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## Institutional culture and transformation in higher education in post-1994 South Africa: a critical race theory analysis

### Culture institutionnelle et transformation dans l'éducation supérieure en Afrique du Sud après 1994: une analyse de la théorie critique de la race

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Apartheid left in its wake a South Africa characterized by social inequalities that are embedded and reflected in all spheres of social life, including the higher education system. While the post-apartheid government has made efforts to transform the higher education system it inherited, the pace has been slow and has fallen significantly short of what many regard as modest expectations. This paper interrogates why transformation has remained elusive in the higher education sector in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly with regards to the institutional culture at historically white universities (HWUs). Focusing on the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and *Luister*, a documentary film at the University of Stellenbosch, it employs critical race theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework and analytical tool. Using CRT identifies the centrality of racism in shaping the slow pace of transformation in general and concerning the institutional culture at HWUs in particular. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of this lack of transformation, particularly in a time where poverty is endemic and unemployment rampant.

**Keywords:** higher education; transformation; institutional culture; critical race theory; post-apartheid; historically white universities

L'apartheid a laissé dans son sillage une Afrique du Sud caractérisée par des inégalités sociales ancrées et reflétées dans toutes les sphères de la société, y compris dans le système des études supérieures. Le gouvernement post-apartheid a fait des efforts pour transformer le système des études supérieures dont il avait hérité, mais le rythme a été lent et n'a pas du tout été à la hauteur d'attentes que nombreux pourraient qualifier de modestes. Cet article s'interroge sur les raisons pour lesquelles la transformation est restée marginale dans le secteur des études supérieures dans l'Afrique du Sud de l'après-apartheid, en particulier pour ce qui est de la culture institutionnelle des universités historiquement blanches (HWUs). Il se concentre sur la campagne Rhodes Must Fall (RMF – Rhodes doit tomber, en anglais) à l'Université de Cape Town (UCT), et sur *Luister*, un film documentaire à l'Université de Stellenbosch, et il emploie la théorie critique de la race (CRT) comme cadre conceptuel et outil analytique. Utiliser la CRT identifie le caractère central du racisme dans la lenteur de la transformation en général, et en particulier celle de la culture institutionnelle des HWUs. L'article se conclut par une réflexion sur les implications de ce manque de transformation, en particulier à une époque où la pauvreté est endémique et où le chômage est rampant.

**Mots clés:** études supérieures; transformation; culture institutionnelle; théorie critique de la race; postapartheid; université historiquement blanches

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## Introduction

On 27 April 1994, South Africa finally became a constitutional democracy underpinned by values of inclusivity, equality and respect for the human dignity of all its citizens. Apartheid though, had left in its wake a country characterized by social inequalities that are embedded and reflected in all spheres of social life, including the higher education system (Badat 2010). While the democratically elected government from the onset committed itself to transforming the higher education system it had inherited from apartheid, and while significant gains have been made, the pace at which this has proceeded has been slow and has fallen significantly short of expectations that many regard as modest. According to Reddy (2006), transformation within the sector has focused on issues of student intake and throughput, as well as the over-representation of white faculty at the expense of issues such as institutional culture and internal power dynamics.

This paper focuses on the transformation in the higher education sector in post-1994 South Africa, focussing specifically on the issue of institutional culture at historically white universities (HWUs). We employ critical race theory (CRT) (Zamudio et al. 2011) as a conceptual framework and an analytical tool in order to make sense of the slow pace at which HWUs have transformed their institutional culture. According to Badat (2010), the inequalities and inequities that currently characterize the South African higher education sector are due to the systematic political oppression, social discrimination, and economic exploitation of black people during colonial and apartheid rule. Race, therefore, continues to be the defining feature of social life in contemporary South Africa. Furthermore, if race is pivotal in shaping inequities in society, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) maintain, we are compelled to deploy a race-critical theory to understand why transformation in the higher education sector in post-apartheid South Africa has been slow. By foregrounding race as all-encompassing, CRT offers both an epistemological lens and methodological tool to interrupt and dismantle inequality and inequity (Zamudio et al. 2011) by challenging the experience of white people in society as the standard to follow (Taylor 1998). Not only does it enable us to identify and challenge the macro- and micro-aggressions that black people suffer, we are also able to critically examine how they are impacted by issues related to epistemology, policy, pedagogy, and curriculum (Yosso et al. 2005).

We first survey the changes that have been implemented to transform the South African higher education sector and to make it more equal and equitable. Following this, we unpack the notion of institutional culture in order to expose its saliency in sustaining the status quo and resisting the establishment of more equitable learning environments with the South African higher education sector. We then provide a brief overview of the student protests in the post-1994 era, before discussing the two events on which the paper centres: the *Rhodes Must Fall (RMF)* campaign at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and *Luister*, a documentary film made at the University of Stellenbosch. We outline the main tenets of CRT and apply these to the two events to explain how racism is perpetuated by institutional culture in the higher education sector. The final section addresses some of the implications that CRT reveals for full transformation.

## The slow pace of change in post-apartheid higher education

Apartheid's higher education system was segregated by race, ethnicity, class, and geography; it was inequitable in terms of gender and language; and it was characterized by highly uneven quality between and within different historical institutional types (Fiske and Ladd 2004). The democratic government in 1994 committed itself to reshaping unjust and discriminatory institutional structures and practices that were designed to privilege whites during apartheid South Africa, so as to create a more equitable society (Pattman and Carolissen 2018). This process,

which was to be non-negotiable and firmly embedded in the ideals of the Freedom Charter, started almost as soon as the newly democratically elected government took office in 1994.

In February 1995, President Nelson Mandela appointed a National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), whose role was to develop a policy framework for transformation, entitled *A Framework for Transformation* (Council on Higher Education CHE 1996). This report formed the basis for the development and publication of the *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* in 1996, and the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of the Higher Education System* in 1997. The Green Paper envisaged that South African higher education should be planned, governed and funded as a single coordinated system that required the adoption of a range of new governing, planning and funding arrangements. The White Paper, on the other hand, was the culmination of a wide-ranging and extensive process of investigation and consultation that was initiated with the establishment of the NCHE. These two documents signalled the beginning of the formal process of legislating higher education transformation and culminated in the promulgation of the *Higher Education Act of 1997*.

A flurry of policy activity followed. Almost two decades spanned the tenure of four ministers of education, who collectively produced seven white papers, three green papers, 25 bills (of which 17 were amendment bills), 35 acts, 11 regulations, 52 government notices, and 26 calls for comments (Sayed and Kanjee 2013). Yet, the quantity of policy activities did not translate to concrete changes. Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela (2009) argue that, in addition to being voluminous, these documents lacked clarity of implementation steps, involved a vast number of coordinating bodies, and were mistakenly underpinned by the assumption that institutions and academics have enough capacity and support to implement these policies. This led to stagnation in policy implementation, fears of encroachment on issues related to institutional autonomy and academic freedom, and sometimes animosity and resistance to change (Hay and Monnapula-Mapesela 2009).

Jansen (2004) also accuses the Department of Education (DoE) of undermining higher education institutions' autonomy and academics' freedom through funding formulae and legislative interventions. Similarly, many of the institutional managers in the historically white universities have accused the state and its bureaucrats of violating university autonomy and the freedom of individual academics (Bentley, Habib, and Morrow 2006). Bentley, Habib, and Morrow (2006) further accuse institutional bureaucrats within the walls of the universities of violating academic freedom. In addition to this, Desai and Böhmke (1997), identify senior academics who allow their research agendas to be determined by those prepared to buy their research and writing skills, most often the government or the private sector, as violators of academic freedom.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges around policy implementation and while not fully reversing the exclusion of black people, there have been significant achievements with respect to equity and redress within the post-apartheid higher education sector. Among these are the increase in the proportion of black and women students in public higher education, curricular changes, and changes in the academic profiles of institutions (Badat 2010). The Centre for Higher Education Trust (CHET 2012) notes that over 60% of all students enrolled in the university system were African in 2006, compared to 50% in 1996, and that this had increased to 70% by 2012. Furthermore, by 2008, 56.3% (450 584 out of 799 388) of enrolled students were female, compared to 43% (202 000 out of 473 000) in 1993 (Badat 2010). In addition to this, a funding framework in the form of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has been successfully established in order to effect social redress for poor students (Soudien 2010).

Yet, while these achievements are noteworthy and have to be acknowledged, it is clear that transformation of the South African higher education system involves more than mere access and admission to universities. Soudien (2010) cautions that a representative institution does not in and of itself translate into being a transformed institution. For example, while South African

universities have experienced a dramatic increase in students accessing institutions of higher learning since 1994, graduation and retention rates, especially of students coming from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, remain low (Soudien 2010). According to Chetty and Knaus, of the 60% of historically disadvantaged students who make it past their first year, only 15% will complete their studies (2016).

Many historically disadvantaged students encounter challenges and problems that make it difficult for them to succeed at university. They tend to drop out because they are too poor to stay (Breier 2010). Other challenges include language, communication, and writing challenges (Jones et al. 2008), as well as poor inference skills, all of which derive from continued inequities in access to quality primary and secondary education (Subotzky and Prinsloo 2011). Added to this, are the challenges that black students encounter when they navigate the acculturation process at HWUs in particular. Acculturation refers to the ‘... phenomena which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups’ (Amer 2005, 5–6). According to Culhane, the process of acculturation can unfold in four different ways (2004):

- Integration refers to when individuals maintain their cultures and are able to accept and adapt to the host’s cultures.<sup>1</sup>
- Assimilation refers to when individuals fully adapt to the host’s cultures, while they become more alienated toward their own cultures.
- Separation refers to when individuals become alienated toward the host culture and separate themselves from the main society by mainly socializing with persons from their own culture.
- Marginalization refers to when individuals become alienated toward both their own and the host cultures.

While integration as defined above, would be the ideal outcome of the acculturation process, this is sadly not the case for many black students, particularly at South African HWUs. Here they are confronted with an institutional culture that is neither receptive to their needs, representative of their culture, nor relevant to their existential reality as black people. As a consequence of all of the aforementioned factors, they struggle to become part of the academic community and are forced to exist on the periphery of the university system (Lourens 2013).

### **Whiteness and institutional culture in South African higher education**

While much has been achieved in terms of legislative policies to transform the post-apartheid higher education system, Reddy (2006) observes that these gains sit alongside old patterns reproducing themselves both within the higher education sector and in relations between this sector and society. This is perhaps most palpable at the level of institutional culture, which appears to remain a potent stumbling block in the pursuit of a more equitable culture in higher education in the post-1994 era. Despite the focus on representation, the notion of institutional culture has been prominent in the higher education policy discourse in post-1994 South Africa (Thaver 2009). It found expression in both the South African government’s Education White Paper 3 (DHE 1997), and its regulatory instrument, *the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education*, which emphasize the need for institutions to change their institutional cultures (Asmal 2001). In addition to this, a *Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education* was appointed in 2008, followed by the establishment of an *Oversight Committee on Transformation in South African Universities* in 2013. Their aim was to monitor progress on transformation in public universities and advise

on policies aimed at combating racism, sexism and other forms of unfair discrimination (Suransky and van der Merwe 2014).

According to Maart (2014), transformation charters, which are meant to provide a vision of the future, and guide staff and students towards a process where each recognize the need to work together, are well-established at South African universities in one form or another. The University of South Africa (UNISA) launched their charter in 2011, the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) launched theirs in 2012, while the university of Venda (UNIVEN) launched theirs in 2015. Development and implementation of the charters are typically spearheaded and instituted by the institution's executive management with input and buy-in from all university stakeholders.

Yet we are reminded that, it is almost self-evident therefore that merely because an institution of higher learning has a transformation charter/ policy, such existence does not equate with Vice-Chancellors, Chairpersons of Council, and academic staff in particular as indeed being committed to the implementation of the same transformation processes (Higher Education Transformation Network 2016). Noting that, while the demographic profiles of students and senior management at UCT have changed since the 1990s, the profile of the academic staff who are at the core of the academic enterprise has hardly changed, an enquiry into the circumstances surrounding Professor Bongani Mayosi's<sup>2</sup> tenure as Dean of Health Sciences at UCT concludes that: 'Institutional culture is mostly manifested at this [academic staff] level of the academic project – teaching, learning, research and all associated processes that define the lived experience of staff and students in this area. It is also this level that has been successful in appropriating the language of change without actually changing' (Nhlapo et al. 2020, 115). Maart reminds us that: 'Whilst one can legislate for and against almost anything and everything, one cannot legislate attitude!' (2014, 57).

Nieman asserts that a strong institutional culture has to be purposefully and patiently cultivated by management (2010). Yet, Van Wyk (2009) alludes to the presence of an insidious and endemic sub-culture that some faculties nurture within the broader university that creates a sub-culture predicated on suppression and subversion of the transformation discourse in the post-1994 era in South Africa (2009). It is for this reason that Badat warns that higher education will not realize the potential it has to contribute to social justice if universities continue to be powerful mechanisms of social exclusion and injustice, through their internal thinking, structures, cultures, and practices and their external conditioning by the broader society (2010).

Institutional culture is the sum-total effects of the values, attitudes, styles of interaction, and collective memories of a university, known by those who work and study in the university environment through their lived experience (Steyn 2007). Simplistically put, therefore, over time institutional culture becomes the *default way of doing things*. It 'not only seeks conformity, but also often acts to screen out and marginalize dissident voices as a dominant sub-culture, asserting its values and mindset as an informal institutional code of conduct, thereby consolidating institutional hegemony ...' (Higher Education Transformation Network 2016, 15). Implicit in the above, is how practices and patterns of inclusion and exclusion informed by social markers such as race and gender, are reproduced, normalized, and in the process perpetuate injustices.

A concept that can potentially add further conceptual clarity to institutional culture is the notion of *whiteness*. It has been argued that everyday racism in the institutional cultures of HWUs is embedded in whiteness (Van der Merwe and Van Reenen 2016). According to Van der Westhuisen, whiteness is also a structural position that is embedded in heteropatriarchal and middle-class privilege, which is self-sustaining, invisible, and which is normalized as the standard of achievement (2018). Delgado and Stefancic contend that white hegemony has evolved to the degree that it allows many forms of racism to go unacknowledged, unconscious in the minds of white people, and largely invisible (2001). Whiteness, therefore, operates to position certain individuals as automatically deserving of whatever material benefits may be on offer



(Van der Westhuisen 2018). It is for this reason that Steyn highlights the importance of making visible the dominant, inherited institutional culture, which was shaped around, and arose out of whiteness to those that function within it (2007).

Whiteness essentially defines institutional culture across HWUs higher education institutions in South Africa. It does so by determining how different forms of multiculturalism can be identified in terms of their relationship to the power of white privilege (Steyn 2007). Racism inherited from apartheid policies and beliefs imbues this white-dominant institutional culture with assumptions that white dominance equates with excellence and deservingness, whereas blackness is consciously or unconsciously associated with mediocrity or failure (Robus and Macleod 2006). The message that this conveys to those not ascribed to whiteness is clear. If you are a black staff member, you are not good enough (Moraka 2014), and if you are a black student, you are not expected to succeed (Njovane 2015, 121). Kessi observes that myths about black intellectual inferiority are reproduced and reinforced through discourses that equate affirmative action policies to a lowering of standards and the deficit model underscoring academic development programmes in helping black students to ‘catch up’ (2018). Black students are socialized to believe their survival depends on the extent to which they aspire and enact whiteness through assimilation. This Ratele argues is nothing more than reheated colonialism and apartheid, which serves nothing more but to create new, subtler, but no less unjust, forms of coloniality and hierarchisation (2018).

### **An overview of student protests**

Student protests against the lack of transformation in higher education can be traced to February 2009, when students at the University of Limpopo protested around issues concerning accommodation, NSFAS support, quality of staff, student victimization by staff, and academic exclusion (South African History Online 2015). A few months later in September, students at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) protested against pending fee increases for the following year, while their counterparts at the University of Pretoria protested against the lack of political party representation in the Student Representative Council (SRC). Similar protests involving more or less the same issues followed every year from 2010 to 2014 involving universities in Gauteng, the Western Cape, KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape (for a timeline, see South African History Online 2015). In 2015, there was intensification in student protests, which started with Wits students protesting over funding and registration related issues. That same year witnessed the birth of the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign at UCT and the release of *Luister* at Stellenbosch University.

### **Rhodes must fall, luister, and the aftermath**

The RMF campaign and the production and distribution of *Luister* came to epitomize the conviction with which the students gave expression to their pain and anger, which they experience as a result of feeling marginalized and alienated at HWUs. While some had expressed surprise at this type of student radicalism that had been unheard of in the post-apartheid era, others, such as Professor Jonathan Jansen, who was at the time the first black Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Free State, an Afrikaans-medium HWU, felt that it was bound to happen. Jansen notes that he had warned the new vice-chancellor of an old white university that a storm was coming (2015a).

That storm erupted on 9 March 2015 in the form of the RMF campaign at UCT, an English-medium HWU with a liberal tradition that had at the time been the highest-ranking university on the African continent. On that day, a group of predominantly black students demanded the

removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the university's grounds. For them, the statue represented the racism, plunder, white supremacy, colonialism, pillaging, dispossession and the oppression of black people that Rhodes had propagated (Masondo 2015). The following extract from the UCT Rhodes Must Fall Mission Statement embodies the symbolic meaning that black students, staff, and workers attached to the statue:

'The statue has great symbolic power - it is a glorifying monument to a man who was undeniably a racist, imperialist, colonialist, and misogynist. It stands at the centre of what supposedly is the 'greatest university in Africa'. This presence, which represents South Africa's history of dispossession and exploitation of black people, is an act of violence against black students, workers and staff. The statue is therefore the perfect embodiment of black alienation and disempowerment at the hands of UCT's institutional culture' (2015, 1).

HWUs generally stood accused of willingly submitting to pressure from interest groups such as alumni unions to resist transformation, and where it did take place, to effect it begrudgingly and slowly. For many university administrators, transformation was about access and admissions, and because they believed that they had done well in those areas, they had become increasingly self-congratulatory when reporting on changing demographics. One merely needs to look at their reporting on transformation and the way changing demographics are foregrounded in their annual reports (see for example, University of Stellenbosch 2019; University of Cape Town Transformation Report 2019). This renders them oblivious of the extent to which this focus on numbers had masked what Soudien refers to as the continuing presence of racism and sexism and the emergence of different manifestations of exclusion that access and admission are unable to solve (2010). Despite policies and frameworks that speak about equality, equity, transformation and change, institutional cultures and epistemological traditions have not changed considerably (Heleta 2016). According to the Department of Education, the main issue has been a lack of willingness to implement these policies (2008). The consequence is a higher education system that remains a colonial outpost up to this day, reproducing hegemonic identities instead of eliminating hegemony (McKaiser 2016). The fact that a university residence warden would shout at a group of black students animatedly watching a soccer game on television, telling them to 'stop acting like monkeys' (Matthews and Tabensky 2015, 2), two decades since the attainment of democracy, is evidence of this.

The traction garnered by the RMF campaign quickly spread to other HWU campuses. Thus, students at Rhodes University, also named after Rhodes, protested in sympathy with their UCT counterparts, and among others, called for the renaming of their university. Even the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande supported the removal of the statue (Hall 2015). After a sustained campaign involving protest marches, the occupation of administrative buildings on campus, and the use of social media to have the statue removed, the UCT council voted in favour of the removal of the statue, which took place on the 9th April 2015.

In August 2015, the spotlight shifted to the University of Stellenbosch, which is located less than an hour's drive from Cape Town. The university used to be an Afrikaans-medium HWU and was widely considered to be the bastion of conservative Afrikaans teaching and learning. There, black students have consistently complained of the indignities that they routinely encounter both on and off campus because of the colour of their skin. While many of these had been reported, it was felt that the consistent lack of meaningful action on the part of university authorities to address their concerns warranted a different strategy. The result was a 35-minute documentary film entitled *Luister* (an Afrikaans word that means 'listen' in English), based on interviews conducted with 32 students and one lecturer at the university.



The film documented their experiences, which include institutional racism, discrimination, and harassment. For many of the students, being black at the University of Stellenbosch and in the small town of Stellenbosch had come with an enormous social burden. They described their sense of not belonging and feeling alienated, questioning their sense of self and self-worth, and having to give up their identities as black people in order to survive. They detailed the hostility that greeted them in the town's social spaces; the unprovoked physical attacks at the hands of white students and the town residents; and the indifference with which these had been treated when they reported incidents to university authorities. Many of their complaints were also directed toward the university's language policy of institutionalizing Afrikaans as a language of instruction and accommodating non-Afrikaans-speaking, mostly black students through translators. Some students in the film even expressed their fondness for the language and emphasized the fact that they have embraced it and used it in social interactions. However, they found that imposing it on them in an academic setting not only disadvantages them, but also exacerbated their sense of exclusion and alienation (Corder et al. 2015).

The groundswell in student awareness and activism that RMF and *Luister* ignited spawned what became known as the *#FeesMustFall* campaign. This protest campaign started at the University of the Witwatersrand in response to a 10.5% increase in student fees for 2016. Within a week, this became a national campaign that spread to other institutions across the country, causing most of them to shut down for two weeks. While the focus of the *#FeesMustFall* Campaign had been on the cost of higher education, it eventually assumed an all-encompassing character and demanded a radical re-imagining of the South African higher education landscape. The campaign found expression in demands that included, but were not limited to, the de-commodification of higher education; the decolonization of the curriculum; addressing inequities in racial and gender staff composition; as well as the insourcing of general workers, the majority of whom are black (Langa 2017).

### **Applying critical race theory (CRT) to understand the slow pace of transformation of higher education in South Africa with specific reference to institutional culture at HWUs**

CRT has its origins in the field of critical legal studies that seeks to address the racial inequities in society (Hiraldo 2010). It was first introduced as an analytical framework to assess inequity in education in the United States in 1994 (Decuir and Dixson 2004). According to Parker and Villalpando, its central purpose is to make visible profound patterns of exclusion and that which is taken for granted when analysing race and privilege in society (2007). For this reason, Hiraldo asserts that CRT can play an important role when higher education institutions work toward becoming more diverse and inclusive (2010). According to Zamudio et al., CRT as applied to the field of education is predicated on the assumptions that race, history, voice, and praxis matter (2011). All of these assumptions are related in the sense that acknowledging the primacy of racism, linking current challenges of transformation to the structural legacy of our past, and having a voice, inspires social action that will ultimately result in the attainment of social justice. Within the context of this paper, these assumption provides an analytical framework for examining the slow pace of transformation in general and revealing how superficial changes such as shifts in student demographic sometimes disguise continuities in terms of the institutional cultures of HWUs (Matthews and Tabensky 2015). In the discussion that follows, these propositions are dealt with in more detail and applied to the RMF campaign and *Luister*. The aim is to make sense as to why, after more than two decades of democracy, black students in South Africa, especially those at HWUs, continue to be confronted with an institutional culture that subjects them to racism, alienation, and marginalization, and other forms of discrimination.

### ***Contemporary challenges as historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid***

Critical race theorists argue that history matters because racialization of a society is necessarily a historical process. As a result, we need to link contemporary racial inequality to past historical practices (Zamudio et al. 2011). Indeed, the priority placed on transformation in the post-1994 era bears testament to the fact that the South African higher education system is founded in the nation's colonial and apartheid past (Bawa 2011). In 1953, then Minister of Native Affairs and apartheid architect Hendrik Verwoerd, declared that: 'Race relations cannot improve if the wrong type of education is given to the Natives. They cannot improve if the result of Native education is the creation of frustrated people who, as a result of the education they received, have expectations in life which circumstances in South Africa do not allow to be fulfilled immediately' (Sparks 1990, 196). The structuring of the higher education system was developed with these aims in mind and resulted in a fragmented higher education system consisting of highly advantaged institutions that catered for whites and that were well resourced on the one hand, and on the other, severely disadvantaged institutions with limited resources catering for blacks (Council on Higher Education 1996). According to Bawa, this was made possible by a funding model that discriminated against black institutions of higher learning (2011). While opportunities for whites were endless, the primary function of disadvantaged institutions were essentially to be producers of black professionals and civil servants and not producers of new knowledge as their white counterparts (Bawa 2011).

In the aftermath of apartheid, the new democratic government emphasized the importance of transforming the South African higher education system. These transformation efforts have had some success, such as the fact that it resulted in a dramatic changes in student profiles at South African universities to the extent that it is now more reflective of the country's demographics (Cooper and Subotzky 2001). Despite these successes, however, the reality of the higher education system is still far removed from the vision of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist higher education system and South African universities are struggling to address their own particular apartheid legacy and become public universities for all citizens in a democratic society (Suranskya and van der Merwe 2014). Although universities have policies aimed at addressing discrimination, they appear to fail to consider historical factors when examining racial inequalities and are bound to reproduce unequal power relations and academic outcomes (Zamudio et al. 2011). HWUs in particular are likely to follow Badat's assertion that the contemporary problems besetting higher education in South Africa: '... were profoundly shaped by apartheid planning and by the respective functions assigned to them in relation to the reproduction of the apartheid social order' (2007, 6). Yet, the extent to which this principle informs their attitude and approach to transformation is unconvincing, particularly if one considers their preoccupation with equality of access as opposed to equality of achievement outcome. This results in the undermining of black students' education and their ability to achieve social mobility. Van der Berg warns that inequalities in schooling outcomes are manifest in subsequent incomes, perpetuating current patterns of inequality (2004).

### ***Racism as an impediment to change***

From a CRT perspective, claims of colour-blindness and counter-accusations of reverse racism equates political rights with social equality and represents a failure of grasping the ways in which race and racism function in society to reproduce contemporary social inequality (Zamudio et al. 2011). In a study that examined online debates in which a racially diverse sample of South African undergraduate university students negotiate the meanings assigned to whiteness, claims of the existence of reverse apartheid under the guise of affirmative action, were particularly salient (Conradie 2015). In addition to this, the mere talk about notions of whiteness as a

societal phenomenon were perceived as essentialist attacks, and therefore incompatible with democratic values of non-racialism (Conradie 2015). In this context, non-racialism as colour-blindness is invoked to argue that race is not related to advantage or disadvantage (Wale and Foster 2007). In another study at the UCT Health Sciences Faculty, white medical students used the term *reverse racism* to describe affirmative action measures, which admit black students to university with lower marks, as constituting an unfair and discriminatory advantage (Erasmus and De Wet 2011). This is despite research demonstrating that that reverse discrimination is not a valid argument against affirmative action (Pincus 2003).

Because historically entrenched inequalities lead to societies where racial inequality permeates all aspects of social life, race must be a central construct for analysing inequality (Delgado and Stefanic 2001). By foregrounding race, we can come to understand how subtle beliefs about racial superiority serve to elevate the traditions, art, language, literature, and ways of knowing of some groups, while disparaging the contributions of others (Zamudio et al. 2011). Because of its endemic and permanent nature, racism can have devastating structural impacts at the individual, community, and national level (Bell 1992). The value of CRT lies in its potential for offering an alternative perspective to identify more effective solutions to the dilemmas that lead to inequality and lower success rates for black students at historically white institutions.

That Rhodes was an unapologetic racist and an affront to black people is undeniable.<sup>3</sup> In 1877, he had written: 'I contend that we are the finest race in the world and the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race' (in Karabel 2005, 121). In that same year, he had proclaimed to the house of assembly in Cape Town that: 'The Native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise. We must adopt a system of despotism in our relations with the barbarians of South Africa' (Nyamnjoh 2016, 40). Yet, more than two decades after the end of apartheid, his statue had continued to occupy a prominent place on the UCT campus. For many students, this represented a celebration and memorialization of colonialism; and having to endure this daily had become unbearably humiliating.

The salience of race was also manifested in the criticism that was lodged against the campaign to have the statue removed. For the mostly white defenders of the statue, the fact that apartheid had ended meant that racism was no longer a salient social problem. Following this logic, they contended that the campaign to have the statue removed constituted nothing more than an infantile, uneducated attempt at rejecting history (Harding 2015). Kessi observes that representations of black students as lacking in intellect, irresponsible, criminal, and uncivilized, among others, found expression in critiques of RMF protests (2018). These representations are embedded in the university's institutional culture and subtly but potently serve to reify the white male privilege embodied in the statue of Rhodes, thus further excluding black students from being equal stakeholders of UCT (Kessi 2018).

Critics of the RMF campaign who framed student activists as anti-intellectual were deploying narratives implicitly or explicitly associated with cognitive ability and grounded in the assumption that such students were disinterested in and incapable of identifying, reflecting, articulating and actively fighting against social injustices. However, Gramsci, a prominent influence in the development of CRT, reminds us that intellectualism should be associated with a particular social function rather than a measure of cognitive ability (1999). In the same vein, Said, whose views also informed the development of CRT, contends that the modern-day intellectual is someone who is committed to the on-going pursuit of equality and justice as material goals and not only as political rhetoric (1994). It is reasonable to conclude that in terms of these formulations, the students by virtue of their actions and the beliefs that informed them, could not and should not be accused of anti-intellectualism. By acting as a voice for the voiceless through active political participation, student protesters place themselves outside of the more

conventional conception of what constitutes an intellectual; this renders them unpopular with the dominant class and its agents (Said 1994).

In addition to the counterargument against the depiction of students as anti-intellectual, a counterargument can be made against the invocation of civility as moral censure by those who criticized student actions. Concern has been expressed over calls for civil dialogue that is ostensibly framed in terms of expectations about how to debate and how to disagree, but in reality, serves as a weapon to silence dissent (Scott 2015). For instance, Applebaum asserts that, ‘Those who dare protest loudly or aggressively against injustice are often vilified as violating civility’ (2020, 279). Furthermore, Scott argues against the tendency of equating the incivility that promotes social injustice with incivility that attempts to fight it (2015). For her, incivility can be a tool for social transformation by disrupting power relations and opening spaces for popular dissent. It is from this social justice imperative that incivility is legitimized and from which it derives its civility (Diduk 2004). It is for this reason that Applebaum implores us to consider the following: ‘Who is calling for civility, and to what ends? What are the effects of policing classrooms and political forums in the name of civility? What has been the history of the invocation of that word?’ (Applebaum 2020, 278)

The fact that Rhodes embodied the colonial dispossession and oppression of black people, and the fact that even former UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price had questioned the existence of the statue on his campus, yet did nothing about it, is at most perhaps testament to the persistence of racism, and at least, symptomatic of the indifference of whites to confront and dismantle racism (Hodes 2015). In 2016, only five of the 200 senior professors at the University of Cape Town were black. While the university has blamed this on the inherent difficulty in attracting senior black academics, others have argued that this was merely used as a pretext for gatekeeping and excluding black academics. Black staff at UCT had accused the university of deliberately discriminating against competent black professors in its hiring and promotion practices (Petersen 2015). Furthermore, according to former UCT’s Dean of Humanities, Professor Sakhela Buhlungu, a labour market expert, there are mounting frustrations across several South African universities at employment practices that systematically disadvantage black South Africans (Hall 2015).

*Luister* also emerged in reaction to institutionalized racism at the University of Stellenbosch (Corder et al. 2015). The film starts with a male student lamenting: ‘The colour of my skin in Stellenbosch is like a social burden ... I mean just walking into spaces, there’s that stop, pause, and stare where people cannot believe that you would enter into this space’ (Corder et al. 2015). Racism found expression in the hostility and other micro-aggressions that black students encounter daily, as well as the unprovoked and often violent physical attacks. Another black male student shared his experience. ‘We were in a club and I was dancing with another white lady ... She was friendly, so I was also ... We were just dancing. When I’m done, I sit down with my friends. There was a group of white guys ... One of the guys threw a glass of beer in my face’ (Corder et al. 2015).

A deeply concerning manifestation of this institutional racism was in the university’s language policy that disadvantaged and marginalized black students not only in the lecture halls, but also in shared social spaces, such as residences, dining halls, etc. A white male, presumably one of the producers of the film, sums up the dilemma that black students at the university face because of the imposition of a language that is detrimental to their chances of academic success. ‘These are people that can’t get degrees, because they can’t take courses that they need for their degree and they end up dropping out of university because they can’t understand the work that they are being taught, and the disproportion and the absurdity in the response to the problems that we are talking about ...’ (Corder et al. 2015).

The film’s protagonists described the Stellenbosch campus culture as not only unwelcoming, but also hostile. It was a place where they were constantly reminded that they do not belong

because of their race. The fact that they paid the same tuition and residence fees as their white counterparts was immaterial. For black students in the film, the message was clear: be grateful that you are accommodated in a place where you have no right to be in the first place. It is for this reason Maart concludes that at HWUs, transformation is a term that is merely used to assess the extent to which the beneficiaries of white domination have adjusted to the imposition of blackness (2014).

Given the ethno-nationalist significance of Afrikaans at Stellenbosch, the increasing use of English as a medium of instruction to accommodate black students at Stellenbosch threatened the privileged position of Afrikaans at the institution and evoked anger and anxiety among many white Afrikaans speakers. Even the university leadership, who advocated for the university to become more inclusive, drew the ire of conservative Afrikaans public figures, who accused them of being sell-outs and undermining the language. According to van der Waal and du Toit (2018, 456):

‘The activists for Afrikaans accused Brink [then rector and vice-chancellor of the university] of undermining the position of Afrikaans and promised that the language struggle would become bitter. They called for an Afrikaans-supporting language policy and ‘auditing’ the amount of Afrikaans in dual-medium teaching. The pressure on those seen as guilty of selling out Afrikaans culminated in the departure of Brink in 2007.’

While the personal accounts of students in the video had shocked many, it had initially been dismissed as highly exaggerated and had even been described as a conspiracy theory. The critique against the black students was led by the Afriforum Youth, the youth wing of Afrikaner nationalist group, Afriforum. Thus the chairperson of Afriforum Youth, Henk Maree told reporters that the video constituted a malicious attempt to promote a racist agenda at the University of Stellenbosch and a conspiracy theory accusing people of racism when no grounds for such accusations existed (Hartleb 2015). According to a female student who participated in the film, even their moral integrity was questioned, the irony of which was not lost upon her. ‘When students are protesting against a language policy, its all of a sudden immoral, but when people are getting beaten up at McDonalds or when people get threats on Facebook, it all goes silent and its hush-hush. No one mentions that that in and off itself is immoral, excluding students from an education that we all pay for, that somehow is not immoral, but speaking against it, somehow is?’ (Corder et al. 2015).

Similarly, the response of the University immediately after the release of *Luister* was symptomatic of white attitudes towards race when black students try to call attention to their plight at South Africa’s HWUs. Thus, on 21 August 2015, the university released a media statement in response to the release of *Luister* (University of Stellenbosch Corporate Marketing 2015). While it conceded that some students continue to be victims of racism and discrimination on campus, the media statement constituted nothing more than a glowing performance report that was aimed at protecting the university’s corporate image. It highlighted the institution’s steadfast commitment to transformation, documented its achievements as evidence of this, and dispelled most of the claims made in the video as unfounded and disingenuous.

The university expressed sympathy with the few unfortunate victims of racism and gave the assurance that it was not indifferent to their plight. Thus vice-chancellor Wim de Villiers expressed sadness at seeing some students being exposed to racism and discrimination, but protested that ‘... to insinuate that the university is not serious about transformation, that it turns a blind eye to flagrant racism or that it in some sense advocates or maintains a culture of Apartheid at the university, is simply not true and cannot go unchallenged’ (Nicolson 2015, 1).

This served to deny the systemic nature of the problem and reinforced the prevailing discourse that these were isolated incidents for which a few culprits were responsible. Contemporary critical race theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva asserts that the denial of racism as a systemic feature of social structure are mobilized in the era of *de jure* equality to provide ideological support for a racially unequal status quo (Bonilla-Silva 2014). On this basis, it could be argued that it is precisely this tendency to liken racism to individual prejudice and bigotry and denying its structural and social embeddedness that continues to thwart transformation on HWUs.

### ***Giving voice***

Critical race theory supports a voice or counter-narrative that opposes the dominant or master narrative by making visible the structures, processes, and practices that continue to contribute to racial inequality (Zamudio et al. 2011). Counter-storytelling is a framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups (Decuir and Dixson 2004; Ladson-Billings 1998; Parker and Villalpando 2007). According to Zamudio et al., the use of counter-narratives in analysing higher education's climate provides black staff and students with a voice to share their experiences of marginalization and the devastating impact these have on them (2011).

Both the RMF campaign and the release of *Luister* constituted powerful counter-narratives by black students demanding the opportunity to speak, to be heard, and to be taken seriously. Hlophe aptly describes these as the rising voices of youth who are increasingly distrustful of the *rainbow nation* doctrine and neo-liberal democracy (2015). In a 2016 interview, one UCT student protester who had been interdicted and expelled described this thus: 'Post-1994, we have been brainwashed with the idea of the 'rainbow nation'. What is clear is that we live in a post-apartheid South Africa where inequality, racism, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy continues to oppress black people in the country ... The movement comes out of feeling desperate, angry and frustrated by the state of things in this country' (Ndelu 2017, 64–650). The students' unwavering commitment to the removal of a symbol that served as a cogent reminder of white privilege at the expense of black alienation and oppression, is perhaps indicative of the level of frustration that they experience when they have been continually silenced, as well as their desperate need to have conversations about matters affecting their lives. This is perhaps most cogently expressed in the following extract from the mission statement of the Rhodes Must Fall Movement under the sub-heading: *Centering Black Pain*:

'At the root of this struggle is the dehumanisation of black people at UCT. This dehumanisation is a violence exacted only against black people by a system that privileges whiteness. Our definition of black includes all racially oppressed people of colour. We adopt this political identity not to disregard the huge differences that exist between us, but precisely to interrogate them, identify their roots in the divide-and-conquer tactics of white supremacy, and act in unity to bring about our collective liberation. It is therefore crucial that this movement flows from the black voices and black pain that have been continuously ignored and silenced' (UCT Rhodes Must Fall Mission Statement 2015, 1)

While the removal of the statue took centre-stage, it also ignited additional voices to come to the fore. For example, at a meeting on 24 March 2015, members of the Black Academic Caucus at UCT, a collective of black academics committed to transformation in Higher Education in South Africa, gave testimonials of the difficulty of being a black faculty member of the institution (Kamanzi 2015). The campaign also stimulated dialogues and conversations that agitated for changes in curricula that have consistently marginalized the Afro-centric worldview, thoughts, and teachings (ibid.).



Although *Luister* was not as dramatic as the RMF campaign, it nonetheless conveyed the frustration and desperation that black students at historically white universities experienced. In the immediate aftermath of the RMF campaign at UCT, staff and students at the University of Stellenbosch established *Open Stellenbosch*, a movement campaigning against the lack of systemic transformation on the campus. Members of the movement subsequently faced disciplinary action for engaging in protest action on campus. There were fears that this pending disciplinary action could silence the movement. This was the impetus for producing a film that documented the existential realities of black students on the university campus and their experiences of living in the conservative town of Stellenbosch (Nicolson 2015). The result was an account of the painful and humiliating experiences that black students are typically subjected to both on and off campus. Jansen describes listening to the calm, deliberate accounts of regular and routine racism that chips away daily at the humanity and integrity of black students in former white institutions as gut wrenching and telling a compelling story that demands society's attention (2015b).

Thus, both the RMF campaign and the release of *Luister* could be said to signify an insistence on the part of black students that their voices count; a demand to be heard and listened to; and a rejection of an institutional culture that co-opts them into becoming complicit in their own oppression. Because this oppression is part of their lived experience, Skovlund warns that it has the potential to become internalized (2014). In this way, it can limit the ability of black students to speak about the personal cost of oppression, and thus force them into becoming complicit in their own oppression. 'Internalized oppression is likely to consist of self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive' (Pheterson 1986, 146).

### ***Pursuit of social justice***

Voice does not inherently lead to social action (Coudry 2010). Proponents of CRT argue that knowledge should not be produced for the mere sake of knowledge production but should instead be dedicated to the pursuit and attainment of social justice through social action (Zamudio et al. 2011). Praxis – defined as 'critically informed action in the service of social justice' – is a key pillar of applied CRT (Zamudio et al. 2011, 7). In this tradition, CRT serves the interest of social justice by illuminating the underlying dynamics that produce racial inequality and the processes that obscure these dynamics. This imbues social activists with a sense of optimism and an unwavering commitment that counteracts against being overwhelmed by the inherent difficulty in fighting for social justice.

It is reasonable to conclude that the RMF Campaign and the release of *Luister* invigorated the pursuit of social justice not only in South Africa, but also abroad. At UCT, the momentum garnered by the RMF campaign gave further impetus to the emergence of a broader movement called the *Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) Movement*. It consisted of students and staff from *Transform UCT (renamed the Black Academic Caucus)*. It was established in the aftermath of the statue's removal and has committed itself to the removal of all forms of systemic racism borne from apartheid and colonialism. It focused on mobilizing for direct action against institutional racism in the form of white supremacy and privilege at UCT, and agitated for the university to heed to their calls for real transformation, calls that the institution had consistently ignored for decades (Rhodes Must Fall 2015).

Internationally, the RMF campaign garnered messages of support from students from Canada, New Zealand, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and the US (Chernick 2015). Also inspired by what was happening in South Africa, students at Oxford University in the United Kingdom (UK) started a campaign for the decolonization of their institution (Hlophle 2015). As recent as 2020, students at Oriel College at Oxford University were still holding protests for the

removal of a Rhodes statue on their own campus. In addition to this, the Black Students Union at the University of California, Berkley in the United States (US) also came out in support of their UCT counterparts and focused on demanding an end to black marginalization on their own campus (Sobiso 2015). Solidarity is valuable for critical praxis in pursuit of social justice in the interest of the vulnerable and marginalized. In this regard, Blum, highlights the importance of ‘out-group’ solidarity (i.e. solidarity by those who are ascriptively not part of a marginalized community), particularly in relation to critical praxis (2007). It follows that engaging in critical praxis has the potential to give those engaging in out-group solidarity, insight into the existential reality that the marginalized in society occupy. Within the context of institutional culture at South African HWUs, this conscientisation of the (often privileged) out-group members, not only of the vivid reality of the (marginalized) in-group, but also of their own (out-group members’) complicity in sustaining oppressive policies and practices, can cause them to act in proactive and potentially transformative ways in pursuit of the interest of the in-group. For privileged out-group members, standing in solidarity with in-group member, is hard; often perceived as heretical since a huge part of upholding systems of oppression involves the silencing of the voices of those most repressed and promoting narratives that normalize and justify exploitative social relations over time (Brock 2020).

### Implications

More than two decades after apartheid made way for a new democratic dispensation, it is clear that the euphoria that had accompanied this transition has made way for a more sober realization that deeply entrenched inequalities and injustices based on race are still at the core of South Africa’s social fabric (Suranskya and van der Merwe 2014). It is therefore unsurprising that the country’s higher education system, a key site of apartheid’s ideology of social engineering, continues to be plagued by racial inequalities and injustices. At HWUs, transformation has been interpreted to mean helping black students assimilate into these institutions. In terms of the literature, assimilation is equated to a form of adjustment (Grayson 2003), which takes place at various levels including the academic, social, and cultural level (Tinto 1993). Black students at South African HWUs have expressed their discontent at how pervasive white ideology and culture are at HWUs and how cultural and ideological assimilation is regarded as a precondition for academic success (Corder et al. 2015). Binikos and Rugunanan remind us that students often encounter challenges when assimilating and as a result drop out of university (2015). In light of what has happened at UCT and the University of Stellenbosch in 2015, it is clear that social and cultural transformation involves much more than assimilation, particularly in a society that is underpinned by constitutionally derived democratic ideals of egalitarianism, inclusivity, and compassion. In such a society, the starting point for transformation should be an affirmation of racial diversity and difference, not mere co-option into the dominant way of being, thinking, and doing.

The lack of transformation at historically white institutions can also be framed within the accountability – institutional autonomy debate that has characterized higher education discourse in South Africa. Internationally, institutions of higher learning have regarded institutional autonomy as vital for them to fulfil their mandates. Institutional autonomy refers to the right of institutions to self-govern without external interference, particularly from the state. According to Jonathan, institutional autonomy is often equated to academic freedom, which in the context of South African higher education, is understood in terms of what is referred to as the T.B. Davie formula (2006). The T.B. Davie formula, named after T.B. Davie who was vice-chancellor at UCT from 1948 to 1955, means freedom from external interference in (a) who shall teach, (b) what we teach, (c) how we teach, and (d) whom we teach (Du Toit 2013). Contestation around

these concepts notwithstanding, in instances where they are perceived to be under threat, academic freedom and institutional autonomy tend to be defended with vigour (McKenna 2013).

However, in the face of perceived failures of higher education institutions insofar as they foster inclusion and respect diversity and difference, there has been growing constituent demands for more accountability (Jonathan 2006). Indeed, one could be forgiven for suspecting that it is perhaps this very notion of institutional autonomy that is antithetical to the ideals of diversity and inclusion that institutions of higher learning are supposed to strive for in post-1994 South Africa.

For this reason, the wisdom of whether these institutions should be allowed to govern themselves and decide on the central questions of who to teach, what to teach, how to teach and when to teach, have been questioned (South African Students Congress 2009). Thus the South African Students' Congress (2009) has suggested that it is precisely the values that underpin institutional autonomy that have been used to legitimate and validate undemocratic, exclusionary, aristocratic governance and unjustifiably slow transformation, as well as unresponsiveness to South African societal and economic needs.

Whether this is true or not is debatable. The critical issue is that lack of institutional transformation of its institutions of higher learning has major implications for South Africa, particularly in a climate of endemic poverty, deepening inequality, and rampant unemployment, both of which have a distinctly racial character. Higher education is a key driver of social mobility. The ability of many black students to attain this is compromised by institutional cultures that exclude and marginalize them, and as a result, negatively impact on their chances of academic success, particularly at HWUs. Many black students are first-generation university students, who according to Wilson-Strydom, are received in an institutional context that is difficult for them to negotiate (2010). As a result, their anger has reached boiling point as their patience with white pretensions and having to wait to reap the fruits of democracy is running out. With increasing numbers of black students entering historically white institutions, this anger is likely to reach even greater proportions. Inevitably, issues that are contested at universities are likely to have far wider and much more devastating consequences for all South Africans.

Luister emerged in response to incidents of racial assault and ongoing racism on and around campus and the university's lack of response to these despite its stated commitment towards systemic transformation. The documentary also attracted political attention, with the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande, expressing shock after having viewed the video, summoned the university's authorities to appear in parliament in order to account for what is portrayed in the video specifically, and what they have done to advance transformation generally at the institution (Evans 2015). He also convened a Higher Education Summit from October 15 to October 17, 2015, where a resolution was made to strengthen the mechanisms for holding institutions accountable for transformation goals, and that transformation indicators should urgently be developed to help steer transformation goals to support effective implementation of transformation imperatives (Department of Higher Education and Training 2016). In line with these resolutions, then President Jacob Zuma in 2017 signed into law the Higher Education Amendment Act, which gives the Minister of Higher Education greater powers to intervene in university matters and advance transformation within the higher education sector. Among others, the amendments were made to ensure that the thread of transformation ran through all aspects of university life, including institutional culture, and allow the minister to issue ministerial directives pursuant to this.

## **Conclusion**

This paper interrogates the slow pace that has characterized transformation within South African higher education since the end of apartheid. It focuses on the RMF campaign at UCT, and the

release of *Luister* at the University of Stellenbosch as incidents that are symptomatic of the slow pace that has characterized transformation with regards to institutional culture at HWUs in particular. These two campaigns highlight black students' frustration with the incongruence between the promises of transformation and the existential realities they face on campus. The cases can be located in the broader struggle student activists have been engaged in even before 1994.

While English HWUs in South Africa have always tried to distinguish themselves from their Afrikaans counterparts on the basis of their supposed liberal traditions in contrast to the conservatism that was the ideological bedrock of Afrikaans institutions, this distinction has been superficial and has obscured the way in which whiteness as embedded in institutional culture at English HWUs, have excluded, marginalized, and alienated black students and workers at these institutions. This distinction has also impacted on how racism tends to be manifested at these two institutional types, with explicit blatant racism more likely at Afrikaans HWUs, while the manifestations of racism at English HWUs are more likely to be hidden in policies and practices underpinned by whiteness, and masked by claims of neutrality, colour-blindness, and meritocracy (Möschel 2014). It is also worth noting that while the most obvious institutional distinction between Afrikaans and English HWUs has been language, that distinction is disappearing as Afrikaans HWUs are increasingly adopting English as the medium of instruction, not only in response to demands for more inclusivity, but also the demand for relevance in globalized world (Mwaniki 2018).

The paper draws on CRT as a conceptual framework and an analytical tool to make sense of the frustratingly slow pace of transformation at HWUs particularly with regards to institutional culture. The application of CRT to the RMF movement and *Luister*, allows us to unmask the hidden, but racialised interactions in South African higher learning contexts where whiteness is normalized and racism is concealed, and the attendant consequences it has for black students in terms of issues such as academic performance and mental health. By foregrounding and validating their experience of marginalization, alienation, and dehumanization, it illuminates how dominant narratives serve the interests of whiteness. It allows us to counteract the myths of post-racism under the guise of *rainbowism*. Furthermore, by positioning the experience of being black at HWUs within a historical context, CRT demonstrates how apartheid-inspired exclusion, marginalization, alienation and dehumanization continue to define the experiences of black students at HWUs, more than two decades since apartheid had ended, despite noteworthy positive changes.

The ongoing upheaval at South African higher education institutions is a reminder that racism cannot be continually downplayed and whitewashed as isolated. Rather, as the historical perspective offered by CRT reminds us, these are manifestations of a troubling norm. Unless HWUs begin to admit that racism is pervasive, deeply entrenched, and systemic (see, for example, Nhlapo et al. 2020; Institutional Reconciliation and Transformation Commission – IRTC 2019), they will continue to nurture and perpetuate it. Transformation, therefore, should start with a focus on uncovering what it is that informs notions of white privilege and black disadvantage, and critically examine how complex processes of inclusion and exclusion driven by race manifest themselves in these institutions (Suranskya and van der Merwe 2014). Should they fail to recognize the central role that race plays in shaping inequities in higher education, their efforts towards transformation are likely to be ineffective (Iverson 2007) and will rather work to propel and reinforce structural and institutional racism (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes

1. *Host culture* in the context of this paper refers to the dominant/dominant institutional cultures at HWUs. According to Nhlapo, Fikeni, Gobodo-Madikizela, and Walaza, these are by their very nature, difficult to detect and measure, but their impact is unmistakable to the extent that it has been identified as a major source and manifestation of resistance to transformation at UCT, sometimes even overriding ‘formal authority and expressed policy’ (2020, 128).
2. In the aftermath of his death, the UCT Council was approached by various stakeholders of the University, including the Mayosi family, student representatives and staff formations, with a call for an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding his death. A task team constituted by the Council conducted a preliminary investigation into the matter, based on which, an inquiry panel was established by a resolution of the Council taken on 10 September 2018. The panel presented its final report to Council on 16 June 2020 (Nhlapo et al. 2020).
3. It is worth noting that calling for the removal of Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town was not new. Afrikaners had a similar disdain for Rhodes and Afrikaans students also demanded that his statue be removed in the 1950s (Masondo 2015).

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