

ON UCT, ITS ORIENTATION PROGRAMMES AND THE REPRODUCTION OF WHITE PATRIARCHY

oNe StAB

Musician, Writer and Education Enthusiast

This paper contains some of my thoughts on orientation at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Many of these thoughts were constructed after witnessing one particular orientation activity at Kopano, an all-male UCT residence. I expand my thinking to suggest what orientation might reveal about the institution, the hegemonic culture of the institution and that culture's dominant values. I am arguing from a departure point that the value system of the university is derived from distinctly South African expressions of white patriarchy that are largely rooted in an aggressive heterosexual masculinity in which South African white male sporting culture is steeped. Further, I consider what the orientation process might be like for people who are typically excluded by white patriarchy and what that means in the context of the university. While a lot of criticism (particularly recently in the context of the #Rhodesmustfall movement) has rightly been aimed at the University and its racist institutional culture, a lot of that criticism has been silent on issues of sexism that are as widely prevalent and are, indeed, linked to issues of racism.¹ This paper is attempt to draw those two struggles together by thinking outwards from the space of orientation.

UCT at the beginning of the year is swamped with packs of first years looking something like tourist groups; orientation is the name of the game. It is a time to introduce new students to the university, to help them navigate the institution. It is also a lens

into the gendered, racial and class dynamics on which the institution is constructed. Through the orientation process students are confronted with the dominant value system of the institution, and they then have to decide how they will define themselves in relation to those values. Depending on an individual's background, identity, and ultimately their social capital and ability to navigate that culture, they will have more or less scope (than others from different backgrounds) to do that. In that regard, in terms of how one might define themselves in relation to a particular culture, I think people have three main² choices. Firstly, they can assimilate into that culture. This is obviously easier and more possible for certain groups – white people and, although assimilation will never be complete or unproblematic for them, Black people who have been socialised in white spaces. An individual's lived experience up until that point will determine whether or not they have the social and cultural capital that would make assimilation into the dominant culture of the university any kind of possibility for them. If they are unable to assimilate, or do not want to be a part of the dominant culture they then have two remaining decisions – the first of which is really a non-decision on the part of the individual. The 'decision' is essentially forced upon them by the sheer distance between the hegemonic culture and the social and cultural capital to which someone has access. If the barriers to assimilation are too high for a particular individual, they will likely shrink into their shell, convinced that they are not good enough to be a full participant in society: they will be silenced by the dominance of that culture. The last remaining decision, of which this essay is an exponent, is active resistance to the hegemonic culture and the alienating



and dehumanising effects it has on those who are excluded by it.

Back to UCT orientation: Earlier this year I witnessed a particular event that was part of UCT's orientation programme that starkly highlights how the space of orientation proactively reproduces white patriarchy. On Monday 2 February 2015 I was playing soccer in the vicinity of some Kopano (an all-male residence) orientation activities on UCT's Lower/Middle Campus and witnessed some deeply detestable and highly offensive sexist practices. The first years initially had to run around the soccer field in groups of 8-10 linking hands - an activity that wouldn't seem out of place at a white all-boys' school rugby camp. Indeed the hegemonic culture at most male UCT residences is one that is very strongly linked to, and to a large extent derived from, the sporting culture at white private and model C schools; a culture that celebrates particular expressions of masculinity largely based on violent aggression and objectification of the female body. Anyhow, that running activity wasn't the particularly offensive part of the programme - after running around the field in groups and getting

of the tiny proportion of students who are fortunate enough to take classes with some of the, still tinier, number of progressive academics working actively to subvert the hegemonic culture, there is nothing about the experience of studying at UCT that challenges its dominant values or (which are the same as) the dominant values of our society. When it comes to relations of oppression and domination, the values on which UCT and our society are based, there is no such thing as a neutral position; and it is evident that - except in a few teaching spaces that (due to the individual work of a handful of committed academics) hold the potential for radical challenge, UCT as an institution is not actively working to challenge sexism or racism. In fact the converse is true – UCT embodies and reproduces those values of racist and sexist oppression. The event I described earlier is evidence of this.

If the University is serious about the types of claims it makes about wanting to be a space free of discrimination then it has to realise that to become that type of space is a revolutionary undertaking. The executive of the University needs to understand that anti-sexism and anti-racism are not default values in our society, they are subversive, radical ways of being, of constantly struggling against a hegemonic system so deeply embedded in the thoughts and actions of almost all people. Anti-racism and anti-sexism require critical, deeply reflective personal journeys to unlearn the crooked ways in which gender, sexuality and race differentially constitute our everyday experiences.

[The executive of the University needs to understand that anti-sexism and anti-racism are not default values in our society, they are subversive, radical ways of being, of constantly struggling against](#)

[a hegemonic system so deeply embedded in the thoughts and actions of almost all people.](#)

If the University is not willing to take up the sword against the hegemonic culture of society and itself, it must stop speaking as if it is committed to values it doesn't truly understand. If it wants to be a space that is primarily affirming for rich white boys from the suburbs who attended schools like St Johns, Michaelhouse, Bishops or any of the other patriarchal profit centres that instil the type of sexist ideology in which the detestable war-cry/song I mentioned earlier is rooted, then they would do well to ignore or, better, encourage this type of orientation practice. But if UCT is truly committed to anti-sexism and anti-racism, and if it aspires to provide a positive, safe space for those who do not immediately identify positively with the hegemonic white patriarchal value set of the institution, it will have to walk a hard road to get there.

The only way to truly travel that road is, firstly, to LISTEN. LISTEN to the voices of RMF: we, the Black students who have created safe spaces for critical debate on intersectional identity. We, who have dared to imagine a university free from racism, free from sexism. We, who have the radical impulse and revolutionary commitment to realise what we imagine. The University has to make space for the voices of marginalised people of the institution - black people, women, workers, and people from the LGBTIAQ community – not only to be heard but to dictate the transformation agenda. The knowledge of how the oppression of the institution operates is situated in these groups and it is critical that the experiences of these groups – those oppressed by the hegemony of white capitalist patriarchy – are listened

to and not argued away by white liberal standpoints that seek to preserve the status quo. It is only through listening to and understanding the daily experiences of these people, and then, taking as a departure point the transformation of the dominant culture and the institutional structures that reproduce those experiences of oppression, that any sort of relevant transformation agenda can be forged. Indeed a transformation agenda that we are driving is the only one we will accept.

Regarding a transformation agenda then, a good place to start might be the value set that is disseminated through orientation. Obviously the orientation process does not define the institution's culture. It is merely an introduction to it, it is a space of the reproduction and dissemination of white patriarchy. So changing the value set the orientation programme in itself will not change the institutional culture (that has to be done in parallel with challenging it on multiple fronts), but I believe that transforming the orientation space is critical to the creation of a culture where everyone feels welcome, where their identity does not feel as though it is under attack, where people are not violently forced into either assimilating to, being silenced by, or taking up arms against a radically oppressive, exclusionary dominant culture. How might we do this? As I mentioned earlier, the experiences of people who are marginalised and oppressed by UCT's dominant culture are central to any true transformation programme. A committee should be set up comprised of representatives of these groups of people that both thoroughly interrogates orientation programmes, especially those of all-male institutions, and runs compulsory workshops that explore identity, institutional oppression and how they intersect at

UCT. But, a reminder that transformation cannot stop there, with orientation. To become a space free of oppression and domination entails a radical commitment to a programme of ongoing revolution.

Onward.

ENDNOTES

- 1 UCT is also blatantly classist and, while this essay does not speak explicitly to class as a unit of analysis, class and class oppression at the University are as important issues and are very much bound up with oppression based more overtly on race, sex and sexual orientation.
- 2 This does not purport to be an extensive list, there are other possible choices. The three choices I outline appear to me to be good points of departure for analysis of the topic at hand.
- 3 See: 1. Max Price's letter, <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/ucts-response-to-allegations-of-racist-violence--m>, 2. A potent piece of commentary by Dela Gwala on how response to the attacks largely missed out on their sexist nature, <http://feministssa.com/2015/02/05/the-other-half-of-the-conversation-osrin-and-daily-violence/>, and 3. A critique of Price's letter and his superficial understanding of racism (newspaper clipping at bottom of page).
- 4 Sexism and sexuality are issues which, while race is highly politicised on campus, the University in general and Price are noticeably silent. I think that this trend largely mirrors the political dynamics of South African society wherein issues of race receive more attention and are perceived to be of more importance than forms of oppression based on sex or sexuality.
- 5 I hereby acknowledge that one can simultaneously be oppressed as a member of all of these categories. My intention here in identifying groups is not to make an exhaustive list of all people that are oppressed by patriarchal white supremacist capitalism, or the differential and intersecting ways in which these groups are oppressed, merely to illustrate a general point.

Max Price's thesis notwithstanding, UCT is racist

WE WISH to respond to Max Price's letter to the University of Cape Town's Student Representative Council published on PoliticsWeb on November 25.

In his response to the recent spate of racist attacks, some in which UCT students are implicated, Price makes a series of points we find hugely offensive and wish to contest.

Price claims that "it must be stated categorically that UCT absolutely, utterly rejects racism, violence and discrimination of any kind".

We contest the statement that UCT rejects racism, violence and discrimination. As TO Molefe asserts (News24, November 27) racism is a systemic oppression manifested by structural

subjugation and exclusion, and not just isolated individual actions. We believe that such racism is rife at UCT.

We see racism in the content of the curricula, the composition of the staff and student bodies, the symbolic honouring of colonial legacies, the hegemony of English and particular ways of speaking it, the treatment of outsourced workers, the racist responses to black students who challenge racism in the classroom, and in any violent actions of UCT students against black people.

What then is the evidence that Price provides for his assertion that his UCT is by and large, not a racist environment? He appears to centre his

thesis on the fact that some UCT students work for Shawco, some are involved in interracial relationships, and some stay at each other's homes over the holidays. We oppose this naive, uncritical construction of anti-racism.

In attempting to turn these incidents of violence "into good", he writes, "We should also remember that from the experience itself there can sometimes come the deepest transformation through learning the error of one's ways".

It is outrageous that Price uses these recent violent incidents of racism as learning for white people.

In concluding, Price writes that "it is unfair to these wonderful students

(those working at Shawco and involved in interracial relationships of different sorts) to be tarred with the same brush because someone looking like them has stepped out of line. It in itself is a form of racism".

This sentiment assumes that what matters here are the feelings of white UCT as opposed to the brutalisation of two black South Africans - Michelle Puis Nomgcana and Delia Adonis - who are not so much as mentioned in his letter, let alone acknowledged.

Asher Gamedze, Dudu Ndlovu, Emma Druyan, Lesley Blinn, Peter Van Heusden, Ru Slayen, Wanelisa Xaba