

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Coming to UCT: Black students, transformation and discourses of race

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### *Abstract*

Since the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, increasing numbers of black students have been enrolling at historically whites-only universities. This situation has been paralleled by a resurgence of racialising discourses that represent black students as lacking in competencies, lowering academic standards and undeserving of their places at university. This paper investigates the impact of these discourses on black students at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Over six months, 24 students from seven departments and four faculties participated in a Photovoice project during which they produced photographs and stories representing their experiences at UCT. The findings demonstrate that, through practices of material and symbolic exclusion, racialising discourses of transformation had a detrimental impact on students, affecting their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and academic performance. The discussion reflects on the identity dynamics and the coping strategies that black students adopt to fit into the whiteness of the university.

### *Keywords*

*Transformation, black students, South Africa, higher education; race, Photovoice.*

### *Introduction*

The transition from apartheid to democracy paved the way for significant changes in South Africa's institutions of higher education. Arguably, the most notable change is the shifting demographics of historically 'whites-only' universities. In 1989, on the eve of the dismantling of apartheid, black students<sup>1</sup> constituted 24.7% of the student population at the University of Cape Town (UCT) (Luescher, 2009), a leading South African public institution. It took another 16 years for the number of black students to exceed white students when, in 2007, black students accounted for 51% of UCT's student body (DHET,

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2007). Figures for 2011 indicate a total of 25 279 students, of which 7 262 were African, 3 748 were Coloured, 1 859 were Indian and 9 306 were white (DHET, 2011) – indicating that black students still constituted just over 50% of the student body. Despite these promising figures, the politics of transformation at UCT have been the subject of intense debate (Erasmus, 2010; Kessi, 2013a; Soudien, 2010), with particular emphasis on the admissions policy. The discourses emerging from this debate tend to present black students as ‘the problem’. Furthermore, amidst what we will argue are contradictory practices of transformation, little is known about what black students at UCT think, and how they feel and navigate these dynamics on a day-to-day basis. This paper is thus concerned with the experiences of black students at UCT who tell a very complex story of the dynamics of racial transformation.

### *Discourses of race and transformation at UCT*

Racial differences and race discrimination are recognised as central concerns of the transformation process.<sup>2</sup> However, the growing number of black students at UCT, resulting from the admissions policy, has been met with a more direct discourse of resistance to transformation. Discourses of low standards and reverse racism have inundated the media and present black students as the ‘problem’ rather than as rightful co-beneficiaries of transformation (Kessi, 2013a).

Discourses of transformation thus produce knowledge about black students as underserving of an education either because they are lacking in capabilities (they are accused of not entering on merit) or lacking in hard work (they are accused of being unfairly advantaged). Studies on the impact of racialisation on educational achievement in South Africa (De Beer, Smith & Jansen, 2009; Higham 2012; Vincent, 2008) and elsewhere (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Codjoe, 2001; Davis *et al.*, 2004; Harper, 2009, 2012, 2013; Howarth, 2004; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Gillborn *et al.*, 2012; Phoenix, 2009; Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007) have shown that such discourses can affect the self-esteem and sense of belonging of black students who internalise the negative stereotypes assigned to them, often leading to a drop in their academic performance.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the experiences of black students at UCT, to voice their views on transformation, and to build a framework for resisting and altering the negative discourses associated with the transformation discourse. It further contributes to the research on transformation and decolonisation in higher education in South Africa from the perspectives of black students.

### *Photovoice methodology*

The data for this project was collected through a participatory action research initiative using Photovoice methods. Photovoice involves the collection of photographs accompanied by written stories or captions (referred to as ‘photo-stories’) produced by the research participants to describe their experiences at UCT and their views on transformation. These photo-stories were then displayed at a photography exhibition held at UCT and open to the public. Drawing on feminist theory, Freirian conscientisation and

documentary photography (Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997), Photovoice is a method that offers participants the opportunity to voice their concerns, represent themselves, gain a deeper awareness of the issues affecting them, and reach a broad audience. Hence, participating in a Photovoice project can be an empowering experience in which participants develop a consciousness of their situation and become active change agents in their own lives (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997; Kessi, 2015). Photovoice research has been effective in working with young people in South Africa to address issues of identity, stigmatisation and social change (Moletsane *et al.*, 2007; Kessi, 2011, 2013b; Langa, 2010) and is particularly appropriate for use with university students who may feel unable to reach those in the institution who make influential decisions (Goodhart *et al.*, 2006), and to raise consciousness about the impact of racialisation (Kessi, 2011, 2013b).

The participants in this study were 24 full-time undergraduate and postgraduate black students from UCT, 5 male and 19 female, drawn from seven departments in four different faculties.<sup>3</sup> The participants were recruited through the Department of Psychology's Student Research Participation Programme (SRPP),<sup>4</sup> or by word of mouth.

The design of the project included a series of activities including focus group sessions on transformation; written personal reflections (of 500 words); a photography training exercise; photo-story production; and a photography exhibition. The exhibition opening was held at UCT on 10 October 2013 and was attended by students, participants, faculty and members of the public.<sup>5</sup>

The project thus involved participants in an organised and staged process designed to encourage a rigorous reflection on the complex issues surrounding transformation at UCT and to give black students an opportunity to be heard and recognised as active and full members of the UCT community.

### *Findings*

The findings are organised below into three themes and present the data arising from the focus group discussions, the personal reflections and the photo-stories collected during the project. The themes present how the discourses of low standards and reverse racism occur in participants' stories of their experiences at UCT. The first theme, *Out of focus: Racial identity and belonging*, highlights their general reflections on their identity and position within the institution; the second theme, *Daily experiences of segregation, othering and inequality*, exposes the ways in which their experiences of being black at UCT are reinforced in many aspects of their everyday lives on campus; and the third theme, *The whiteness of UCT: Cultural and symbolic exclusion*, presents participants' deeper reflections on the historical, institutional and relational barriers that contribute to the racial dynamics that they experience at UCT.

#### **Theme 1: Out of focus: Racial identity and belonging**

This theme describes the impact of stigmatising discourses of blackness on students' experiences at UCT. Many of the participants described how arriving at UCT was marked by 'feeling black' for the first time.

In this first photo-story, Claudia describes her impression of UCT as more concerned with its reputation than with embracing the racial transformation of the institution. In the photograph, a black student is standing 'out of focus' in front of a UCT building that is 'in focus'.

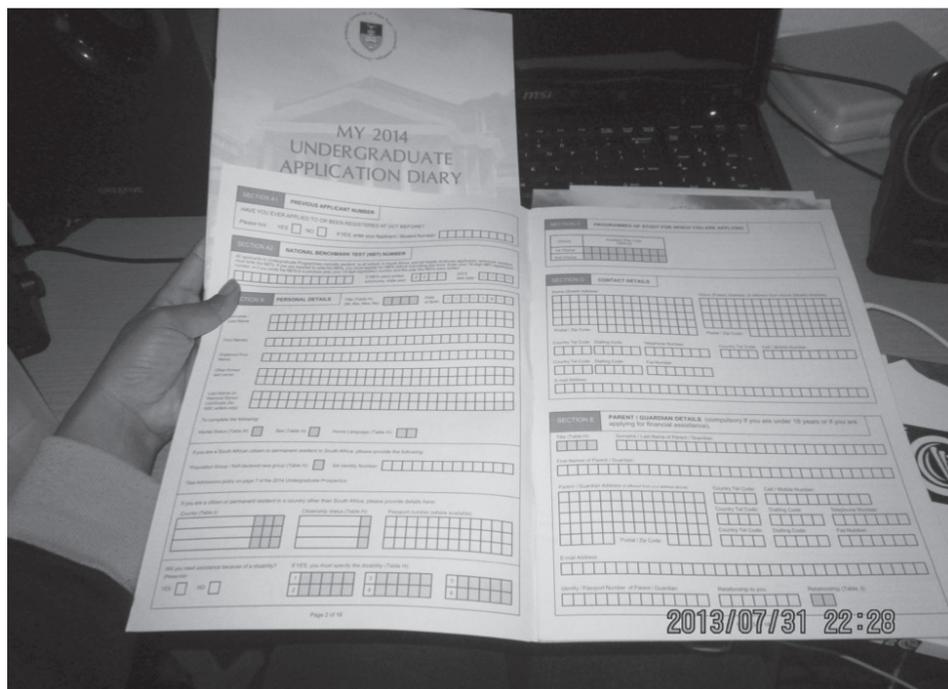


### Out of focus

As part of the theme on transformation at UCT, I took this photo as it captured this idea. The fact that the subject, the student, is out of focus while the building is in focus, has important suggestions being made concerning transformation at UCT. As a newcomer at UCT it feels as though it is the image of UCT (top achieving institution on the continent) which is privileged over the students themselves [...].

Being 'out of focus' is the metaphor for feeling insignificant as opposed to the significance of UCT. This reveals a disconnection from the institution – the black student in the photograph does not contribute to the reputation of UCT but rather highlights the perspective that increasing numbers of black students leads to a drop in status for the institution.

These ideas of lowering standards also came up significantly in the data through students' experiences of self-doubt. Many expressed that 'feeling black' led them to internalise the negative imagery of incompetency attributed to them and, therefore, to question their own abilities. In the following photo-story, Vicky reflects on the application process and the changing significance that indicating one's race on the application form had for her:



### Coming to UCT was the first time I felt black

Indicating my race on my application form was one of the information that I gave not thinking that it mattered that much. I thought it was just for statistical purposes, but it came to be something that would impact my self-esteem greatly in my life at UCT. I have started to wonder if I got to where I am because of my academic potential or whether it was because I am black and there needed to be some black people in the class for UCT to be achieving their goal of transformation [...].

This first encounter with ‘race’ at UCT left her uneasy and made her question her academic abilities. In the title of her photo-story, the phrase ‘feeling black’ is used as a negative experience of racialisation as opposed to being black. ‘Feeling black’ was a way of describing how black students are perceived by others through stigmatising images of blackness. Davis *et al.* (2004), who interviewed black students about their experiences at a predominantly white American university, noted one student saying that “you will come here and you will learn that you are black” (p. 432). For Vicky, indicating her race on her application form was at first a rather benign act that subsequently gained a new significance after her experience of UCT. As she reflected on that moment and connected it to her current experiences, she concluded that the students who are meant to be central to transformation were somehow removed – they were simply numbers on a form.

In her personal reflection, Lindi also expresses the impact that these discourses have on her ability to succeed: “Had I entered because of merit? Or had I entered because of my skin colour? [...] I believe that these doubts have been the major contributor to my recent

low academic achievements [...]”. Being in an environment that marginalises and alienates black students made her question her abilities and impacted her academic performance.

Students also explained their experiences of ‘feeling black’ in relation to their academic competencies vis-à-vis white students and how, consequently, they were made to feel that they were taking the place of white students. In the following extract from a focus group, Sean says:

I feel it in my [X] class all the time. I’m just there, I’m just occupying a space that was actually meant for another white person that did better than me [...] I do feel, all the time! [...] I do feel I’m occupying a space that wasn’t actually meant for me.

Here we see the combined impact of discourses of low standards and reverse racism. Sean describes how ideas of incompetency are associated with the guilt of taking the place of white students. Hence, as black students internalise what it means to be black at UCT, they begin to construct their black identities in relation to white identities and take on the responsibility of reverse racism. Left unaddressed, this creates the conditions for isolation as depicted in the following photo-story:



**Isolation (Zethu)**

Isolation is the theme captured in this image as it is also an important part of transformation experienced at UCT. The fact that this male student is alone and almost blurred shows the possible disillusionment in which this isolation sometimes results.

In this photograph, there are two students – one white student sitting on the stairs and a black student who is not only blurred but also partly hidden behind the tree. However, the photographer only speaks of the black student in her story and leaves the racial dynamic as a tacit interpretation. The white student is more visible in the photograph and is reading

a book, which could symbolise his connection to being a student at UCT, whereas the black student is hardly visible and seemingly passing by, as if there by mistake. This photo-story is a powerful example of how a photograph can convey beyond words the affective experience of being black at UCT. Being in an environment where racial identity is salient leads to a sense of isolation, a lack of belonging and low self-esteem amongst black students who are left to grapple, often for the first time, with the reality of what it means to be black in South Africa today. The reflections in the above stories are verified by De Beer *et al.* (2009), who found that the black students who perceived themselves as 'second-class students' (regardless of their academic ability) had lower academic performance than those who did not. These racialising experiences therefore have a real impact on both identity and performance and have been documented by a number of researchers (Codjoe, 2001; Cokley *et al.*, 2012; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2012; Gillborn *et al.*, 2012; Griffin *et al.*, 2010; Harper, 2013; Howarth, 2004; Phoenix, 2009). These experiences may not be particular to UCT, but for many of the participants, the awareness of being black in a racialised society was heightened by the focus on racial identities in university practices, in particular the hostility surrounding the affirmative action discourse. Universities are often referred to as elitist institutions that cater for a privileged few (Gibson, 2015). Hence, experiences of belonging and exclusion become even more palpable in such environments (see Tabensky & Matthews, 2015). As the next two themes demonstrate, the elitism of UCT is very much racialised through day-to-day practices and upheld by cultural symbols of whiteness.

## Theme 2: Daily experiences of segregation, othering and inequality

This second theme highlights the racialising encounters that black students face on a regular basis. These take place during lectures and tutorials, in residence halls, and in other public spaces across the university. The stories below are examples of the racial segregation that exists on campus, of encounters with white students and of the material inequalities between white and black students.

In the following extract from his personal reflection, Kopano describes the commonplace practice of sitting in separate race groups:

First day of lectures and the class is split almost perfectly by race. All the white students sat in one section we coined "Camps Bay". All the Indians sat in another. Most of the coloured and Muslim students would sit next to the Indian section or at the back of the class or "Mitchell's Plain". The upper middle class black students congregated in a small area and finally the rest of the black students populated the remainder of the class "Khayelitsha". I was in shock ...<sup>6</sup>

The practice of labeling physical areas by race is an indication of the lingering impact of apartheid segregation. The fact that this practice occurs at UCT makes it apparent that the current generation is still affected by racial beliefs, contrary to what the discourses of reverse racism suggest. Segregation is not a benign act of separation in South Africa but a historical practice of oppression that signified a division between superior and inferior 'race' groups (Zuma, 2010) and has been documented in previous studies with UCT students (Alexander & Tredoux, 2010; Schrieff *et al.*, 2010, 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Participants also spoke about their experiences of othering during group work or joint assignments with white students. They complained about how their contributions were often undermined or that white students demanded to check over their work before submission. One participant, Mashama, described a situation where she got higher marks on an assignment than her fellow white student, who said: "... oh man I just don't know what happened. Something's wrong ...". Participants described these as subtle experiences of racism that indicated a sense of entitlement amongst white students. Indeed, the reluctance of white students to work with black students in group-work projects has been widely documented (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2012, 2013; Higham, 2012; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Vincent, 2008).

Another important issue that participants raised is the material inequality that they encounter. These experiences represent a stark contrast to the discourse of reverse racism. Having to face the privilege of white students on a daily basis heightens students' experiences of 'feeling black' and its associated stereotypes. The following focus group exchange explains:

Buhle: Yesterday, am walking back home after class and this boy drives off in a Porsche Boxter...I was like, oh my gosh, this boy, this kid, this child, is driving a car that could like pay for my entire fees, like everything, 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, Honours, Masters. This guy is driving a car and he's revving his engine and I could just not stop laughing at how (pause) I felt so poor...

Bongi: And it's crazy because then, after that moment you had, you're supposed to just carry on with life now like you had that moment, take it all in and like you deal with it, take it in, suck it up and then you go to class and sit right next to this person every single day.

These differences in material wealth further contribute to the affective experience of exclusion and incompetency. 'Feeling poor' is another way of depicting the range of experiences of 'feeling black' at UCT and one that arises out of the confrontation with excessive wealth. These experiences are a constant reminder for black students that they are not on a level playing field with their white counterparts. Hence, experiences of segregation, othering and material inequality are a few of the ways in which racial disparities are reinforced in black students' day-to-day lives at UCT.

### **Theme 3: The whiteness of UCT: Cultural and symbolic exclusion**

The data up to this point has touched upon participants' position at UCT in relation to institutional practices and in relation to white students. Their testimonies of these experiences point to the whiteness of the university, a set of cultural practices that are historically, socially and culturally produced (Frankenberg, 1993) and that privilege the experiences of white students over black students. The following set of stories highlights how participants reflected more broadly on the whiteness of the university to explain the devaluation of their own identities and experiences.

Returning to the sense of 'feeling black' expressed in the first theme, the following story reflects on how coming to UCT is many black students' first significant exposure to whiteness.

Kagiso: Maybe I always knew I was black. And perhaps I always knew there were white people. I never really cared about it though. It never really impacted me in any way. The thing is, I grew up in a township. We never did see any whites, let alone interact with them, unless we went to town [...]. Fast forward a few years and I find myself in Cape Town, a student at UCT as a fresher [...] and for the first time ever in my life I was confronted with the cultural capital that comes with being white, or familiar with the white world. Thus, for the first time ever in my life, I felt black, I knew I was black [...] and suddenly for the first time ever in my life too, I felt inferior [...].

Kagiso describes how coming to UCT ignited his awareness of the broader power relations between blacks and whites in society. Although he hints at a vague awareness of it growing up in the township, his first significant encounter with whiteness was at UCT. He refers to the “cultural capital that comes with being white” as a symbolic location of privilege, and highlights the significance of the sense of familiarity with the white world that made him, as a black student, feel inferior. This familiarity relates to the affinity that white students automatically have with the cultural symbols and artefacts imbued in the discourses and practices of UCT.

The following photo-story about the statue of British mining magnate and colonialist Cecil John Rhodes (who ‘donated’ the piece of land on which UCT is built) that previously stood high in the centre of upper campus<sup>8</sup> captures many of these ideas.



Power and internalised inferiority (Sean)

This picture shows the main statue of Cecil John Rhodes on upper campus. As I took the picture standing in front of the statue, I thought about the internalised inferiority that is imbued in my psyche as a black student at UCT. These are unconscious processes that dictate my relationships with others, my decisions, the way I speak and how I have come to perceive myself and people who are of my race. Standing in front of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, I still felt the power of the colonisers on my colonised forefathers and myself in contemporary South Africa. In taking the picture, I was still positioned in a lower position of both the statue and my white fellow students standing next to the statue. This elevated their position in relation to me and the Jammie stairs was a metaphor for the upward mobility of black people and how that meant that whiteness or the colonisers' position needs to be aspired to. The fact that I adjust my accent and continuously refine my English is a reflection of this and the black person's positionality in this institution.

A most interesting aspect of this story is how the condition of success for black students is the assimilation into whiteness. Sean suggests that if black students want to be successful at UCT, they must take on the values and culture of the white world and aspire to it, in this case through changing their language and accents to fit in.

Participants also raised related issues such as the whiteness of the curriculum and the lack of black representation in academia. As Mareka reflects:

Our curriculum is still from a Western perspective. You look at most of the lecturers we have, I'm a third-year student at UCT and I've not been taught by somebody who's black or someone who's of another colour.

The content of the curriculum is important as students' ability to relate to the material is a significant factor in facilitating their learning experience and promoting their knowledge and capabilities (Codjoe, 2001; Nhlapo, 2011; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003). Furthermore, the lack of black academic staff can reinforce black students' sense of exclusion. It symbolises a lack of opportunities for them to gain access to careers in academia but also denies them the advantages of having professors of their own race. Some of those advantages are that black lecturers can help to validate students' academic ability, belongingness and racialised experiences, and serve as role models (Davis *et al.*, 2004; Harper, 2013).

The cultural capital associated with whiteness is both despised and envied by participants who, on the one hand, take on some of the behavioural expectations that ease their assimilation into the culture of the institution and, on the other hand, resist because of the impact on their identities and sense of self-esteem. These experiences largely revolve around discourses of incompetency and reverse racism that they face on a daily basis and that highlight a master narrative of black underachievement (Harper, 2009). The discussion that follows will focus on the identity impacts caused by these experiences and the need to re-centre the transformation discourse on more positive outcomes.

### *Discussion: Identity impacts, coping and resistance*

Students' experiences in this study highlighted some of the many challenges of 'feeling black' at UCT and the centrality of race in the politics of transformation. Imbued in participants' experiences are feelings of inadequacy, not belonging, self-doubt and confusion. In response to these dynamics, students adopted strategies to cope with the dominant culture of the university. Many students silence themselves and are thus not able to participate fully in university life. Others distance themselves from the transformation discourse as one that applies only to *other* black students (Kessi, 2013a), whilst many students assimilate into the dominant culture by taking on certain cultural practices, such as modifying their language and changing their accents, making friends with and engaging in the activities of white students.

Kopano explains how he transitioned from feelings of inadequacy and incompetence that led him to silence himself in the classroom, to a sense of inclusion by making friends with white students and joining the predominantly white rugby team:

And if white people see me asking a question, "who's he who thinks he's..." you know? And also in my mind I'm thinking they got higher marks than me, so obviously my question's going to be stupid. And you always second guessing yourself... because I couldn't ask a question in the class I doubted my entire ability and it affected my ability to get good marks. The way I got over it, very embarrassing, I decided to start playing rugby with the white guys... I decided to start playing to become friends with them so that I know that I can interact on the same level to get in my mind that we can think the same so that in class when I talk they know that we've the same brain... and lo and behold it improved my marks by about 8 per cent.

For Kopano, being in close contact with white students reduced his feelings of incompetence and exclusion and had a positive impact on his academic performance. Although this was an effective strategy for Kopano and one that disarmed his white counterparts, being accepted by white students remained the underlying condition. In doing so, he took on the responsibility of the stereotype and for transformation, letting white students off the hook. Also, his embarrassment indicates that efforts to fit into the culture of UCT sometimes come with other affective consequences. Students who assimilate with whiteness are faced with the additional burden of how this might be perceived by other black students. One participant, Mashama, explained how relating to white students when she first arrived at UCT earned her the label of 'coconut' – a term given to black people who take on white identities.

Participants described how interactions between themselves as black students became more complex in the context of UCT where the need to belong often dictated who they would relate to and how.<sup>9</sup> These complicated identity dynamics mean that black students must find strategies for coping in addition to their academic requirements (Smith, Allen & Danley, 2007). These strategies also shift over time. The contrast between Lihle, a first-year student, and Sean, a postgraduate student, speaking of racism at UCT is evidence of the need for effective coping and resistance strategies:

Lihle: Back home, people talk about UCT like, “Oh my gosh! This diverse place, I mean amazing place. There’s no racism there whatsoever! People there are equal [...]”. And that’s the mentality I had coming here. I didn’t really want to, I don’t know maybe I didn’t want to find out about this, but I just don’t know. I ignored whatever came my way, whatever racism thing that came my way.

Sean: I mean I used to feel so confident. These things I weren’t aware of, and then you become aware of them and you become your insecurity. I can speak about it because I’m able to deal with those insecurities, that’s why I’m so open about it.

Black students have to put in the extra effort to fit in, to prove themselves, and to defend their right to be at UCT. Many black students at UCT are excluded by transformation discourses and simultaneously take on the burden of transformation. Transformation then is not simply about diversity statistics in admissions but is also, and just as importantly, about addressing the culture and practices that perpetuate their marginalisation from UCT. The rationality and reductionism of the transformation discourse, as one that supports black students to ‘fit into’ the university but simultaneously portrays them as incompetent, conceals the exclusionary practices that take place.

### *Conclusion*

Despite the increasing numbers of black students at UCT, their sense of belonging to the university remains limited and their position within the discourses of academic achievement remains precarious. Black students are seen as passive recipients of transformation policies rather than active contributors to the prestige of UCT.

Directing our attention to the contributions that black students make to knowledge production in higher education would represent a paradigm shift in understanding transformation at UCT and elsewhere. Black students have been and continue to be at the forefront of socio-political changes in South Africa. As such, their involvement in historically white universities such as UCT should continue to guide current and future transformation efforts.

### *Endnotes*

1. ‘Black students’ in this paper refers to African, Coloured and Indian/Chinese students as per the former racial categories instituted under apartheid. We use the term ‘black’ as a political identity that acknowledges that all these racial groups were affected by apartheid policies and as a way of promoting a common experience of racialism and a solidarity between black students that goes beyond apartheid classifications.
2. <http://www.uct.ac.za/about/transformation/>
3. One student only participated in phase 3 and subsequently dropped out. Two students participated in most phases but did not submit final photo-stories. The final data set includes the personal reflections and photo-stories from 21 participants.
4. SRPP is an online system to promote and facilitate student involvement as participants in the research activities of the Psychology Department.
5. The exhibition is mentioned here as an important part of the Photovoice project. However, due

to space limitations, this particular paper focuses on the data collected in the project and does not reflect further on the impact of the exhibition.

6. Camps Bay is an affluent white suburb, Mitchell's Plain is a coloured township and Khayelitsha is an African township. During apartheid, black South Africans were assigned to live in under-resourced settlements – 'townships' – and separated by apartheid racial categories.
7. The student self-segregation that Kopano describes is not only by race but also by class by referring to the "upper middle class black students" and the "rest of the black students". Differences amongst black students in terms of class, gender, ability and sexual orientation have come up more prominently in subsequent phases of the project and have been discussed elsewhere: Cornell, J. (2015). Transforming higher education: UCT students' visions for the future. *Mail and Guardian*. Retrieved 26 September 2015 from: <http://thoughtleader.co.za/psyssa/2015/09/26/uct-students-visions-for-the-future-transforming-higher-education/>
8. The project took place before the emergence of the #RhodesMustFall movement and the subsequent removal of the statue from UCT campus.
9. The authors acknowledge that these participants may have experienced racism differently depending on other identity factors such as class, gender, language and nationality. However, these concerns did not come out significantly in this phase of the project. This could be the result of the Photovoice methodology, which aimed at building solidarity amongst students in relation to their racialised experiences. More recent groups of LGBT and gender non-conforming participants revealed more prominently the intersecting realities of being black at UCT.

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