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# Race, gender and sexuality in student experiences of violence and resistances on a university campus

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## Abstract

*With the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, significant changes were made to higher education in South Africa. Access to higher education has expanded and student bodies are now more representative in terms of gender and race. However, demographic change alone is insufficient for higher education transformation. As in other parts of the world, within dominant educational discourses ideal students are still typically represented as white, middle-class, male, cisgender and heterosexual. Furthermore, students who occupy these categories tend to hold symbolic power within these institutions. Recently, student movements, starting with RhodesMustFall (RMF) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), have begun to challenge this and draw attention to these issues of transformation. This study was critically and empathically provoked by engagements around the RMF movement and aimed to examine students' experiences of transformation in higher education relating to race, gender and sexuality at UCT. Photovoice methods (involving focus groups, personal reflections, photographs and written stories) were used to explore two groups of students' experiences of non-direct, symbolic violence (i.e. issues of bathrooms, residences and campus art) and direct, physical violence on campus as well as these students' resistances and disruptions to the violence they encountered.*

**Keywords:** Higher education; transformation; students; photovoice; visual participatory research methodology; violence; resistance; gender; race; sexuality

## 1. Introduction

With the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, significant changes were made to higher education in South Africa. Transformation became a key focus. There was a push to devise policies to redress historical inequalities and to expand access to the higher education system. Arguably, the biggest post-apartheid transformation success has been the increase in diversity of student bodies in terms of gender and race (Cloete, 2002), although issues of sexual identity, particularly in interaction with other identities, require more examination (Francis & Msibi, 2011).

However, demographic change alone is insufficient for higher education transformation. As in other parts of the world, many higher education institutions remain racialised, hetero-patriarchal, middle-class, Euro-American-centred

spaces in which the dominant academic culture maintains this status quo (Billimoria & Stewart, 2009; Walker, 2005; Woodford, Kulick & Atteberry, 2014; Woods, 2001). Consequently, many students' lived experiences do not reflect transformation policies' aims (Hames, 2007). Globally, within dominant educational discourses, ideal students are still typically represented as white, middle-class, male, cisgender and heterosexual. Furthermore, students who occupy these categories tend to hold symbolic power within these institutions (Jones, Castellanos & Darnell, 2002; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003). As a result, those who fall outside these categories, such as black<sup>1</sup>, female, working-class and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) students question their belonging and experience a sense of alienation and exclusion (Bourke, 2010; Dugan, Kusel & Simounet, 2012; Ellis, 2009; Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez; 2011; Harris, 2003; McKinney, 2005; Rankin, 2005; Sedlacek, 1999).

This view on the insufficiency of demographics-focused transformation corresponds with the findings of the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions* (Soudien *et al.*, 2008). The report concluded that although many higher education institutions had clear transformation policies, transformation was not reflected in the everyday experiences of many students and staff. There is a "disjunction between policy and practice", due either to a lack of awareness of these policies or a "lack of institutional will" (Soudien *et al.*, 2008: 14). However, the *Transformation and Student Life at UCT* report which explored the University of Cape Town's (UCT) students' perceptions of the campus climate concluded that it is not the failure of implementation but policies themselves which fail to address "self-perpetuating apartheid legacies that pollute the institutional climate" (Luescher, 2005: 21). Although this report is more than a decade old, recent events such as the RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement demonstrate that transformation issues are quite pertinent.

Beginning in March 2015, students at UCT launched the RMF movement, which called for the decolonisation of UCT (see UCT, 2016). It started symbolically with the demand for the removal of the statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes from UCT's upper campus, which the university removed in April 2015. Beyond the Rhodes statue, RMF problematised the Eurocentric focus of curricula and the dearth of black academic staff. The campaign around the decolonisation of higher education would spread to other universities countrywide, often using social media and other internet platforms. These included student movements such as TransformWits (at Wits University) and Open Stellenbosch (Stellenbosch University) which mounted challenges against the dominant practices and colonial culture at their universities. In late 2015, the campaign culminated in the national FeesMustFall protests, which focused on the unaffordability of higher education for most South Africans. These protests have sometimes been characterised by violent clashes between students and police (Eye Witness News, 2015). These developments have highlighted students' concerns with transformation at universities and focused attention on black, poor but also female and queer students' experiences in higher education.

A need for detailed scholarly engagements with these movements and the issues they highlight therefore exists (Luescher, 2016). Distinct challenges face higher education in South Africa and research is needed that continues to examine higher education spaces critically and, particularly, the experiences of students who are alienated and marginalised. If higher education institutions are left unexamined and unchallenged, existing oppressive

<sup>1</sup> The term black in this study is used in the inclusive sense and refers to members of all racial groups classified as disadvantaged by the apartheid regime.

cultures and practices are unlikely to change (Watson & Widin, 2015). In particular, it seems attention should be paid to who is subordinated in higher education, how power perpetuates itself and how it might be undone. Although there have been studies on some of these issues (e.g. see Higham, 2012; Kiguwa, 2014; Vincent, 2008; Woods, 2001), more research is needed giving voice to marginalised students, and making their experiences central to the transformation and decolonial debates. However, many studies that examine students' experiences in higher education relate to only one category of identity, usually race or gender. As Msibi (2013: 71) argues, current approaches to transformation in higher education tend to be "atomistic and compartmentalised". Research that takes a more integrated approach to students' experiences is required.

This study, which extends a project first initiated in 2013, seeks to explore students' experiences of transformation at UCT. Initial stages of this project investigated students' experiences of transformation in higher education relating mainly to race. However, it has become clear that other aspects of their identities mediate students' experiences. This study explores students' experiences of transformation at university relating to *race*, *gender*, *class* and *sexuality* as they interact. As engagements around the RMF movement also critically and emphatically provoke it, the study furthermore aims to examine how students resist and disrupt the incidences of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia they experience.

## 2. Research design

### Photovoice methodology

This study employs photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a visual participatory action research (PAR) methodology in which participants document aspects of their lives using photography and writing (Wang, 2006). Participants are given cameras and photography training. They are then asked to take photographs and write captions or "photo-stories" to portray elements of their experience. These photographs and photo-stories are then exhibited.

Photovoice methodology aims to promote critical dialogue and engage people in active discussions about their experiences. It seeks to empower participants; assists them to identify and address challenges in their communities and reaches policy makers through photographic exhibitions (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004).

Visual participatory methodologies have been employed in South Africa before (see Moletsane, 2012). Photovoice has specifically been used successfully with young people countrywide to explore various issues (Langa, 2010; Suffla, Kaminer & Bawa, 2012). Photovoice is also useful when working with university students, as they can feel powerless to reach institutional authority figures. The methodology enables students to have their voices heard and potentially influence university policy (Goodheart *et al.*, 2006).

The use of a PAR methodology was also particularly important for this project as the first author is a white, middle class, cisgendered postgraduate student who in many ways occupies the "ideal student" position. The participatory nature of this research helps mitigate the power dynamics of a white, privileged student doing research on black, marginalised students. Although we are aware that negating one's role as a researcher positioned in particular ways in the research entirely is impossible, what helped to mitigate these dynamics was that the third author supervised the first author during her studies. The third author occupies the position of

a black woman heavily invested in transformation at UCT. Furthermore, the second author, a black man who has done extensive work on gender, race and sexualities, also supervised the first author during her research internship.

To start with, focus groups were held with participants to explore their thoughts around transformation and their experiences in higher education. Participants were then required to write short, personal reflections on their experiences at UCT and some brief thoughts on transformation. Participants then attended a training workshop with a professional photographer, where they were loaned cameras. During the workshop, they were encouraged to brainstorm photo-story ideas and reflect on themes that emerged in the initial focus groups. Participants were given a few weeks to create their photo-stories, which were then printed and exhibited at UCT. The exhibition opening was held in November 2015. Participants, other students, faculty members, senior executives and members of the public attended the exhibition.

### Participants and recruitment

Participants were fulltime undergraduate and postgraduate black students at UCT, drawn from different departments and faculties. Attempts were made to ensure LGBTQI students were represented. Word-of-mouth and snowball sampling was used to recruit students. For example, an invitation was sent to students in UCT's LGBTQI student organisations, *The Rainbow Society* and the *Transcollective*. All students who responded to our invitations and who met the inclusion criteria were included in the study. In this round of the study, there were two groups of participants. Firstly, five black, heterosexual, cisgender female students and secondly, seven LGBTQI black students. This group included (as per participants' self-descriptions: two male gay students, one female lesbian student, one transgender womyn<sup>2</sup> student, one transgender male student, one gender binary transgender student and one gender nomad student). The project, initiated in 2013, was originally inspired by wanting to explore the impact of racialising discourses surrounding the affirmative action debate at UCT and how it positioned black students in the institution as overcrowding and lowering standards. The second phase of the project, described in this paper, started in 2015 shortly after the removal of the Rhodes statue. At that time, black students from diverse gendered identities started questioning the identity dynamics within the RMF movement, in particular the contradictions between what it meant to act in solidarity with other black students whilst being simultaneously marginalised in those same spaces. Hence, a concerted effort was made to include LGBTQI students whose experiences might add to the stories collected in phase one.

### Conceptual framework and analysis

To frame the study and to inform the analysis, two concepts were useful. Firstly, Bourdieu's theoretical concept of symbolic violence was employed in the analysis of the participants' experiences. Symbolic violence, according to Bourdieu, refers to non-physical violence or "power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: 4). Secondly, although we did not perform a full intersectional analysis, the concept of intersectionality was helpful in informing how the material was approached (see Crenshaw, 1991; Hull, Bell-Scott & Smith, 1982). Intersectionality enabled an analysis of overlapping, non-reducible oppressions, multiple gazes and entwined discourses of non-transformation and resistance in participants' lives. This approach was important for the study as previous work on students' experiences

2 The term womyn is the designation preferred by the participant.

in higher education often focuses on a single category of identity such as race or gender. However, the experiences of all black or female students, for example, are not uniform and are rather shaped by the interaction of being a black or female student with other categories of identity such as class, geography and sexuality.

### **Reflecting on ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of South Africa's (Unisa) College of Graduate Studies Research Ethics Review Committee and the Department of Psychology Ethics Committee at UCT. It is especially important to underline that the participants gave consent for their photo-stories to be exhibited and published without censorship. In fact, the participants whose faces and bodies feature in the photo-stories included in this paper were adamant that they did not want their photographs to be blurred. However, all the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

A major ethical problem we faced was around the naked self-portraits taken by two of the participants. In light of the history of the objectification of the black female body and the danger of 'colonially anthropologising' the participants, we had serious hesitations around exhibiting and publishing these photographs without censorship. However, the participants who created these images were insistent that they be shown uncensored. Thandi particularly, during a personal communication about the ethics of publishing, indicated that she would consider it *violent* if the researchers used any technique to conceal her naked body on the photograph. These participants are part of a student movement that regularly uses nudity as a mode of struggle and views it as a radical political act. Thus, given the participatory nature of the project and the strength of the participants' views we were obliged to agree with their wishes. We could not ethically call this a participatory study and censor students who already regularly face silencing and marginalisation on campus specifically but also general societal invisibility as black queers (Matebeni, 2013), particularly when this is the very issues they are highlighting in their stories.

## **3. Analysis**

Two themes that emerged from the analysis of the data will be discussed. The first theme, *Experiences of violence*, explores participants' experiences in higher education based on their intersecting identities. The second theme, *Resistances and disruptions*, examines participants' responses to the experiences explored in the first theme.

### **Theme 1: Experiences of violence**

Students in higher education who do not fit constructions of the ideal student discourse because, for example, they are black, female, LGBTQI and/or working class, often experience forms of violence. The shape this violence takes depends on students' identities. Interestingly (and worthy of further study), most participants described experiencing "non-direct" violence, although one participant did describe experiencing "direct violence". Both of these will be explored below.

#### ***Symbolic violence on campus***

Most participants experienced "non-direct" violence. Several concepts explain this type of violence. Galtung (1990) refers to both "cultural violence" and "structural violence". He defines "cultural violence" as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence [...] that

can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence” (Galtung, 1990: 291), whereas “structural violence” refers to the constraining of human potential due to economic or political structures (Galtung, 1969). Zizek (2008: 2) states that “symbolic violence” is embedded in language, which pertains to the “imposition of a certain universe of meaning”. Bourdieu’s definition of symbolic violence, referred to earlier, is closest to explaining participants’ experiences in this study. As Watson and Widin (2015) suggest, this definition of symbolic violence is useful for understanding power relations in higher education spaces (Watson & Widin, 2015) and is helpful in exploring participants’ experiences. Participants described numerous instances of symbolic violence. Some examples were the paucity of gender-neutral bathrooms, issues in “male-” and “female-only” residences, and representation of black bodies in campus symbolism.

### *Bathrooms*

Particularly for transgender students, a form of symbolic violence or power they encountered daily was the paucity of gender-neutral bathrooms. Most campus bathrooms are “male-” or “female-only”. As Samkelo explained, if students have most lectures on the other side of campus to the few gender-neutral bathrooms, using them is unrealistic:

*All these cis people walk around knowing that there’s a bathroom nearby that is accessible for them to use [...] But a bathroom designed for me is all the way in the dungeon of [building name]. It’s so far away. All of my [...] tuts and lectures are all on the northern end of campus (Samkelo, FG2).*

Furthermore, locations of gender-neutral bathrooms are not well publicised by the university and are often in obscure locations. Samkelo was only aware of one gender-neutral bathroom and was surprised to learn about a second one in the building in which the focus group was happening:

*Interviewer: There’s one here*

*Samkelo: Really!?*

*Interviewer: Yeah*

*Samkelo: You see, I always find out this way! Why am I finding out this way!?! (FG2).*

The location of this bathroom is not a common student thoroughfare. It would be inconvenient for students outside of this department (such as Samkelo) to use this bathroom regularly. Thus, many transgender and gender fluid students are forced to use bathrooms within the gender binary to which they do not subscribe. This has repercussions for their sense of safety, comfort and identity. This issue was the focus of many photo-stories participants produced, such as the following photo-story from Fiki, below:



**Figure 1:** *The Politics of Peeing*

*Privilege is having to go about your day without worrying about where, when and how you can safely answer to nature's call. For a transgender student peeing is political, it's no longer basic human right that structures like university management care to support and therefore requires a well thought out strategy [...] peeing involves mapping the "happy hours" of all nearest bathrooms [...] (referring to the times when it is least likely to bump onto anybody in the bathroom space) [...] But the "happy hour" strategy is not always efficient, because if somebody does walk in [...] you're literally imprisoned in your toilet cubicle until they leave. If you dare come out [...] you know you'll be subjected to trauma [...] the prominent cisgender slur, "we cannot have trans people in our bathrooms, they will rape us!"*

(Fiki, Photo-story 1)

As Fiki explored here, a fundamental biological function becomes complicated and painful. These students are required to put great effort and thought into the simple act of urinating, often experiencing great trauma. These experiences echo findings of other research, which indicates that transgender men, women and gender non-conforming people are frequently ridiculed, insulted, physically attacked and sometimes arrested when they use public bathrooms (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015). Consequently, they are often forced to plan visits to the bathroom carefully (Gershenson, 2010; Herman, 2013).

In addition to the abuse they receive from cisgender students in bathrooms, participants also described facing constant scrutiny about their gender identity on campus in general. As Fiki again described,

*I get this question every day, "Are you male or female?" [...] So, it's a very, difficult space to be in. UCT first university in Africa [...] and as a student in this university [...] every single day you need to explain yourself" (Fiki, FG2).*

In prioritising "male-" and "female-only" over gender-neutral bathrooms, university management reinforces the gender binary and delegitimises identities of non-gender binary students, which can thus be seen as a form of symbolic violence. As Watson and Widin (2015) emphasise, many higher education practices (such as the dominance of "male-" and "female-only" bathrooms) privilege already dominant groups (i.e. cisgender students and staff). This is done by assigning them with power disguised as legitimate order and as Grenfell and James (1998: 24) suggest, "because one group's legitimacy rules another, a 'violence' has been and continues to be done". The situations participants describe here are ultimately about the ability to be seen as legitimate students and to enact everyday student activities (e.g. going to the toilet) without facing questioning, scrutiny and violence.

### *Residences*

Residences also emerged as a site of symbolic violence for some participants. Many of UCT's residences are gender-segregated and subscribe to cisgender assumptions about gender. For example, the residences are described with statements such as "33 male residents are accommodated" and "houses 229 female students". As happens in many higher education institutions, students are usually assigned to residences based on their gender assigned at birth rather than their current gender identities, as occurred with Samkelo and Thandi. Samkelo described the resulting experiences of alienation and symbolic violence as follows:





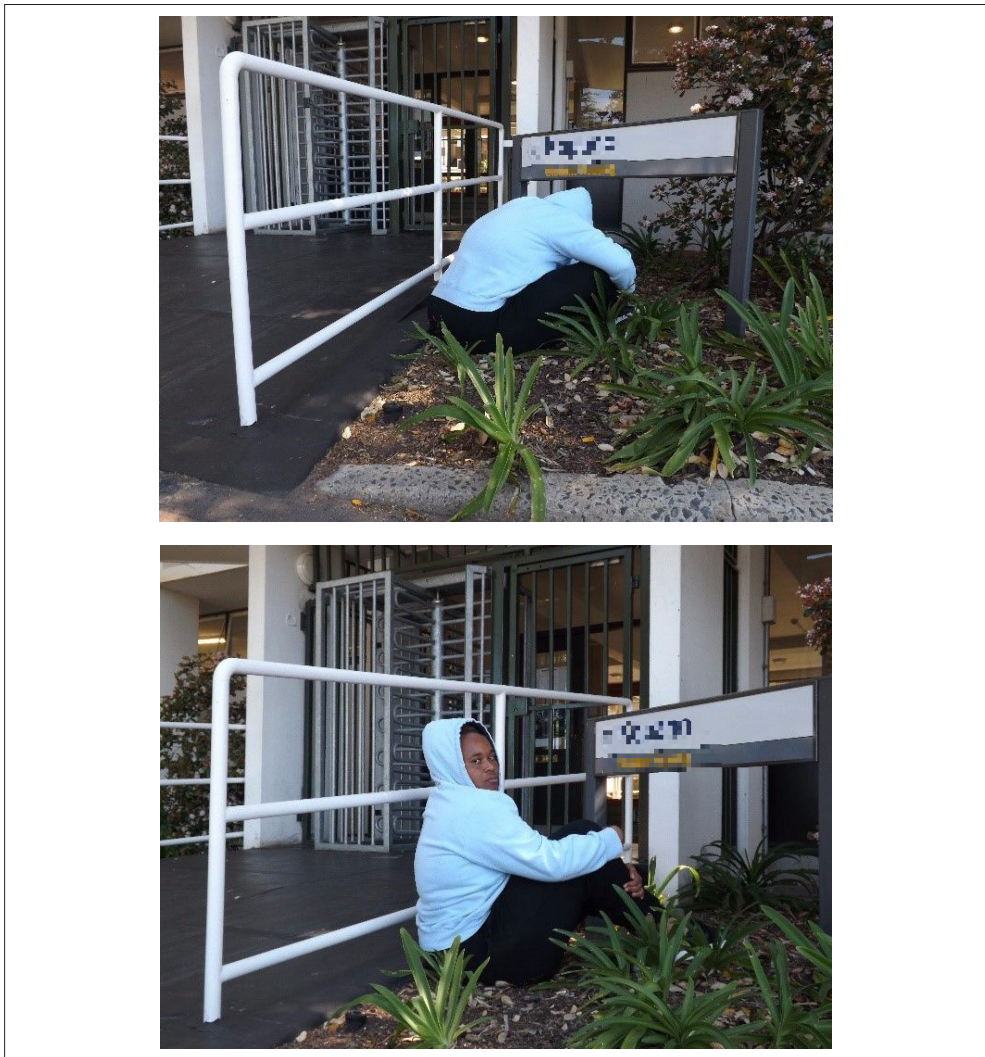
**Figure 2:** Home?

*My ID tells lies about who I am; I'm subhuman so I don't deserve a restroom; the language to accommodate me does not exist in the vocab of the majority. And even when I come home, this space expects me to be a "first lady". Home should not be violent. There's no space in which I am acknowledged and validated. There are only spaces that tell me who I am.*

(Samkelo, photo-story 1)

Here, Samkelo touched on instances of symbolic violence encountered by students who do not fit the construction of "ideal student". Samkelo lives in one of the university's "female only" residences. The nickname for students who stay in this residence is "first lady". By placing Samkelo in a female residence, the university administration imposed a gender identity on Samkelo that Samkelo rejects. UCT privileged the information contained in Samkelo's identity document over Samkelo's own self-identification. Furthermore, it occurred in the one campus space in which Samkelo should feel at home.

Thandi had a similar experience when she was transitioning while living in a male residence, which she reflected on below:



**Figure 3:** Isolation, Annihilation and Trans Pain

*My journey of transitioning began while I stayed in a 300+ strong male residence. UCT male residence cultures cater for the white cisgender heterosexual middle class able-bodied male. I still ask myself how my psychology was affected by this space, and how has it contributed to the person that I am today. All I can remember about [name of the residence] is the sheer amount of isolation and annihilation I felt [...] I had a few friends [...] but the majority would ignore my existence. Now that I look back [...] after acquiring the language to describe my experience, I have come to understand that my body [...] was subjected to unprecedented levels of violence: trans misogyny, sexism, transphobia, homophobia all resulting from deeply imbedded patriarchy in the residence system.*

(Thandi, photo-story 1)

Thandi's experience as a black, working-class, transgender womyn demonstrates that for some students, symbolic violence is experienced at multiple levels of identity. Her reflection

also highlights the psychological cost for students whose various identities do not fit within the discourse that positions the “ideal student” as white, male, cisgender, able-bodied and middle class. The symbolic violence and to another extent bodily violence of attending a university that privileges the experiences and needs of students from particular identities over others can lead to marginalisation and alienation for the ‘othered’ students. This in turn can affect students’ educational outcomes and their success in higher education.

Institutional policies that assume all students will be male or female fail to serve the needs of transgender or gender non-binary students. It is reasonable to expect university management to introduce policies that consider the diversity of gender identities present in their student bodies and ensure all students feel at home and validated (Beemyn *et al.*, 2005). Nicolazzo and Marine (2015) recommend that student housing staff and administrators should allow all students to self-identify their gender, pronouns and name and that their residence placement should be based on these self-identifications.

### *Campus symbolism*

The experiences of symbolic violence and power discussed above related mainly to gender and sexuality. Participants also experienced instances of symbolic violence relating to their race, such as the devaluation of the black body in campus symbolism. Lindiwe explored artwork on campus and representation of blackness.



**Figure 4:** *(De)Valuing the Black Body*

*The image itself brought a great deal of discomfort and confusion. Initially I thought it was a lampshade and was meant to be aesthetically pleasing – (it isn't). I couldn't understand how this could even be artistic expression. Walking around campus and seeing artworks like this which physically represent the institutional value of the black body to the university.*

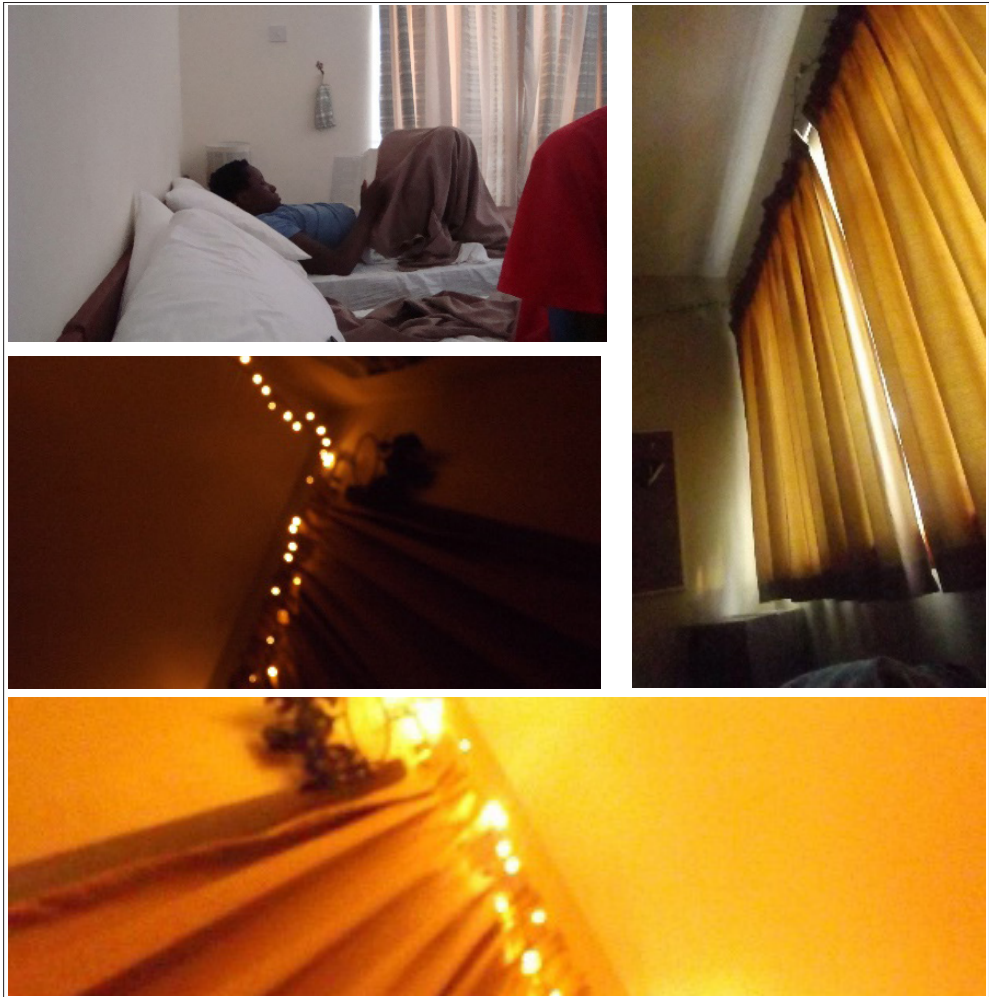
(Lindiwe, photo-story 1)

Symbolism around campus, such as art and statues, sends messages about what is valued by and who belongs at the institution. As the RMF movement has highlighted, this institution had routinely displayed artwork and statues as Lindiwe described, in which black bodies were absent or derogatorily represented and white colonial figures were celebrated. As Grace remarked: "I sometimes feel like I'm in a European university placed somewhere next to Africa" (Grace, FG2).

These instances of symbolic violence and power, whether they relate to race, gender and sexuality or an overlap of these identity categories, assign legitimacy to certain students over others. According to Lindiwe, "the emphasis is being a problem, not a person with a problem" (Lindiwe, FG1). In some ways, these instances of symbolic violence not only undermine participants' confidence in their position as students within the institution but also as human beings.

### ***Physical violence on campus***

The experiences discussed above dealt with symbolic violence and marginalisation, whilst this next section will explore one participant's experience of physical violence. Tendai described an ambivalent experience with encounters of belonging, violence and exclusion. He described in the focus group how his arrival at UCT was his first encounter with open and proud queerness but also his first experience of the physical violence so frequently directed towards queerness. During orientation week with some of his peers, Tendai encountered *The Rainbow Society* stand. The liberation of discovering this place of acceptance was hampered by the derogatory comments made by his companions and later by his experience of rape in his residence bedroom. In his photo-story, Tendai described how this experience was a physical violation and a violation of his one private campus space, his residence bedroom. Of all spaces, a student's bedroom should be one of belonging and safety. Tendai explored how once this rape had occurred, the space itself changed. It became a constant reminder of that violation:



**Figure 5:** No Title

*In these images, I try to play around with light centred around a very personal space that a person can have; their bedroom. My project focuses on how rape can alter the perspective of your bed and what you see when on your bed. Rape violates that space and in these series of images I use light to show that violation. I wanted to use my project to showcase the personal effect of this.*

(Tendai, photo-story 1)

Although only one participant raised physical violence, recent events at UCT indicate that physical violence, particularly sexual violence, is disturbingly commonplace. At the time of writing this paper, the university had sent out a number of e-mails warning of a serial rapist attacking women around campus and the surrounding suburb (there have been five incidences between 11 December 2015 and 11 March 2016). The media and university correspondence portray this individual as an outsider; however campus insiders frequently (and more commonly) perpetrate sexual violence, such as by students on students but this is less widely reported. The *UCT Survivors* blog (see <https://uctsurvivors.wordpress.com/>)

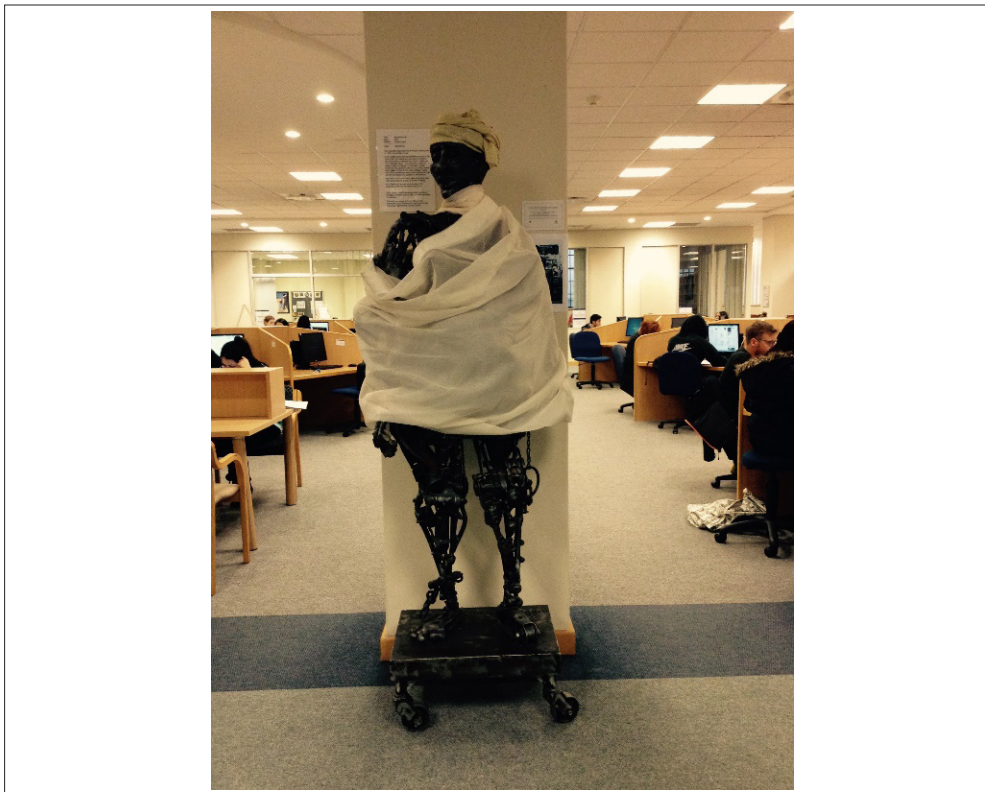
for example, which anonymously details first-hand accounts of sexual violence on campus, describes many incidences of sexual assault at university events and spaces. Therefore, the few references to physical and sexual violence are interesting and perhaps suggestive of issues of this specific sample of participants, how they define violence and the possibilities and potential limitations of the methodology.

## **Theme 2: Resistance and disruption**

Although the participants experienced these forms of violence, they also resisted and disrupted this violence in different ways, often using their photo-stories and then the actual photovoice exhibition to do this. This next theme explores participants' resistances to violence, which are varied and mediated by their different and salient identities. This underscores the need to consider these resistances in context.

### ***Exposing and covering up***

For some participants, nudity and exposure was a form of resistance and liberation. Contrastingly, others achieved this through covering up or dressing in certain types of clothing. Musa, a cisgender, heterosexual woman, used covering up in her photo-story as a means of resistance. She photographed a sculpture depicting Sara Baartman in the library, which had been covered in fabric:

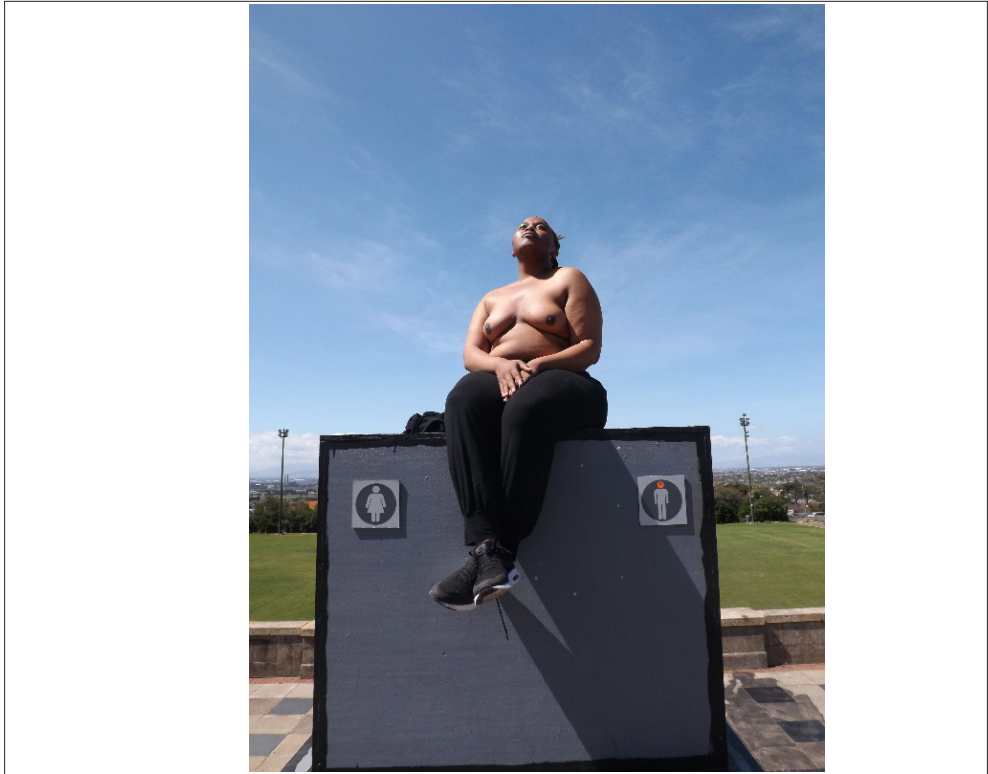


**Figure 6:** *Re-dress: Finding lost dignity*

(Musa, photo-story 1)

For Musa as a black cisgender woman, in the context of the historic and current violence and scrutiny directed towards black female bodies, resistance meant having this body covered and unexposed. For Musa this was a means of achieving dignity. Musa's photo-story articulates some African anti/post-colonial narratives on black womanhood, which often covers and de-sexualises the black female body to counter "the colonial visual practice of disrobing the black female body" (Coly, 2010: 654).

For Thandi, however, as a transgender womyn, resistance was achieved through exposing. In her photo-story below, Thandi placed herself on the plinth on which Rhodes' statue previously stood:



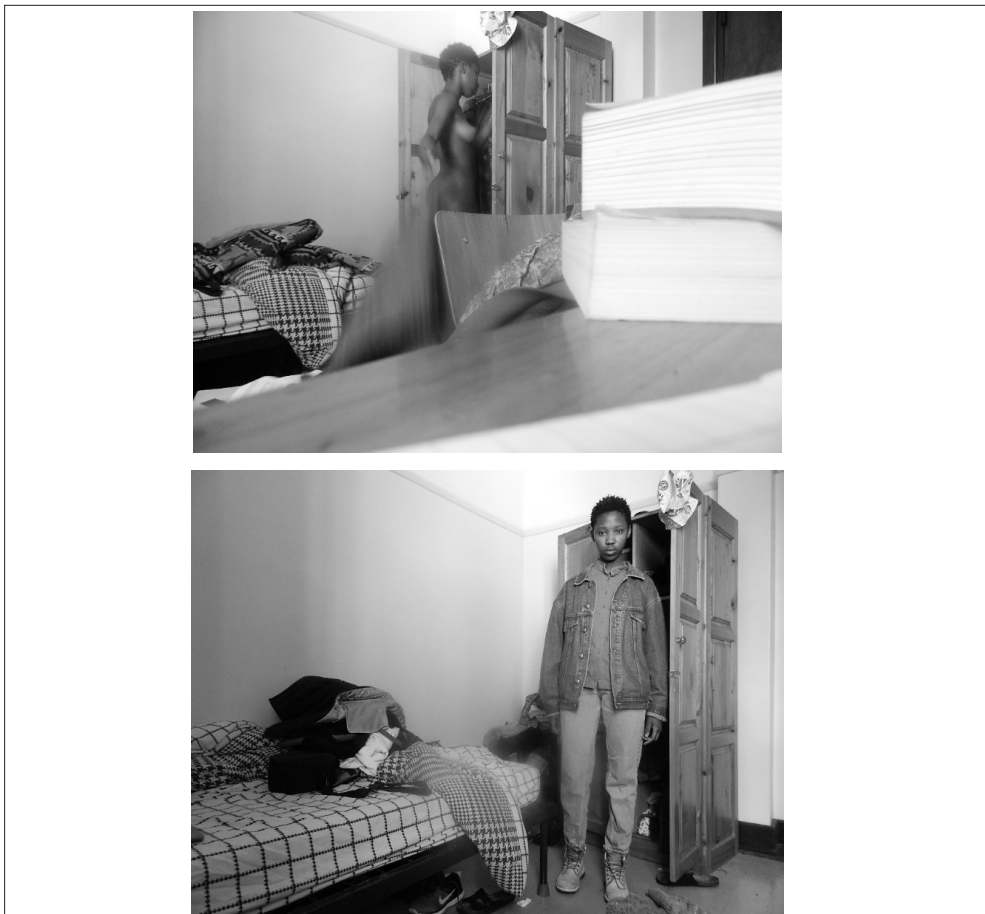
**Figure 7:** *Liberatio*

*This is an image of me sitting on the same plinth that The Rhodes Statue stood on. On either side of me is a sign for a cis female and a cis male. I see my body as the in between, but even more so, something that cannot be quantified and reduced into a physical sign. There is no other stronger indication of my presence than my own body. In this picture I chose to take off my shirt. This should only be interpreted through a political lens. A poor black trans queer womyn sitting bare where a colonialist was once worshipped is a revolution in itself. I sit facing UCT unlike Rhodes, Rhodes sat there to look down at the "peasants". Being one of the peasants I have a responsibility to confront his empire hence the choice to face UCT, which is part of Rhodes's legacy.*

(Thandi, photo-story 2)

Thandi exposing her breasts, in many ways symbols of her femininity, is a resistant act in an institution that has positioned her as male (e.g. when she was assigned to an all-male residence). This can be contrasted to her previous photo-story in which she was fully clothed with her hood pulled up and her head bent down and she described the pain and alienation she experienced. However, in addition to resisting the positioning of her body as male, Thandi also tackles the gaze, which then comes with having a black, female-presenting body. As Matabeni (2013) highlights in her discussion of the photography of the artist and activist Zanele Muholi, although this photograph exposes the black, female form, the subject controls the gaze by positioning herself above the viewer and looking down on them with an authoritative tilt of the head. This gaze, as well as Thandi's literal positioning of herself on the plinth that once held the likeness of Rhodes, perhaps the ultimate coloniser, works to dismantle the "pornographic and colonialist lens that exploit the (black) female body" (Matabeni, 2013: 407). Thandi's positionality as a black transgender womyn means that she must resist multiple gazes and restrictive discourses.

Thengi's photo-story also centred on the use of clothing as disruption, featuring a series of photographs of Thengi getting dressed (two included below):



(Thengi, photo-story 1)



In the first photograph, Thengi appears to play into and highlights the colonial masculine gaze by placing the camera in a voyeuristic position hidden behind books on a desk, where the viewer feels as though they are secretly watching a naked Thengi get dressed. However, by the last image in the series, the camera has moved and Thengi faces the viewer straight on with direct eye contact and a stern expression. In this way, it could be that Thengi is forcing the viewer to confront their voyeurism and their complicity with the colonial gaze. Furthermore, although Thengi uses clothing to do so, her covering up is different to that referenced by Musa. While post-colonial African discourses tend to depict black women in modest but typically feminine clothing (Coly, 2010), this story ends with Thengi covering up with distinctly unfeminine clothing. As Thengi described in the focus group, clothing can be a prison (being forced to wear dresses by their<sup>3</sup> mother) yet it can also be a protection and a liberation (trousers and other clothing associated with masculinity are described as a “hazmat suit”). Thengi described how heteronormative and cisgender standards within the university attempted to position their black queer body as a black female, cisgender body. These standards denied Thengi’s identity as a queer, gender nomad. For Thengi, these standards are violent and violating, a “noose around the throat”. In this photo-story, Thengi chronicled how clothes are used to fight this, or as they described, be the “blade that snips the noose off the throat”. Thengi dressed in traditionally masculine clothing to exert a queer existence and disrupt the positioning of the body underneath as female and cisgender. In the photo-story, Thengi noted the discomfort that this caused, which was a means of power and like the discomfort Thandi causes with her nudity, it is liberating. However, Thengi was careful to note the danger associated with this discomfort and highlighted how resistance, whilst empowering, can open an individual up to repercussions.

For Musa, Thengi and Thandi, clothing and nudity are integrally political. However, because of their different identities and backgrounds, nakedness and dress are used in different ways. For Musa as a black cisgender woman, the history of commodification and degradation of black female bodies led her to resist by covering up a statue of Sara Baartman (perhaps the symbol of this degradation). For Thandi as a trans womyn, removing her clothing and exposing her breasts were political and disruptive in a context which positioned her body as male and her proud gaze down at the viewer challenges the colonial gaze that is then turned on her female body. For Thengi as a gender nomad, exposing and then covering breasts with masculine clothing was a means of fighting the discourses that positioned Thengi’s body as cisgender and female and highlighting and then subverting the colonial gaze.

### ***Dismantling violent spaces***

Participants also changed physical campus space to resist the violence they experienced, particularly in relation to the bathroom issue. They used official and unofficial channels to address the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms. This initially involved communication with university management, as Thandi remarked, “I’ve already told Max Price<sup>4</sup> to his face that the bathroom situation is bull” (Thandi, FG2).

What was frustrating to some participants was that the solution is straightforward. As Samkelo remarked, “At least [sighs] can we just get another neutral bathroom? It’s not that hard” (Samkelo, FG2). There are many “male-” and “female-only” campus bathrooms, thus it is not a matter of building more bathrooms but changing the current signage. Of course,

<sup>3</sup> Thengi prefers the pronouns they/their.

<sup>4</sup> Dr Max Price is the Vice Chancellor.

attitudes of cisgender students and staff towards transgender students should be addressed but at least accessible and safer bathrooms will be available.

Some participants were frustrated with waiting for the university to act and have started to initiate this change themselves. Specifically, some participants are members of a student activist group that has been involved in removing male and female signs off bathrooms around campus and converting them into gender-neutral bathrooms. As was discussed in the focus group:

*Thandi: We should take down the signs. That's the simplest thing.*

*Samkelo: Yes!*

*Tendai: Take down the signs all over campus.*

(FG2)

At the photovoice exhibition, some participants created a collage of these signs, which they asked to exhibit with their photo-stories, as can be seen below.



This illustrates that although students experienced symbolic violence, which can be disempowering, they were also able to resist and disrupt these instances of symbolic violence.

#### 4. Conclusion

Participants' experiences illustrate that instances of symbolic and physical violence are common in the daily lives of many black, female, LGBTQI and/or working-class students. The residence system and most campus bathrooms, for example, subscribe to cisgender, heterosexual norms and those students who fall outside of those norms are subject to scrutiny and abuse. This is evidence of the cisgender heterosexual nature of the academic culture of the university. Similarly, much of the artwork and symbolism around campus reveres the

white colonial figure and denigrates the black body, which in turn is evidence of the whiteness of the academic culture. The experiences of these participants speak directly to the calls for decolonisation in the recent student movements in South Africa demanding curriculum change, insourcing and free education (Kamanzi, 2016).

Clearly, many symbolic practices in higher education privilege and re-entrench the power of dominant groups. However, as participants illustrate, students are able to disrupt these instances of symbolic violence in various ways, such as using their own bodies or identities as a site of resistance or physically changing campus spaces.

We feel that the study methodology, photovoice, helped to an extent to facilitate this disruption. This methodology provided participants with points of solidarity with their fellow participants as they discussed these shared experiences in the focus groups and workshops but also with us as the researchers of whom two are black academics who critically engaged through various academic and activist platforms with issues of race, gender and sexuality. The positioning of the two authors possibly enabled a relatively safe and empowering space for black female and black gender-non-conforming students to articulate their experiences at UCT. The participatory nature of the project, relating particularly to the exhibition, could be seen as also empowering for the participants. The participants were actively involved in the exhibition process, including decisions on who to invite and how to set up the exhibits. The initial exhibition opening (to give an example of the participatory nature of the project) was rescheduled after it became clear that it was scheduled for the same evening as a student protest in which there were calls to stay off campus in solidarity and in which some of the participants were involved. At the eventual opening, speeches were given by some of the authors and some of the participants. The participants' removal of the bathroom signs and their decision to exhibit them was also a direct consequence of their involvement in the photovoice process and further demonstrates how photovoice can be empowering and lead to further acts of political resistance. There are of course limits to the extent to which all students have been empowered through participation in this project. Even with students who have been empowered, this (along with other long-term impacts) would be difficult to measure, considering the limited scope of this current project.

Whilst photovoice has been legitimately employed to study the experiences of a small group of participants, future studies could benefit from the participation of white students and more male-bodied students. However, given the original aims of the project and the nature of the discussions around gender identity, race and sexuality in the focus groups it may have actually helped facilitate a supportive and safe environment for the participants.

Another limitation of the study is that it focused on one university. Numerous other higher education institutions in South Africa's student experiences may differ. In particular, the experiences of students at historically black universities might diverge from the experiences of students at historically white universities such as UCT. Conversely, as the presence of student movements across the country suggests, there might also be similarities. Furthermore, UCT attracts certain types of students with particular ideologies. Thus, although other students may identify in similar ways to the UCT students in this study, their context may mean that they have different responses and different possibilities for resistance. While it is valuable to explore the experiences of students at UCT, it is certainly important to acknowledge this divergence of experience and call for studies at different universities.

It was puzzling, and warrants scrutiny, given the violence that pervades South Africa, that only one participant described experiencing direct violence. Despite these limitations, it is hoped that the insights gained through this study have contributed towards a clearer understanding of students' experiences of transformation in higher education. In particular, we feel that the use of photovoice methodology helps add further nuance to the growing body of literature on students' experiences.

Future studies are thus called for and researchers might want to try including males and white students, more South African universities, including historically Afrikaans and black institutions, as well as tools that are better able to unmask forms of direct violence.

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