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### Transcending apartheid in higher education: transforming an institutional culture

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## Transcending apartheid in higher education: transforming an institutional culture

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Twenty years after Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa, deeply entrenched inequalities and injustices are still at the core of the country's social fabric. South Africa's public and private sectors continue to battle with the situation and higher education institutions are no exception. The South African Ministry of Education has identified systemic problems within the institutional cultures of universities as one of the key obstacles to change. This article focuses on a racist incident that occurred at the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa in 2007. The incident shook the university's institutional culture to the core and became a catalyst for change for universities across the country. We portray the institutional culture of the UFS on the basis of a series of interviews with management and student leaders who personally played key roles in handling the incident in 2008. The interviews reveal some of the 'story stock' within the institutional culture and highlight four interrelated dimensions of contestation. The stories also show that the interviewees frequently situate and justify their beliefs and actions in an intergenerational chain. Finally we consider some of the implications of our findings for the ongoing reconstruction of post-apartheid institutional cultures in higher education.

**Keywords:** higher education; institutional culture; racism; intergenerational justice

### Introduction: post-apartheid transformation in South African universities

Twenty years after Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa, it is evident that the euphoria of liberation from apartheid has made way for a more sober realization that deeply entrenched inequalities and injustices are still at the core of the country's social fabric. South Africa's public and private sectors continue to battle with the situation and public higher education institutions are no exception. All institutions in this sector:

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... were profoundly shaped by apartheid planning and by the respective functions assigned to them in relation to the reproduction of the apartheid social order. It was the fundamental differences in allocated roles that distinguished the historically white and historically black institutions and constituted the key differentiation and the principal basis of inequalities between them. (Badat 2007, 6)

While white institutions were provided with excellent infrastructure, adequate funding and capacity for teaching and research, black institutions 'were mainly located in under-developed, impoverished rural areas with little economic infrastructure for supporting local development and university expansion' (Jansen 2003, 5).

Today, the reality is still far removed from the post-apartheid vision of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist higher education system. South African universities struggle to address their own particular apartheid legacy and become public universities for all citizens in a democratic society. The establishment of an 'Oversight Committee on transformation in South African Universities' in 2013, by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, attests to this. The Committee was asked to 'monitor progress on transformation in public universities and advise on policies of 'racism, sexism and other forms of unfair discrimination.'<sup>1</sup> The establishment of this committee was in fact a key recommendation of an earlier national committee which was tasked in 2008 to 'investigate discrimination in public higher education institutions, with a particular focus on racism and to make appropriate recommendations to combat discrimination and to promote social cohesion'.<sup>2</sup> Their report concluded: 'none of South Africa's universities can confidently say that they have transformed or have engaged with the challenges of transformation in an open, robust and self-critical manner' (Soudien 2008, 117).

The difficult transformation process of South African higher education has been the subject of other studies in *Race, Ethnicity and Education*. Walker (2005, 129) focused on 'how students construct and reconstruct race and identity' and 'how discourses of race and racial identities are being reconstructed or transformed under new historical and institutional conditions of possibility.' Leibowitz et al. (2010, 83) described their experiences with an 'interdisciplinary and collaborative educational module' at two higher education institutions in South Africa which exposed students to differences and inequalities. Jawitz (2012) investigated the relationship between race and the experience of academic staff with a focus on assessment practices.

In this article we will take a different angle to reflect on transformation of higher education in South Africa, namely by focusing on the role of institutional culture. We start by exploring the significance of institutional culture in the process of change and align ourselves with the idea that

institutional culture is best understood as a ‘contested social reality.’ We then focus on a specific racist incident that occurred at the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa in 2007. This incident shook the university’s institutional culture to the core and became a catalyst for change not only for UFS, but indeed for universities across South Africa. We will portray the institutional culture of UFS on the basis of a series of interviews with management staff and student leaders who personally played key roles in handling the incident in 2008.<sup>3</sup> The interviews reveal some of the ‘story stock’ within the institutional culture and highlight four interrelated dimensions of contestation. The stories also show that the interviewees frequently refer to experiences of previous generations and thus situate and justify their beliefs and actions in an intergenerational chain. Finally we consider some of the implications of our findings for the ongoing reconstruction of a post-apartheid institutional culture.

### **Institutional culture as a contested social reality**

In their study on academic culture and climate, Peterson and Spencer (1990, 6) describe the culture of an organization as the ‘deeply embedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs or ideologies that members have about their organization or its work.’ They state that ‘for anyone familiar with colleges or universities, culture has face validity. It is the dominant behavioral or belief pattern that reflects or holds the institution together – a kind of ‘organizational glue’ (Peterson and Spencer 1990, 6–7). They argue that research into institutional culture is a useful way to understand the ‘complexities of organizational operations’ and point out that such research can help to make ‘sense of the non-rational and informal aspects of an organization’ (Peterson and Spencer 1990, 4). They also note that interest and research activity related to culture and climate in higher education is expanding. One of the reasons they cite is a ‘growing constituent demands for more accountability.’ This last observation is certainly applicable in post-apartheid South Africa. There is not only more demand for accountability in South Africa, but rather the demand has changed to include improved access and quality for all South Africans. Accountability in higher education has become a factor in pursuing social change and social justice. While there are other systemic problems in higher education that need to be addressed, we believe that challenging the apartheid-imbued institutional cultures can play an important role in the process of change.

In 1997, the South African Government’s white paper ‘*A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*’<sup>4</sup> identified systemic problems within the institutional cultures of South African universities. The Ministry expressed its ‘serious concerns’ about ‘institutionalized forms of racism and sexism as well as the incidence of violent behavior on many campuses of

higher education institutions.’ The White Paper considered it ‘essential to promote the development of institutional cultures which will embody values and facilitate behavior aimed at peaceful assembly, reconciliation, respect for difference and the promotion of the common good’ (South African Ministry of Education 1997). Ten years later, Higgins (2007, 97) quotes ‘recent analysts’ who claim that ‘it is simply the massive fact and bulk of institutional culture that may be the main obstacle in the way of the successful transformation of South Africa’s higher education system.’ He goes on to say that ‘institutional culture may well be the key to the successful transformation of higher education in South Africa.’ Steyn (2007) describes institutional culture as ‘the “sum total” effects of the values, attitudes, styles of interaction, collective memories – the “way of life” of the university, known by those who work and study in the university environment through their lived experience. One is therefore addressing many layers of practices, norms and attitudes, some of which are more tangible than others’ (Steyn 2007, 13).

Although institutional culture is widely regarded as important, its complexities make it difficult to grasp. But, perhaps some ambiguity can be a valuable asset. Higgins (2007) suggests that ‘our response to the conceptual slipperiness of the term should not be the impulse to settle on an exact, objective or scientific “definition” of institutional culture. Rather, we should accept that what this term tries to name is a contested social reality and our interest ought, precisely, to be in the nature and terms of that dispute’ (Higgins 2007, 98).

Vincent (2013)<sup>5</sup> suggests that in order to address the ‘conceptual slipperiness’ of institutional culture, one can approach it at two interconnected levels: a discursive level and a material level. She argues that when we want to engage with institutional culture at a discursive level, we need to listen to the ‘story stock’ of an institution. These are the stories which narrate life at an institution. By analyzing which stories it authorizes, circulates, negates, suppresses and subordinates much is revealed about its institutional identity. Vincent (2008), quotes Aguirre who defines stories as ‘social events that instruct us about social processes, social structures and social situations.’ Our stories ‘narrate social relations so that certain kinds of stories are told at certain historical moments, for specific reasons, the stories we tell reflect and often reproduce existing relations of power and inequality’ (Vincent 2008, 1429). Or as Walker (2005) remarks: stories can ‘also work to hold prevailing power relations in place when they work to make sense of the world in ways which reinforce the status quo’. In a process of change, suggests Vincent (2013), new stories are introduced in the face of dominant narratives.

This study is about one such new story which exploded on the UFS campus. It is the story of ‘Reitz,’ which had a seminal impact on the university, and also presented an opportunity to introduce new narratives

into its institutional culture. To provide a background for the story, we will first situate UFS in the landscape of South African higher education and then give a factual account of what happened.

### **The University of the Free State and the ‘Reitz event’**

UFS was founded in 1904 and is one of South Africa’s oldest institutions of higher learning. In the apartheid era, this university accommodated only white students, with Afrikaans<sup>6</sup> as the single medium of instruction. In 1993, UFS adopted a new *Parallel-Medium Language Policy* (Afrikaans and English,) which led to a major increase in enrollment of black students. However, this did not advance any significant direct interracial contact or integration on campus, since the majority of white students attended lectures offered in Afrikaans, and black students those offered in English. In the late 1990s, the integration process within the campus-based student residences met with violence between black and white students. The university subsequently adopted a hostel placement policy based on voluntary association. However, this soon resulted in the recreation of mono-racial residences. The new placement policy, together with the parallel-medium language policy, divided the student population along racial lines as was acknowledged by the rector in 2005: ‘... on the main campus in effect we have two campuses – one white and one black, separated in the classrooms and in the residences’ (Fourie 2005, 6).

By 2007 the demography of the student body had changed from a white majority to a 60% majority of black students of the university’s 25,000-strong student body. In June 2007, the university council approved a new residence integration policy, stipulating that a ratio of 70/30 for first year students would be introduced as from January 2008. This meant that 30% of first year students placed in a ‘white residence’ should be black and vice versa. This decision was met with fierce resistance by the majority of white students, who claimed that the university was forcibly integrating their residences. They were supported by a significant part of the institution’s traditional white constituency that was largely made up of parents of UFS students, alumni, staff members and the broader Afrikaner community in the province. The local Afrikaans-medium newspaper *Die Volksblad* effectively became a platform for opposition to the transformation initiatives at the university. A conservative all-white political party, the Freedom Front Plus, also actively mobilized white students against the integration policy.

It was within this context that the Reitz event happened. The story starts with a video made by four white Afrikaner male students. At the time, these students lived together in a traditionally white and all male residence called Reitz<sup>7</sup> on the campus. The video was their contribution to an annual cultural evening. They recruited five black middle-aged cleaning staff (four women and one man) some of whom worked in the Reitz residence, to participate

in their project. The storyline depicts a mock initiation ceremony based on the hazing traditions of the residence. The workers had to re-enact humiliating initiation activities, normally performed by new first year students. It starts like this:

Once upon a time the 'Boere' [White Afrikaner farmers] lived joyfully here on Reitz Island, until one day when the previously disadvantaged discovered the word 'integration' in the dictionary. Reitz was then forced to integrate and we came up with our own selection process.

What follows is a range of activities in which the workers had to participate: a beer-drinking competition, dancing to traditional Afrikaans music, sprinting down an athletics track and participating in a mock rugby practice. The most controversial part of the video depicts one of the students seemingly urinating in a concoction which the workers then eat while sitting on their knees. Throughout the video, sarcastic reference is made about university transformation initiatives. The video finishes with a written message which reveals the intent behind their production: 'At the end of the day, this is what we really think of integration,' in response to the university's recently introduced policy to racially integrate the student residences. The video won first prize at the cultural evening.

Turmoil, anger, condemnation and demands for action followed after the video was released into the public domain via YouTube. An explosive situation developed. Within days, hundreds of national and international journalists gathered on the campus. The incident was covered widely, both in South Africa and across the world and exposed deep racial fault lines in the university community and the broader political arena.

On the day that the Reitz video became public in February 2008, the rector released a statement in which the executive management condemned it and apologized to the workers in the video and the broader public. He stated that the students would be suspended and criminal charges would be laid against them. Meanwhile, the five cleaning staff members who featured in the video took the matter to the Equality Court, assisted by the Human Rights Commission.

At his inauguration in October 2009, the then newly appointed black Vice Chancellor of UFS, Professor Jonathan Jansen, surprised many when, as an act of reconciliation, he pardoned the four students who made the Reitz video. He argued that the problem was 'not simply the guilt of the Reitz four themselves,' but rather 'that there are wide layers of institutional complicity in understanding who should take responsibility for the event' (Soudien 2010, 1). Jansen apologized on behalf of the university to all South Africans and announced that the university would pay reparations to the workers concerned.<sup>8</sup> The pardon sparked a new round of controversy, which to a large extent divided the university and broader South African



community along racial lines. Most white Afrikaners welcomed the decision, while many black South Africans were angered by it.

The matter was even discussed at a national cabinet meeting, after which government spokesperson Maseko told a media briefing that ‘the manner in which this matter was handled suggests that the rights of the perpetrators have been given preference over the dignity and rights of the victims.’<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Jansen also received prominent support from Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, who commended him in an open letter saying: ‘Your magnanimity has aroused the ire of quite a few, who argue that it could encourage a repeat of such despicable conduct; and that the perpetrators should be dealt with firmly and not with a sentimental wishy-washiness. ... I, on the contrary, I salute you, for you have done us proud’.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next few years, the court cases on the matter of Reitz and UFS continued. In February 2011, an out-of-court settlement of an equality court action brought in by the South African Human Rights Commission against the four (by now) former students and UFS, culminated in a public reconciliation ceremony at the university. In a judgment of the Bloemfontein High Court in June 2011, the sentences of the students were reduced on appeal which brought closure to the legal proceedings of the Reitz incident with regard to the involvement of the students.

### Stories of Reitz

For our study, we interviewed management staff (not surprisingly, predominantly white men) and student leaders (black and white male members of the Student Representative Council) who were in charge at the time of crisis. Their stories provide a narrative account of what happened, seen from their perspective. The interviews, conducted in 2010, were framed around key questions about their understanding of what happened and their own role in dealing with the crisis. All interviews were captured on video.<sup>11</sup> Through a qualitative analysis of the data, we distinguished several dimensions of contestation within the institutional culture at UFS. We recognize that our interviews cannot render a comprehensive portrayal of such culture because ‘institutional culture’ is multi-layered, mobile and a site of struggle which is manifested at many levels of institutional life. However, we believe that the stories of those who were in leadership positions at the time of Reitz can help us to develop a deeper understanding of the collective ‘institutional memory’ of UFS which continues to play a role in the transformation of the current institutional culture, not only at UFS, but across South African universities. While the story of Reitz is meaningful within the specific historic context of UFS, its major themes are recognizable for all other institutions of higher education. As Lewins (2010) notes: ‘Reitz became a major signifier of all that was wrong in overcoming apartheid-era relations of differences at



universities. It became a medium through which discrimination on other campuses could be spoken about’.

### **A prominent focus on racial identity and difference**

Soudien (2010) distinguishes two levels in the responses to the Reitz event. The first one is the ‘large question of identity and difference – the nation, the people, the community and our own individual positions in relation to it’ (Soudien 2010, 2). The second one is that of the ‘positions as scholars within the academy.’ In our interviews with staff and student leaders, the first level, that of identity and difference, featured overwhelmingly. As one of the student leaders told us:

When I first came to campus, I noticed that racial issues were highlighted here. Coming from a political family, I connected with the Student Representative Committee after I became personally involved in a racial incident. (Black male student leader)

Most interviewees foregrounded a strong focus on race-based identities and emphasized differences between self-declared ‘white’ and ‘black’ views. Black respondents saw the event as obviously racist and assumed that the ‘Reitz Four’ had deliberate racist intentions:

Those boys were very wrong. It is clear what happened: here is racist intent. They knew what they were doing and they thought that what they were doing was right [...] What they did to our mothers was not right.<sup>12</sup> (Black male student leader)

Many black respondents also expressed their sense of personal pain as the event recalled and symbolized their own lived experiences of racism:

The video was so painful ... so hurtful. My mother was a domestic worker, she was like these women! ... [it] brought back memories of my own mother who suffered [...] Some people considered the video a joke ... but [...] this was clearly an act of racism, informed by apartheid! (Black male staff member)

On the other hand, many white respondents believed that all the commotion was exaggerated and that Reitz had little to do with racism. Consider these statements:

The Reitz boys were not racist, they were playing around, involving the workers playfully in the residence culture, these women were not forced to participate, they had a choice [...] it was not done to harm anyone. You can see that it was playful and joyful. (White male student leader)

Their motivation [to make the video] was not political. It was purely a hostel event. They had many traditions [and one of them] was a cultural evening. [They] decided to make a parody and joke a bit about integration. It was not for external consumption. It was only for internal purposes. (White male staff member)

The reference to ‘internal purposes’ connects with an interesting thematic thread in the stories of the interviewees and points towards a shift in what was deemed to be ‘private’ and ‘public’ at UFS. Previously, the dominant culture, especially in the male residences, strongly reinforced a traditional white Afrikaner hetero-normative and patriarchal culture. The residences were seen as private homes where specific traditions could be practiced and where there was reluctance to accommodate people outside of what they perceived as a close knit Afrikaner family ethos. For the majority of black students, the metaphor of a residence as a private house did not make much sense – they viewed a residence as a public space that merely provided them with the necessary accommodation:

For the vast majority of students [black students], residences are about accommodation and not about cultural identity. (Black male student leader)

### **Shifting private and public boundaries**

After the video was released, a new dynamic was introduced in the institutional culture: namely, that what had long been considered to be ‘private,’ and taken for granted in the dominant institutional culture, was now catapulted into the public domain where it developed new and contrasting meanings. Invoking the ‘private’ and the public’ as organizing categories means entering a complex terrain of demarcation. With Weintraub, we believe that ‘debates about how to cut up the social world between public and private are rarely innocent analytical exercises, since they often carry powerful normative implications [...] depending on context and perspective’ (Weintraub 1997, 3). Black students leaders at UFS consciously decided to expose the video in the public realm:

... the people had gone too far this time. We [decided to] show the video in all the residences to spread the word [...] Here was proof of what we were saying! People’s anger burned over [It was] at this time that for the first time we had a sense of black pride on campus. (Black male student leader)

The distinction between the private and the public generally refers to establishing the boundaries of the political. The above quote exemplifies this point by claiming that the video could not be political because it was meant for private use in the hostel and thus positioning the hostel outside the political domain. A staff member voiced particular suspicions in connection with

the release of the video. He believed that it was the act of exposing the video which politicized the event, rather than seeing the making of the video itself as a political statement:

[One] evening certain SASCO and SRC leaders went with this video from black residence to black residence and said, 'Look at this video!' One of the residence heads phoned me, actually they phoned my wife because I was on campus [...] When I got home, my wife told me that SASCO is showing a video at the residences [and that] these students are now really upset. That was the first time I saw it and then the next morning the news broke. [I still] question how ordinary students managed to make it world news within 12 hours! Ordinary students don't have those kinds of contacts! (White male staff member)

Institutional dynamics changed after the video was made public. When power shifts, the private and the public are reconfigured. With these shifts of political boundaries of the 'private' and the 'public,' people's experience of 'ownership' also changed. For so long, UFS had been a place which was unambiguously meant to strengthen white Afrikaner conservative identities. It was rooted and constructed as an extension of the Afrikaner community, particularly within the local province and often entangled with personal family histories:

For the Afrikaner community, the UFS is an Afrikaner institution, similar to the church. It is a space of conserving what we value, where we can do our own thing. Our thing as opposed to others. (White male staff member)

The University of the Free State has been a symbol of learning for the Afrikaner community, in fact, it is more than a place of learning: it is a place that changes people's lives. My father [worked here, and] as a school boy I came here regularly and sat in his office. (White male staff member)

### **Changing experiences of ownership and belonging**

When 'ownership' was challenged in the fall out from the Reitz event, there was a strong defensive response:

The University of the Free State is so typical of the Afrikaner culture and traditions in South Africa. (They) wanted to protect what they had built up over many generations. Their hearts were missing in the transformation process because they felt so threatened by what was happening. (White female staff member)

For the Afrikaner community, the closure of Reitz would be symbolic of closing down the Afrikaner community. (White male staff member)

In the changing situation, the student leadership became more divided along racial lines, which in South Africa often coincides with political lines:

It was hard to work for the SRC [because] there was a political rift between the Freedom Front and the Blacks. The [black] vice president of the SRC had his own agenda, he stood by Sasco<sup>13</sup> But in our SRC, the majority of the portfolios were not [handled by] Sasco, but by the guys who were with the Freedom Front. So we still had a quorum and we could make all the decisions. (White male student leader)

In the struggle that ensued, support was invoked from community – and political organizations. In our interviews, frequent reference was made to the mobilization of (party) political agendas within the dynamics of the institutional culture:

The opponents [of racial integration of the residences] were so well organized. The Freedom Front steered everything into the direction of protecting the Afrikaans language and culture [...] their conservative voices heavily influenced the UFS alumni organization and [also] student politics. [Many of the main people on] the Student Representative Council were politically active in the Freedom Front. (Black male staff member)

The Freedom Front decided to intervene on campus. There was a lot of pressure on Council to overturn [transformation policies]. The *Volksblad* [local Afrikaans medium newspaper] became a major voice for the Freedom Front. The Freedom Front, the Alumni and the *Volksblad* formed a coalition against transformation and enhanced the resistance. In this political climate this coalition managed to shift the main source of authority from the university to the Freedom Front. It was in this political climate that the video was produced. These Reitz boys felt a lot of support for their anti-integration theme. (White male staff member)

The ANC Youth League, Cosatu<sup>14</sup> and the SACP<sup>15</sup> helped us from the start to articulate the broader issues. Sasco helped to mobilize students in constructive ways by engaging them with substantive issues. ... I can say that [with help from outside political structures] we mobilized students. (Black male student leader)

In our interviews, black student leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which UFS management acted when 'ownership' was challenged:

The university [...] acted against the boys, but at the same time, they were all out to suppress the impact of Reitz and dismiss its significance. It made clear that Whites owned the UFS and Blacks were just guests. (Black male student leader)

There was a sense of disappointment expressed by one of the black student leaders:

These boys were punished, but it left no sense of gratification because no fundamental changes have been achieved ... the Reitz video gave the UFS an opportunity to admit that there are real racial problems. ... But, the current image of 'it is all fine now, blacks and whites are together' is wrong. White people are still fine and black people are still disenfranchised. White people certainly got the better deal. (Black male student leader)

On the other hand, the fact that Reitz had become public, also presented opportunities for change:

['Reitz'] ... was a good thing: it exposed [UFS] as an institute where racism was promoted and nurtured. For me, integration of the residences was priority number one, with great symbolic meaning in dealing with apartheid legacy. What gave me strength amidst all the problems, was the idea that the province of the Free State is part of South Africa and that the University of the Free State is a public South African university! (Black male staff member)

With the changing dynamics of 'ownership' also came new challenges to the pursuit of traditional practices on campus. One such practice concerned family history. Black students began to reject legitimacy claims based on personal entitlement by white students:

... there were students who made ridiculous claims, such as 'my father's father stayed in this room, so I have to stay there as well. (Black male student leader)

Reitz signaled the possibility to question existing cultural practices, as rituals of belonging, of white Afrikaners. It was no longer obvious that long-standing traditions would be able continue:

Initiation was an accepted practice in the Afrikaner community. This resonated with what happened in the army. But black students could not agree with it, they found it de-humanizing and infringing on their human rights. (Black male staff member)

### **Gender inequality and the power of masculinity**

References to the army and its associated 'army culture' featured regularly in our interviews. At UFS, the Reitz residence was commonly known for its historical connection to the South African Defense Force in the apartheid era:

[The alumni of Reitz] are men who fought on the border. They were groomed in the army to fight Blacks as terrorists. That kind of culture was transmitted to Reitz and ingrained a feeling of 'it is beautiful to be a Reitz man.' (White male student leader)

While the Reitz residents in 2007 were too young to have fought in the South African Border War<sup>16</sup> themselves, it is likely that their fathers and other close relatives would have. The stories of our interviewees confirmed that the Reitz residence was associated with the 'military ethos' of the apartheid army. This situation created new tensions in transitional times. At the time of 'Reitz,' the institutional culture at UFS did not provide a context in which the university community was able to deal with the different military affiliations and histories of struggle:

Many black and white kids came to campus with different army affiliations ... the white kids with the apartheid army and the black kids with the liberation army. And the UFS did not have the skills to deal with this. (Black male staff member)

Alongside references to the influence of the army on the culture at UFS, came particular assumptions about masculinity which presumably played an important role in the way in which white male Reitz students would have been prepared to get involved in racial integration. Their outlook on racial integration seems very much limited to their own frame of reference, reproducing a social order in which being good at tough confrontational sports was considered significant:

We wanted the residences to recruit their own black guys who would fit in. For Reitz it meant that they should be good at rugby so that they would not weaken the residence. (White male student leader)

Our interviews indicate that the Reitz event also signaled the significance of unequal gender-based roles within the institutional culture at UFS. A number of interviewees claimed that the whole Reitz incident was over-determined in racial terms, and that much more weight should be given to gender dimensions. This aspect became apparent from the onset of our research, when the main selection criterion for inclusion in our interview sample was having played a key role in handling the Reitz incident in 2008. This criterion yielded an all-male group, with only one exception. In the stories about Reitz, there is frequent reference to all male meetings:

When we met to consult about the closure of Reitz, it struck me that all who were present were men, even the parents ... there were only fathers. (White male staff member)

What happened was not only racism, it also had gender dimensions. [In] the treatment of the women [the workers], you see contempt. For example, it could happen that when a woman walked past a male residence, she was forced inside and given an option: 'you either have a cold shower with your clothes on or a warm shower naked' [with male students watching]. ... In another incident, a white matron came to see me after she got upset when

these boys told her [in a denigrating manner] ‘Shush woman!’ [These are examples of] humiliation as gender power. (White male staff member)

Even at decision-making level, our only female interviewee experienced her lack of agency as a form of gender-based exclusion:

I was the only female [decision maker] and men tend to have different views. I felt excluded. Their whole way of handling the situation was very male oriented in their way of thinking and responding. For instance, they started with the view that [the Reitz incident presented] a ‘reputational risk’ for the university and they hired a PR consultant to control the damage [...] women handle such things differently. (White female staff member)

Ramphela (2008, 210) argues that it ‘is to be expected that institutions founded by white males for white males would have very strong male cultures. Academic institutions worldwide reflect an ethos flowing from the dominant roles that men have played as students, teachers and researchers.’ UFS is no exception, and the stories of our interviewees confirm that its institutional culture has been dominated by strong white male chauvinist culture. The authoritarianism associated with such a culture plays a significant role within the institutional dynamics.

### **‘Reitz,’ institutional culture and intergenerational justice**

As Vice Chancellor of UFS, Jonathan Jansen foregrounds the experience of Reitz as a story that signifies serious problems in the institutional culture, rather than a relatively isolated racist incident. When he pardoned the white Reitz students in his inaugural address, he contextualized his decision by stating:

...the biggest mistake made in the analysis of Reitz is to explain the incident in terms of individual pathology. Yet to dismiss the video as a product of four bad apples is too easy an explanation [...] The question facing us, therefore, is a disturbing one, and it is this: What was it within the institution that made it possible for such an atrocity to be committed in the first place? [...] When the focus of analysis shifts from that of individual pathology to one of institutional culture, then it becomes clear that the problem of Reitz is not simply a problem of four racially troubled students. It is, without question, a problem of institutional complicity. (Jansen 2009)

Keet (2011) agrees that Reitz was not simply an incident. He considers it a ‘rupture,’ an ‘attempt by history ... [to give us a] ... “still” impression of the complexities of the violence in everyday human relations [...] which questioned our frames of meaning-making, analyses, social activism, politics and ethics ... it questioned our very way of “thinking” and “doing”’ (Keet 2011, 4).



As a ‘rupture,’ the Reitz event strongly impacted on the institutional culture as a ‘contested social reality.’ At a discursive level, Reitz challenged the dominant ‘story stock’ of UFS. Our interviews foreground four interrelated dimensions of contestation through narratives of: (1) self-declared ‘raced-based identities and difference’; (2) shifting boundaries between the ‘private’ and the ‘public’; (3) a changing sense of ‘ownership’ and ‘belonging’; and (4) the power of masculinity and gender-based inequalities. Interestingly, we observed that in all these four dimensions, the interviewees repeatedly situated themselves in an intergenerational chain. In order to substantiate and legitimate their own points of view, the interviewees would frequently refer to previous generations to justify their present actions and claims.

Gosseries and Meyer (2009) demonstrate that the idea of linking intergenerational perspectives to justice claims has rapidly gained significance over the last few decades and has generated a discourse on ‘intergenerational justice.’ This concept has become particularly powerful in the field of sustainable development where ‘intergenerational duties’ play an important role in addressing environmental concerns. In the world of sustainable development, one is acutely aware of intergenerational obligations and that ‘just contemplating the present does not suffice if long term sustainability is our goal’ (Gosseries 2008, 40). Another field in which intergenerational justice plays an important role is economics. Here it is often addressed as intergenerational equity such as in public debt management or pension schemes (Gosseries 2009, 124). One of the leading theories in this field is the ‘indirect reciprocity theory’ which departs from the commonsense idea that reciprocity presupposes that if people are able to do so, they are under an obligation to return to others what they themselves have received from them. While direct forms of reciprocity are typical amongst contemporaries, intergenerational justice departs from the assumption that ‘because we received something from our parents, we must transmit something in return to our children’s generation.’ This specific understanding of an intergenerational obligation to preserve and bequeath an inheritance was prominently expressed by many white Afrikaner interviewees. The responses of most black interviewees indicated that they too lived under an intergenerational obligation to succeed where their parent’s generation under the apartheid regime could not.

In her work on reparation and historical justice, Thompson (2002) focuses on ‘lifetime transcending interests’ and what she calls ‘trans-generational obligations’ of citizens. She argues that ‘members of a political society typically regard themselves as participating in intergenerational relationships of obligation and entitlement.’ They see themselves as ‘inheritors of a history and a political tradition’ and ‘understand themselves and their political actions in an historical framework that connects the deeds of past generations to their own deeds and to aspirations for the future of their society’ (x–xi). At UFS, and presumably at other universities in South Africa, the stories of

our interviewees reveal that those who have historically been in charge of the university, experience their intergenerational obligations and entitlements very differently from those who were excluded in the apartheid past. Our interviewees referred to vastly different expectations between black first-generation students<sup>17</sup> who focus on ‘righting historical wrongs’ and white students with a family history at UFS who feel pressured to live up to family and community expectations to preserve.

Wilson-Strydom (2010) argues that first-generation students are received in an institutional context which is difficult for them to negotiate. She notes that:

Often university bridging programs or first-year orientation activities specifically seek to address gaps in the academic behaviors that students arrive with [...] A facet of readiness that tends to receive far less attention is that of college knowledge or university knowledge [which] refers to an awareness and understanding of the social context and organization of the university ... in short, entering students need to develop an understanding of how the university system and culture work. (Wilson-Strydom 2010, 319 – 320)

Wilson-Strydom makes a valid point, but at the same time we believe that not only first-generation black students, but also those from white Afrikaner communities with a long family history on campus need to develop a new understanding about how the university system and culture work, because universities have become transforming spaces where institutionalized privileges need to be recognized, critiqued and changed. In order to develop such understanding, students do not only need to know about formal university proceedings, but also about the informal ins and outs, the dos and don’ts, about how ‘it works’ at the university and how one can successfully become part of it. This requires obtaining social knowledge about the institution. Linde (2001) distinguishes two kinds of social knowledge in institutions and organizations: ‘knowledge about social groups held by an individual and knowledge held by the group itself. Individual social knowledge includes knowledge about what the identity of the group is, what it means to be a member, and how to be a member. She argues that this last form of knowledge is ‘most frequently and best conveyed through narrative and narrative induction: the process by which newcomers to the group learn to take on the story as their own’ (Linde 2001, 3). Stories, so Linde argues:

... provide a bridge between the tacit and the explicit, allowing tacit social knowledge to be demonstrated and learned [...] stories do not only recount past events. They also convey the speaker’s moral attitude towards these events. (Linde 2001, 5)

The ‘Reitz stories’ in this study show a wide gap between the ‘story stock’ and social knowledge of different race-based communities and disregard of gender-based inequalities. Yet, these differences and inequalities play a

central role in the process of narrative induction into the institution and thus in the ongoing construction of a new post-apartheid institutional culture.

## Conclusion

This study takes as point of departure a much publicized racist event which became a nationwide symbol of the lack of post-apartheid transformation of higher education in South Africa. The Reitz event flagged many of the ongoing realities of inequality and social injustice which are perpetuated in spite of all the ‘transformation-speak’ in the higher education sector. All South African universities were left with their own particular apartheid legacies in 1994. They need their own context-relevant interventions to address the challenge to become public universities for all South Africans. There are numerous additional systemic reasons for the lack of transformation in the realm of inequity, but we believe that the persistence of historical, apartheid-imbuéd institutional cultures are an important negative factor in the process of change. After centuries of colonial and apartheid rule in South Africa, it should not be surprising that racial inequalities are still widely prevalent in its institutional cultures. Privileged ‘whiteness’ is still dominant or in the words of Higgins: ‘institutional culture is used to refer to what is perceived as the overwhelming “whiteness” of higher education in South Africa’ (Higgins 2007, 97).

In our study, we concentrated on UFS by focusing on a specific event which presented itself as a ‘rupture’ in its history. This rupture exposed some of the salient features of the contested social realities within its institutional culture. The four dimensions which we identified, point towards some of the collective aspects within institutional fields of contestation. The interviews in our study show vast race- and gender-centered differences in the ‘story stock’ of the institutional culture at UFS. The university is challenged to construct a new story stock in the face of strong legacies of apartheid-rooted social knowledge. Linde (2001) suggests that narrative is a powerful way to express and transmit social knowledge. Since narrative is ‘fundamentally social,’ and relies on interactions between people, she argues that it is important to ‘create social mechanism for narration’ and that institutions should be encouraged to foster occasions for narration (Linde 2001, 12).

Such occasions could contribute to foster change and new solidarities in the institutional culture at the university.

Jansen (2009) discusses the importance of creating hope through a post-conflict pedagogy which does not ‘deny the ideological and material conditions that shape interracial relations’ (Jansen 2009, 271). Instead, he argues:

... hope recognizes and works through those conditions of oppression by recognizing the common bonds and bondage of white and black teachers and

students [...] and demands that the consequences of white history and power be redressed. However, it cannot be taken on without the bonds of solidarity ... being first established between white and black. (Jansen 2009, 271)

After the Reitz event became public in 2008, UFS has undertaken a number of initiatives to establish what Jansen refers to as 'bonds of solidarity.' Deep institutional transformation has remained on the agenda and there is certainly less resistance to change today amongst most students and staff. However, while new programs have been launched and new 'stories' and values are becoming part of the institutional culture at UFS, its 'contested social reality' remains racially divided and unequal in many ways. In her paper on *Theorizing Race and Identity Formation in South African Higher Education*, Walker (2005) concludes that 'to speak transformation is important, but it is not to do transformation by changing our attitudes and actions.' (Walker 2005, 143 – 144). She argues that:

...more attention is needed to foster democratic and deliberative institutional spaces, practices and dialogue to challenge hostile and ignorant claims to shift the flows of power if higher education is to be a place where critical and constructive citizens are indeed educated and the public good is served by higher education. (144)

We propose that in order to change institutional cultures, South African universities should include institutionally-specific foci which give substantive content and meaning to the very predictable 'container' notions of white privilege and black disadvantage. Each South African university needs to critically examine how complex processes of inclusion and exclusion, including those driven by racism, manifest themselves in their own institutions. By delving into the institutional memory of UFS, through the stories of those who were in charge when 'Reitz' happened, our study suggests that transformation initiatives at UFS take a number of questions into consideration. Such questions include: (1) How can we make staff and students critically question their own self-declared race-based identities? (2) How can we enhance our understanding of the normative implications of a reconfiguration of the public and the private within the social fabric of the institution? (3) How can we strengthen a new sense of belonging in a transforming space in which institutionalized privileges can be recognized and redressed? and (4) How can we effectively question and change the authoritarianism associated with a strong male chauvinist culture?

Our study further suggests that challenging institution-specific dimensions of institutional culture could be enhanced by taking into consideration different notions of what 'intergenerational justice' means to diverse constituencies on campus. Many of our white interviewees looked back at previous generations and emphasized their current obligations and entitlements based on their heritage. Many black interviewees emphasized the

possibilities which the present offers in order to correct historical injustices of the past and ensure a better life for future generations. Further research could shed more light on the different normative frames of reference which diverse constituencies bring to the fore.

The domains of sustainable development and economics show how the idea of intergenerational justice can be developed as a productive normative criterion in changing conceptions of justice. Here, intergenerational justice as an ethical category states that the interests of future generations should be taken into consideration. At the same time, it is important to understand how contemporary generations view their intergenerational obligations and entitlements in line with their inherited past. At UFS, as we suspect in all South African universities, notions of intergenerational justice and concomitant understandings of intergenerational solidarity are to a large extent still racially divided. In a transformation of institutional cultures, existing dominant notions of race-based justice claims will have to make way for a new future oriented notion of intergenerational justice. Urban Walker (2006) suggests that in situations where people 'reckon with wrongs,' 'moral repair' is needed, which 'restores, stabilizes or creates' the 'basic elements that sustain human beings in a recognizable moral relationship' in which 'a certain disposition of people toward each other and the standards they trust, or at least hope, are shared' (Urban Walker 2006, 23). We believe that this demands as a precondition, the development of new understandings of not only *intergenerational* justice, but also of *intragenerational* understandings and practices of *intragenerational* solidarity amongst people of the same generation, who are currently still largely divided across lines of race-based inequality.

## Notes

1. <http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=33,784&tid=96,716>.
2. Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion, chaired by Professor Crain Soudien.
3. The interviews were conceptualized by JC Van der Merwe and conducted and filmed by an independent filmmaker. The taped interviews, much of it confidential material, is part of the database on Reitz of the Institute of Reconciliation and Social Justice at UFS. All interviews were analyzed by JC van der Merwe and Carolina Suransky. The experiences and opinions of those who were directly involved with making the Reitz video, namely the students and the workers, are not the subject of inquiry in this article.
4. See Chapter 3, part 3.41 – 3.44 in: <http://www.info.gov.za/whitepapers/1997/education3.htm>.
5. Paraphrased from Professor Louise Vincent's presentation on 'Changing a University's Institutional Culture' at the 2013 Higher Education of South Africa (Hesa) Colloquium on Transformation (6 May 2013).

6. Afrikaans is a Germanic language which originates from seventeenth century Dutch dialects spoken by the mainly Dutch settlers of what is now South Africa. As a language, Afrikaans has played a major role in Afrikaner nationalism and identity formation over the centuries.
7. Named after Francis William Reitz, President of the Orange Free State (1889–1895), today known as the Free State Province.
8. Jansen, J. (2009) *For Such a Time as This*. Inaugural speech of the 13th Rector and Vice-Chancellor of UFS. The full text is available at: <http://blogs.timeslive.co.za/hartley/2009/10/20/jonathan-jansens-inaugural-speech-as-vice-chancellor-of-ufs-full-text/>.
9. <http://mg.co.za/article/2009-10-22-cabinet-voices-displeasure-over-reitz-decision>.
10. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=147,446&sn=Detail>.
11. The videotapes contain confidential information and are owned by the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice of UFS.
12. The female workers who appeared in the video are often referred to as ‘mothers’ as a broad term, used particularly by black students ...
13. Sasco stands for South African Student Congress, a national student organization which was founded in 1991 through a merger of a number of student organizations which were affiliated to anti-apartheid liberation movements.
14. Congress of South African Trade Unions.
15. South African Communist Party.
16. The South African Border War, or commonly known in South Africa as the Angolan Bush War, was an armed conflict that took place from 1966 to 1989 largely in what is now Namibia and in Angola. This war was closely intertwined with the Angolan Civil War and the Namibian War of Independence.
17. Here we refer to students who belong to the first generation in their families to pursue a university degree.

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