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Race, class and gender in a time of protest: Black student experiences at UCT

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### **Abstract**

In the post-apartheid dispensation formerly white only universities have taken on transformation projects to redress inequalities of the past on campus. Black students have contested and problematized this transformation project for its failings, particularly through the wave of student activism that swept the country in 2015. It was during this year that the Rhodes Must Fall movement began at the University of Cape Town. It brought with it a kind of activism which centred the experiences of black students in its critique of institutional practices. Activism on the campus has persisted since, manifesting itself in an array of different student groupings and political organisations. They typically aspire towards building intersectional movements, and particularly look to articulate their experiences through the intersections of race, class and gender. Through the use of photovoice the experiences of some of these activists are documented. Intersectionality is used as a theoretical framework, and race, class and gender are the identities prioritised in the analysis in order to present the activists' stories in ways that align with their own politics. Experiences of alienation, violence and trauma are reported, and the students find themselves desperately trying to cope with their pain, and not always in the most constructive of ways. Whilst participating in protest itself makes students vulnerable to traumatic experiences, they continue to engage in activism in hopes of carving out space for themselves to exist in the university. The conflict however is not only with the university. Students often have to deal with problematic reproductions of social norms within their own spaces.

*Keywords:* black students; student activism; student protest; Fees Must Fall; race, class and gender; black student experiences; UCT

## **Introduction**

For many years, there has been a vast amount of research done on the experiences of black students in predominantly white universities. This is particularly important in the South African context given the history of apartheid and segregated schooling and higher education system. In the present day, 23 years post-apartheid, formerly white only universities find themselves in a transformation project which has for many students failed to make them feel like they are a part of their respective institutions (Durrheim, Trotter, Piper, & Manicom, 2004; Soudien, 2008). However, students do not simply have uniform experiences of marginalisation and exclusion on these campuses. This review will show that as they exist in these spaces they strive to make space for themselves, to resist, and to become a part of the university by organising themselves to challenge the institution.

## **Transformation**

Transformation is a concept which seems to have been employed in many formerly white only universities in South Africa, in an attempt to address the inequalities of the past (Durrheim, et al., 2004). Despite this stated commitment, research in these formerly white only institutions suggests a different reality. At the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (University of Natal) the legacy of apartheid remains intact in the university at the level of institutional policy (Durrheim et al., 2004). Black students here describe prevalent racializing discourses, coupled by informal segregation, which they view as purposefully enforced by the mostly white authorities within the university (Durrheim et al., 2004). Similarly Walker, in research done at a formerly Afrikaans only institution in South Africa, finds that apartheid ideology lives on within the campus, despite the official institutional narrative being one of equity and change (Walker, 2005). Both studies find that commitment to transformation is superficial and seems to be based more on numbers (changing student demographics) than on real policy change (Durrheim et al., 2004), (Walker, 2005). What results for black students in such circumstances is alienation, isolation, and feelings of exclusion (Sennet, Finchilescu, Gibson, & Strauss, 2003; Walker, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

## **Belonging and Alienation: Issues of Class and Gender**

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At the University of Cape Town (UCT), Kessi & Cornell (2015) find that black students often feel their sense of belonging becomes limited, due to exclusionary practices on the part of the institution. Discourses around transformation, which are heavily racialized, are also found to have affected the self-esteem of students (Kessi & Cornell, 2015). Speaking further to this concept of belonging, Soudien (2008) investigates the intersection of race and class in mediating student experiences in higher education institutions. Soudien finds that black working -class students in formerly white only universities feel deeply alienated, and desire intensely to fit in and be accepted in the institution. This experience informs students' desires to rise from their troubled circumstances and improve their economic situations (Soudien, 2008). Bangeni and Kapp(2005) do similar work considering the intersection of race and class, and they find the same drive amongst black students from disadvantaged backgrounds to work against their circumstances and attain individual success. However, Bangeni and Kapp challenge the conventional notion that black students either assimilate uncritically to dominant institutional culture, or are completely excluded and alienated from it. They argue that there is no clear distinction between “insiders” or “outsiders”, and that as members of an academic community, their participants are able to use the academic and physical resources of the institution to create spaces for themselves to belong(Bangeni & Kapp, 2005). These findings explicate the often conflicting relationship black students have with the university. Though on the one hand they experience alienation within the campus, they are simultaneously afforded opportunities beyond what they had before, and subsequently may potentially have access to greater personal and social mobility. This however often strains their relationships with their home communities, which often times reject them for having become “snobbish” (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005). As such, the search for belonging and acceptance persists.

Cornell, Ratele & Kessi (2016) go on to look at dimensions of gender and sexuality in their inquiry into black student experiences at UCT. Given that the ideal university student is often presented as white, middle-class, male, cisgender, and heterosexual (Cornell et al, 2016) it becomes important to understand how occupying multiple marginalised identities informs experiences of marginalisation on a university campus. In addition this study looked at modes of resistance employed by students in response to their experiences of violence on campus. The research itself was provoked by engagements on the Rhodes Must Fall movement, which emerged at UCT early in 2015. Many of the students who participated in

the study were members of this movement (Cornell, Ratele, & Kessi, 2016), and so their experiences of the university took place within the context of both marginalisation and resistance.

### **Race and Gender in Student Organisations: Some International Cases**

Given that black students often possess fewer social support structures on predominantly white campuses (Sennet et al., 2003) the presence of student movements/organisations on campus that can actively resist exclusionary institutional policy whilst simultaneously providing support for their members becomes very important. Harper and Quaye's (2007) work on the ways in which black student organisations in predominantly white campuses are able to create space for black men to assert and express their identities as black people in an otherwise exclusionary institution investigates this. They found that membership in organisations became an important outlet for the expression of identity, allowing for the fostering of a sense of belonging whilst being used to advocate for a better life on campus (Harper & Quaye, 2007). In UCLA, a student organisation called Reza Womyn of which Chicano/Latino student activists are members supports women of colour on the university campus (Revilla, 2010). This organisation is one which is actively engaged in multidimensional struggle against homophobia, racism, classism and sexism whilst simultaneously seeking to provide a safe space for queers on the university campus (Revilla, 2010). Also key to their work is to simultaneously create a counter space that challenges institutional policy and mobilises for social justice through conscientisation (Revilla, 2010). This organisation is particularly important since it addresses oppression at a racial level, whilst also considering other marginalised identities and actively working to create spaces where students who feel alienated can receive support and find a place to belong in the university.

Throughout the literature there emerge questions of belonging and alienation, along the lines of race, class and gender within exclusionary institutional boundaries. Issues around resistance and support are also apparent, as students organise themselves in defiance of institutional policy they find problematic, whilst simultaneously creating spaces where they can belong and feel safe on campus. However there is insufficient literature exploring student movements and organisations in present day South Africa, particularly considering the recent spate of student protests nationwide. In the case of UCT for example, groupings like Rhodes

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Must Fall, Fees Must Fall, Shackville TRC and Patriarchy Must Fall among others, have emerged on campus. Given that such groupings often claim to fight for all marginalised identities (though they centre the black subject) (RMF, 2015), (Shackville, 2016), primarily along the dimensions of race, class and gender (RMF, 2015). It is important to understand how the presence of these movements and the work which they do affects how black students experience university. Equally important is to understand how students experience these movements themselves.

With such issues in mind there is a clear direction which further research in this area can follow, and fruitful knowledge and insight could possibly be developed. An inquiry into these questions will deepen understandings of black student experiences in formerly white only universities given the current climate of student protest and activism. This knowledge may also have important implications for institutional transformation policies going forward. It may also affect how student movements organise themselves in future as they advocate for student interests.

### **Aims and Research Questions**

This project seeks to explore and understand the experiences of black students at the University of Cape Town, looking closely at how race, class and gender intersect to shape and inform these experiences. These experiences are looked at within the context of student movements on campus, with the aim of understanding how the presence of these movements, influences the experiences black students have in the university. Two broad questions are explored. These are:

1. How do the dimensions of race, class and gender intersect to shape black student experiences at UCT?
2. What impact have student movements had on the experiences of black students at UCT?

### **Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality**

The social identities of race, class and gender are investigated here in this work, with the aim of understanding how these identities operate in concert to shape the experiences of



black students on the university campus. Intersectionality is thus an ideal framework for such an inquiry as it seeks to understand how different social identities operate and interact to create unique subjective experiences (Warner, 2008). Intersectionality proceeds with the understanding that identity is not reducible to a summary of the social categories that a person belongs to (Warner, 2008), rather it views each social category as informed and influenced by others, thereby making it difficult to understand any single identity in isolation from others (Collins, 2007). Intersectionality further explains how an individual is able to occupy both positions of privilege and marginalisation at the same time, as they may simultaneously occupy a historically oppressed identity whilst at the same time belonging to one that is privileged in society (Collins, 1990). These identities thus need to be understood within the broader cultural and historical context of the societies in which they emerge (Collins, 1990). In order to generate these understandings of how intersecting identities inform unique experiences, intersectional research privileges above all the experiences of the individuals participating in the research (Cuárdraz, Uttal). The knowledge produced here is thus experiential in its nature (Syed, 2010).

Intersectionality however is not about identities alone, but rather how structures make certain identities vulnerable to oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). It can thus be used as a tool for understanding and critiquing structural oppression (Syed, 2010) and how it informs the lived experiences of people in their day to day lives. What an intersectional analysis must entail then is an interrogation of the structures which people exist within, and how those structures define and position the various identities people occupy.

### **Research Design: Photovoice**

Qualitative research is well suited to intersectional research (Syed, 2010) and for this particular study the photovoice method was used. Here participants, usually belonging to marginalised social groups, are given cameras so that they record and present their narratives and experiences from their own perspectives (Sutton-Brown, 2014). They then provide captions to describe the images which they take (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Photovoice is a participatory approach to research that encourages participants to lead the process of research (Foster-Fishman, 2005). In this way, participants come to research with the researcher rather than simply participating in a rigid and pre-set project. As such, participatory methods like photovoice are typically very flexible in their design (Redwood-Jones & Wang, 2001),

allowing participants room to influence and guide the process of research at every step. As such, the details of any given photovoice design can differ greatly from study to study. With such an approach to research there comes an explicit political agenda, which is usually orientated towards activism (Burriss & Wang, 1997). The potential for the empowerment of participants is emphasised, though it is not something that researchers can guarantee will occur (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Nonetheless, photovoice is still able to stimulate dialogue and produce shared knowledge through participant engagement (Redwood-Jones & Wang, 2001). All this work is geared towards action, be it through reaching policy makers, engaging members of the community, or both (Redwood-Jones & Wang, 2001). Thus, photovoice not only allows members of marginalised social groups to participate in analysing their own subjective realities, it also allows them to use their experiences to promote dialogue and advance social transformation (Graziano, 2004).

### **Sampling**

A purposive sample was used for this study. Black students at the University of Cape Town were recruited to participate. Eight students were recruited, and a total of five completed the study. Included were students who participated in the Rhodes Must Fall, Fees Must Fall and Shackville TRC movements on campus. Participants were recruited in a number of different ways. These included word of mouth and social media advertising on my personal accounts. For the purposes of gaining more rich and detailed data, students who had spent at least one year in the university were recruited.

### **Data Collection**

Photovoice employs both photography and focus groups as data collection methods, while sometimes also including one-on-one interviews with participants (Burriss & Wang, 1997; Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang, 2006). Wang (2006) proposes a set of steps as a guideline to collecting data within such a design, though they are not intended to be followed strictly and must be considered within the aims and objectives of the specific study the researcher has in mind (Sutton-Brown, 2014). It is with this then that the current project proceeded according to the following steps:

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1. Once participants were recruited, an initial meeting took place where the overall aims and objectives of the research were explained. The process of how the data was to be collected, ethical issues, and the degree to which participants were able contribute to how the research proceeded were discussed in detail. The participants were then told how long the research was likely to take, and how committed they needed to be in order to conclude the whole process. Here the consent forms were handed out and signed. A discussion also took place on the research questions and possible approaches to answering them. Participants shared some initial thoughts and ideas which would go on to appear in the data they presented. They were also told that, aside from the photos and captions, they would also provide a separate piece of writing detailing their experiences and thoughts

2. Participants were issued cameras. Many already knew how to operate them and so only a few needed to be taught. Issues around safety and consent when taking photos of others were also discussed.

3. Students returned their data after two weeks with the cameras. Another meeting took place. Participants were then debriefed and asked about their experience of the photovoice project. Participants were asked for their consent to have their pictures used in the final thesis.

The meetings and were all facilitated by Khumbulani Jali. All of these, with the exception of the photography training, were audio recorded and transcribed. The Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town was used as the location to meet participants, and rooms were at all times booked in advance for these meetings.

#### Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data collected. This method of analysis seeks to identify and report common and recurring patterns (or themes) in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Its great flexibility allows it to be applied to a wide range of theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, an inductive thematic analysis was performed. This type of thematic analysis is one wherein the themes identified link strongly with the data analysed, privileging the experiences reported by participants over any theoretical interest the researcher may have (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This fits well with an intersectional framework as it recognises knowledge as experiential.

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Braun & Clarke (2006) recommend a six step process to carrying out a thematic analysis. The steps proceed as follows:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data: Here the data is transcribed, read and re-read, and any particularly interesting initial ideas about the data are noted.
2. Generate initial codes: Codes are produced for notable features within the data, systematically throughout the whole sent. Data that is relevant to each of these initial codes is collated. Patterns start being identified here in this step.
3. Search for themes: In this step the codes are then sorted into potential themes. Links between codes are identified and they are combined to reveal patterns within the data.
4. Review Themes: The themes are then reviewed and refined in relation to coded extracts in the data. Here some themes may combine, others may separate, and others may be disregarded altogether.
5. Defining and naming themes: Precise definitions and names are generated for each theme, as the themes are refined and clarified with the aim of ensuring that no single theme is overly complex.
6. Producing the report: Selected extracts are analysed in detail with reference to the research question, the literature and the themes generated. A clear and coherent account of the stories told by the data is presented here, and the overall results of the research synthesised and discussed.

These steps were all employed, however not necessarily in a linear fashion. Certain steps had to be performed multiple times, codes were revisited and reviewed multiple times, and themes were defined and redefined. This is to be expected with such research, as the experiences being analysed do not confirm to any clear discernible structure themselves.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity refers to a continuous process wherein the researcher recognises and reflects on how their positionality and overall situatedness affects the participants, the questions being asked, the data collection process, and the interpretation of the data (Berger, 2015). In this respect, the researcher must realise and acknowledge that despite attempts to privilege the voices of those being studied, the researcher is at all times limited by their own

perception and subjectivity when they collect and interpret data (Allan, 2012). As the researcher, my direct involvement in some the student movements on the university campus, and thus familiarity with some of the participants may influence the research, particularly the analysis of the data. Being familiar with participants may elicit more detailed accounts of experiences, and assist in the production of shared knowledge. However it may also lead to biased interpretations of the data. My own involvement in student movements may also influence how I respond to critiques of the movement, and how such data is interpreted.

Finally, it is important to note that since the research interrogates the intersections between race, class and gender, my situatedness within these identities matters, and may influence how I carry out the research process. As such it appears necessary to disclose my situatedness here before going into the analysis of the data, so that the reader may see how my own identities may influence the discussion. As a black student in the university myself, the research is already deeply personal as some of the experiences that the participants shared here were experiences I had myself. On the dimension of class, my family is what would likely be considered middle-class, in this society. This may affect my ability to properly analyse accounts given by students of the working-class. On gender whoever, the issue of open disclosure becomes quite complex. I'm gender non-conforming, and given the marginalisation those like myself face in society, its problematic to expect this information to be provided. Being forced to "come out" as it were robs one of their agency, of full control over their body and identity. It takes from the person a moment which they should have full control over. I feel that I may be in a similar moment here as I write this and I am not sure that I'm okay with feeling as if it was necessary for me to disclose my gender for the sake of academic work. With this in mind, I took care not to expect the same from participants in the study. Those who chose to openly declare their gender did so without being asked about it, in an attempt to give them as much control over their identities as possible.

## **Ethics**

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Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee at UCT. Participants were asked to give their consent to participate before any data collection began. They each filled in the informed consent form (Appendix A) which requests that participants give permission for their photographs, stories from focus groups, and written pieces be used for the research. Participants were also asked for their consent to having the focus groups audio recorded, and they were informed about the ethical issues involved in photographing other people. The data was, and is, stored on a password-protected folder on the researcher's laptop, and backed up on password protected cloud storage. Pseudonyms were used throughout to protect the identities of the participants. This also helps prevent the sensitive information they reveal here from being traced back to them

### **Significance**

With student protests having been commonplace across the country in a number of universities, there is a domain of student experience emerging which little attention is being paid to. Understanding the experiences of black students in these universities during this time can create a better understanding of student movements, their motives, demands and the tactics they employ in protest. This can have implications for institutional policy, as it can provide policy makers within universities direct and specific accounts of the student experience which can demonstrate the shortcomings of university policies and provide possible solutions. This research is also important for students, as it provides them an opportunity to potentially empower themselves, and reflect on their own experiences to advance their thinking and consciousness through engagement with others. It may also assist student movements themselves by encouraging engagement that may help movements grow and learn by better understanding how the way in which they organise affects fellow students. This may improve the ability of student movements to advocate for student needs on the campus.

### **Results and Discussion**

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A total of six students ended up participating in the study, one of which did not return to provide the data she collected at the end. The data discussed here then are from the five students who remained for the entire study.

### **Belonging and Alienation**

Participants in the study describe experiences of alienation in the university. As they try to integrate themselves into the university community, they find it difficult to become comfortable and to exist as regular students within the institution. At the root of this is what students describe as an exclusionary culture on campus which alienates and excludes blacks. One of the ways in which this exclusion manifested was in the accommodation crisis of 2016.

At the beginning of the 2016 academic year, scores of students who had been promised residence rooms found themselves without housing as spaces in residences were overbooked (Rmf, shackville statement). This meant that countless students found themselves homeless when they were supposed to be settling in to the university and preparing for the academic year. In response, Rhodes Must Fall activists erected a shack on campus to highlight the rampant homelessness and illustrate the conditions dispossessed blacks in broader society often resort to when they have no housing (Rhodes Must Fall, 2016).



*Figure 1. UCT Upper Campus, by Fuller/Smuts Hall, the location of Shackville*

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*The irony in this picture is that even the location of Shackville has writing on it that says NO-ENTRY . For black students at UCT that's the feeling you feel all the time that you are not allowed in this space, you are not wanted. They want you to leave! You are not welcome ! Even when we are at the university, you are constantly reminded that you were not meant to come here and survive, whether you graduate or not, the gates of humanity and equality are not for you.*

Goitsemedi takes the image above to illustrate the alienation that UCT subjects black students to as they seek belonging on the campus. The “NO-ENTRY” sign is read as a command to black students, continuously reminding them that they do not belong in the university even once they have entered. The decision to position the shack here could thus be read as an attempt to illustrate how the university marginalises poor black students.

Shackville sharply illustrates how race and class intersect to shape student experiences. Poor students travel from all over the country to come to UCT in search of an education. The majority of poor people in the country are black, and this is no different among poor students .Those who could afford to find alternative accommodation at short notice were able to shelter themselves from the crisis, but for those students who were poor, homelessness awaited. These students were invariably black.

This homelessness also meant alienation from the university experience that other students were able to enjoy. Without a room in residence, students often found themselves anxious and were unable to settle in. This affected their ability to participate in orientation programmes and to interact with fellow students. Instead their introduction to university life came in the form of homelessness. For poor black students, the university then comes to reproduce their position within broader society, becoming a site of oppression where it was meant to be a place of hope.

Beyond the issue of residences, the institutional culture of the university has also been problematized by students. The university itself has admitted to its own failings in creating an inclusive campus. In the 2010-2014 Strategic Plan (2009) UCT noted that:

*Black students, staff and many women experience UCT's culture as alienating, closed to transformation and they feel like visitors in a white male club... We need to focus on treating people equally, overcoming deep beliefs and conditioning that some are better than others, overcoming the stereotypes we hold, and valuing diversity and difference.*



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Yet despite this realisation eight years ago, movements like Rhodes Must Fall, Fees Must Fall, Patriarchy Must Fall, The Trans Collective (now the Trans University Forum) and Shackville TRC among others have emerged in recent years to address the very problems described here by the university. This suggests either an inability or unwillingness to transform the institution, protecting its existing culture at the expense of black bodies.



Figure 2. *Koffin for Kaffirs.*

*At another point of oppression is Kramer law school: Where there is no work towards ethical lawyering or human rights . It seems like a fortress of solitude for Caucasians, as they are protected here. But it is a “koffin for kaffirs ”. Black people who have protested have faced threats of being disbarred before they’ve even completed their law degrees . Like myself. One only has two choices as a black body in Kramer: assimilate or die*

The image and text above were provided by Kgatlisio, a third year law student. She explains how the law faculty in particular has protected whiteness, marginalising blacks in the process. Her use of the term “kaffirs” here signifies the racism which she experiences in the faculty, and she describes the building itself as a “koffin” to represent it as a place where black

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students are buried. This describes an exclusionary culture which alienates black students from the rest of the faculty.

The “lack of ethical lawyering or human rights” suggests a problematic curriculum that is resistant to change. This is despite constant critique from black students within the faculty over the past few years. A student grouping known as Decolonise UCT Law has organised on campus to challenge the faculty’s culture over the past two years. In the past they’ve critiqued the faculty for protecting the interests of white upper-class students and failing to address transformation issues (Decolonise Uct Law, 2016) Recently the Center for Higher Education has given the faculty a “Notice of withdrawal of accreditation” for its undergraduate LLB programme, citing amongst other factors a failure to meet minimum transformation goals, which include producing only 4%-14% output of black graduates from its LLB programme (Rebecca Davis, 2017) It was also chastised for its failure to consult stakeholders “particularly students” in drafting its Improvement Plan (Davis, 2017) The faculty responded to this by calling the CHE’s decision “alarmist” and stating its intention to respond within a few weeks, (Mitchell, 2017) despite being given until May 2018 to address the issues identified by the CHE (Davis, 2017). This arrogant response is indicative of a resistance to transformation, further perpetuating an exclusionary culture that continues to marginalise and alienate black students.

The threat of disbarment for protesting is another example of this exclusionary culture. Black students enter the university and feel alienated. In response, they organise and protest, in a quest to create space for themselves to belong. The faculty responds to this with further alienation, threatening to jeopardize students’ future career prospects. Through this, the law faculty not only alienates students whilst they are in the university, but also within the professional world when they eventually graduate.



Figure 3. Wen' Ungubani

*At the heart of what protest spaces are about is the question of identity. And not the identity that has been assigned to you, but one that you assign to yourself. It is about who you are in the Republic, who the people around you are in relation to that, and what that means moving forward. While marginalisation is experienced in different ways in the university, much of resisting it is about ensuring that your identity is not just tolerated, but like an ID, is fully recognised and accepted into the social fabric of society.*

Cebolenkosi reflects on identity politics and what they mean for protesting black students. The quest to have one's identity recognised and accepted as a part of the social fabric communicates the persistent longing for a place of belonging both within the university and within broader society. Protest is used as a tool for the attainment of this goal. In this process however, students within movements have to reflect on their own identities and how those inform relations within movement spaces and with other black students. The quest for belonging is one that requires the navigating of multiple identities, and in order to fully

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develop and realise their own politics, members of student movements have to be cognisant of how structures in society both privilege and make vulnerable the identities which they occupy. When students fail to do this, what results is alienation within the very spaces that were meant to be a site of belonging for all black students.

*. Black bodies constantly have to look around, negotiate safety, take up and reclaim spaces which means different things to different bodies . Even in protest spaces that are supposed to be all inclusive, its about how much social capital you can gain or how many black cis het men want to fuck you.*

Kgatlisó's reflection on how blacks have to negotiate safety even within protest spaces refers largely to the role played by patriarchy in alienating certain bodies from the space. As a queer woman, she notes how masculinity holds power within movement spaces, and that visibility within these spaces for women is often premised on whether men find them attractive or not. This erases the work women do in these spaces, leaving their intellectual labour to be claimed by men (Xaba, 2017).

The point Kgatliso makes about the sexualisation of women within protest spaces also reveals how their bodies are made vulnerable by men within student movements. Not only is their intellectual labour in danger of being appropriated, but they are in danger of being victimised physically. It is therefore unsurprising when one encounters numerous accounts of sexual assault and harassment from women within such spaces.

Despite this however, these students at the same time express that these spaces do provide places of belonging for them. Speaking on this, Kgatliso says "In protest spaces: there are feelings of belonging in created spaces. Providing more detail, Goitsemedi reports:

*As violent as student movements may be, there in whatever sense it may be, I found a home, a place where I was challenging violent societal norms, and place to escape the violence that comes with being a black, queer, Motswana, woman at the university of Cape town.*

Such spaces then are a site of both belonging and alienation. They offer a reprieve from the structural violence students encounter from the university whilst simultaneously inflicting violence themselves. They provide a place to challenge "violent social norms" as Goitsemedi notes, but they also appear to reproduce those same social norms as well. The challenge such

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movements face is therefore not only to confront the violence black students face from the institution, but also to challenge the violence they face from each other.

The experiences detailed by the participants here explicate to some extent how gender power dynamics operate within student movements, but they do not offer reflections on how class affects relations within these spaces. This is interesting to note given that one of the dimensions students were asked to explore in the research questions was class, and how it intersects with both gender and race. This could perhaps be a reflection of a hesitance within these movements to discuss matters of class and how they operate within movements. In my own interactions with student movements on campus, conversations on gendered violence have occurred frequently in meetings (even though little has changed materially) but conversations on how class operates in movement spaces as it intersects with these and other experiences have been few and far between. This may be contributing to feelings of alienation within movement spaces.

#### **Resisting to Exist**

When black students are faced with alienation as they interact with the institution they respond. Entering a space that fails to accommodate them, they create space for themselves through protest. They resist in order to exist in the university.

*UCT is a space that is anti-Black and thus when one attempts to be Black in such a space, the space resists and as long as this anti-Blackness is the norm at UCT, there will always be a need for resistance and there will always be students ready to take part in such resistance. Thus I cannot conceptualise my experience of UCT outside of the scope of protest.*

Daluxolo here notes the impossibility of even existing as a black person within the university. For him the culture of the institution is anti-black. This anti-blackness is so pervasive that it resists against the very being of the black person within the university. As such, in order to be black in the university, this resistance must be challenged, and for Daluxolo protest is the appropriate tool for this. His experience therefore is one wherein his blackness is necessarily defined by resistance to the university's culture. He has no concept of existing as a black person at UCT "outside the scope of protest."



Figure 4. The Tunnel

*These ivory towers and hubs of knowledge production only memorialise, celebrate and commemorate certain (colonial) buildings/ landmarks . And depending on positionality; these mean different things to certain classes of people depending on history and their backgrounds. For example, a certain race protests, so landmarks on protest routes mean something to black bodies only*

Kgatliso makes reference to certain sites on campus that, though existing alongside old colonial buildings, hold particular meaning for protesting black students. Sites that exist along so called “protest routes” are areas that, with frequent enough protest on campus, have come to be associated with the very act of protest itself. Through resistance, the students unintentionally assign meaning to certain sites on campus. A symbolic battle of sorts takes place. Through their protest black students both understand their existence on campus through these symbols, and they become sites of memorialisation for them. Even if there may be no formal recognition of this, the memory of black student protest is held within these sites. However, these symbols can only maintain their meaning if protest on campus persists,



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due to the lack of any formal recognition of these as symbols of protest. This further underscores the point that in order to exist, black students on campus must continue to resist.

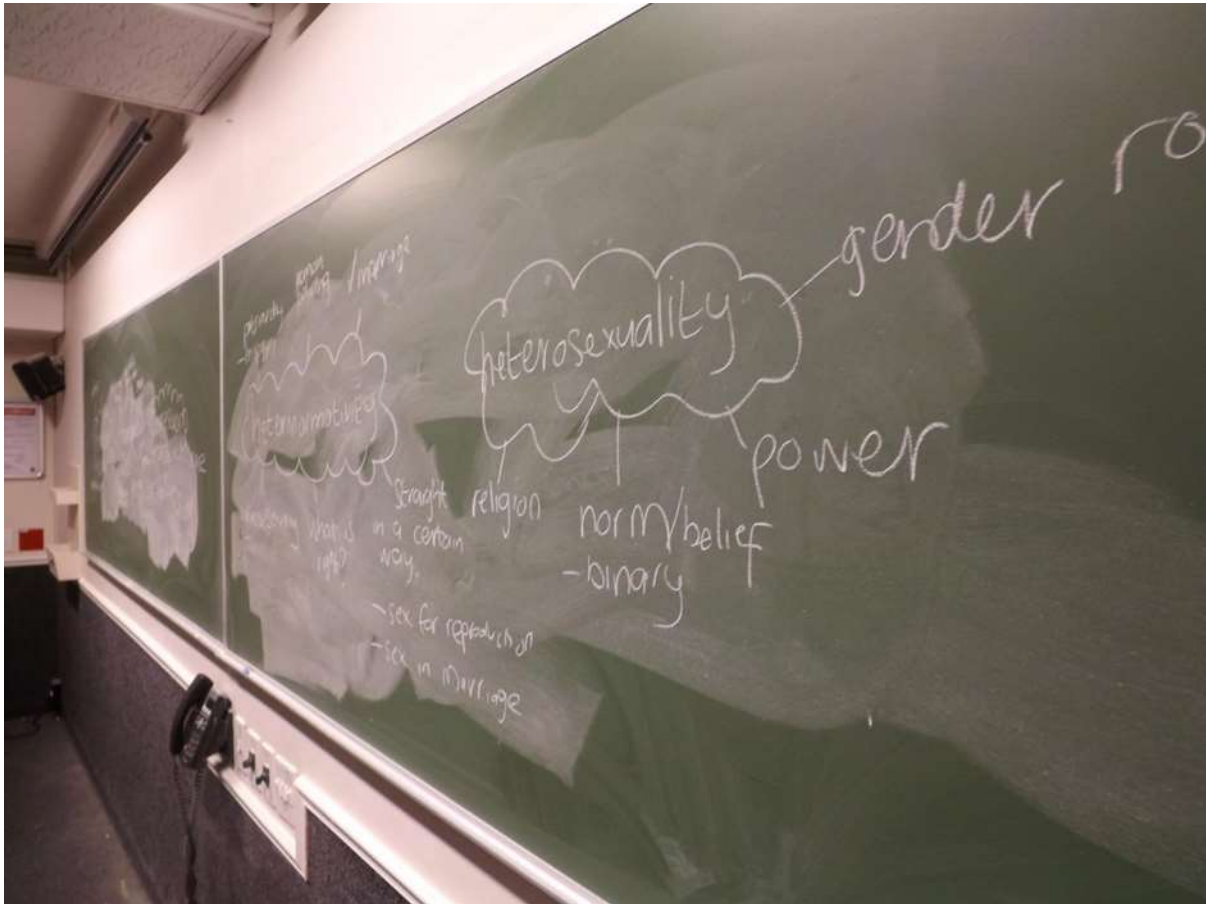


Figure 5. Where is true knowledge found?

*A lot of work done by student movements over the 2015/16 period has been to carry out mass conscientization programs where identity politics are engaged with in ways that has never been possible before. Suddenly intersectionality not only had to be understood, it had to be practiced. And while this presented many challenges for different groups that found themselves in the margins of protest spaces, it also created a space for a special type of learning – one brought about by lived experience.*

Given the alienating forces which existed within their own spaces, students participating in activism on campus often had to resist even within their own ranks to claim their right to exist. The intersectional politic that the movements tried to embody was central to this, advancing a kind of thinking which prioritised experiential knowledge and constant self-evaluation. This was necessary in order to generate the kind of self-awareness necessary for individuals to construct a space that is at all times aware of how different identities interact to shape and inform experiences.

Cebolenkosi's account of how "intersectionality suddenly had to be understood" and learning from the real life experiences of others takes us to another dimension of resistance. The internal work students within the movement needed to do in their self-evaluation and reflection meant they needed to challenge existing social norms. These same social norms had become internalised, and it thus became necessary for students to resist them at an internal level if they were to be part of the movement. These ideals are ones students held as central not only to their immediate activism on the campus, but to the ideal society they had in mind. It was the realisation of these ideals that was necessary in order for them as blacks to truly be liberated. Their existence therefore is defined by resistance at the institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal level. They challenge society, the institution, each other and themselves.

### **Accounts of Trauma and Violence.**

In their own way, each student recounts a tale of violence experienced on campus, either as a normal part of interacting with the university daily, or as a direct consequence of the university's response to protests. One particular cause for such traumatic experiences is the university's deployment of private security and police on campus, which has led to numerous instances of physical violence against students. This physical violence has long term psychological effects (Manzini, 2017).

*They closed us in, shot at us and threw tear gas, on a public road, by our campus, less than 1 km away from a police station, in 2017, let that sink in.*

Goitsemedi recounts the night of Shackville wherein the university summoned police and private security onto campus in response to a protest wherein paintings were burned in response to threats of violence from the university's executive. On the night, six students were arrested. One student leader who wasn't part of the protest was kidnapped and beaten up by private security (Ndelu, )Police violence on campus on the night compromised the safety of not only protesting students, but passers-by who were not part of the protest themselves. The university justified the presence of police and private security by pointing to the actions of students on campus. Their protest is labelled as violent and as such this legitimises a violent response.

What must be noted however is that the violence the institution inflicts on black students is itself not regarded as violence. Oppressive structures within the university and within society are not regarded as violence (Xaba, 2017) because they are less visible in that



they lack a direct physical imposition of force. Rather they are more sinister as they embed themselves in the values and social systems which govern institutions. Political violence in response to such forms of oppression is not seen as justified in the same way that police violence is, and is thus criminalised rather than understood in context.

Goitsemedi's experiences of violence are neither unique to her nor unique to this protest. Since 2015, when the RMF protests began, the university has deployed both private security and police on campus. At the time of writing (November 2017) this practice continues despite the university publicly stating its regret on its use of police in campus in 2015 (Peterson, 2015)

The violence which occurs when police and private security encounter protesting students is also gendered. On the side of protesting students, militarised masculinities often emerge in response to police presence, with sticks and stones being used as weapons in efforts to defend from violence (Xaba, 2017). Militarised masculinities amongst police and private security officers then respond to this perceived threat with so-called crowd control measures, which themselves provoke militarised masculinities to respond in kind.

The hypermasculinity behind this violence also exists within the executive of the university which deploys these police and private security officers, though this is silenced in the mass media (Ndelu, 2017). In an interview for a study carried out by Ndelu (2017), a member of the Senior Executive Task Team at UCT noted that

*[hyper-masculinity] goes both ways: suddenly our meetings shifted from Bremner to this place called the JOC [the police and private security operating base]. You should have seen those guys! [in management] They were so excited and happy. It was interesting to see how excited they were that we were going to protect our university – and creating a police strategy for this and for that. To me, that was totally a performance of masculinity. (Focus group, SETT member, 2016)*

This example illustrates how violent masculinities influence the decisions made about how the university will respond to protest. Militarised masculinities that respond in turn are affirmed through the use of force. In this way, masculinities in management instigate and reproduce violence on campus. However, the privileged position of the white, upper-class management shields their violent masculinities from view. Their privileged position also grants them greater access to powerful media outlets, thus allowing them to portray

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themselves as rational actors responding to irrational criminal acts. On the other hand poor black students are presented as dangerous and violent by these media outlets, fuelling police violence against them when they protest (Ndelu, 2017). This prevents their actions from being recognised as political, and they are instead viewed as criminal.



*Figure 6. Main Road Rondebosch by Baxter theatre.*



*Figure 7. Main Road Rondebosch by Baxter theatre*

*These pictures represent the night of Shackville, I think that night I knew for sure, what my heart always knew, which is that as black students we are on our own , and that we will lose pieces of our innocence in order to get what we want . Shackville I always say was the first time I felt like I had died spiritually, and the night still replays in my mind , the fear and sorrow and all the memories . That’s the reason why I took a picture that was clear and one that is blurry, to show the disorientation and world wind of emotion attached to that night.*

The images above representing Goitsemedi’s experiences of Shackville present a chilling picture of the trauma students encounter when they are confronted with police violence. The fact that the night still “replays” in Goitsemedi’s mind, with all “the fear and sorrow” over a year later suggests that the incident has had a long term psychological impact on her. Her comment on how this was the first time she “died spiritually” means that on this night she encountered something which inflicted upon her a kind of damage she had not previously experienced. The disorientation she describes lives on in memory, and the fact of it being connected to her realisation that black students are “on our own” in the university connects it

to her experiences of the entire institution itself. It is thus a defining feature of her views on the university as a whole, and how she experiences the university as a black person.



*Figure 8. I Thirst*

*Many people who experience marginality of some kind in the university can attest to the fact that the hostilities faced are emotionally dehydrating. It drains you to continue trying to survive the institution's culture and to navigate through its unwritten rules. Like the plants in this image, parts of who you are wither and die.*

Concepts of death and loss are used repeatedly by participants to describe the suffering they endure at the hands of the university. Cebolenkosi notes here that the culture of the university is “emotionally dehydrating” and that parts of yourself “wither and die” because of it. Another participant, Qhaweletu, comments that UCT is “a place where dreams come to die.” Goitsemedi speaks on how “we will lose parts of innocence to get what we want,” in reference to the trauma she experiences in encountering police violence, and also speaks on how she “died spirituality” on that night. The reflections offered by Cebolenkosi and Yibanathi are in response to the institutions culture. The everyday running of the institution is therefore identified as being the cause behind their suffering. Goitsemedi on the other hand

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points out how the institutions response to protest on the campus is traumatic in similar ways to the institutions culture. Indeed these responses can only be a reflection of the institutions culture.

Death is an ending; the loss of something which cannot later be recovered. In death that which once lived ceases to exist. For students to employ such a concept when describing the traumatic experiences they face in the institution means that they view the university as an institution of violence, whose culture can only be sustained by killing. It also means that students feel they have lost parts of themselves which cannot be recovered, and that they have changed in irreversible ways because of the structural and physical violence inflicted on them by the institution. What is lost is not necessarily just material, as the reflections here point to suffering endured at an internal, emotional level. It can thus be concluded then that black students face psychological trauma in their interactions with the university.

#### **Coping Strategies.**



*This is the first time I witnessed people my age deliberately getting drunk and high to deal with the fact that they don't feel like they are part of the world that they live in . cigarettes help with anxiety, they help you control your breathing, alcohol helps with the depression, and the social anxiety so you can hang around people who are like you and talk to them about how you probably aren't gonna graduate, or get funding for your next year of study.*

In responding to the trauma and suffering endured whilst at the university, black students, in this case the ones who've been part of student movements, often turn to alcohol and



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cigarettes and alcohol as a remedy for their pain. When Qhaweletu says that this is the “first time I witnessed people my age getting drunk and high to deal with the fact that they don’t feel like they are part of the world they live in” it can be understood that the use of substances is done as a direct response to feelings of alienation. UCT is a part of this world, and its alienating culture is a likely contributor to this phenomenon. Qhaweletu’s comments also suggest that a great number of black students they interact with suffer from mental illness. Though it is not possible to attribute the cause of these illnesses to the university, an alienating culture which exposes black students to trauma and violence is almost certain to exacerbate any mental health problems students may have. The point Qhaweletu makes about funding concerns that students have connects the issue of class to these experiences. Amongst the problems faced is the inability to afford education.

*It’s a running joke between my friends and I, “you don’t tell a black person how to drink or smoke because neither of you can afford to take them to a psychologist.*

The use of substances doesn’t seem to be a choice here, but rather a final resort due to affordability. Poor black students therefore are doubly marginalised by an exclusionary culture, and the inability to acquire therapeutic assistance should this culture take a psychological toll on them. The university does provide assistance through Student Wellness services. These services however are not always free. Though they are meant to be free to financial aid students, the service itself has been grossly understaffed for years when it comes to mental health practitioners. What has resulted are cases where students have often been placed on the waiting list for months before they are able to even get a single appointment. Those who can afford private help do not have to deal with this problem, but poor students are left with no alternative except to wait. This is highly problematic for students as their problems are often immediate and can exacerbate if left for long periods of time without intervention.



*Solace for many on the margins is found at the bottom of the bottle. While there are many ways to cope with marginality, many students find their coping mechanisms in alcohol(ism ). And while this happens, in those moments, it is sometimes revealed that we are broken . Broken on the inside.*

Cebolenkosi's image is particularly powerful because it not only portrays the brokenness of the marginalised (black students in this case), it also illustrates the brokenness of "the bottle" itself. What Cebolenkosi reveals here is the destructive nature of alcohol as a coping mechanism, for it's potential to become alcoholism. This is a mental health problem in itself. The use of alcohol may further exacerbate existing problems, as well. This makes the need for therapeutic intervention even more immediate, but the inability to afford this leads students right back to substances for "solace." A destructive cycle is created, one whose only remedy it seems is the financial means to source professional help. In the absence of this, the culture of substance abuse which seems to exist among these students will persist, not entirely because of their own doing, but because of circumstances beyond their control which dictate both their material and psychological conditions.



*Nights alone are normally spent in ritual. Smoke on the balcony and try to fall asleep without thinking. Drink on the balcony and try to fall asleep without thinking. Pray on the balcony and try to fall asleep without thinking.*

Qhawelethu introduces the concept of ritual here as a coping mechanism. The use of substances here becomes part of a ritual. The concept of ritual provides a predictable and consistent refuge. Ritual can represent stability, and this can be useful when coping with emotional and psychological turmoil, even if some of these rituals are potentially destructive. Prayer is also employed here as a coping strategy by Qhawelethu as part of their rituals. Prayer and ritual existing together alludes to spirituality.





*This tunnel for me will always be a place of healing and mourning . Many a times during protest whether it be for fees, patriarchy, rape culture etc. I remember when we would pause here and sing, a lot of the times I would cry, there is something about the echo of our voices, surrounded by comrades, singing to the ancestors and letting it all out that makes me emotional . Asking for guidance from the forces that may be, asking for healing and for strength.*

The concept of prayer and ritual also carries meaning for Goitsemedi She describes singing in the tunnel with her comrades on the numerous protests she's participated in. It somehow became a common practise for any protest to pass through this tunnel and pause for an extended period of time. Goitsemedi, this was a moment to ask for "guidance from the forces that may be," referring to ancestors. This in itself is an act of prayer that occurs during protest. A prayer during which students ask "for healing and for strength." It therefore operates as a coping mechanism even in the midst of protest itself.



*A large part of protest spaces involves a contestation of ideals and value systems. A battlefield of ideas. And like much of the message found in biblical scripture, much of those ideas attempt to present some kind of deliverance from experienced miseries (i.e. through socialism, decolonisation, black centred feminism etc) . The message may have changed in tone and emphasis, but it still bears remnants of hope for those who trust in it. Indeed, for many of us, the word had been there from the very beginning and continues to mould and shape how we perceive the world.*

Cebolenkosi draws interesting parallels between ideology and spirituality. The ideas that emerge from protest spaces are compared to “the word” which has always been there from the beginning. The word offers hope and the possibility for “deliverance” from oppression and suffering.. It also offers the possibility for of life after death, It is fundamental to constructions of self and it gives meaning to existence, thus become essential in coping with suffering. Cebolenkosi here shows how the ideas adopted and espoused within protest spaces can be as powerful and as important as “the word” itself. These ideas, like the word, provide hope, meaning and inform constructions of self within the world. By serving as a lense through which to analyse society, they also provide pathways to different futures, thus

carrying the potential for “deliverance.” The ideas students adopt in these spaces thus serve as coping mechanisms themselves.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The broad themes identified within the data were: 1) Belonging and Alienation. 2) Resting to Exist. 3) Accounts of Trauma and violence and 4) Coping Strategies. Each theme unveils interesting and complex elements of the student’s experiences on campus. Students enter a space that alienates them as they search for belonging. This pushes students to join student movements which end up producing both sites of belonging and alienation as well. In response to their alienation students resist. This resistance then becomes a defining feature of their existence. There are also accounts of violence and trauma experienced by students at the hands of the university. Death is employed as a metaphor to symbolise the psychological pain and trauma that marginalised students feel. Lastly, the coping strategies employed by students are explored. And though some of these are destructive (substance abuse), students do also find refuge in spirituality, and in the very ideas that guide their activism.

Black students who engage in protest on the UCT campus, particularly disruptive protest, do so at great personal risk. Working from an already vulnerable position as marginalised peoples, they become more vulnerable when the university responds. The pain and suffering endured in protest, the risk of arrest and permanent criminal records, the violence experienced at the hands of private security, and the threat of suspension or even expulsion loom over any student who decides to participate in activism of this nature on campus. For already disadvantaged students to put this much on the line indicates that there is something so problematic about the university’s normal operations that it makes these risks more reasonable than continuing on with university life as normal. The university is to a large extent already aware of these problems as they problematized the university’s alienating culture years before these movements emerged.

The presence of a white upper-class masculinity in the university management must be noted and explored further. Student movements have come under great scrutiny from mass media to justify their politics and their actions, yet university management has not had to do the same. The internal dynamics that govern their spaces, and the power dynamics therein remain largely unknown to those not sitting in their offices. So long as this information is not uncovered and made widely available, it will not be possible to interrogate these power structures and change the way they operate. These however are the sorts of changes that are

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necessary in order to transform institutional culture on campuses like UCT. If the management continues to operate in the same way without contest, then it will perpetuate the same culture it always has, regardless of any protest or agreement reached in negotiations.

With regards to the experiences given by students, it is worth noting that though one of the research questions dealt specifically with the intersections of race, class and gender, the participants mostly recounted how they come to be marginalised as black people on campus, and how they respond to that marginalisation. This suggests that within the university, the students primarily are oppressed because of their race. Oppression along the lines of class in the university is also invariably against blacks because they are the ones who are poor in this country. Accounts of oppression along the lines of gender are only offered in reference to occurrences within movement spaces, and in interactions with the university or its culture. This is not to say that the university is absent of any patriarchy whatsoever (note the earlier point on white upper-class masculinities). It suggests rather that student movements have a serious problem with patriarchy internally.

This project provides great insight on the student movement, how students themselves see it, and how they have constructed meanings around it. There are lessons which can be learned both by university management and students who participate in activism. It also reveals that there may be potentially serious and long term psychological effects that come with such campus activism and protest. Given that such protests have occurred nationwide, and many university campuses have responded with similar force as UCT has, there is cause to be concerned about the mental health of these students across the country. On the side of university management, it means there is a need for universities to reassess the ways in which they respond to student protest.

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***Race, Class and Gender in a Time of Protest: Black Student Experiences at UCT.***

You are kindly invited to participate in a study examining how race, class and gender intersect to inform your experience at this university as a black student amidst the current climate of protest as student movements emerge on campus. You will be given the opportunity to tell your story through speaking, writing and photography

**Procedures**

The method to be used here for this study is photovoice. This is a procedure whereby you will be given a camera to take photographs reflecting your experiences and write about them. You will also attend focus groups to discuss these photographs and the experiences they depict. As part of this research design, your input will have an influence on how the whole project is executed.

If you elect to join the study, you will need adhere to the following:

- You will first attend a meeting with the other participants where the overall aims and objectives of the study will be discussed. Ethical issues in the research will also be discussed here.
- You will then join a focus group session where we will discuss the research questions and collectively begin forming possible ideas that can be explored in the photos. Your input will be very important in guiding this process as the experiences you will document are your own, after this session, there will be a short training session for camera usage. The camera will then be issued to you
- You'll keep the camera for two weeks. Take as many pictures as you wish, and write a short reflection/caption for the pictures you deem most powerful/important. You will also write a 500 word piece reflecting on your experiences with reference to the ideas covered in the initial focus group.

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- After the 2 weeks you will hand in the camera, your written piece, and the images you took.
- Soon after this, the entire group will gather again and we will have a second focus group. Here you will need to bring the images you have selected and the group will discuss them collectively, reflecting on any notable patterns that may emerge, or any particularly striking ideas.
- An exhibition will be held later in the year where some of these pictures will be displayed. The group will collectively decide how this is curated, and who is to be invited. These decisions will be taken during our final meeting, where we will also debrief and reflect on the experience of carrying out this research.

#### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

All possible measures to ensure privacy and confidentiality will be taken. However, given that you will discuss experiences and ideas with a group of other people, it will be important for each person involved to respect the information shared by others and not share that information outside of our meetings. Information that you provide through photos, writing, or speaking may be used in academic reports and publications. Your identity will be protected throughout this process through the use of pseudonyms. However, should you wish to not hide your identity, the possibility of having your real name used does exist, but this shall have to be negotiated as the research proceeds in order make sure you remain protected. Focus group discussions will be recorded and transcribed. All data will be stored on password protected folders on my laptop, and backed up on secure cloud storage.

#### **Photographs**

All the photographs you take belong to you. I will request your consent before using any photograph for any purpose. Photographs wherein you can be identified will not be used, unless you explicitly and voluntarily indicate that that is what you wish. The same principle applies to the use of your name.

#### **Participation in project and withdrawal**

As your participation is voluntary, you may withdraw without having to explain yourself at any time. No negative consequences will follow whatsoever.

**Benefits**

There are no obvious material benefits to participating, however I do hope that being a part of this process can further engagement amongst black students on the issue of the student movement, and how it can improve its work and effectively change the institution. I also that it advances your own thinking on these matters. Lastly, this may also potentially be an empowering experience for you, however this is not gaurunteed.

**Questions**

If you have any questions at any point about any of the issues pertaining to this study, and your rights as a participate, do not hesitate to contact any of these numbers

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## Running head: Black Student Experiences at UCT

If you would like to participate in this study, please sign below:

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Name

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Signature

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Date

I have read and understood the information about the project, and volunteer myself to participate. I consent to having my voice audio-recorded during focus group sessions, and agree to participate knowing that the data collected here may be accessed by other researchers and used in reports.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_