-is-not-just-about-university-fees/>

to convene, organize, channel arguments and influence public action around issues such as race.²

By using *#FeesMustFall*—one of the largest civic movements in South Africa since 1994 and also one of the largest events on *Twitter* in 2015—as a pivot for discussion, I aim to explore how *Twitter* played a role in this so called “change in psyche.”

In her book, “What If There Were Not Whites in South Africa?” Ferial Haffajee (2015) has described the broader impact of the movement: “*#FeesMustFall* is about much more than fees—it’s about freedom’s unfinished work and its soldiers are the children of that freedom; it is also about choices the democratic state has made” (ibid: 162).

To address such a multi-layered movement which incorporates issues of access to higher education, structural racism, colonialism, white privilege, and inequality (ibid: 163) acutely experienced by young black South Africans, I drew on anthropological works from Yamar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa’s (2015) “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States,” as well as Sanjay Sharma’s (2013) “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion.”

As the movement resonated across multiple platforms on social media, mainstream media, and physical protest action, I also referred to John Postill and Sarah Pink’s (2012) article: *Social Media Ethnography: the Digital Researcher in a Messy Web*, which explored how “Social media ethnography produces ‘ethnographic places’ that traverse online/offline contexts and are collaborative, participatory, open and public” (ibid: 2).

While detailed demographic data about *Twitter* users in South Africa was not immediately available at the time of research, I have drawn from available resources such as the Social Media Landscape 2015 report, produced by technology market research organisations World Wide Works and Fuseware. The work is supplemented with interviews from South African social media researchers Arthur Goldstuck (managing director of World Wide Works) and Kyle Findlay (a data science researcher).

METHODOLOGY

As a white South African, I have long believed that many white South Africans remain largely ignorant about the real struggles and discrimination still experienced by black South Africans. In 2016 through social media, it seemed to me that suddenly the floodgates around issues of white privilege, inequality, racism and ignorance opened up in the public sphere whereas before these

2 | Interview with Kyle Findlay, March 2016.

issues were mainly discussed in homes and social circles of black and white communities separately. Social media, particularly *Twitter*, has played an important role in opening up these conversations.

Tracking a wave of conversations around race on social media, especially *Twitter*, led me to explore related links to conversations and articles. Mainstream media in South Africa, such as the *Daily Maverick*,³ *The Citizen*,⁴ and the *Mail and Guardian*,⁵ along with others, make direct links to *Twitter*'s role. A good example of this can be found with Stephen Grootes' opinion piece "When *Twitter* met South Africa—a match made in a train smash."⁶ These explorations, as described by Postill and Pink (2012), "can end in a quick glance at a webpage or in longer, more meandering explorations of a potential research site, participant or initiative" (ibid: 7).

It is no coincidence that this heightened debate is happening at a time of political turmoil. There is a surge in student activism from a generation facing a country still deeply affected by the legacy of apartheid yet who are not afraid of challenging the dream of a multiracial "Rainbow Nation" that was sold to my generation. Somehow *Twitter* is at the heart of it. As one of the respondents, Kyle Findlay said, "We wouldn't be having these conversations if it wasn't for *Twitter*."

So my aim was to extrapolate the role of *Twitter* in the current discourse around race, by focusing on the *#FeesMustFall* movement—one of the biggest civic events in the country and on *Twitter*. To do this, I observed discussions on *Twitter* referencing the *#FeesMustFall* movement, as well as a chain of knock-on "Fallist" campaigns such as *#ZumaMustFall*, *#OutsourcingMustFall*, *#AfrikaansMustFall*. I have also conducted in-depth interviews with a small sample of respondents active on *Twitter*: journalists, social and political commentators, researchers, entrepreneurs, comedians, and students. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in Johannesburg, and on *Skype*. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes.

There are several limitations to this research. The first is that I only began the participant observation in 2016. While the *#FeesMustFall* and related hashtags are still used as ongoing protest action takes place in various universities in South Africa, the bulk of the protest action specifically around *#FeesMustFall* action took place in 2015. Therefore, this research consists of a

3 | <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/>

4 | <http://citizen.co.za/>

5 | <http://mg.co.za/>

6 | Grootes, Stephen (2016): "Op-Ed: When *Twitter* met South Africa a match made in a train smash." <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-01-28-op-ed-when-twitter-met-south-africa-a-match-made-in-a-train-smash/#.Vq50JcvBzFI>

variety of examples, which reference the movement activities in 2015 as well as 2016.

The second limitation is that the sample of interviewees is small and the topic is quite broad. However, I believe that the material is at least able to provide a snapshot of a changing discourse in South Africa and an important shift in the psyche of South Africans. In this, *Twitter* has played a critical part by providing a platform for young black South Africans to express their views, align arguments, influence public opinion and debate issues facing a post-apartheid South Africa.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

In April 2015—the same month that a student movement called *#RhodesMustFall* took protest action to remove a statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town (UCT) as part of its broader aim to decolonise the university—negotiations around annual fee increments began at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) between student representatives and university management. Six months of intense efforts by the Wits Student Representative Council (SRC) to keep fee increases at bay were met with no success as the Wits Senate voted in a 10.5 percent fee increase—a decision which would make higher education largely unaffordable for many young black South Africans, particularly those from the “missing middle,” who are already struggling with tuition and living fees. These “missing middle” are students who cannot access the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding because they are just above the threshold but are still not able to afford standard university fees (Wits 2016).

The SRC saw no other option but to take protest action against the university. So the *#FeesMustFall* movement was born. Political and gender writer Sisonke Msimang (2016) eloquently explains this:

This movement wasn't supposed to be necessary in a new South Africa. Anyone would have been able to understand poor people who continued to stay trapped in poverty since 1994 but these are people who aren't actually poor but who have financial problems perfectly understandable to middle class people black and white.⁷

Early in the morning in mid-October 2015, a small group of student protesters blocked the entrances to Wits university as a symbolic move to show how black students from disadvantaged backgrounds would be prevented from continuing their studies if the fee increment was implemented. The protest also aimed at making white students (many of whom use their own cars to

7 | Interview with Sisonke Msimang, March 2016.

travel to university) aware of their “white privilege”—likely they could afford the fee increase. Wits University along with the University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, University of the Free State, and University of Pretoria, are seen as traditionally white institutions since, during apartheid, only white students could study there. Despite more than two decades of democracy, it is still felt by many that these universities remain untransformed in terms of management, staff, and curricula. Law lecturer, Joel Modiri (2015), described why this legacy still remains:

Because a central outcome of de jure apartheid was the racial stratification of society in hierarchical terms, the unequal distribution of rights, resources and benefits continues to favour whites and disfavour Blacks. Thus we can say that we currently live under conditions of de facto apartheid or neo-apartheid/neo-colonialism in which the same macro-structure of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” which defined colonial apartheid continues to operate, although under a different legal and political arrangement (i.e., a liberal democratic government under non-white rule). (ibid: 221)

While the *#FeesMustFall* campaign’s main public goal was to address the fee increment, much like the earlier *#RhodesMustFall* movement, it also sought to challenge these conditions. According to Fasiha Hassan (2016), Wits SRC Secretary General:

Decolonisation is the umbrella under which we are functioning. *#FeesMustFall* highlighted the racial disparity in a post-1994 context where people like myself (who are born free) haven’t overcome the real wounds of apartheid, colonialism, racism, structural racism and it’s clear that there are still biases.⁸

As the days drew on, so grew the crowds of students and, like wildfire, similar protests sprung up in other institutions across the country, with an increased engagement and support from a broad-based South African public. Sympathisers in the United States of America, India and other countries, showed solidarity on *Twitter* and social media. Mainstream media covered the movement extensively, often re-quoting student-led *Twitter* accounts.

Two weeks after the movement started at Wits, a mass protest was held at the Union buildings in Pretoria where President Jacob Zuma announced that there would be no fee increase for 2016. The students had won, but it was bittersweet as Mzwanele Ntshwanti (2016), Wits SRC Projects, Media and Campaigns Manager recalled: “When we were coming back from Union

8 | Interview with Fasiha Hassan, March 2016.

buildings I didn't feel victorious and not on the basis that we didn't get what we wanted, but it was on the basis of what we had to do to get that."⁹

Image 1



The frustration of students who feel their voices are not heard. Seven months of negotiations with Wits management to prevent an increase in fees yielded no success forcing students to take action.

WHO IS ON *TWITTER*, HOW ARE THEY USING IT, AND WHY?

According to the South Africa Social Media Landscape 2015 report, *Twitter* is the third most used social media platform after *Facebook* and *YouTube*, and its 7.4 million¹⁰ strong user base is still growing healthily. This growth is contrary to trends in developed countries, such as the United States of America (Goldstuck 2016).¹¹ South Africa's growing middle class and the increased affordability of smartphones, has led to a strong uptake in the platform (World Wide Worx and Fuseware 2015: 2). According to Arthur Goldstuck, managing director of World Wide Worx, "This means a big user base coming on board that is keen on a platform where they can express themselves." This is not unique when compared to other developing countries, but, said Goldstuck: "What make's South Africa different is that there is a very vigorous public discourse here. South Africans want a platform where they can be heard and be part of a conversation." Despite being the most popular social media platform, *Facebook* has failed in that instance because it caters mainly for a user's social circle, whereas on *Twitter* a user's opinion is public (Goldstuck 2016).¹²

Therefore, when viewed as an unmediated platform allowing anyone with access to the internet to participate in a discussion, *Twitter* can be seen a democratizing tool, in the context of Jurgen Habermas' public sphere, as "an arena, independent of government [and market]...dedicated to rational debate and which is both accessible to entry and inspection by the citizenry. It is here

9 | Interview conducted with Mzwanele Ntshwanti, March 2016.

10 | Interview conducted with Arthur Goldstuck, March 2016 (Social Media Landscape report has older figure of 6.6 million).

11 | Interview conducted with Arthur Goldstuck, March 2016.

12 | Interview conducted with Arthur Goldstuck, March 2016.

...that public opinion is formed” (Holub quoted in Webster 1995: 101-2; quoted in Postill 2012: 166).

But this poses a question as to how we can avoid what Bonilla (2015) warns as the “Common slippage made by journalists and others who tend to represent *Twitter* as an un-problematized ‘public sphere’ without taking into account the complexity of who is on *Twitter*, as well as how people are on *Twitter* in different ways” (2015:6).

During the course of this research it was not possible to source detailed demographic data about *Twitter*’s user base. Goldstuck explained that this breakdown would only appear in a later version of the Social Media Landscape 2015 report. However, based on data science researcher Kyle Findlay’s network analytics on the major communities on *Twitter* and interviews with respondents, some conclusions can be drawn.

When *Twitter* was first taken up in South Africa, it was very much the preserve of the educated middle class (Goldstuck 2016).¹³ While it largely still remains the domain of both the black and white middle classes, as internet access improves and there is a greater take up of cheaper smartphones, the picture of *Twitter* users is becoming more broad-based to include wide engagement from a greater variety of black commentators (Findlay, 2016).¹⁴

Looking at data collated by Findlay, as well as sentiments expressed by interviewees, this step change began around the start of 2015 with the entry of this more broad-based black South African online community, known as “Black *Twitter*.” While initially the community was based in Johannesburg and exchanges revolved around celebrities and entertainment, the usability of *Twitter*—combined with a turbulent political situation—quickly broadened conversations. Throughout 2015, comments became centred around *#RhodesMustFall*, *#SONA* (State of the Nation Address), *#FeesMustFall*, and *#ZumaMustFall* (Findlay, 2016). South Africa’s “Black *Twitter*” draws parallels to African American engagement on *Twitter*, with users identifying closely with causes such as *#BlackLivesMatter*. Journalist Kwanele Sosibo explained this interconnectivity:

It’s really modelled on African American culture and so looking at how the platform is being usurped by younger black people and with this American Imperialism (this is how a lot of black people speak here) there is less of a distance between the diaspora. I do think this shapes how the discourses happen and just with the information age, the level of people’s consciousness has shifted and they are able to analyse issues of race and nuances more.¹⁵

13 | Interview conducted with Arthur Goldstuck, March 2016.

14 | Interview conducted with Kyle Findlay, March 2016.

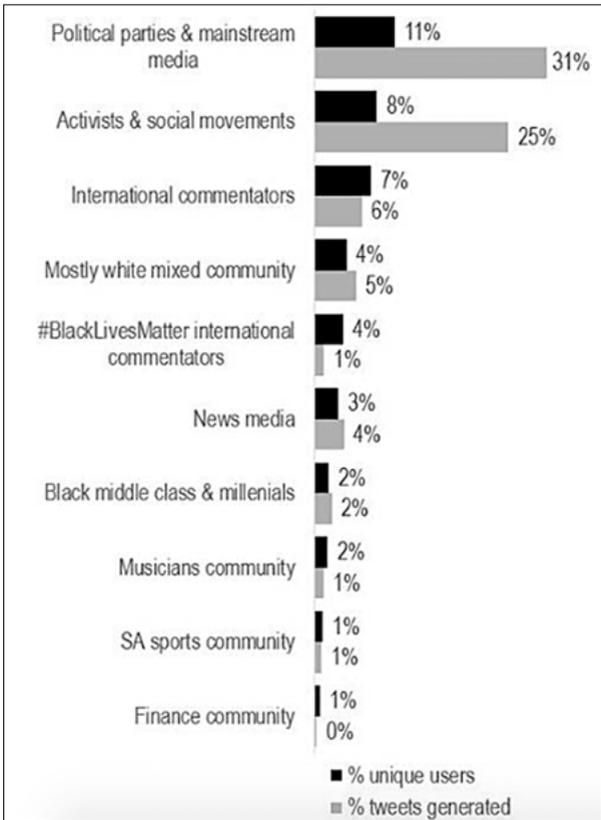
15 | Interview conducted with Kwanele Sosibo, March 2016.

Findlay's research looks generally at the political discourse in the country over 2015, focusing on key events including *#FeesMustFall*. He noted that 52 per cent of tweets about these events came from just two communities. The first is defined as representing "the establishment" (estimated to be made up of about 80 per cent white and 20 per cent black users), and is comprised of large accounts run by political parties and mainstream media—making up 11 per cent of users—who generated 31 per cent of all tweets. The other big community is "the anti-establishment" comprised of activists and social movements (such as *@RhodesMustFall* and *@DailyVox*, the youth-based online publication that was at the forefront of *Twitter* coverage of *#FeesMustFall*) representing 8 per cent of users in Findlay's dataset¹⁶. This community, estimated to be around 56 per cent black and 40 per cent white, is heavily weighted toward female users, and is made up largely of young people aged 18-25. That this community represents just 8 per cent of users yet generates over 20 per cent of tweets shows that it is a highly engaged and impassioned community. Findlay (2016) says, "They are shouting, they are passionate, and driven." *Twitter* is empowering black South Africans to flourish by providing a platform to speak about issues such as race, discrimination, inequality, that previously would only have been discussed in private. Sosibo¹⁷ described what may be behind this uptake: "I think people took for granted that the more upwardly mobile black classes will fit in more with the status quo and hold more liberal views. *Twitter* shattered that myth maybe because before black people didn't have an outlet to express their opinions so a lot of people didn't know what they were thinking."

16 | Findlay, Kyle (2016) 2015: The year according to Twitter <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-02-17-2015-the-year-according-to-twitter/#.VydH4aN97EY>

17 | Interview conducted with Kwanele Sosibo, March 2016.

Image 2



South African *Twitter* communities in the conversation map on main political events in 2015 (Findlay: 2016)

In this way *Twitter* appears to be a much more empowering tool for black South Africans than for white South Africans. Journalist Deshnee Subramany (2016) explained:

Black people have become a lot bolder to say certain things that they wouldn't normally say walking through the mall. Having *Twitter* is at least a starting point for that conversation to let people know its ok to express yourself because other people have had the opportunity to do that their whole lives, black people haven't. So it's a really good space for people to just start their purging process. For me, it has been a really good space to get my arguments together and understand what I'm actually feeling as opposed to just getting lost in the emotions and not have the words to say it.¹⁸

18 | Interview conducted with Deshnee Subramany, March 2016.

This, to an extent, echoes Bonilla's statement:

Twitter affords a unique platform for collectively identifying, articulating, and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations. Whereas in most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are over-determined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counter narratives and re-imagining group identities. (2015: 3)

DISRUPTING THE NARRATIVE

This digital empowerment has been reflected in the *#FeesMustFall* movement where Wits students armed with smartphones (Haffajee 2015: 161). The students took charge of their own story out of a desire to disrupt the “white space” of the university and “white” liberal media, whom they felt were not telling their story accurately.¹⁹ The *Daily Vox*,²⁰ a youth-based online publication, became one of the primary voices of the movement and *Twitter* was its main vehicle for transmitting news. Throughout the protests, the publication distributed video, audio and images—telling stories that traditional media was not picking up, especially at the start of the protest. For instance, on the first day of the protest, there was a white student motorist who tried to drive through the protesting line, “A lot of people were shocked by that and were like this is exactly the problem with white people in South Africa,” said Patel.²¹ Fasiha Hassan, Wits SRC Secretary General (2016) affirms this when she states, “This is not something the media reported on,” said Hassan, “because then we were seen as hooligans.”²²

Two respondents also described how some students blocked journalists from mainstream media houses from covering the event because they felt they were inaccurately being depicted as violent troublemakers. Journalist and activist, Oliver Meth said, “We were reading the report from the day before and we were like ‘No this didn’t happen’...That’s when we took over in terms of reporting our own story using the *Daily Vox* platform.”²³

Khadija Patel, co-founder of the *Daily Vox*, said social media became vital to overcome the “distrust of an alternative narrative that comes from the younger generation.” She went on to explain that by taking control of their story on

19 | Interview with Khadija Patel, March 2016.

20 | <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/>

21 | Interview with Khadija Patel, March 2016.

22 | Interview with Fasiha Hassan, Wits SRC Secretary General, March 2016.

23 | Interview with Oliver Meth, March 2016.

social media, particularly *Twitter*, students were able to disrupt the traditional narrative told by mainstream media and ensure student voices were both credible and authoritative.

Image 3



Students take charge of their own story and criticise mainstream media

TWITTER AND THE DIGITAL REBIRTH OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Students identify their cause with that of the 1976 student uprising against Afrikaans as a forced language of instruction. Black Consciousness theories from Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon have become popularised again and form important pivots for the movement. Oliver Meth²⁴ explained the reason behind this revival:

There is the revival of black consciousness because the black youth voice has been marginalised from the political debate. This is the platform for us to portray the kind of messages to interpret to people who don't understand what happened on the ground for youth in tertiary institutions, and for youth in general in townships that are pressed by these different systems formed during the colonised days.

When exploring *Twitter's* role in this revitalisation in the current discourse around race in South Africa, it is important to look at *Twitter* as a consensus-building medium. *Twitter* essentially allows more people to align around a particular body of knowledge, which comes pre-packaged with certain arguments. "So if you have a debate today with someone, I think you will have the same kind of arguments and counter arguments arising whereas if you had

24 | Interview with Oliver Meth, March 2016.

them two years ago in South Africa you would have had it coming from a more individual point of view,” explained Findlay.²⁵

Twitter as a Polarising Tool

One of the extreme characteristics of *Twitter's* consensus building attribute is polarisation. It is worth highlighting some of key lessons learnt by Wael Ghonim, an activist during the Arab Spring in Egypt, on his engagement with social media as quoted in *The New York Times* opinion piece by Thomas Friedman (2016). There he described how users on social media communicate generally with people they tend to agree with and how a mob mentality can quickly take over discussions:

Because of the speed and brevity of social media, we are forced to jump to conclusions and write sharp opinions in 140 characters about complex world affairs. And once we do that, it lives forever on the internet...Today, our social media experiences are designed in a way that favours broadcasting over engagements, posts over discussions, shallow comments over deep conversations...It's as if we agreed that we are here to talk at each other instead of talking with each other.²⁶ (Ghonim, 2016)

This kind of polarisation can be seen particularly in spin-off “Fallist” campaigns from the *#FeesMustFall* movement such as *#AfrikaansMustFall*. This campaign started at the University of Pretoria, a formerly white Afrikaans university, which still uses Afrikaans as a medium for instruction together with English. The aim was to remove Afrikaans as a medium of instruction because it excludes black students who feel it is discriminatory; some students, mostly white Afrikaans students, are at an advantage of learning in their mother tongue while black students must take their classes in English, a second language for most. Afrikaans students in favour of learning in their mother tongue opposed the protest with the *#AfrikaansSalBly* (“Afrikaans will stay”). Violence between groups quickly erupted leading to a university shutdown (ENCA: 2016).²⁷

25 | Interview with Kyle Findlay, March 2016.

26 | Friedman, Thomas (2016): “Social Media: Destroyer or Creator?” http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/opinion/social-media-destroyer-or-creator.html?_r=0

27 | “Police monitor AfriForum and EFF students at the University of Pretoria.” <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/students-divided-over-afrikaans>

Image 4



University of Pretoria issues a warning to students and staff using social media to spread hate speech and incite violence in view of increasing tensions over Afrikaans as a language of instruction.

As the protests on the ground increased, so the conversations on *Twitter* intensified, culminating in the University of Pretoria issuing a warning to students, staff, and others regarding using social media to incite violence and hate speech. Simultaneously, the *#Afrikaansmustfall* movement gained momentum at other universities still keeping a dual language policy, such as University of the Free State (UFS), University of Stellenbosch (US) and North West University (NWU).

The pressure resulted in UFS removing Afrikaans as a language of instruction as of 2017. This was a major move within a university struggling with transformation. Only this year, UFS suffered a horrific violent racist event: during half-time of an inter-university rugby match, black student protesters went onto the field demanding an end to outsourced employment of workers under the banner *#OutsourcingMustFall*; the protest turned violent when white spectators ran onto the field and beat up some of the black protesters (EWN: 2016).²⁸

Events such as these have obviously heightened racial tensions on campuses and prompted an increased intensity of engagement on social media.

28 | EWN(2016): "Tensions high after UFS Rugby Brawl". <http://ewn.co.za/2016/02/23/UFS-suspends-classes-after-black-vs-white-brawl>

There have been attempts by some students to pacify violence through prayer groups and on social media through a *#colourblind campaign*. This campaign encouraged students of different races to take photos with each other in an effort to help end racial violence on campuses. But it received a huge backlash on *Twitter* because many people felt it washed over key issues raised by black South African students.

As protests continue, these multidimensional arguments are fast coming to the fore, with confrontations on social media sites and actually on campuses. But, as Khadija Patel (2016) explained, the role of *Twitter* needs to be contextualised:

I don't think we are on the brink of a race war any day now. But we need to have the kind of conversations that can result in change that people can see. Because they are just tweets, someone's thoughts, they are not going to change the world unless someone does something with it.²⁹

CONCLUSION

In South Africa, as in many other contexts, *Twitter* should not be seen as a place that transcends social boundaries and categories but rather, as Sharma (2013) highlights: “It reflects an internet that is a [...] ‘racially demarcated space’” and that “is a manifold set of sociotechnical practices, generative of digital privileges and racial ordering” (2013: 46).

The growth of the voices of young, born free, black South Africans on *Twitter*—eager to tell their stories themselves and to disrupt a traditional narrative—has opened up a wider, diverse, more robust discussion around race and inequality in South Africa. I hope this research, while limited in scope, has provided a snapshot of some key trends within the discourse around race in South Africa though it has by no means sufficed in exploring them in depth. It also fails to address many other themes and trends such as the politicization of *#FeesMustFall* by political parties, the dynamics at play between older commentators and youth movement members, along with how much *Twitter* can amplify hate speech. There is therefore much scope for more additional, more specific and refined research on these trends.

29 | Interview conducted with Khadija Patel, March 2016.

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