Research article

Ceremonial Transformation:
The Significance of Renaming Memorial Hall after Sarah Baartman at the University of Cape Town

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Abstract

At the end of 2018, the University of Cape Town renamed its prominent Memorial Hall after Sarah Baartman, which signalled a significant contribution towards transformation endeavours for the institution. This article is a critical literature review of institutional transformation and practice at UCT which examines the significance of renaming the Memorial Hall. Relying on already published work, it explores student and staff experiences to argue that renaming buildings without changing the lived experiences of those who occupy such buildings is not enough. Therefore, the article concludes that attempts at transformation need to stop being solely ceremonial and recommends that UCT improve its transformation efforts. A process that will hinge on the interrogation of the non-traditional experiences of those who now occupy the buildings during and after the renaming processes, especially for buildings as significant as the Memorial Hall.
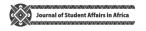
Keywords

black students, higher education, renaming of buildings, transformation, universities

Introduction

This article aims to provide a critical evaluation and interpretative analysis of literature on the significance of renaming the famous University of Cape Town (UCT) building, formerly known as the Jameson Hall, the Sarah Baartman Memorial Hall. Renaming the hall is an achievement in UCT's transformation efforts and it serves both existential and political needs of the institution. This article uses the higher education transformation framework to contextualise UCT's transformation processes, which, in 2018, culminated in the renaming of one of the university's landmarks. We acknowledge, however, that the transformation discourse of recent years has been complicated, signifying different things to different people.

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Like Ismail (2011), this article subscribes to the notion that knowledge and experiences are situated, and therefore the reader has to take into account the context and researchers' positionalities. Researcher positionalities foreground the way in which research is conducted and how the social and political positions of the researcher(s) influence the research.

It is essential to note that we, the authors, would previously not have been admitted into UCT as either students or scholars, had it not been for transformation efforts in higher education institutions. We are black and hail from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. We also share the experience of having been students at UCT. The first author is a postgraduate student and a part time employee in the institution and the second author is a member of faculty. Meaning that we are active participants in the environment under study.

Further, we are also, in one way or the other, involved in and with the university's transformation endeavours. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the recognized and unrecognized power dynamics between us (that is, student-lecturer; supervisor-supervisee; race and class dynamics) as influenced by our individual positionalities. The significance of our positionalities can be related to how we both became interested in the research fields of higher education transformation and student access and success, as influenced by our lived experiences as black students in a historically white university.

Defining Transformation

For Pattman and Carolissen (2018, p. 1), transformation refers to "ways in which unjust and discriminatory institutional structures and practices engineered to privilege dominant cultures during apartheid South Africa had to be reshaped for a just and equitable society". Therefore, nominal changes, such as UCT's renaming of Jameson Hall, exemplify institutional responses to the previously unacknowledged potential psychological impacts of historical aesthetics on those from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, as they echo harmful ideologies. However, this type of transformation arises not wholly from a sympathetic impulse. By changing "the names of buildings, […] the iconography, the economy of symbols whose force is to create or induce particular states of humiliation; pictures or images that mentally harass Black students on an everyday basis because these students know whom these images represent" (Mbembe 2016, p. 29), it also attempts to refine the public image of universities.

Albertus (2019) suggests that transformation in higher education aims to change the social structures of colonial education embodied in our universities. And meaningful transformation should be about changing the curricula and increasing the number of black academic staff. This means that transformation must be all-inclusive, politically and philosophically, with the intention of changing the historically Eurocentric intellectual tradition (Albertus, 2019). Through the work of Taylor and Taylor (2010), we understand transformation in higher education as endeavours that seek to redress the marginalization of African civilization in the processes of knowledge production and its dissemination.

Transformation at UCT

UCT is a significant space in which to evaluate transformation because it is one of the historically whites-only universities which now is "a highly ranked, research-led university in South Africa" (Morrell et al., 2020, p. 2), and it is also argued to be one of the best universities on the African continent. UCT also became one of the critical sites where students initiated the active and symbolic removal of the statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes, which previously stood at the centre of upper campus, in 2015. #RhodesMustFall was followed by #FeesMustFall student protests which erupted from the University of Witwatersrand (Ndelu, 2017) as a way of agitating for transformation and claiming space.

The renaming of buildings that had previously been named after people with a dishonourable colonial history was in response to the demands of #RhodesMustFall activists. Such demands rest on the argument, forwarded by Manatsha (2014), that the inherited colonial names of buildings glorify colonial brutality and racism and this glorification has to end (see Ndletyana, 2012). This compelled UCT to establish task teams to audit the work of transformation committees that had been established before the student protests, including the Naming of Buildings Committee (NoBC).

The decision to rename the building now known as the Sarah Baartman Memorial Hall lay in its significance to university culture. The building is meaningful to the experiences of UCT students because it houses graduation ceremonies, thereby bringing together different families from different walks of life to celebrate success. Therefore, renaming this building could be understood as a practice of material and symbolic inclusion of students and staff of previously excluded identities (Kessi & Cornell, 2015). It is an attempt to centre the feelings of students from previously marginalized backgrounds, which are normally not accorded significance, especially in comparison to the glorification of the institution.

Furthermore, the institution recognizes that transformation is an ongoing process, and it has committed itself to reinforcing a new, inclusive identity for UCT through an appropriate display of artworks, symbols, and building names and through the use of indigenous South African languages for official informational purposes (UCT, 2016).

This article presents several factors related to transformation in addition to renaming of buildings, which are relevant to histories resisting change and institutional culture, namely curriculum change, student accommodation and demographics. We argue that if such examples are not linked with positive lived experiences of staff and students, they represent what we have termed ceremonial transformation – and ceremonial transformation has to end. The article starts with research methodological insights on how data has been collected. It then provides background on the life of Sarah Baartman and the significance of her name replacing that of a colonialist. Literature on histories resisting change and on institutional cultures will then be reviewed, followed by a discussion. The article contributes to the research on transformation and specifically the debates about the significance of renaming buildings at higher education institutions in South Africa.

Research Methodological Insights

This article was developed within a qualitative research paradigm through a critical literature review. We have used the literature review to critically discuss prior research and strengthen knowledge by giving focus and direction to studies for further improvement (Pare & Kitsiou, 2016). Jesson and Lacey (2006) argued that critical literature reviewing is based on a selection of sources; it is perceptive and analytical. Our selection is based on the relevance of research done in this area, thereby identifying the gap in what still needs to be researched. Critical literature review has enabled us to demonstrate that, although changing building names is significant, it is not enough to alter the lived experiences of students and staff.

Sebidi and Moreira's (2017) research, conducted to understand black students' lived experiences concerning transformation in extended degree programmes, is imperative in our evaluation of the significance of renaming the hall after Baartman. Their work is relevant for its discussion of alienating, exclusionary, and structurally violent experiences of the student body at UCT. This takes place despite the positive shifts in student enrolment demographics and the renaming of buildings.

Moreover, Luckett and Shay's (2020) critical evaluation of transforming the curriculum is crucial for understanding the significance of renaming the hall. Their conceptualization of transformation, coupled with black African students' lived experiences, offers a critical appraisal of the transformation process on which the university has embarked. They demonstrate confidence in using curriculum transformation to challenge broader structural injustices. They also argue for going beyond the concept of justice and emphasising ethical responsibility, which needs to be devised politically and practically by all who are affected by transformation processes (Luckett & Shay, 2020).

The Significance of Sarah Baartman

According to Scully and Crais (2008), Sarah Baartman was a woman of Khoisan descent born in the Eastern Cape in the mid-1770s. She had three children, who all died in their infancy. Her husband was Hendrik de Jongh. She was more than 30 years old when she was brought to London by Hendrik Cesar. In London she was exhibited as a freak show attraction. On stage, Baartman had to erase aspects of her personal history, experience, and identity in order to make her performance of "the Hottentot Venus", as she was nicknamed, credible to her audience. From Magubane's (2001) article, we deduce that "Hottentot Venus" was a derogatory description of the Khoikhoi and San people as a way of othering them.

Sarah Baartman experienced harsh racism and exploitation with which our world still grapples (Scully & Crais, 2008). In 1814 she was sold as a slave to an animal trainer in France, where she died barely a year later of disease and homesickness. Her humiliation did not end there: a plaster cast was made of her body, which was then dissected, and her brain and genitalia were preserved. Her body was dissected by European scientists of that century despite the Griqua people's request to have her remains returned in the 1950s (Scully & Crais, 2008). Finally, in May 2002, Sarah Baartman's remains were repatriated to South Africa and a traditional Khoisan ceremony was held on 9 August 2002 (Pityana & Phakeng, 2018).

On 13 December 2018, UCT officially renamed the hall after Sarah Baartman (Pityana & Phakeng, 2018). The Jameson Hall was originally named after Sir Leander Starr Jameson, the former prime minister of the Cape Colony who initiated an unlawful raid that brought war to South Africa. Therefore, the university determined that it was fitting that the name of Sarah Baartman, a victim of colonial inhumanity, should replace that of a perpetrator of colonial crimes (Pityana & Phakeng, 2018). This action was rationalised by the university as a proud, important, and symbolic step towards ongoing transformation within the institution. According to Kessi (2019), it was also a claim, justification, support for, and legitimisation of the transformative ideas and perspectives officially embraced by the university.

Furthermore, the renaming of the hall was done in the "hope to honour her memory and to restore to her name the dignity that was so brutally stolen from her in the 19th century" (Pityana & Phakeng, 2018, para. 1). The renaming of the hall after Sarah Baartman can be located within the broader context of attempts to eradicate colonial memory and efforts to satisfy black existential identity post-colonialism (Ndletyana, 2012). It was also a significant moment for recognition of the past traumas especially of black students and staff and signify the institution's attempts at fostering healing (Kessi, 2019).

The idea of renaming the hall was initially communicated to staff, students, and alumni in 2016 (Pityana & Phakeng, 2018) and it is aligned with the *UCT 2020 Strategic Plan Framework*. After the university had invited students, staff and alumni to suggest possible names for the hall, the NoBC proposed Sarah Baartman as the new name and initiated the appropriate procedures and consultations with members of UCT and the Khoisan community.

The consultation process included university, community, faith, political and cultural organisations, (Pityana & Phakeng, 2018). UCT committed itself to address practices that have been exclusionary for marginalized identities within UCT. This commitment intended to further motivate the imagination about alternative practices that advance social justice and, as such, contribute to sustainable development (UCT, 2016).

Findings

Histories resisting change

According to Manatsha (2014), people who resist change posit that it is important to "preserve" history by leaving the colonial names unchanged. Similarly, others argue that while renaming buildings may tell a new tale, the old names also tell a story. They therefore believe that there is a need to strike a balance (see Ndletyana, 2012). Striking a balance would be acknowledging that both the formerly oppressed and the oppressors are going through a change, which would see both lose some history and gain some new experiences. Ndletyana, (2012), however, highlights that the black population responds differently to colonial memory – some relate to it, while others are ambivalent – whereas most white people feel that they are losing their identity and privilege in this transformation process.

The movements of 1976 and 2015/2016 have demonstrated how, whatever changes governments have proven unwilling to institute, South African students have shown that they would agitate for themselves. From 2015 to 2017, predominantly black students

under the banners of the #RhodesMustFall, #FeesMustFall and #Shackville movements expressed the persistent exclusion that black students and staff are subjected to at UCT. It is for this reason that black students in their large numbers called for the fall of the Rhodes statue at UCT, regarding it as a symbol oppression of black people (Ndelu, 2017).

After nearly 30 years of democracy, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is still planning to tackle the lack of student accommodation, evidenced in the *DHET Strategic Plan 2020-2025* (Nzimande, 2020). It is for this reason that Luckett and Shay (2020) proposed that, in order to transform higher education, it is important to address black students' material needs. Provision of student accommodation, for which previously disadvantaged students are prioritised, is an important part of transformation, and it is also one way of addressing black students' material needs and hence changing their lived experiences. Under the banner #Shackville, black students at UCT highlighted the difficulties of lack of accommodation (Ndelu, 2017), which, as we know from Xulu-Gama's (2019) work, has adverse consequences for black students.

In a study by Sebidi and Moreira (2017), black students were able to identify the differences between a curriculum with content which they felt was too Western and did not reflect their lived experiences, and the courses and a curriculum that they felt spoke to their identities and experiences. These students are the same as those housed in university student accommodation and lecture halls whose renaming was celebrated at UCT, and this shows that transformation needs to be comprehensive. While transformation might be partly addressed by renaming buildings, it may continue to be disregarded in course content or living conditions at residences.

Luckett and Shay (2020) document that South Africa's inherited curriculum does not meet the needs of the majority of the student body. It is for that reason that they argued for the salience of reframing or decolonising the curriculum to recognize the plurality of the student populace, given that the current curriculum is defined by an overwhelming privileging of white culture. They envisioned that a truly transformed curriculum would encompass different cultural backgrounds, dismantling the asymmetrical, hierarchal dynamics of current popular education systems, which see the teacher cascading knowledge down to unquestioningly receptive students (Luckett & Shay, 2020).

However, the mostly white male traditionalists resisting change at higher education institutions argue that transformation would mean lowering the standards of education and knowledge produced by higher education institutions (Kessi, 2013; Kessi & Cornell, 2015; Ramphele, 2008). This resistance leads us to explore the significance of institutional culture.

Institutional culture

UCT has acknowledged that institutional culture change is their greatest challenge. Therefore, they have made it the cornerstone of UCT's vision of transformation (DVC, 2018). For a long time, UCT has had transformation policies that sought to change its institutional culture and it continues on this trajectory. For instance, under the leadership

of Vice-Chancellor Ramphele, UCT had goals to increase the number of black students and academics, and thus introduced Growing Our Own Timber (GOOT). GOOT intended to recruit black students to encourage them to consider a career in academia, (Ramphele, 2008).

Sadiq et al. (2019) argue that, notwithstanding increases in the number of black scholars over the years, the majority of UCT academic staff is still white. Furthermore, the recent, aforementioned example of bringing back a white male professor (Hall) to fill a position vacated by a black female professor (Feris), who was a deputy vice-chancellor (DVC), is indicative of a faltering in the institution's efforts to institute a transformed institutional culture (Naidu, 2021).

UCT's strategy to change its institutional culture is characterized by six key focus areas, namely (1) students and staff; (2) place and space; (3) institutional responses to discrimination, harassment, and violence; (4) community engagement; (5) African identity; and (6) curriculum support. The focus of this article is on place and space, which has to do with artworks, symbols and naming of buildings (DVC, 2018). For us, this key area does not make sense on its own but is intricately interlinked with the experiences of the students and staff, the first key area. From the background provided above, it is evident that UCT, through the process of renaming the hall, tried to work through most of these focus areas, bearing in mind the continuous transformational processes that the university continues to engage with.

Ramphele (2008) described UCT's institutional culture as entrenched practices that favour white males at universities at the expense of others. On the same note, Nhlapo et al. (2020) conceptualized institutional culture as white, un-communicated practices that are exclusionary and discriminating to black academics and students at UCT. They noted, however, that not all white academics at UCT harbour racist sentiments against black academics and students.

According to Ismail (2011, 2007), institutional culture is often described as chauvinistic, cold and competitive, and is often cited as a barrier to attracting and retaining black staff and students. Other factors which add to the complexity of institutional culture are a great divide in rank between junior and senior academic staff, and between administrative and academic staff. Unfortunately, this one example of Professor Hall replacing Professor Feris aligns with the definitions of institutional culture documented above.

A more relational interpretation of institutional culture has been provided by Van der Westhuizen (2018) who acknowledges that institutional culture is not quantifiable; hence a lot needs to be done in order to eradicate institutional practices of domination, exclusion, stigmatisation, and marginalization. For the UCT community, this implies that simply presenting statistics indicating growth in black student admissions to the institution cannot be regarded as an adequate reflection of transformation. This also applies to the number of buildings that have been renamed and the number of sculptures and artworks which have been placed around campus.

Institutional culture has also been seen as part of the hidden curriculum. Van der Westhuizen (2018) explains that:

> [the] hidden curriculum consists of everyday, normative, cultural assumptions that form part of and are productive of the institutional culture, that it encompasses both the informal and formal statements in educational spaces, that it should be broadly contextualised to ascertain the social norms that inform it; that it represents a contact point for acculturation into dominant norms that draw on race, gender and other categories to determine recognition of subjects within an institution. The hidden curriculum is a situated, determinable instance of the institutional culture at micro level. (p. 345)

Van der Westhuizen (2018) approaches these elements as operating in a dynamic co-constitutive interrelatedness:

> They mutually construct each other and together, interactively constitute the whole of institutional life, formal and informal, individual and collective, micro and macro, at universities. Therefore, transformation in one or more of these areas will affect other areas, either in advancing transformation or in invoking resistance to transformation. (Van der Westhuizen, 2018, p. 340)

As part of institutional culture, the chances of seeing black bodies at UCT campuses have increased greatly, as evidenced by Luckett and Shay (2020), Kessi and Cornell (2015) and Ramphele (2008). Luckett and Shay (2020), however, noted the ambivalence of the transformation embodied in the extended degree programme with black students feeling that such a programme, couched in a modernising development discourse, creates colonial binaries of us and them; the educated and uneducated. Taylor and Taylor (2010) warn that there is a massive clustering of African women in social sciences and humanities as well as in education, a large number of whom end up not even graduating.

While UCT has witnessed a few black women in key strategic and management positions (such as former VC, Dr Ramphele, chancellor, Dr Precious Moloi-Motsepe, VC, Professor Phakeng, chair of council, Ms Ngonyama and Ms Mohamed as deputy), if people in such positions – nominally of power – continue to experience bullying, alienation, marginalization and stigmatisation, similarly to the many black staff and students, the transformative processes and achievements would surely be put into question. Their positioning would be revealed to be exemplary of ceremonial transformation. Leading us to ask: what is the significance of these transformative actions? Are they merely for window-dressing UCT as a truly inclusive African university? Do the experiences of the UCT community at large signify the institution's commitment to changing the institutional culture?

Discussion

The process of renaming buildings is an ongoing initiative, geared towards righting the colonial wrongs and thereby reclaiming African identity in the university space. Manatsha (2014) attests that renaming buildings usually follows some kind of a revolutionary change, be it social, political, or economic change. At UCT, a kind of revolution was revived by students through the #RhodesMustFall movement. Munyuki et al. (2018) argue that while universities frequently have formal policies in place to declare their commitment

to inclusion and non-discrimination, there are a number of ways in which institutional cultures do not support the espoused policies. For example, having a black woman professor who was a DVC for transformation replaced by a retired white male professor signifies historical institutional culture refusing to change.

With the renaming of the Sarah Baartman Hall, the university tried to decentralise power and authority, to communicate that any part of the university community stood an equal chance of coming up with the new name. The process of renaming critical landmarks is a power play and such processes are always contested (Manatsha, 2014; Ndletyana, 2012). It evokes identity politics and unequal power relations and dynamics, as well as deep ideological deliberations (Manatsha, 2014).

Ismail (2007, 2011) recognized the demonstration of an awareness of cultural diversity by identifying suitable names for buildings as an important step towards transformation. We also acknowledge the efforts that UCT made in forming the NoBC, as well as the NoBC choosing Sarah Baartman's name. Indeed, it is significant that such a structure exists and that the new name is not of a male politician, but that of a poor black South African woman. Manatsha, (2014, p. 272) argues that, "colonialism played a major role in 'erasing' the identities of the conquered and colonised communities in many ways". Therefore, using her name for an important building at UCT is a way of reasserting the history of UCT, rewriting her history, and endowing her memory with the significance and dignity she was denied in her later life and that of the many people she represents.

However, in a study done by Kessi and Cornell (2015) at UCT, many of the participants, who were black students, described how arriving at UCT was marked by "feeling black" (p. 3) for the first time. The feelings of students as they walk up and down these buildings and corridors do not match the status accredited to the institution worldwide. These feelings also cannot be matched with the respect accorded by family, friends and their communities when they learn that students are part of the top-achieving university. One participant from Kessi and Cornell's study said it seems the institution is more privileged than the students, as students see themselves as insignificant (Kessi & Cornell, 2015).

The UCT environment marginalizes and alienates black people and this is unfortunately an important part of transformation era experiences at UCT – a lack of belonging and low self-esteem amongst black students and staff who are left to grapple, often for the first time, with the reality of what it means to be black in South Africa today. Kessi and Cornell's (2015) findings show that students' perception of themselves impacts on their academic performance, similarly to how Xulu-Gama (2019) shows that access to student accommodation positively impacts their academic performance.

In this article, various transformative processes have been discussed, with the focus being on the renaming of the Sarah Baartman Memorial Hall. We argue that what we have termed ceremonial transformation is that which can be recognized quantitatively and symbolically but not felt qualitatively: it renames buildings (whether it is lecture halls or student accommodation) and hosts huge events to launch the new names without changing the lived experiences of the people occupying those buildings. One example of ceremonial transformation is the appointment of black people to higher positions without

providing adequate support to the newly appointed individuals. Another example would be increasing the number of registered black students in former white universities without providing the necessary academic support, including providing student accommodation for the back students who are in need.

Conclusion

This article argues first that renaming the hall after Sarah Baartman inadequately signifies transformation or changing institutional culture if the structures and the practices of those who occupy these buildings remain the same. Second, the renaming of the hall as an act of transformation stands in contradiction to other seemingly anti-transformative practices (such as the appointment of a white male professor as DVC of transformation). While a black woman's name and history is being glorified, many black women's experiences are undermined and disqualified in the country and in historically racially exclusive spaces, such as UCT. The large numbers of black students without accommodation, and who struggle with course content and end up not graduating reflect the soft underbelly of ceremonial transformation. Therefore, bringing an end to ceremonial transformation is one way of successfully fighting the histories that resist change as well as changing the stubborn institutional culture plaguing our institution. We recommend that UCT must further interrogate if there are any new meanings and experiences that staff and students associate with these renamed buildings. What are the ways in which students and staff can resist the feelings of isolation, alienation, inferiority, inadequateness and incompetency as they occupy these renamed buildings?

Statement of Ethics, Funding and Interests

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How to cite:

Mlambo, Y., & Xulu-Gama, N. (2022). Ceremonial transformation: The significance of renaming Memorial Hall after Sarah Baartman at the University of Cape Town. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, *10*(1), 145-156. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v10i1.2187