

# **Bleeding women and theology from below: How Mark's narrative of the indignity of the bleeding woman serves as a model of transgressive resistance for the "violent" contemporary South African Student Protest Movement**

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## **Abstract**

Dishonour is heaped upon dishonour for those who have been deprived of material conditions for life, often due to historical legacies of racialized inequality and oppression. Rather than villainizing those engaged in protests that produce disorder and defacement, identifying and articulating the sacredness of seemingly profane aspects of such contemporary movements is a singular and imperative task of Christian theology today. Through a close reading of the narrative of the bleeding woman in Mark's Gospel, this essay argues that the South African student protest movement of 2015-2016, which included regular eruptions of destructive physical force, is an example of activism that represents the Gospel's injunctions towards the securing of dignity by the marginalized unheard and unhelped. First, the essay will discuss the milieu of honour/shame which pervaded the first-century Palestinian context of the Gospels. Following this, the essay undertakes a close reading of the biblical narrative of the bleeding woman in Mark's Gospel. It will be demonstrated that the woman's intentional transgression of the social order resulted in her approbation by Jesus.

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Finally, the South African student protests of 2015-2016 will be considered through the lens of honour/shame, or dignity. The activists' transgression of the social order will be analysed in relation to the transgressive acts of the bleeding woman. Like her actions, transgression of laws, customs, and traditions by the students warrants the support, and not censure, of those who follow Jesus.

### Keywords

*Blood; flow; woman; protest; violence; honour; shame; dignity*

## Introduction

The eruption of contemporary protest movements in the USA and South Africa has revitalized bygone issues of extreme civil disruption and use of force during protest actions. Often acts of extreme disruption and property damage are deplored as taints to the purity of activism's requisite "non-violent" ethos. However, none other than the titanic figure of Martin Luther King, Jr., the most influential practitioner of non-violent resistance in the USA history, allowed that extreme civil disruption and defacement of space was language in want of a listening ear. Says King,

[Intolerable living] conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention ... a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquillity and the status quo than about justice and humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Today, it would seem that it is no longer only white society that is occupied with concern for maintaining tranquillity and the status quo, but that the racially diverse society of the mainstream Christian church is equally unprepared to provide a listening ear to interpret the language of unruly protest. This lack of an ear to hear comes at a time when the impact of

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2 M.L. King, Jr., "The Other America," in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Boston, MA: Beacon Press 2005), 238.

decades of neoliberal economic policies, increasing technology-driven employment redundancies, and the effects of ecological violence by the wealthy of the earth, has become harder to evade for larger and larger segments of the population. Protest by those without financial means, without work, without the security of land, homes, water and food cannot be unexpected. Many are denied dignity because of their colour, race, or ethnicity, and, accordingly are deprived of the material conditions for life. Then because they lack the material conditions for life, they are ascribed as undesirables, and treated with indignity. Dishonour is heaped upon dishonour. Disruptive protest, under these circumstances, is likely to only increase.

Rather than villainizing those engaged in protests that turn to a use of destructive force, identifying and articulating the sacredness of seemingly profane aspects of current movements is a singular and imperative task of Christian theologians today. Through a close reading of the narrative of the bleeding woman in Mark's Gospel, this article argues that the South African student protest movement of 2015–2016, which included regular eruptions of destructive physical force, is an example of activism that represents the Gospel's injunctions towards the securing of dignity by the marginalized unheard and unhelped. First, the article discusses the methods employed of social-scientific and narrative criticism. The article utilizes social science criticism to discuss the milieu of honour/shame which pervaded the first-century Palestinian context of the Gospels. It then employs narrative criticism to engage in a close reading of the biblical narrative of the bleeding woman in Mark's Gospel. The article shows that it was the woman's intentional transgression of the social order which resulted in her approbation by Jesus. Finally, the South African student protests of 2015–2016 will be considered through the lens of honour/shame. The protests' transgression of the social order will be analysed in relation to the transgressive acts of the bleeding woman, where it is explained, why such protests warrant the support, and not censure, of those who follow Jesus.

## Methodology

The bible plays a central role in formulating Christian theology. Therefore, this essay pays significant attention to what the bible says and what is meant by what the bible says with respect to acts that transgress the social order.

### Social scientific criticism

Examination of biblical meaning entails not only attention to the text itself, but also to understanding “the values, institutions, social systems, and interconnected relationships that are intrinsic to the New Testament world.”<sup>3</sup> Such an examination aids understanding of the written and also the “hidden” texts of scripture as they are presented to us.<sup>4</sup> Without reference to the vastly different social systems of the biblical world, “nonunderstanding, or at best misunderstanding [of the New Testament world], will be the rule.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, contemporary readers of the Gospels must seek to understand the social systems of the Gospels’ original audiences.<sup>6</sup>

### Honour/shame and dignity in the Gospel context

One key social dynamic embedded in first century Roman Palestinian culture is that of honour/shame. Concern for honour permeated all aspects of public life and was a fundamental value at all levels of society.<sup>7</sup> As Malina and Rohrbaugh describe, honour determined one’s dress, mannerisms, vocation, dining position, and conversation partners. “It serve[d] as the prime indicator of social place (precedence) and provide[d] the essential map for persons to interact with superiors, inferiors, and equals in socially prescribed or appropriate ways.”<sup>8</sup> Honour involved not only one’s status, but the community’s recognition of one’s status. It was

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3 M.A. Powell (ed.), *Methods for Matthew* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9.

4 B.J. Malina & R.L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 9–11.

5 *Ibid.*, 13

6 *Ibid.*, 13.

7 *Ibid.*, 369.

8 *Ibid.*, 370.

“public acknowledgement of one’s worth or social value.”<sup>9</sup> One might equate the pervasiveness of concern for honour in the ancient context, with the pervasive concern for skin colour in the modern context.

Possessing honour also entailed, ironically, possession of a positive, or favourable, shame, which meant having “sensitivity about one’s reputation, sensitivity to the opinions of others.”<sup>10</sup> One’s lack of positive shame was considered shamelessness. It was to be a “person with a dishonourable reputation beyond all social doubt, one outside the boundaries of acceptable moral life, hence a person who must be denied the normal moral courtesies.”<sup>11</sup>

The achievement of honour in the culture differed according to gender. Female honour was connected to the family structure, which was the core of social, economic, religious, and political life. Female honour and family honour were mutually determinative. A female could add to or diminish the family’s honour, and family honour had ramifications, particularly for women, as it determined who one could married, work with, live near, and more.<sup>12</sup> Family honour, like a woman’s honour, once lost could not be recovered.<sup>13</sup>

A man’s honour involved guarding against other men breaching the boundaries of the family. This was understood, in particular, as a requirement to guard the women in the family, including a man’s wife, daughters, and sisters, from being illegitimately sexually penetrated. To protect women’s bodily boundaries, physical boundaries were arranged around women and women’s work. Space was arranged to control and prevent threats to women’s physical integrity, thus, securing the preservation of their honour. Spaces where women were free to move and labour included the home, the kitchen, places for acquiring water and goods to bring into the home, etc.<sup>14</sup>

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9 Ibid., 371.

10 B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (3rd rev. ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 49.

11 Ibid., 49.

12 Malina & Rohrbaugh, *Social-science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 371.

13 Ibid., 371, 372.

14 Malina, *The New Testament World*, 47.

For a woman to go beyond the socially accepted women's sphere was for her to bring shame upon herself and her family.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, because space and labour were gendered, it followed that certain behaviours were inherently imbued as categorically either honourable or one of shameful. Generally, as Malina argues, men were categorized as having a degree of honour, and women were categorized as having a degree of shame.<sup>16</sup> Thus, honour/shame is not only able to be equated with modern conceptions of race, to the extent that both pervade and order the culture, but it might also be equated with modern conceptions of "dignity." Like honour/shame, dignity can be broadly categorized and found attached to or absent from specific behaviours. Dignity also has been recognized as more present in certain bodies, i.e., White bodies, and less present in others, which might instead be recognized as embodying shame, e.g. Black bodies.

What this background reveals is that in both the New Testament context, and our own contemporary contexts, there are key issues of honour and shame – or in contemporary parlance dignity and marginalization – that are in operation, serving as an ecology in which we live and function. Honour/shame must be engaged for complete comprehension of how the biblical text is functioning in the biblical world.

### **Narrative criticism**

In addition to employing social-scientific criticism, which was previously discussed, the method of narrative criticism will also be used.

Narrative criticism emphasizes receiving the stories of the bible as stories. Narrative criticism poses questions of the biblical text that would be posed of other narratives, e.g., "What are the roles of characters and characterization in biblical narrative? How are scenes composed? ... What

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15 Ibid., 46–48.

16 Ibid., 49. Wikan, however, critiques the broad categorization of honour/shame as gendered. See U. Wikan, "Shame and Honour: A Contestable Pair." *Man* 19, no. 4 (1984):635–652.

does the narrator tell the reader and what information is withheld?”<sup>17</sup> Elements that comprise the narrative may include<sup>18</sup>:

1) a sequence of events; 2) scene and staging, the place where the action occurs; 3) time and the flow of time; 4) characterization, what we are told or shown about the persons in the story; 5) perspective – the narrator or character’s point of view about what is occurring; 6) insider information, such as when the narrator reveals to the audience what the characters do not know or understand; and 7) intertextuality, which refers to “the presence of quotations, allusions, and echoes of Israel’s Scriptures”<sup>19</sup> in the text of the Gospels and Acts.<sup>20</sup>

This list is not intended as an exhaustive methodology. It simply identifies recurring elements of narratives that aid in the close reading of texts. The passage of the text that presents the woman with the flow of blood will be discussed in its narrative form in the Gospel of Mark.

## **A flow of blood and a flow of power**

### **The Bible passage**

<sup>24</sup>And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. <sup>25</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup>She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” <sup>29</sup>Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup>Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus

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17 J. B. Green, “Narrative Criticism,” in J.B. Green (ed.), *Methods for Luke* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 76.

18 *Ibid.*, 95–98.

19 *Ibid.*, 98.

20 A. A. Brown, “The Violence of Jesus and the justice of God: The life, death, resurrection, and Parousia of Jesus as exemplary of non-lethal violent resistance, and the implications for acts of protest by the subaltern.” PhD Diss. Stellenbosch University, 2019, 24–25.

turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”<sup>31</sup> And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”<sup>32</sup> He looked all around to see who had done it.<sup>33</sup> But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.<sup>34</sup> He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease” (Mark 5:24–34, NRSV).

In Mark’s narrative a woman has endured a condition of irregular menstrual bleeding for twelve years. She has sought medical help to no avail, losing all her money doing so. She heard about Jesus’s healing power and determined to seek his help. She came close to Jesus in a crowd. She considered what to do, and then reached out to touch Jesus’s clothes. Immediately she was healed. Jesus sensed a loss of healing potency and asked who in the crowd touched him. He looked around at the crowd. Fearfully, the woman came forward. Kneeling before Jesus, she confessed that it was she who touched him. Jesus then addressed the woman, called her daughter, commended her faith and sent her on her way in peace, healed of her bleeding condition.

### **The woman with a flow of blood**

Within the passage, aside from Jesus, the woman<sup>21</sup> is the central figure. The woman is not identified by name, which is consistent with the practice of the time of not identifying women by name in written materials.<sup>22</sup> This omission, and its ubiquity, serve as an indication of the social status that this woman occupied in her context. Besides a generalized diminished social standing, or diminished attainment of honour, the text notes that the woman faced particular challenges that diminished her honour and increased her shame in specific ways.

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21 Mark features women regularly in his Gospel account. These include Peter’s mother-in-law, Jairus’s daughter, Herodias and her daughter, the Syrophenician woman, as well as the women at the cross and tomb.

22 T. Ilan, “Notes on the Distribution of Women’s Names in Palestine in the Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods.” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989):186–200. Ilan notes that women are named only 10.8% out of all named figures in writings of the period, Josephus, New Testament writings, rabbinic literature, as well as inscriptions and papyri.



First, the woman was physically unclean due to her unceasing flow of blood. Second, the woman's bleeding rendered her spiritually unclean. Her menstrual bleeding tainted her with ritual impurity, pursuant to the Levitical purity regulations (Lev 15: 19–30).<sup>23</sup> As a related matter, the woman was isolated. Being unclean meant that she must be separated from the community, as the Levitical regulations deemed anyone and anything the woman touched as also unclean. Her separation would have meant no festivals, no feasts, no communal gatherings at the temple, or elsewhere. Third, the woman's isolation extended to family. An honourable family could not maintain relations with a perpetually unclean woman. Also, a lack of a marriage partner may be presumed, since as Selvidge notes, "sexual activity and normal social functions were prohibited during a woman's 'infectious' time."<sup>24</sup> From a gender perspective, the woman's generally diminished status as a woman, her further diminished status as a ritually unclean woman, was lowered further still by her being a woman outside of patriarchal authority. She has no father, no husband, no brother, no man at all, to represent and defend her in the world. Finally, the text indicates that the woman's condition drained her financial resources. It may be inferred that, since she was unable to associate with others, she was unable to earn income for her sustenance.

Thus, in Mark's Gospel the bleeding woman is a pivotal figure in the narrative and bearer of multiple indignities. She is one who is without physical, familial, community, or financial hope. Without honour, she is as "lesser" socially, and is relegated to geographies of space and being that are on the periphery of society.

Yet the Gospel narrative offers this dismal portrayal as a precursor to its offer of hope. Hope is located in this outcast, segregated, poor and dishonoured woman allowing herself the astonishing thought that she

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23 M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2009), 148; J. Marcus, *Mark 1–8* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 368. See, however, C. Wassen, "Jesus and The Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5:24–34: Insights From Purity Laws From The Dead Sea Scrolls," in A. Voitila & J. Jokiranta (eds.), *Scripture in Transition: Essays on Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo* (Leiden, Brill, 2008), 647–666 who argues that Levitical purity was not at issue in this text.

24 M. J. Selvidge, "Mark 5:25–34 and Leviticus 15:19–20: A Reaction to Restrictive Purity Regulations." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 4 (1984): 619.

would say, “No.” She would not accept that she had to remain outside of the zone of being. Despite all cultural, social, and religious cues to the contrary, the woman perceived that she had personhood; that her humanity was not “lesser” or invalidated. Remarkably, she dared to believe that she was worthy of more than bare life,<sup>25</sup> and was worthy of liveable life.<sup>26</sup> Thus, she made a plan to resuscitate her life, by stopping her flow of blood.

Her empowered plan, however, violated the law and community standards. The Galilee region was an almost entirely Jewish area, which means that any crowd she entered would have been a Jewish crowd, and a crowd of men. This woman, or any woman, was not allowed to be among a crowd of men. When the woman saw Jesus, he was not alone, but walking with the head of the synagogue. The bleeding, unclean woman should not have been in the presence of a religious leader. The woman came from behind Jesus, in a stealthy manner, and reached out and touched the bottom of his robe. She was not allowed to touch anyone or anything lest she make unclean that which she touched.

The woman, then, intentionally disregarded the prohibitions in place to safeguard the community from people like her in situations like hers. The woman transgressed social and special boundaries to take what she needed to be healed. Her act of taking, or tacking of action, became the key that released the flow of Jesus’s power. When she took the illicit actions that she did, she felt power immediately flow into her and felt her healing take place.

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25 For Agamben, the foundation of the city entails the foundation of social and political life, establishing the critical difference between physiological life or “bare life,” and community, or life in the polis. See, G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

26 J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 25. “By declaring their mark of divine goodness [Gen 1:27] the gathered bodies demonstrate the Divine unction of their worthiness of life, and their worthiness of the “liveable lives,”...[They] constitute “a public insistence on existing and mattering ... And only through an insistent form of appearing precisely when and where we are effaced does the sphere of appearance break and open in new ways,” in A. A. Brown, “Re-imagining Sacred Texts: Recognizing the Ways in Which Protests, Tattoos, and Hashtags Constitute Vibrant Articulations of the Christian Faith.” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 18, no1. (2020): 4–5, quoting Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 37.

### The encounter and the flows of power

Upon the woman's act of touching, a mutual recognition of power occurred. The woman's healing was so sudden and complete that the intrepid woman was stunned. "Knowing what had happened to her," (v.33), she confronted the magnitude of the power that she has experienced. "Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him," (v. 30) Jesus is also stunned, halted on his journey and turned around. He asks a seemingly nonsensical question, "Who touched me?" (v. 31) This question was not the result of Jesus's experience of having been touched. The crowd had been touching him during the entire time since his arrival in the area (v. 24, 31). Jesus's astonishment arose from him becoming aware of the sudden way that power had gone out of him. In other words, he was not expecting that someone's touch, the touch of this woman, would have the power to release the flow of his own power.

Soon the frightened law-breaking woman confessed to her transgressive misdeeds, explaining her condition and her healing. The text then moves from a description of the woman's shameful state, to an emphasis upon the woman's restoration of dignity.

Jesus addressed the woman directly, which was, in itself, an acknowledgment of her personhood. Mark tells us that Jesus's words to the woman were, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease." (v. 34) Words of recognition, inclusion, and restoration.

The woman's faith was the mechanism of her healing, but what constituted the faith for which the woman was lauded? There is no indication at all in the text that the woman's faith was related to her perception of Jesus as Lord, and/or as saviour from sin. Nor does the text emphasize that the woman was commended for her belief in Jesus's power to heal. After all, even the religious elites opposed to Jesus did not doubt, but fully acknowledged, that Jesus had the power to heal.<sup>27</sup> Rather, the woman's commended faith, was connected to her actions. Her actions revealed underlying beliefs. It was these beliefs that gained her Jesus's esteem.

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<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Mark 1:27, 2:12, 3:2, etc. However, Mark does indicate that the knowledge of Jesus's power was accompanied by the religious elite's attribution of that power to an evil origin. (3:22).

What were these beliefs? Her actions reveal a belief that her life mattered; a belief that she could take action to secure her needs from one with the power to meet her needs; a belief that rules and boundaries can and must be transgressed for the sake of securing liveable life, i.e., securing dignity. The woman was commended for her belief in *herself*, in her own dignity and in her own power to lay claim to a liveable life. Significantly, Jesus did not give this woman her healing. The woman took the healing she needed. Instead of censure for this taking, Jesus deemed the woman's need for a restoration of dignity, via the stanching flow of blood, as, in itself, sufficient justification for the taking. Much like hunger was sufficient justification for the picking of grain on the Sabbath though such an action was prohibited.<sup>28</sup> The woman's belief that her dignity should and could be restored was the basis for the commendation of Jesus.

### The family of God and family resemblance

In Mark's entire Gospel, certain words are used only when Mark is referring to this woman, and to Jesus. Only about these two does Mark use the word "body," and mention the word "blood." When Mark writes of someone who "suffered many things," he is either speaking of Jesus or of this woman.

Thus, for Mark the two are mirrors, especially in how Mark describes their flows.<sup>29</sup> In the moment when the woman touches his robe, she feels in her body her flow of blood stop. In that same moment Jesus feels in his body his flow of power start. The woman flows blood and Jesus flows power.<sup>30</sup> Just like her flow of blood, Jesus's flow of power is something with physical properties, a thing that can be felt. Just like this woman, Jesus is unable to control the flow that leaves his body.

For Mark, this lowly dishonoured woman is connected to Jesus in a way no one else is. She bears the image of Jesus – in her outcast "body," her leaking "blood," and her "suffering many things" – in a way that no one else does. Like Jesus, this woman defied the culture's judgment of her, and her place

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28 See, Mark 2:23–28.

29 C. Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25–34." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (2010): 507–519.

30 *Ibid.*, 516.

of subjection. Both lived into a belief that, against all evidence, a desperate, tragic, and hopeless situation – a broken body and a fallen world – could be changed.

The woman transgressed the rules to make an assertion of dignity, just like Jesus, transgressed the rules to assert the dignity of others like her. She claimed her place in the world, just as Jesus’s ministry was facilitating others to do.

Jesus bestowed honour upon this nameless, kinless woman, not only by his recognition of her, but also by giving her a name. He calls this woman, and only ever this woman, daughter.<sup>31</sup> She is named by Jesus not a friend, or a follower, but one who images and belongs to him; his family. Mark tells us that for Jesus, family is determined by “whoever does the will of God.” (3:35) Thus, Jesus acclaims this woman’s bold actions of securing her dignity as doing the will of God. He then tells her that it is she, her faith leading her to act, that brought about her healing. Her daring and disavowal of life-diminishing laws and customs has made her free.

The woman’s temerity has brought her to freedom from her symptom of bleeding, and also from the cause of her even more serious condition of having internalized indignity and dishonour. By transgressing the law, she has done the will of God.

## Student protests, dignity, and transgression of the social order

Violence as a feature of South African protest has become ubiquitous.<sup>32</sup> In recent years, union members engaged in a wildcat strike, protesting for a wage increase to R12,500 per month (about US\$760).<sup>33</sup> The workers’

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31 R.G. Branch, “A study of the woman in the crowd and her desperate courage (Mark 5:21–43).” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47, no. 1 (2013). Art. #649, 13 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v47i1.649>.

32 “What the Government Doesn’t Want You to Know About Violent Protests in SA. *Business Tech* (Johannesburg). 14 June (2016). [Online]. Available: <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/126775/what-the-government-doesnt-want-you-to-know-about-violent-protests-in-sa/> [2018, May 29].

33 P. Alexander, “Marikana, turning point in South African history.” *Review of African Political Economy*. 40, no. 138 (2013): 607.

2012 protest was met by police infliction of a lethally forceful response.<sup>34</sup> In a different vein, the ongoing struggle for provision of public services to the poor, often results in transit trains, schools, roads and other public properties being obstructed and destroyed by protesters in the articulation of grievances.<sup>35</sup> More disturbing, given the civic geography of the occurrences, was the recent protest movement of students on university campuses.

### 2015-2016 Student protests

In 2015, Chumani Maxwele, a student at the University of Cape Town, staged a protest, during which, faeces he had collected from a communal toilet in a Black African township was thrown at a statue of colonial settler John Cecil Rhodes, which was installed prominently on the University of Cape Town's ("UCT") campus.<sup>36</sup> His action birthed the #rhodesmustfall protest movement to decolonize higher education. #Rhodesmustfall, or #RMF, successfully culminated in the removal of Rhodes's statue from

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34 Ibid., 608.

35 Online searches for "news" of the terms "service delivery protest South Africa" returns thousands of results, which document the ongoing occurrence of protests every year for the period between 2012 and 2017. When search parameters are examined by year the results returned show marked yearly increases during this time frame as well. See, e.g., news articles *GroundUp*, "Cape Town Commuters Rebel as Metrorail Fails." *Cape Times* (Cape Town). 13 June 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2017-06-13-cape-town-commuters-rebel-as-metrorail-fails/> [2019, September 30]. L. Isaacs, "Violent service delivery protests on the rise." *EWN Eyewitness News* (Cape Town). 26 May 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://ewn.co.za/2016/05/26/86-percent-service-delivery-protests-characterised-by-violence> – Municipal-IQ [2019, September 30]; "Service delivery protests twice close N2." *IOL News* (Cape Town). 16 September 2014. [Online]. Available: <https://www.iol.co.za/news/service-delivery-protests-twice-close-n2-1751386> [2019, September 30]; "Violent delivery protest in Bekkersdal." *News24* (Cape Town). 23 October 2013. [Online]. Available: <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Violent-delivery-protest-in-Bekkersdal-20131023> [2019, September 30], and Sapa, "One dead in Cape Town service delivery protest." *Mail & Guardian* (Cape Town). 14 August 2012. [Online]. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2012-08-14-one-dead-in-cape-town-service-delivery-protest> [2019, September 30].

36 E. Fairbanks, "Why South African Students Have Turned on Their Parents' Generation." *The Guardian* (South Africa). 18 November 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/nov/18/why-south-african-students-have-turned-on-their-parents-generation> [2019, September 29].

the university's campus.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the student protest movement on university campuses continued to gain momentum.<sup>38</sup> Added to calls for decolonization<sup>39</sup> were calls for no tuition increases (#feesmustfall),<sup>40</sup> and an end to sexual assault of women (#rapeculturemustfall).<sup>41</sup>

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37 “Rhodes Statue Removed in Cape Town as Crowd Celebrates”. *BBC News* (Cape Town). 9 April 2015 [Online]. Available: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32236922> [2019, September 30].

38 In addition to the demands discussed here, students also agitated for fair pay for university workers. I chose to exclude this demand from the listing as the demand for worker rights did not gain the traction among protesters that other demands for change gained, and also because it was not an example of activism by those affected on their own behalf.

39 Large protests began in 2015, following Maxwele's demonstration. Students gathered and occupied buildings at the University of Cape Town demanding the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes from its prominent place on campus grounds. The statue was viewed as emblematic of the colonial legacy surviving at the institution, which contributed to the ongoing alienation of Black students. The protest soon spread to other institutions of higher learning in South Africa. See, e.g., D. Glazebrook, “Decolonizing education: Rhodes must fall.” *RT* (Cape Town). 23 November 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/323094-decolonizing-education-cecil-rhodes/> [2019, September 30]. and K. Sosibo, “#RhodesMustFall Protest Spreads to Other Campuses.” *Mail & Guardian* (Cape Town). 26 March 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-03-26-rhodesmustfall-protest-spreads-to-other-campuses> [2019, September 30].

40 See, B. Baloyi & G. Isaacs, “South Africa's “Fees Must Fall” Protests Are About More Than Tuition Costs.” *CNN* (Cape Town). 28 November 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/27/africa/fees-must-fall-student-protest-south-africa-explainer/index.html> [2019, September 30]; G. Nicolson, “Fees Must Fall, Reloaded.” *Daily Maverick* (Cape Town). 12 January 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-01-12-fees-must-fall-reloaded/#.WcIt3sgjGUk> [2019, September 30]).

41 Protests against “rape culture” on university campuses and in communities in South Africa made use of hashtags such as #RUReferenceList, which named alleged serial rapists and abusers on Rhodes University's campus, #Campusrape, which raised challenged the way that policies on university campuses responded to complaints of sexual assault, and #rememberKwezi, which recalled the name of the woman whom South Africa's sitting president, Jacob Zuma, was acquitted of raping in 2006. See, e.g., E. Corke, “#Campusrape: Universities overhaul policies Amid Rape Culture Protests.” *EWN Eyewitness News* (Johannesburg). 18 May 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://ewn.co.za/2016/05/18/Universities-overhaul-policies-amid-protests-over-rape-culture> [2019, September 30]; B. Dayimani, “#1in3 silent protest leads to rape victims speaking out.” [Online]. 2016. Available: <http://www.destinyconnect.com/2016/08/08/1in3-silent-protest-encourages-victims-speak/> [2017, September 20]; D. Seddon, “We will not be Silenced: Rape Culture, #RUReferencelist, and the University Currently Known as Rhodes.” *Daily Maverick* (Cape Town). 1 June, 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-06-01-we-will-not-be-silenced-rape-culture-referencelist-and-the-university-currently-known-as-rhodes/#.WcI30cgjGUk> [2019, September 30].

These intersectional issues were joined to the issue of lack of student housing on UCT's campus at the beginning of the school term in 2016. Hundreds of UCT students were not allocated housing and contended with displacement.<sup>42</sup> UCT administration advised that the shortage was due to increased demand, and to students being delayed from vacating housing as a result of the prior term's protests, which shuttered the campus and delayed exams.<sup>43</sup> Student activists, however, offered a different perspective. They viewed the housing shortage as exemplary of larger systemic issues, including economic inequality and historic loss of land. Members were quoted in the press as saying,

At residences throughout UCT, the privilege of white students, who are not subject to the large-scale eviction or space shortages which black students face on a systematic basis, is further entrenched. This despite them [white students] being generally better equipped to find and afford accommodation outside of the residence system.<sup>44</sup>

In response to the shortage, student activists erected a shack on the central plaza of UCT, which they dubbed "Shackville." For the activists, "Shackville [was] a representation of black dispossession, of those who have been removed from land and dignity by settler colonialism, forced to live in squalor."<sup>45</sup>

Student protest over the intersectional issues of decolonization, fees, patriarchy, and housing, reached an apex on Feb 16, 2016. On that date a group of students removed paintings from a building on campus and burned them in a bonfire near Shackville.<sup>46</sup>

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42 C. Petersen, "#Shackville: UCT Hits Back." *IOL News* (Cape Town, SA). 16 February, 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/shackville-uct-hits-back-1984961> [2019, September 29].

43 Petersen, "#Shackville: UCT Hits Back."

44 Petersen, "#Shackville: UCT Hits Back."

45 Petersen, "#Shackville: UCT Hits Back."

46 Raborife, M. "UCT Students Set Paintings Alight." *News24*, 16 February 2016 [Online]. Available: <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/uct-students-set-paintings-alight-20160216> [2018, May 29].





**Photo by Ashleigh Furlong.**<sup>47</sup>

The students’ actions were denounced in news accounts.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, an interdict was obtained against those involved, which resulted in their expulsion from UCT.<sup>49</sup>

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47 “Rhodes Must Fall Protesters Burn UCT Art.” *GroundUp* (Cape Town). 14 February 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/rhodes-must-fall-protesters-destroy-uct-artworks/> [2019, September 29], licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

48 J. Cameron, “Burning Books, Buildings, Cars: University Fee Protests Reach Boiling Point.” *BizNews*, 7 September 2016 [Online]. Available: <https://www.biznews.com/leadership/2016/09/07/burning-books-buildings-cars-university-fee-protests-reach-boiling-point/> [2018, May 29]; Editors, “Whiteness Burning – Student Protests in South Africa.” *The Economist*, 18 February 2016 [Online]. Available: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/02/18/whiteness-burning> [2019, September 29]; E. Herbst, “Arson at UCT: What You Didn’t Read in the Cape Times.” *PoliticsWeb*, 19 May 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://www.politicsweb.co.za/opinion/arson-at-uct-what-you-didnt-read-in-the-cape-times> [2019, September 29]; M. Raborife, “UCT Students Set Paintings Alight.”

49 *University of Cape Town v Davids and Others*. (2648/2016) [2016] ZAWCHC 56; [2016] 3 All SA 333 (WCC) (11 May 2016). [Online]. Available: <http://saflii.org/za/cases/ZAWCHC/2016/56.html> [2019, September 29].

### Student protesters as modern-day bleeding women

While the loss of property, including artwork, is lamentable, the acts of the student activists involved in the 2015-2016 protest movements must be perceived as just and as scandalously commendable as the act of the bleeding woman whom Jesus encountered in the crowd.

The activists made visible the invisible dishonour in which they are held in the culture. From the margins they entered the crowd of the public. They appeared representing the shameful state of being that was designated for their habitation.

Though Apartheid ended in 1994, 26 years later, in 2016, the effects of Apartheid continued, and racial separation in many ways remains to the present. Nearly 7 million Black South Africans live in informal dwellings consisting primarily of shacks,<sup>50</sup> with over 60% of the population lacking piped water inside their dwellings.<sup>51</sup> Racialized economic disparities are equally dire. “[T]en percent of the population own more than 90 percent of all wealth while 80 percent have no wealth to speak of.”<sup>52</sup> In education racialized inequalities are also commonplace. A 2007 study showed 41% rural Grade 6 children, largely Black South Africans, were functionally illiterate,<sup>53</sup> while a 2011 study showed that 50% of children whose home language is not English or Afrikaans, could not read by Grade 4.<sup>54</sup> Only 44% of non-White youth graduated high school, compared to 88% of White youth.<sup>55</sup> These facts speak to systemic and structural social causes that are linked to race. The pattern of indignity and dishonour that was legislated under Apartheid has not abated despite political transition.

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50 Statistics South Africa, “Community Survey 2016 Statistical Release.” *Statistics South Africa* (Pretoria, 2016), 59.

51 *Ibid.*, 64.

52 A. Orthofer, “Wealth Inequality in South Africa: Evidence from survey and tax data” *Research Project on Employment Income Distribution and Inclusive Growth*, Working Paper #15 (June 2016). Cape Town, 4.

53 N. Spaul, “Education in SA – Still separate and unequal (Extended version of *CityPress* article).” 12 January 2014. [Online]. Available: <https://nicspaul.com/2014/01/12/education-in-sa-still-separate-and-unequal-extended-version-of-citypress-article/> [2019, September 29], citing SACMEQ study of 2007.

54 Spaul, “Education in SA,” citing prePIRLS study of 2011.

55 Spaul, “Education in SA,” citing General Household Survey of 2011.

Confronted starkly with the social and economic chasm existing between themselves and the more privileged, socially mainstreamed, students on campus, and the reality of their predicament of occupation of lesser dignity, the marginalized students resisted. In their resistance they recapitulated the actions of the woman in scripture and may be understood as modern-day examples of “bleeding women.” This is especially so for those involved in the protests resulting in damage to property.

In the same way as the woman with the flow of blood, the protesting students dared to believe that their lives mattered; that there were worthy of liveable life. They believed that there were actions that they could take, from one with power to meet their needs, in order that their needs would be met. They believed that the rules and conventions of the culture – the boundaries put in place to protect those with social dignity from people like themselves – could and should be transgressed for the sake of the dishonoured securing their dignity. The students’ transgression of laws, customs, traditions (like the tradition of non-violent protest), reflects faith. It is a faith that Jesus might commend as the necessary key to unlocking the flow of power from the powerful, leading to miraculous change. Indeed, the actions of the student activists of 2015–2016 resulted in the removal of a symbol of dehumanization, in the reversal of a planned fee-increase, and in new funding for education for the indigent. Things that would not have come about without their bold acts.

## **Conclusion**

We in contemporary Westernized cultures often deny that an honour/shame dynamic is at work in social relations, in the same way that it operated in past Mediterranean societies. The experience of Black persons, whose bodies relegate them shameful geographies—in housing, education, employment, justice – would seem to indicate that ideas of honour and shame continue to govern social structures. The woman with the flow of blood exemplifies one who was relegated to a place of shame in her culture, who resisted such designation. She had faith that she was worthy of a liveable life and reached out and took what was necessary to secure that life. In the same way the student activists in the South African protests of 2015–2016 resisted their relegation to shameful geographies. Believing they

were worthy of liveable life, their faith led them to act against social laws and norms to secure that life. Jesus commended the woman with the flow of blood. A theology from below can do no less. Without promoting the use of force during protest, theologies of the twenty-first century must recognize this commendation, and mimic it in contemporary situations making room for the claims for dignity of those long-denied, in whatever manner that those seeking it deem appropriate. Such honour and honouring of agency work miracles.

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