This summer I had the opportunity to follow-up on the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements that I had witnessed and participated in during my study abroad to Cape Town, South Africa. Under the guidance of Professor Anthea Butler and Dr. Asonzeh Ukah, I analyzed how these movements affected the self-consciousness and identity of black students, and focused specifically on how their religious background and identity affected and was affected by their participation in the movement.

Rhodes Must Fall was a movement starting in early 2015 that focused on bringing down the statue of Cecil Rhodes, a 19th century imperialist, which sat in a main area of the University of Cape Town. Students camped out in a main university building and staged large, mainly peaceful protests to push the university to take down the statue. The success of this movement became nationally known and spurred students at Wits University to protest a rise in university fees beginning in October 2015. From Wits, Fees Must Fall moved to the University of Cape Town and most other universities across South Africa. At UCT, this movement spurred large groups of people to stage mostly peaceful protests in the suburbs around the university but also in the vicinity of the Parliament buildings in the city. This national movement resulted in President Jacob Zuma declaring that fees stay the same the next year.

In conducting this research, I was attempting to understand how movements affected students’ awareness of systems of injustice and if this specifically affected their ties to their religion. Christianity is the predominant religion in South Africa, but its’ arrival in South Africa via colonialism means that some students find that their religious beliefs may conflict with their political interests, especially through their experiences at the University of Cape Town and in the city of Cape Town, with a population of 3.7 million people. Many black students coming to the University of Cape Town from rural areas find that the city itself causes them to rethink previously-held beliefs. Furthermore, the political movements of the past few years in South Africa have focused on dismantling systems and symbols of oppression. They also bring awareness to these issues, potentially affecting students’ identities. I wanted to understand how exactly students grappled with these changes.
Many of the students I interviewed struggled at some point to reconcile this oppressive history with their current beliefs. Some students relied on guidance from family members or church leaders to help them navigate their understanding. Most of my interviewees had been raised Christian, and some continued to be very devout. Others had stopped attending church as often since arriving on campus, and some had chose to only practice elements of African Traditional Religion.

The numerous conversations that I had with students revealed to me the vast ways in which moving to a city and engaging in protest movements affect students’ self-consciousness. Confronted with a completely different lifestyle than that of their hometown, many of the students I interviewed had a lot of difficulty adjusting to Cape Town, which affected their performance in school and their well-being. They grappled with these changes by joining protests and trusting in their faith, among other things, however many still experience difficulties that are incomparable to those that white or more affluent students may come into contact with. Personally, gaining a better understanding of the depth of these issues helped me to understand the complexities of South Africa. The information I received from the interviews I conducted showed me how further research is needed, and how research is never fully done. It prompts me to be interested in continuing this research project in the future.