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UCT professor's lecture addresses institutional racism in higher education



Prof Shose Kessi

Photo: Je'nine May

Professor Shose Kessi, Dean of the [Faculty of Humanities](#) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), recently delivered her inaugural lecture on the topic "S#*t happens: A decolonial feminist psychological reflection on institutional racism in higher education" to a packed audience at the Neville Alexander Building.

Professor Kessi's lecture traced the evolution of key debates about 'race' and institutional transformation at UCT, positioning them within broader struggles for decolonisation in higher education.

The lecture focused on a transformative moment in 2014 when Kessi, a scholar examining the experiences of black students at UCT, found herself at the centre of an unexpected and impactful encounter. During a seminar at the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), she delivered a powerful presentation that addressed the profound symbolic significance of the Cecil John Rhodes statue. The then Vice-Chancellor, Dr Max Price, students and student leaders were in attendance. What began as a research discussion rapidly evolved into a vigorous debate on institutional racism and the urgent need for transformation, setting the stage for the Rhodes Must Fall movement in 2015.

Her research on the sociopsychology of racism in higher education critically examines how black students navigate exclusionary academic environments. She has focused on the admissions policy debate at UCT, where calls to remove race as a criterion for admission ignited public discourse. This debate led to some narratives portraying black students as threats to academic standards, fuelling arguments about 'reverse racism' and the alleged irrelevance of race in contemporary South Africa.

"It is difficult to fully convey what the institutional climate was like at the time of the admissions debate, but those media articles were vicious and relentless; and as a scholar working on the socio-psychology of racism – as a black scholar, personally affected by these debates – and as a teacher, I wanted to find out how students were navigating this. How they felt about what was being said about them, and what impact it had on their psyche, their sense of belonging and [their] ability to perform academically," she said.

In response to the challenges faced by black students, Kessi turned to photovoice, a participatory research method that allows individuals to document their experiences through photography and written reflections. She established the first photovoice lab at UCT's [Department of Psychology](#), using this approach to capture the realities faced by black students dealing with issues such as financial exclusion, Eurocentric curriculum and academic scrutiny.

"Reflecting on the stories, it became evident that black students were experiencing everyday forms of overt and covert racism in classrooms, residences and other public spaces across campus," she said. "They complained about the inaccessibility of tuition fees, the Eurocentric curriculum, the stigma of others who questioned how they got accepted into various fields of study, being overly scrutinised in their assignments, and the stigma associated with being assigned to extended degree programmes. All of which impacted on access, belonging and well-being."

For Kessi, photovoice is more than just a research tool; it symbolises resistance and serves as a decolonial practice. Rooted in the tradition of South African community psychology, her work confronts the discipline's historical involvement in systems of oppression. "Photovoice is a form of community mobilisation, social action and resistance, and is one way of redeeming the discipline of psychology and emphasising the role of academia to not only describe the world, but to change it," she explained.

As UCT approaches the tenth anniversary of the removal of the Rhodes statue, Kessi's lecture served as a commemoration and a critical reflection on the ongoing work of transformation within the institution. She paid tribute to the students who led the Rhodes

Must Fall movement, acknowledging their intellectual contributions and the profound, lasting impact of their activism.

However, Kessi's lecture was more than just a retrospective; it was a powerful call to action. She emphasised that institutional change was not a one-time event but an ongoing, dynamic process that demanded continuous engagement and critical scholarship.

Her lecture also honoured the work of the UCT Black Academic Caucus (BAC), outlining its establishment, its role in addressing institutional racism, and its significant contributions to building the institution following the Rhodes Must Fall protests.

Kessi reflected on her role in co-founding the BAC in 2014, describing it as a pivotal intervention in shaping the university's transformation agenda. As the first chairperson, she spearheaded a transformation agenda for the university that emphasised diversity and inclusion, and that centred African knowledge as the gateway to academic excellence and innovation with a global impact.

Story by Kamva Somdyala, UCT News

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