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The narration of anti-capitalist and anti-white supremacist struggles in post-apartheid South African public discourse generated by events such as the #FeesMustFall movement and the Marikana massacre have tended to privilege certain voices. They have fallen into “‘malestream’ African history”, characterised by the silencing of women’s voices (Zeleza, 2005:207), a tendency seen in previous anticolonial struggles in the country. After experiencing and witnessing this gender bias in the fight against apartheid, South African artist and activist Gcina Mhlophe penned a poem in 1983 titled Say No, where she remarked:

Say No, Black Woman
Say No
When they give you a back seat
in the liberation wagon
Say No.

I have previously written (Dlakuvu, 2015) on the ways in which Black women in #FeesMustFall took up Mhlophe’s call and said “No” to their invisibilisation within the narration of the #FeesMustFall movement by rendering their struggles, voices, labour and impact visible in our public discourse. In November 2016, when I attended the screening of The Giant is Falling by South African Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker Rehad Desai, the significance of Mhlophe’s words found meaning once more. The Giant is Falling is described as a documentary which takes “a close look” at recent years and events in South Africa when “things fell apart” (Desai, 2016). Events looked at include the Marikana massacre as well as the ways in which South Africans as a collective have responded to inequality and “the ANC’s failure to deliver on its promises” (Desai, 2016).

What I witnessed and experienced in the documentary was another instance of Black women being given “a back seat in the liberation wagon” in South Africa’s political landscape (Mhlophe, 1983). Desai reflects the masculinist historical trends which Mhlophe and many Black women have observed by contributing to placing Black women in the ‘back seat’ when telling a nation’s story. This is despite countless recorded attempts to challenge the ‘giant’, that is, the ruling African National Congress (ANC). Black women have been at the helm of challenging the ‘giant’ that is the ANC, along with multiple efforts to contest unjust inequalities that are an ongoing feature of South Africa’s reality. Additionally, Black women’s efforts to create a more equal society through resistance were masked.

The Giant is Falling begins with an image of a Black woman carrying a bucket of water in an informal settlement. She does not speak, and we do not hear her voice. She is nameless and voiceless. Desai, the narrator, uses her image to speak to and over the racialised inequalities that persist in South Africa two decades after democracy. Like dominant representations of Black women in film that continue to persist, Desai denies Black women their subjectivity and political agency and relegates them to mute objects. Moreover, from seeing the film a person unfamiliar with South Africa’s political discourse may correctly assume that Black women have a limited
engagement in political struggles to challenge the ANC and the prevailing unequal socio-economic status quo. Similarly, one may assume that South Africa has an absence of Black women who are political analysts, economists and struggle veterans. Of the many ‘commentators’ in the film, including politicians, activists, lawyers, journalists and economists, only one woman is given a voice. Fiona Forde, a white woman, is the only woman given a platform to provide analysis. Desai’s forms of erasure...
and historical amnesia in relation to Black women characterise the film.

At the film screening in Johannesburg South African activist Sekoetlane Phamodi rose to question and challenge Desai’s blatant erasure. Phamodi stated: “[The film] does not show a single [Black] woman speaking about the experience of women during this difficult time” (Kemp, 2016). This is crucial because this is not the first time Desai has been challenged for his erasure of Black women’s political actions and agency while narrating South Africa’s political history. There is a record of feminist responses to his Emmy Award-winning film Miners Shot Down, which detailed the events of the Marikana massacre, a labour dispute in 2012 against unjust wages which resulted in the death of 34 mineworkers at the hands of police officers.

One of the feminist responses to Miners Shot Down came from South African activist and filmmaker Gillian Schutte (2014), who wrote:

… the fact that there is not one voice of the Marikana women in this film. One would think that this community is only made up of men – that it was only men who were impacted by this historical event.

Black feminist scholar and activist Pumla Gqola has noted (2010:8) that “memory resists erasure”, and Black feminist academics, artists and activists in South Africa have been working to challenge representations of nationhood, political history and memory that place Black women at the margins. Through extraordinary research South African academic Asanda Benya contests the dominant representation of the Marikana massacre as a moment in South African history that only affected men. She works to memorialise the experiences of women working in mines as well as the political mobilisation of Black women in Marikana during and after the massacre. It is worth quoting Benya’s work (2015:555) In Invisible hands: Women of Marikana at length:

… In the early stages of the strike, prior to the massacre in August 2012, often Marikana women’s involvement was to support the women whose husbands were not coming back at night, hiding from police harassment, and to supply workers who were on the hill with food and credit to make phone calls. Later however they took a more proactive role. After the massacre, when close to 270 workers were arrested, it was women who kept the strike alive. Even when police began hounding others in their homes, they were outside the court protesting and demanding the release of their partners. A month after the massacre, women organised their own march demanding that the police and army leave their community and stop harassing them and their children …

These political efforts by Black women in Marikana did not receive a single mention in Miners Shot Down. Just as the political actions of Black women in post-apartheid South Africa to challenge The Giant and prevailing injustices were erased in his recent output.

There are Black women who were crucial to the events mentioned in The Giant is Falling. One such example is in the controversial South African ‘arms deal’ – the country’s ‘Strategic Defence Package’ of military acquisitions in 1999 by the ANC government. These acquisitions were embroiled in corruption at the expense of South African taxpayers’ contributions. This deal has been described as the “R46-billion defence acquisition” that “triggered our loss of innocence” as a country (Munusamy, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that the person who lifted the veil over this national scandal in Parliament in 1999 was a Black woman. Her name is Patricia De Lille, and her role led to a Commission of Inquiry into this case – and her political legacy was masked in the film.

One of the most important events and trials in South Africa – Jacob Zuma’s rape trial by complainant Fezeka Kuzwayo, who was publicly known by her alias ‘Khwezi’ – is only mentioned in passing. They mention the torment from Zuma supporters; they mention the people within the ANC who supported him. However, the film erases the simultaneous resistance by Black feminists outside the same court whose images it features. Black feminist activists, academics and artists ensured that Zuma was held socially accountable. Black feminists formed an organisation called the One in Nine Campaign (2006) which provided

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support for Kuzwayo as well as countless other rape survivors and victims in South Africa who have been denied justice.

Moreover, in the past two decades of our democracy Black women have led and been part of social movements to challenge inequality, failures of state service delivery, rape culture and corruption, among many others. Within the ANC there are Black women who have challenged ANC decisions and inactions, which led to their political exile. There is no acknowledgement of this genealogy of resistance by Black women which has contributed towards the dignity of millions of lives in South Africa. These political struggles have taken a heavy toll on Black women. Black women have been criminalised and physically and psychologically wounded in their fight for a more equitable society at the hands of the ANC government. Yet these narratives are invisibilised and therefore delegitimised.
There are filmmakers, colleagues to Desai, in South Africa who are men who tell stories of the nation without deligitimising Black women’s agency and voices. One recent documentary which comes to mind is *A Letter to Mandela* (2014) by Khalo Matabane. In this documentary Matabane features Black feminist thinkers and activists such as Pumla Gqola and Zubeida Jaffer. The film gives voice to Black women like Charity Kondile, the mother of anti-apartheid activist Sizwe Kondile who was tortured and murdered by Dirk Coetzee, a man who worked for apartheid South Africa’s “state security” (Wiener, 2016). Kondile refused to forgive the people involved in the murder of her son at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Featuring these Black women in *A Letter to Mandela* showcased the gendered and racialised legacy of Mandela’s narrative of ‘forgiveness’ and his heroism in layered and complicated ways. It also showed that it is possible to do the work of telling both our complex history and current presence in ways that do not erase the contributions of Black women.

South African academic Ntahbiseng Motsemme (2004:5) asserts that “when we distil violence by taking out history, politics, culture, gender and class, we will have succeeded in reducing it to fantastical caricatures”. Highlighting Black women’s acts of political resistance, their activist and intellectual work in history-making projects such as *The Giant is Falling or Miners Shot Down*, is not “tokenistic and opportunistic”, as Desai put forward in a South African radio discussion in which I participated with him and Eusebius McKaiser in 2016 (McKaiser, 2016).

In an interview with a South African broadcaster on *The Giant is Falling*, Desai noted that films have a responsibility to “think deeper about what they [are] saying […] We’ve got to think through where our country is at, who were are and where we are going. […] Very much so this film is about a debate about the future” (Desai, 2016). However, the irony in his quest for deeper reflection is that he fails to perform the same task in *The Giant is Falling*. South Africa faces not only racialised socio-economic inequalities, our inequality is also deeply gendered. As South African activist and the executive director of Oxfam South Africa, Siphokazi Mthathi (October 2014 - personal communication), regularly affirms: “the faces of poverty are still most likely to be those of black women [and] children”.

The impact of this erasure has more impact than the film: it affects the daily lived experiences of Black women in the country. Failing to highlight this racialised and gendered form of inequality or to provide a platform for Black women commentators and activists to articulate this lived experience further relegates Black women’s struggles and pains to the margins of our political discourse.

The erasure of Black women’s forms of political resistance in South Africa’s public memory is not only evident in visual sites such as *The Giant is Falling*, we have witnessed it in school curricula, our media, history books, museums and heritage sites. Black feminists have provided eloquence to the complex connections and mediations that come with the contrasting ways in which Black women’s political activism is memorialised and represented. Black feminists located in South Africa, the African continent and the diaspora have reflected on the diverse ways in which Black women’s histories, ideas and transformative labour are erased and invisibilised in their countries’ public discourse and memory. This challenge is present not only in men who are film directors like Desai, but also in cultural critics who fail to pick up the gender dynamics and nuances.

Black women in South Africa are challenging power in various ways. We Black women are engaged in activist-intellectual projects to build a more humane society through our time, voices (written, signed, made verbal), labour, physical presence, ideas and political strategies to build branches/chapters to movements. To engage *The Giant is Falling* is to engage with the negation of Black women in South Africa, their history and acts of resistance. One of the things the film shows well, ironically, is how fractured South African society still is by highlighting the cracks in the myth of the South African ‘rainbow nation’, as well as the promoted narrative of a “miracle nation” of our democracy. Yet this is not enough to save the film. Effectively, *The Giant Must Fall* reaffirmed the flawed perspective that politics and political analysis is the sphere of men.
As scholars and activists have affirmed (Mangcu, 2011), memory and archive - whether through cinematic or written texts - is political. Memorialising the past two decades of South African political discourse while excluding Black women is not neutral. In order for us to create a just society, those that have institutional and financial power to support progressive storytelling should question their role in supporting storytellers that proudly assert that: “I wouldn’t describe myself as an expert or … committed to intersectional analysis”, as Desai did in the radio interview I cited earlier (McKaiser, 2016).

I hope that through paying attention and listening deeply to the voices of Black women Desai and other filmmakers seeking to tell stories of a nation will be more vigilant, because silence and erasure of Black women’s political agency will be resisted.

Note
1. See: Brett Lotriet Best (Director), Miracle Rising: South Africa, 2013.

References
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