UP can stake its place as a benchmark space of higher learning in, and of, Africa

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Every year since 2015 students at South African universities have protested against financial exclusion, organised protest marches, and attacked sacred cows of the colonial legacy in higher education. With the death of a bystander making headlines in 2021, protests continued to draw attention to the reality that funding is an intractable problem in higher education, worsened by a South African economy in a quagmire, by economic disparities, and by political opportunism.

Protesting against fee increases in higher education and demanding free education, students have called for the end of racism and outsourcing of support services at universities. These protests, organised under the banners #RhodesMustFall (RMF) and then #FeesMustFall (FMF), set in motion a series of events with far-reaching consequences for higher education in South Africa and many other countries. Urgent and long-overdue questions were asked regarding the legacies of colonialism, the meaning of symbols and artefacts in the institutional culture of the university and of curricula, and contemporary management practices in higher education.

African studies scholar Professor Nick Shepherd has argued that although RMF sought to interrogate and address the impact of Cecil Rhodes's colonial heritage on the South African university and its curriculum, culture, and ethos, the campaign neglected a historical reality that constituted another earlier trauma, namely slavery, initiated with the first colonial encounters in the mid-seventeenth century at the Cape, and enduring for almost two hundred years. I would argue that in the main in South Africa, slavery is broadly understood to be located and of significance only for the Western Cape. Slavery and colonisation in South Africa have largely been unacknowledged, overshadowed by the more dominant narrative of apartheid. However, given that the Cape was colonised two centuries before the rest of South Africa, the importance of this legacy and its impact on social and economic conditions is fundamental to understanding contemporary South Africa. Grasping the issues facing the South African university today requires an understanding of South Africa's long history of slavery and the displacement of indigenous people and people of colour.

There can be no question that slavery shaped South Africa from the earliest days of colonial exploration, and it continued to have a critical influence through the continuum of colonialism, informing early forms of racial segregation and later feeding into apartheid. The legacy of slavery continues to influence our perspectives today. It is evident in prevailing attitudes to the work of those who are seen as 'black', particularly in the mining and viticulture industries, and in domestic service in many homes. There is a continual reminder of slavery through surnames such as December, September, and February, which recall the random names allocated to enslaved ancestors, based on the month in which such ancestors arrived at the Cape, and were parcelled out to their 'owners'. It is also evident in some of the schisms in religious denominations, notably the division between the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), a branch of Christianity that evolved from the Slave Church ('Gestig').

Slavery shaped churches, mines, agriculture, and educational institutions. The first pass laws were introduced in 1972 in Kimberley to control African labourers employed on the diamond mines. The Natives Land Act of 1913 was the first significant legislation passed after South Africa was united as a single political entity in 1910. The 1913 Natives Land Act dispossessed countless African families of access to farmland and limited the land which could be settled by Africans to a paltry 7% of the geographic area of the country, at a time when Africans constituted 67% of the population. In 1889 the Volksraad of the Transvaal Boer Republic discussed establishing a university for the capital, i.e. Pretoria. In 1932, only 98 years after the abolition of slavery in the Cape Colony, the University Council declared that Afrikaans should be the only medium of instruction. What is now known as the University of Pretoria witnessed the 1935 Innersloop forced removals and the formation of the African Mine Workers' Union (1941). The founding of the School of Management in 1949 occurred on the eve of key apartheid legislation that would have a far-reaching and catastrophic impact: the Population Registration Act of 1950 (which defined all South Africans in terms of race), the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 and the Immorality Act of 1950 (which criminalised and prohibited sexual relationships and marriages between people of different races), the Group Areas Act of 1950 (which separated people living in urban areas in terms of their race), the Suppression of Communism Act of 1953 (which prohibited Communism and other forms of political opposition to apartheid), the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of

1953 (which reserved most toilets, buses, trains, hospitals, ambulances, cinemas, theatres, swimming pools, beaches, and parks for white people, and allocated inferior facilities to members of other race groups), and the Bantu Education Act of 1953 (which closed down all mission schools that provided Africans with education, and imposed racially segregated education on all, with vastly inferior education provided to Africans, coloured people, and Indians). Anyone associated with UP between 1953 and 1967 should have been aware of race-based forced removals from various areas of Pretoria, including Garsfontein, Newclare, Bantule/ Hovesgrond, Eersterus, Wonderboom, Marabastad, Lady Selbourne, Asiatic Bazaar, Yskor, Mooiplaats, and Riverside. Like other universities in South Africa, UP has a troubled past that affects the present in many ways. At times, understanding of the discrimination in the past is seen by academics as providing an opportunity to enable comprehension of present circumstances, and fosters questioning of current policies. Yet on other occasions, academic practices discourage any form of dissent from, or opposition to, the 'UP way'. It appears to have been mute when race-based forced removals took place in Pretoria 50 to 70 years ago.

What lurks behind the pleasant veneer of the impeccably manicured gardens at UP are markers of belonging and privilege that are somewhat less apparent. These include ways of doing things, rites and rituals, old boys' and old girls' networks, ways of speaking and behaving, deference to rank and tenure, and formal forms of politeness that sit uncomfortably with the new. It is incredibly difficult for an academic outsider to find their feet at UP: a sense of bewilderment and paralysis sets in, and unless newly appointed lecturers discover generous and kind mentors who can help them learn and comprehend how things are done, and the new academic is prepared to work only on the margins, paths to success and well-being can be harrowing and thorny.

I do not believe that it is an understatement to say that the university can be a hostile environment for anyone who does not play by the unspoken rules. It is not a comfortable place for the thin-skinned. Women, especially women of colour, often find themselves described as 'difficult' when they voice their opinions. They are often bewildered by rules that appear mandatory for some and optional for (privileged) others. They often have to work twice as hard, engage in mental and emotional contortions (whilst coming to terms with bureaucracy) to avoid any perception that their appointment is based on tokenism. There is not a formal policy that outlines exactly how UP expects its citizenry to behave. For those of

us relatively new to the institution and unfamiliar with UP culture, the university can be lonely and alienating. I imagine that many non-conforming students have similar experiences.

Having said this, UP has more than a few treasures, often found in the most unlikely of places. I believe that the most rewarding aspect of my UP experience has been discovering colleagues and students from entirely different backgrounds, who find common ground through enlightened conversations, respect, hard work, and humility. More can be done to inculcate a culture of dialogic learning, knowledge transfer, and support, tasking each UP staff member and student to grasp that a university is a place of critical knowledge production. It should never be anything less than this.

One would be hard-pressed to not appreciate that UP Hatfield is a beautiful and well-tended campus, providing a soothing green environment. The Old Arts Building – where I had my first office – provides spectacular views of the campus. Space matters. Everything has its place. Markers of history and heritage abound at UP, which is a stone's throw from the Union Buildings – in itself of great significance. These markers are evident in statues, architecture, building names and nicknames, collections, and furniture, inscribing not only the history and heritage of the institution, but also silencing other histories that remain in the shadows of the tall trees that shield students in the heat of Pretoria summers.

It is a struggle to find any UP memorial that publicly acknowledges slavery, yet the form and history of this university sit squarely within South Africa's slave past and the cost that slavery and other forms of discrimination continue to exact on the majority of South Africans; to pay lip service to slavery at UP does a disservice to the institution.

Public commitment to studying the catastrophic and persistent impact of slavery in South African will clear the way in significant areas for this university and the broader public that it serves:

- It offers an opportunity to scrutinise the South African academy about the processes of transformation and the decolonisation of learning through a deep-time perspective on the interlinked legacies of the historical catastrophes of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, as a vehicle to understand their far-reaching and complex effects. Decolonisation

has been at the forefront of teaching and learning, yet not enough has been done to engender the understanding that transformation and decolonisation must, from the outset, be deeply self-reflexive.

- It enables a greater understanding of colour, gender, and sex (in addition to race). It can lead the way with regard to how 'colouredness' is understood in South Africa. Coloured students are few and far between at UP: we need to ask ourselves what about this university makes it seem unwelcoming to this demographic.
- It sheds light on the status of institutions as material beneficiaries of slave economies, and encourages each of us to think seriously about what privilege in South Africa looks like.
- It lays the groundwork for a pedagogically sound and rigorous African studies course that every UP student should take, so that that the business of what it means to study in Africa, and to study Africa, takes its rightful place in this South African academy. This is not just relevant to students and faculty of the Humanities. It should involve questions important for all academics and their students across all the disciplines that are committed to the process of transformation and decolonisation already underway at UP. Such a course could shape the beginnings of a UP culture that speaks to all.

We know that enormous changes are expected in the future which may change the face of the planet. Although South Africa is seen as a middle-income country, it struggles with substantial income inequalities, which natural hazard-induced disasters and climate change are likely to exacerbate. In South Africa, the scars of vast inequalities and social engineering that characterised the apartheid system persist (and in some cases have worsened), despite nearly three decades of democracy. The country is one of the most unequal societies globally. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the ongoing glaring injustices of the country's past.

We have already had to change the way we work as a result of the pandemic. I hope that the past two years have changed the way that we think. We are all involved in the building of democracy. We need to be committed to ensuring that all South Africans can thrive, and we have to deal with the unfinished business of the legacy of apartheid.

UP offers an opportunity to build on the work of the great thinkers of the past, including Imhotep, Plato, Confucius, Mao, Nyerere, Newton, Freire, and Wallerstein, all of whom allocated a special place in their theories of development to understanding that education was the unshakeable foundation of whatever kind of development or progress a country wanted to pursue. UP can stake its place as a benchmark space of higher learning in, and of, Africa.

We can be known as the university capable of having the most difficult of conversations, of not tinkering at the edges of change, and of looking at the past with compassion.

We can do this, not in the shadow of tall trees, but in the full light of the African sun: each of us equal and fully grounded, so that we can continue the long journey to freedom dreamt of by slaves so many centuries ago.