



Crystallising Commitment to Transformation in a South African Higher Education Institute

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Abstract

This paper emerges out of an ethnographic study conducted at the University of Cape Town that explored the dynamics of an intervention providing a ‘safe space’ for university staff to engage in alternative ways with South Africa’s apartheid past, the university’s institutional culture and with each other. This paper focuses on the social politics that arose between the intervention, its participants and imagined non-participants in relation to the university’s ‘transformation’ vision. The interventionist intention was reworked by participants at a ground level into key symbols by which participants shaped the patterns of their behaviours and gave meaning to their experiences. Utilising Ortner’s (1973) model for recognising and using key symbols, I argue that ‘transformation’ and ‘safe space’ are *elaborating* symbols in that they have conceptual and action elaborating power. These elaborating symbols operate in relay with a kind of logic that ‘crystallises commitment’ from participants to the intervention in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated manner. In so doing, they render the intervention a ‘summarising’ symbol capable of expressing what their experience means to them as an imagined community in relation to others.

Résumé

Cet article est issu d’une étude ethnographique menée à l’Université de Cape Town. Il explore la dynamique d’une intervention permettant au personnel de l’université de s’engager dans une voie alternative à celle de l’apartheid en Afrique du Sud. Il traite de la politique sociale qui apparut entre

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l'intervention, ses participants et non-participants imaginaires par rapport à la vision « transformatrice » de l'université. L'intention des interventionnistes a été retravaillée par les participants des principaux symboles qui mettent en forme les motifs de leurs comportements et donnent un sens à leurs expériences. Utilisant le modèle d'Ortner (1973) de reconnaissance et de symboles-clés, je soutiens que la « transformation » et « l'espace sûr » représentent une élaboration symboles, en ce sens qu'ils ont le pouvoir d'action et d'élaboration conceptuelle. Ces symboles d'élaboration fonctionnent en relais avec une sorte de logique qui « cristallise l'engagement » des participants vers l'intervention d'une manière émotionnellement puissante et relativement indifférenciée. Ce faisant, ils font de l'intervention un symbole capable d'exprimer ce que leur expérience signifie pour eux en tant que communauté imaginée par rapport aux autres.

Introduction

Of the many emails that made their way into the inbox of the Transformation Officer at the University of Cape Town (hereafter UCT), was one that noted:

Hi all, it was a bit of a shock to get back to work yesterday. I miss seeing your faces and hearing your voices! I was still feeling a bit wiped out and the environment felt strange, or rather I felt as though I wasn't sure whether I fitted in or not. It wasn't helped by the fact that some people in my department, who knew I had been on the workshop, were looking at me a little curiously, as though I might have grown horns or something. I met with the only other person in my department to have done the workshop. She did it two weeks ago and it sounded as though she had very much the same kind of experience that we did. She was still feeling a little bit vulnerable ... I am aware, very aware, that our workshop experience is not universally shared and I don't want my experience to be degraded by other people's cynicism, nor do I want to bury my experience in the business of the job. I know [the Transformation Officer] appreciates any feedback about the course from us and if the only thing we do is to send her feedback we will have made the workshop live on, at least a little.

The writer was a participant of a *Khuluma* workshop emailing fellow workshop participants after returning to work the next day. The idea behind the workshop was to retreat from the familiarity of the university's work environment for three days in order to enter a space in which to engage in alternative ways with each other around South Africa's apartheid past and the university's institutional culture. *Khuluma*, meaning 'to speak out' in isiXhosa, was an intervention that built upon the then Vice Chancellor's desire to create 'open and safe spaces for dialogue and debate on transformation and diversity issues' (University of Cape Town [UCT] 2006a:3). It was also imagined that through these 'organised and supported sets of conversations' specific courses of action could be identified that would 'effect a lasting, sustainable, set of changes in institutional culture' (UCT 2006a:1).

This paper explores the social politics that arose in relation to the university's 'transformation' vision, through examining the interface between the Khuluma workshops, its participants and imagined non-participants. Through the email above, the writer seeks to claim the Khuluma workshop a success for himself, and to preserve the integrity of individual experience. Although both personal growth and workshop commendation were at stake here, the focus of his commentary revolved around 'protecting' the Khuluma process from criticism from both within and outside of the workshop process. This 'protection' calls attention to what Ortner recognised as the 'crystallization of commitment': a condition necessary for identifying key *summarising* symbols (1973:1342).

The technical term 'key symbol' derives from Sherry Ortner's 1970 dissertation, which made its way into anthropological and popular writings through an article in *American Anthropologist* in 1973. Programmatically laying out an analysis for recognising and using key symbols, Ortner defined two kinds of key symbols on an ideal-type continuum: 'summarising' and 'elaborating'. Ortner was careful to point out that her typology was a heuristic concept rather than a precise reflection of distinct and distinguishable kinds of symbols. Paying heed to this warning, I draw on her model as a framework within which the complexities of an unfamiliar system of cultural symbols may be sorted out. The use of key symbols here should not be viewed as deterministic or overly constraining. That said, Ortner's model generally does not account for power. Thus this paper is both an application of her model to a specific, unusual instance, and a revision of an existing body of theory by exploring the relationship between symbols and power. Drawing on Ferguson's (1990:275) sense of a 'machine' as 'an anonymous set of interrelations that only ends up having a kind of retrospective coherence', I argue that there is power operating between two particular *elaborating* symbols that worked together in relay to produce and crystallise commitment to the interventionist intentions of Khuluma. This paper seeks to demonstrate the complex ways in which 'transformation' and 'safe space' emerged as *elaborating* symbols that interacted to enable participants to rework Khuluma into a *summarising* symbol, through which participants shaped the patterns of their behaviours and gave meaning to their experiences.

On Key Symbols

As every experienced field-worker knows, the most difficult task in social anthropological field work is to determine the meanings of a few key words, upon an understanding of which the success of the whole investigation depends (Evans-Pritchard 1962:80).

The difficulty of identifying 'a few key words' and the necessity for their identification, suggests that they shape the ways that social actors see, feel, and think about the world – that is they provides crucial clues to 'culture'. Looked at another way, 'culture' can be deciphered and commented upon by interpreting key symbols and rituals.¹ Sherry Ortner's seminal essay laid out an analysis for the recognition and operation of 'key symbols', not to be studied in and of themselves, but for what they can reveal about social processes (1973). The focus of interest is not why a symbol is key; it is only a signal that the symbol is playing some key role in relation to other elements. 'Every culture', she argued, 'has certain key elements which, in an ill-defined way, are crucial to its distinctive organizations' (1973:1338). For Ortner, these key elements were a 'jumble' of 'things and abstractions, nouns and verbs, single items and whole events' (ibid:1339). According to Buck (1999:10), a key symbol is 'a superordinating, dominant image of an idea or an ideal' which is 'immediately cognizable' and 'commands respect, fixes attention on the intentional referent for which it stands, a silent yet evocative representation of something religious, present, ethereally imperial'.

For Ortner, a summarising symbol, not surprisingly, 'sums up, expresses and represents' several complete ideas into one symbol or sign that the individual perceives, that is, it comes to 'stand for' the system as a whole (1973:1340). Often this includes iconic, sacred symbols, such as the cross for Christians, but includes 'objects of reverence and/or catalysts for emotion' such as a national flag or hero. It might include more conceptual ideas such as the symbol of 'matriarchy' as a form of female power drawn upon by regional separatists in their construction of a distinctive regional identity, such as that described by Kelley (1994) in her discussion of Galician identity. A summarising symbol speaks to a level of emotional response, in that it 'focuses power, draws together, intensifies thereby catalyzing impact' on an individual (Ortner 1973:1342). In short, summarising symbols result in a 'crystallisation of commitment' to a singular meaning of the symbol.

Conversely, elaborating symbols succeed by fitting complex and possibly indistinguishable beliefs, practices, concepts and emotions into a workable framework. When a symbol comes to stand in for this complexity, an individual can communicate their ideas to others more effectively. Elaborating symbols help to sort, categorise and make sense of experience. They can be further subdivided into two categories, that of 'root metaphors' and 'key scenarios'. Ortner refines Stephen Pepper's notion of 'root metaphor' which is related to the ability to elaborate or orient thoughts. Describing these as symbols which are 'good to think' with, root metaphors operate to 'sort out experience, to place it in cultural categories and to help us think about how it all hangs together' (Ortner 1973:1341). Ortner draws on Godfrey Lienhardt's (1961) careful

description of religion among the Dinka of southern Sudan and the role of cattle as a root metaphor for understanding in Dinka everyday and metaphysical thought. The physical structure of the bull, he argued, served as an analogy of societal structure. An example of this was the way the meat of a sacrificed bull was divided and distributed according to status, functions and interrelationships of the major social groups. Equally cattle-colour vocabulary configured all perceptions of colour, light and shade in the world. To take this away, the Dinka 'would have scarcely any way of describing visual experience in terms of colour, light and darkness' (Lienhardt 1961:13).

Key scenarios, Ortner's other class of elaborating symbols, serve to order action by suggesting 'a clear-cut strategy for arriving at culturally defined success' (Ortner 1973:1342). She argues that every society embodies some vision of 'success', but how success is defined and the best ways of achieving it differ. Ortner draws on the Horatio Alger myth – the rags to riches message in many books authored by Horatio Alger in the nineteenth century – from the United States of America as her example of a key scenario. The myth formulates both the conception of success as wealth and power, and suggests that there is a simple (but not easy) way of achieving them, by leading exemplary lives and struggling against poverty and adversity through single-minded hard work.

Situating the Study

It is important to recognise that the appearance of a new term, idea or symbol such as 'Khuluma', is an active response to a changing social and political reality (Higgins 2007). With the end of apartheid and the first democratic elections in 1994, 'transformation' has become a key feature of South Africa's public and political discourse. More than a century of colonialism followed by half a century of apartheid has created a profound need for transformation in every sphere of South African society. As a significant form of national investment in post-apartheid South Africa, higher education institutes were, and continue to be, seen as vitally important in the transformation process, both as a vehicle for transformation in reconstituting South African society, and in need of transformation in and of themselves (Cloete et al. 2002; Badat 2004; Hall 2007, 2008).

UCT as a historically white and privileged university was positioned as 'in need' of transformation by those within and outside of the university. This led to a variety of initiatives driven by individuals and the university executive alike. Institutional Climate Surveys, commissioned research and subsequent discussions at the University of Cape Town initially centred on questions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, discrimination and inequality (UCT 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b). Over time these discussions came to be increasingly dominated by issues of race and

racism, demonstrating how race remained and continues to remain an all-consuming theme within post-apartheid UCT (Erasmus & de Wet 2003; Higgins 2007; Jayawardane 2007; Raditlhalo 2007). Pressured to act in a more pragmatic way, the university executive launched Khuluma in 2006 (UCT 2006a, Macdonald in press).²

The initial series of workshops were the culmination of a complex lengthy series of dialogical processes, followed by the rapid transition from concept to implementation. The early Khuluma workshops³ were facilitated by an external specialist development agency, and were based on three-day non-residential workshops shaped by a corporate model modified for the university working environment.⁴ The workshops were open to all university employees. The demographic profile of informants cut across all apartheid-imposed racial classifications, gender, age, home languages, department, length of employment at UCT and academic/PASS⁵ staff divisions. Academics, men and PASS (payclasses 1-6) were relatively under-represented in the research process, and reflects how they were represented in the workshops. The roll-out of workshops continued beyond 2006 and variations of the Khuluma idea still continue at the time of writing in 2011.

The dominant finding gleaned from interviews with 47 informants and emails solicited from the University's Transformation Office, was that 93 percent of 71 total responses were overwhelmingly positive about the Khuluma workshops.⁶ Indeed, responses were expressed as both an appreciation of the workshop experience and congratulations to the workshop facilitators and/or the University. This finding extended across all categories of respondents regardless of gender, age, race, home language, department, length of employment at UCT, academic/support staff membership and so on.

The tremendously positive responses indicated that Khuluma was a profoundly important initiative (UCT 2006b, Macdonald in press). Indeed, Khuluma potentially began to address issues of transformation that, since the 2003 Climate Survey, had been identified by the University community as central to its needs. As one respondent said: 'To me, Khuluma was something. My soul was sort of hungry... I want to learn more. I want to feel. I want to hear. I want to see'. Participants were 'hungry' for change on campus. Respondents were 'grateful', 'privileged', 'honoured', 'humbled' for the experiences they had had at the Khuluma workshops. They spoke of it as a 'gift', a 'luxury', an 'enriching experience', a 'powerful journey', an 'amazing privilege', as 'wonderful', 'fabulous' and an 'eye-opener'. Ortner's claim that summarising symbols 'do not encourage reflection' but instead support 'a sort of all-or-nothing allegiance' is a process that appears in play for many Khuluma participants (Ortner 1973:1340). By what Ferguson (1990) calls a 'mechanism', commitment to Khuluma as both a product and an ideal was crystallised for

many, and as such is painted as natural and good, thereby making it very difficult to challenge. I use the term ‘mechanism’ intentionally by invoking Ferguson’s sense of a ‘machine’ as a kind of logic or intelligibility at work in the interaction between the two elaborating symbols – ‘transformation’ and ‘safe space’.

Elaborating Symbols: ‘safe spaces’ for ‘transformation’

Elaborating symbols have conceptual and action elaborating power to ‘crystallise commitment’ to Khuluma as a whole. ‘Transformation’, I argue, is an elaborating symbol, more particularly what Ortner labelled a ‘root metaphor’. Root metaphors are understood to elaborate or orientate thoughts, and to establish a certain view of the world. Ortner appears unconcerned with the linguistic distinctions between ‘symbol’ and ‘metaphor’, yet it is important to bear in mind what a metaphor is and what a metaphor does, as this relates to an appreciation of the dynamics of thought orienting root metaphors. Max Black, in his essay on metaphors, argues that ‘metaphorical thought is a distinctive mode of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought’ (1962:267). For Paul Ricoeur, metaphor ‘is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to re-describe reality’ (1978:7). Beyond mere substitution, highly encoded metaphors condense intersections of meanings, which are said to ‘contaminate’ each other.

‘Transformation’ is a nebulous term in the South African context, and carries with it a host of meanings that vary across contexts and individuals. The Dictionary Unit for South African English, (2002) defines transformation as ‘a marked change in nature, form or appearance’. Oloyede (2007:8) describes how the discourse of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa implies a ‘move from the bad old days to the good present’. In introducing its White Paper on the transforming of the public service, the government clearly defined the aim of ‘transformation’ to create a ‘socially coherent and economically equitable society’ (Republic of South Africa, 1995, para. 1). An ‘economically equitable society’ appears to be a more or less tangible outcome and unsurprisingly, racialised economic transformation has taken priority over other forms of transformation, post-apartheid.⁷ Thus, the vagueness of the term leaves a lot of room for different interpretations and resulting practices, although economic transformation has taken priority.

Equally, ‘social coherence’ in public and political discourse merges interchangeably with other terms: social integration (also inclusion), social cohesion, social transformation and reconciliation; each offering little explanation or clarification. Oloyede argues that ‘it does not necessarily follow that with transformation is *social transformation*’ (2007:10, italics in the original).

Drawing on Bourdieu, Oloyede explains that social transformation involves a change of cognitive categories and underlying concepts, which over time result in new emerging practices such as new forms of social interactions. To translate this into the working arena of higher education, it means, for example, that the mere change of racial profile among staff and students does not necessarily produce social transformation. Over time and in combination with other factors, however, it might entail changes in cognitive categories and concepts, and lead to new forms of social interaction, thus, social transformation.

For South African higher education the question remains: what is being transformed? One report highlighted the move away from the colonial heritage and elitism: that 'it is important to change the image of UCT as an elitist, white institution and to shift from closed, exclusionary, systems, processes and procedures to open and transparent participation' (UCT 2004b:2). Other reports speak in more poignant terms of the need for the University to work actively 'through transformative dialogue toward creating an institutional environment at UCT experienced as being more open, more honest, more trusting, more accommodating, more creative at the same time that it continues to be no less robust as an academic institution' (UCT 2005b:2). Khuluma's focus was therefore not merely on demographic representations but also on the ethos, the practices, norms and 'spirit'. Thus, the transformative process went beyond the normal apartheid legacy concerns, and alluded to aspects of human interaction, including attitudes, communication, power relations, and so forth.

Khuluma participants expressed an entanglement of reasons and insecurities around 'transformation' that produced mixed feelings about the workshops. 'Transformation' served as a root metaphor to orient thoughts (and at times actions). One individual said: 'I wondered, if I didn't attend then [my colleagues] might think it is a certain arrogance on my part or a certain separateness of the processes that they feel is important. So, there is that more sort of subtle, I guess, pressure – but very real, yes indeed'. This respondent perceived that others would interpret his absence as indifference to 'transformation' and hence keenly felt a 'subtle pressure' to attend, regardless of other reasons he had for his reluctance. Thus, he found it necessary to firmly state that he believed 'in the idea of transformation at UCT' and therefore in principle accepted the objectives of the Khuluma process. His comments highlighted a disparity that became apparent among some informants between their commitment to transformation at UCT and a concern about what the Khuluma workshops would comprise. Another informant echoed this sense of a contradiction by correcting an assumption made on the part of the interviewer: 'Hang on; I'm not saying I didn't want to come because of transformation. It's just I didn't want to come. I mean I didn't want to go on the workshop because I'm a shy person'. Here we witness the power of 'transformation' as a root

metaphor, operating at the level of ideas, persuading the mind of its legitimacy and potentially coercing particular forms of actions.

The reader will recall, that Ortner's other class of elaborating symbols are key scenarios which serve to influence action. Key scenarios 'are culturally valued in that they formulate the culture's means-ends relationship in actable forms' (Ortner 1973:1341). The then Vice Chancellor called for 'transformative dialogue' through the action orienting key scenario of 'safe space'. 'Safe space' implies 'clear-cut modes of action' for correct and defined success, however infrequently attained. Interestingly 'safe space' as an action orienting elaborating symbol points clearly to modes of speech, a 'certain freedom to speak and act freely' in much the same way as Jürgen Habermas argued for 'an ideal speech situation' (Payrow Shabani 2003). It should be no surprise then that the individuals tasked with transformation at UCT sought an isiXhosa phrase that encompassed notions of 'speaking up and listening well' and incorporated aspects of 'negotiation'. The word Khuluma was seen as fitting as 'speaking or talking is at the very core of transformation' (UCT 2006b:61).⁸ 'Safe space' became a means to 'speaking out' rather than an ends in itself.

'Safe space' has its origins in psychological discourses around catharsis, and its use in popular discourse emerged in encounter group scenarios from the 1960s, predominantly in gay bars and feminist consciousness-raising groups by providing exclusive physical and discursive spaces for gays or women to come together to talk and support each other. It has since emerged as a desired classroom atmosphere within education in particular around race, gender and sexuality (Ellsworth 1989; Boostrom 1998; Cook-Sather 2002; Donadey 2002; Boler 2004; Fox & Fleischer 2004; Holley & Steiner 2005; Leonardo & Porter 2010). Five years ago, a quick Google search of the internet predominantly yielded initiatives from educational institutes offering programmes of inclusion, acceptance and support where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students could 'self-express'.⁹ Today, a similar search suggests that safety from what or who has expanded. There are spaces of safety in the literal sense, such as a safety from physical harm, as experienced by the need for a 'safe house' for victims of domestic violence, rape or other sexual abuse, a home environment free of pollutants for those diagnosed with environmentally ill bodies (Coyle 2004), or safe living and sleeping spaces for those with special needs.¹⁰ Safe space can include virtual spaces of safety, the barrier of technological security between one's personal computer and the wider malware found on the public internet or in protecting data integrity.¹¹ Equally, spaces of safety can be figurative, such as safety located in a discursive arena that allows for 'safe conversations' that might otherwise be too dangerous to discuss in other contexts. The vast majority of literature on safe space, where space relates to dialogue and communication, largely uses the phrase uncritically. For example,

Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2001) research sought to create safe space in the form of a metaphorical 'dialogue tent' for Palestinian women to speak. Her research carried all the usual assumptions about providing a space where the 'excluded and muted' voices can speak and be heard, with further assumptions that the act of 'speaking' allows for 'rehumanising' (135) and 'self-discovery and self-recovery' of participants (145).

Leonardo and Porter (2010) examine 'safety' as a procedural rule in public race dialogue. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) notion of symbolic violence, they argue that discourses of 'safety' in a public arena are understood to produce 'spaces of integrity' and notions of behavioural etiquette where all are made to feel safe and included in the public sphere. They suggest that 'safe' public spaces inadvertently enact comfort and safety for whites through intellectualising 'race' and reducing it to an idea, while simultaneously acting as a 'veiled form of violence' against persons of colour. They further argue that to counter this discursive space persons of colour are placed at further risk through the process of having to speak up. They must 'speak up and against' using the behavioural etiquette of 'safety'. Their narratives, bodies and emotions must be contained and domesticated otherwise the speaker runs the risk of being perceived as illogical or irrational.¹²

The search for a safe and shared space in the Khuluma workshops was shifting and complex, as some of the experiences showed. The lived reality of many South Africans is incredibly complex, the realisation of, and connection to, apartheid's legacies startled many workshop participants. Some participants were dramatically touched by apartheid, while others felt they had not been affected at all. Seeking a safe space to talk did not guarantee those participants protection from unbidden emotional surges from memories of a painful apartheid past. 'Many emotions were triggered', wrote an email respondent, 'sadness, anger, helplessness, powerlessness and many more'. The workshop was described as 'opening up wounds' that had been 'shelved', 'dealt with' or 'forgotten' or, equally, wounds for which there was 'no ointment'. Yet, only two respondents found the process too painful to bear, and struggled to contain the powerful memories that surfaced:

The Khuluma workshop reminded me of all the bad experiences in my life, of the pain, the anger and the fear I had inside of me... which I have buried and moved on [from]. When I left the workshop I had to deal with all these emotions inside me on my own once again after putting it behind me so many years ago. I cried for four nights in a row trying to find myself, trying to deal with my emotions. Today, I am sorry that I attended this workshop. I am taking one day at a time knowing that life goes on and I have to move with it.

The workshop was very challenging for me. It brought back sad memories about my past as well as racism and discrimination. Talking about it, for the

first time had severe consequences on my body... I even lost my voice and ended up leaving early on the third day and immediately bought a ticket to go home... because I could not bear being in Cape Town at UCT for one more hour, I wanted to be in my mother's arms and to recuperate.

I feel it is important to note here that we should not create pathology from participants' embodied memories. For the majority of South Africans, lived experience and being in the world is in one way or another 'damaged' by apartheid, making it the norm rather than the exception (Kayser 2005:63-4). Paradoxically, Khuluma challenged participants to embrace, not to avoid, the uneasiness of participation, the shocks of awareness and the dangers of vulnerability (Macdonald, in press). Khuluma participants implicitly understood the paradoxical 'unsafety' located in the metaphoric 'safe space'. Participants wanted to 'make space' that was not necessarily safe but filled with risk, innovation, potential dislodgements and provocative practice.

'Safe space' as a key scenario operates in another way, that is, as a programme for orderly social action in relation to the defined goals of 'transformation'. For Khuluma participants 'safe space' ran the risk of censoring critical thinking through its action ordering power and was in danger of perpetuating some of apartheid's subtle (and unsubtle) patterns of violation. Khuluma participants were encouraged to speak freely and to share their experiences openly without fear of censure, ridicule or exploitation. On the one hand, the 'space' is 'safe' when individuals and groups know they will not face criticisms that would challenge their expressions of identity, that is, they are comfortable, in a state of individualised 'normality' or 'neutrality'. In this instance, expressions of self cannot be challenged. This expectation of respect for another's contribution comes to be understood by the group as a whole as a general prohibition against critically assessing someone else's contribution. As Boostrom (1998:407) emphatically states, 'the problem is that that precise outcome is built into the metaphor of "safe space"'. The ability of the 'safe space' metaphor to order action is revealed quite dramatically in an email to the Transformation Officer.

Despite what we were told in word (that there were 'no right answers', that personal experience was welcome, etc.) it was clear that there were right answers and that questions that were raised were looking for those and no others (to the extent that I felt my that colleagues' words were being violated and manipulated into conforming with these 'right answers') and, by the end of Day 2, the class had learned well and were giving teacher the right answers.

On the other hand, few would erroneously equate emotional safety with an uncritical acceptance of all opinions and behaviour. It is one thing to say that Khuluma participants should not be harassed for an unpopular opinion. It is quite another to say that participants must never be asked why their preferences or opinions differ from those of others.

Meta-narratives of 'safe space' inevitably foreclose other forms of conversation whether one subscribes to ideals of transformation or not. Equally a project based on transformation that is imagined as healing, forgiving and reconciling might inadvertently reinforce the status quo. Those falling outside of the model (for example, foreign nationals and the youth who did not experience apartheid directly) were silenced. Those who were not silenced were bound by conciliatory language that 'safe space' actions. For some, notions of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation are 'too much, too soon', and are too easily imposed and staged in the name of transformation. 'Towards the end I said something about forgiveness even though I did not mean it', said one participant. Finally, the emphasis on stories of a particular kind can result in the foreclosing emotions other than sadness or grief.

These two elaborating modes (root metaphors and key scenarios) reflect 'a relay' or 'point of co-ordination and multiplication of power relations' (Ferguson 1990:274). The university took 'transformation' as its point of entry and justification – launching an intervention that may have had no or little effect on 'transformation', but did have other concrete effects. 'Transformation' provided for individual's cognitive and affective categories and 'safe space' provided for strategies for orderly social action in relation to the defined goal of transformation. As key symbols they are valued for their contribution of 'tying together, multiplying and co-ordinating power relations, a kind of knotting or congealing of power' (Ferguson 1990:274). In turn, these elaborating symbols acted with more or less logic to convert complex ideas, actions and experiences into an intelligible whole – a commitment to Khuluma as both a product and a process. In the words of Ferguson and Lohmann, these symbols are 'neither ornament nor the master key to understanding what happens. Rather than being the blueprint for a machine, it is a *part* of the machine' (Ferguson, Lohmann 1994:181).

'Who has and hasn't been khulumaed?'

All research informants considered an aim of Khuluma to be to implementation of change of some description, but the extent of that change was very different for different people. Although some described Khuluma as 'a life-changing experience', most struggled to identify far-reaching significant (or material) changes. One line of thought would suggest that 'transformation' cannot be 'workshopped', that it is simply a managerial solution to a technical problem – set up a workshop and give it an indigenous name. The importance here is not so much what Khuluma might have failed to do (that is, to effect material change in people's lives), but what it did do. It may be that its real importance in the end lies in the unrecognisable or more ephemeral 'effects' that had a powerful and far reaching impact in cementing commitment to Khuluma as both an idea and a product.

These effects while containing ephemeral qualities, operated in ways that produced 'lasting effects', such as greater 'self-awareness' or the altered behaviour of others, such as greetings with people with whom had had little contact in the past. These small changes should not be overlooked, nor their importance underestimated. Shifts in relationships, no matter how slight, were an important result of the Khuluma workshops. Of all informants, only one did not comment on an improvement in personal relationships with colleagues, even where informants had not felt the workshops to be particularly useful to them. The changes that informants reported were not necessarily massive, but even where small changes had occurred, the effect of this on people's interpersonal understandings was extremely important. For example, many participants commented that they now greeted and were greeted by people they had had little contact with in the past. Though a greeting from a colleague may seem like a very small thing, it was something that was particularly significant to informants.

You know, you always see them storming past... one guy, I never used to greet. Now I would go out of my way and say 'HELLO! How are you?' you know, that person will turn around and now, the greeting you get back is so amazing. Whether he's doing it from his heart, that's his baby. But it made me feel good. Shew!

Kayser (2005) discusses the nuances of greeting and handshakes in post-apartheid South Africa, where physical contact between the self and the 'Other' had previously been socially unacceptable except in very specific ways. Kayser comments: 'A handshake thus made conscious, the touching of palms, the sensation of skin, and the pressure of fingers became an entry to producing an altered social space' (Kayser 2005:71). The email respondent I cited in the opening to the paper implicitly recognised a new social space and language when struggling to sign off his email.

Now I'm stuck here, how do I sign off? 'Cheers', 'Regards' both sound somewhat less than I mean. 'Fondest regards' sounds a bit off and I don't know if I can actually sign off 'Love {name}'. But through all the above I hope you get it, how about 'Much respect?'

Workshop participants appeared to forge new identities in the course of the workshop that exacted a physical and emotional toll. 'It was hectic. I couldn't sleep... I remember thinking "I'm so tired". I felt so drained, extremely tired', recalled another participant. Her reaction was a typical one. Very few participants escaped the exhaustion that accompanied the emotional investment of both actively telling one's story and bearing witness to testimonials from others.¹³

The Khuluma workshops carried all the features that van Genneep (2010) noted as essential for rites of passage – separation, transition, and incorporation.

University staff were removed from their working environment for three days in what Turner (1969) labelled a *liminal* space. The most notable aspect of collective liminality is an intense community spirit, a feeling of great social solidarity, equality and togetherness that Turner labelled *communitas*. The importance of Turner's work is not to be underestimated. While ritual is usually interpreted in the light of its conserving function (as a collective representation which reflects society and insures social solidarity), Turner wants us to perceive its creative function (as a transformative – a generating source of culture and structure). 'It's no good attending something like that and coming away without having been touched' stated one Khuluma participant.

Although the longer term effects of the workshop were largely reported positively, participants' memories of their immediate responses to the workshop were not as affirmative, precisely because the workshop was considered to be so powerful and to have had such an impact. This emotional impact often resulted in an embodied response. For example, this informant found herself entirely debilitated after the workshop was finished:

I stayed out of work the Thursday and the Friday. I was absolutely exhausted, stayed in bed and I actually had a reaction. I hoped to come to work on the Thursday morning and realised that I couldn't go to work. I just knew I could not go to work. I couldn't come in and face the office and face coming into work. I think it was a bodily reaction, because emotion had been pulled out and I took off two days of sick leave. I couldn't ... I just ... I mean I hadn't planned to take time off. I got to bed on Wednesday night and assumed that I'd get up for work the next morning and then I just could not. I realised I couldn't go, so I took the two days off and of course, then I had the weekend and then on Monday I went work.

Many informants' narratives showed signs of 'healing', even if understood to simply mean the power to endure. On the other hand, bodily distress articulates a form of 'dis-ease' with society, bringing to light the process of being in its negative mode. In this sense, bodily and mental distress must be looked on as creative change in the embodied process of 'being-in-the-world'. 'Dis-ease' is itself a process whose peculiarity lays within the rupture it brings about regarding the previous relationship between body, self and society. 'We have come back new beings', declared one email respondent. Other participants expressed something similar:

I needed badly to centre myself or I was going to breakdown. Now crying I think is very constructive, because it allows you to let go. It allows you to express and it allows you to then recompose and sometimes to recompose into something new. We could tell them how much it had hurt us or the other party, only then you could feel, you could actually feel, the energy going from one person to the next person. You just want to embrace, you just want to turn the clock around, and hear out all those bad days. I wish I could only start from today. Ja! That's the feeling.

Informants mentioned, in numerous interviews, a feeling that the Khuluma workshop had been a momentous event – in terms of emotion, forgiveness, relationships, understandings of what it is to ‘transform’. To summarise, participants, on the whole, were ‘hungry’ for something to be done around transformation on campus. This hunger translated into informants who worked extremely hard at making Khuluma work (Macdonald in press). This work involved approaching the workshops openly with trust and honesty and not questioning the facilitator’s model nor why it worked. They were prepared to ignore or ‘get past’ any unsafe space that may have been created through the workshop experience, worked through heavy emotional investment on their own or through their social networks, and argued that Khuluma should be compulsory for all UCT staff (UCT 2006b). In other words, Khuluma was bound to succeed on one level, because participants wanted it to. Khuluma was about ‘feeding hungry souls’.

Thus, Khuluma as a summarising symbol is not so much about seeking out what it achieved but rather its use in claiming that the members of a group of people (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from members of other putative groups (Cohen 1989). Persons having undergone the Khuluma workshops became ‘an imagined community’ able to express relational ideas of both similarity and difference to others (Cohen 1989). The initial Khuluma workshops were described as having consisted of ‘three to four hundred people hungry for this space. Now we are coming up against resistance’ (UCT 2006b). This continuous undercurrent of an ideological resistance established symbolic boundaries for those hundreds who were ‘khulumaed’ and those that were not; namely academics, ‘whites’, management, and/or men. As such perceptions of either overt or covert resistance on the part of particular groups to the Khuluma process were interpreted as calculated and collective as opposed to unthinking, private and unorganised. The rhetorical question asked by a Khuluma participant requesting to know ‘who has been Khulumaed and who hasn’t?’ speaks volumes to the way that actors came to manipulate and transform Khuluma’s meaning in the context of transformation where symbols serve as weapons or rallying points. In this way power often crystallises around a single ‘thing’ which comes to carry a heavy (and sometimes contested) symbolic weight (Kelley 1994). Cohen (1989) proposes that we think of community not as an ‘integrating mechanism’, but rather as an ‘aggregating device’. In his approach, the commonality which is found for those ‘khulumaed’ need not be a uniformity. Here, we see the triumph of key symbols precisely because they are imprecise and thus ‘contain this variety that its inherent discordance does not subvert the apparent coherence which is expressed by its boundaries... This relative similarity or difference is not a

matter for objective assessment: it is a matter of feeling, a matter which resides in the minds of the members themselves' (Cohen 1989:20-21).

The heavy symbolic weight that came to be attached to Khuluma ran the risk of over-emphasis on the workshop encounter. This smooths over a further risk that people might feel they have done their work, that is, they have been 'khulumaed'. Khuluma, as an exercise of practising transformation of institutional culture through dialogue in a safe space, may possibly dissolve into a conservative discourse of reconciliation, unity and closure about the past that neither pays attention to the depth of the socio-economic gaps and the lack of actual interpersonal transformation, nor to the tremendous complexities of building a genuine and sustainable transformed University environment, especially where transformation is variously understood and where its meanings shift over time and across the university. Although Khuluma fulfilled an important initial function for a process of experimentation that individuals could pursue, it remains to be seen if these organised and supported sets of conversations have led to material changes in transformation, or any real improvement the institutional climate of the university.

Conclusion: A Note of Caution

The aim of this paper was to explore how certain key symbols came to have meaning and equally shaped meanings in the lives of staff working at UCT while inhabiting a space that demands 'transformation' of social relationships. Given the existence of competing theories of the symbol and its wide array of definitions it was necessary either to invent or to adapt a model to the exclusion of others. By adapting Sherry Ortner's model and modifying it with insights about power offered by Ferguson (1990), it becomes possible to integrate a cluster of key symbols in a part-to-whole set of relations. However, I offer a note of caution: Why are we (as academics) justified in calling a particular symbol 'key'? Academics struggle over issues of how to interpret symbols and understand their use (and our own use of them). As academics, we are not observers outside the processes of transformation struggle and symbolic representation. We have interests and loyalties and we also contribute to the meaning attached to symbols. Am I not, as a symbolic anthropologist, seeing meaning wherever and however I wish? What range of actors are the controllers of symbolic meaning? Do I acknowledge my role as one of those actors, knowing that the outcomes of one struggle for meaning influences other struggles, and the form and content of the symbols themselves?

I also was a Khuluma participant, who was simultaneously moved and paralysed by the workshop engagement and its ephemeral aftershocks (see Macdonald in press). Its enduring impact unfolds into other spaces. For example, embracing unsafety has allowed me to find a way of talking to students who

struggle with their own trauma, to map out ways to negotiate their personal lives and the academic world that so often neglects them. Equally, it allows me to put my teaching under the spotlight and engage with new pedagogical tools with which to teach and transform student learning environments. It allows me to relinquish control in the classroom and encourage students to find their relationships not only to me but, to their own knowledge and how it has been produced and embodied. It has allowed me to embrace the personal and paradoxical unsafety of the dynamics surrounding researchers and particularly white foreign researchers that were brought sharply into focus through Khuluma for me.

Many participants regarded their feedback of the workshop as a way to find personal closure to their experience of it. Indeed, the research process constituted an additional intervention within Khuluma's broader goals by facilitating ongoing contact between some Khuluma participants, and by enabling them to present their experiences in a wider arena. A similar process appears in play for myself. It would appear that by writing this article I am translating others' experiences into my own; an approach which Pat Caplan, following Ricoeur, defines as 'the comprehension of the self by the detour of the other' (1988:9). Caplan goes on to say, 'we need to acknowledge, and this happens but rarely, that in making this detour, the self also changes' (ibid). Firmly ensconced in this hermeneutic circle, I have glimpsed another change in myself. To return to the opening vignette, I imagine that by writing this 'we [I] will have made the workshop live on, at least a little'.

Notes

1. What Evans-Pritchard identifies as 'a few key words', is understood by Schneider (1968) as 'core symbols' in his study of American kinship, and in his study of Ndembu ritual what Turner (1967) referred to as 'dominant symbols'. Eric Wolf (1958) calls the Virgin of Guadalupe a 'master symbol' in understanding Mexican national identity.
2. See the report 'Hungry Souls: An Ethnographic Study of a Climate Intervention Strategy at UCT', prepared for the University Transformation Office (UCT 2006b).
3. A pilot workshop was launched in June 2006, followed in quick succession by an additional eight workshops from Aug-Sept.
4. See the ProCorp website: www.procorp.co.za
5. PASS refers to the University's professional, administrative and support staff.
6. By the time research concluded in October 2006, approximately 360 persons had participated in the Equality Matters and Khuluma workshops. Qualitative data were generated from interviews with 47 participants and output from two focus group discussions. The University's Transformation Office solicited its own

feedback, via email, from workshop participants, of which 24 anonymous responses were forwarded to the research team for further analysis. Some of the 47 informants were also email respondents.

7. The South African government's objective to achieve an adaptive economy characterised by growth, employment and equity by 2014 has involved strategies such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment and the Employment Equity Act of 1998.
8. The word 'khuluma' captures both 'to negotiate' and 'to act', but only if we accept that both the syntax and the semantics of the word, as they stand, convey, in themselves, the two meanings. Omitting some letters from the word would lead to the destruction of the very basic meaning of the word khuluma, which is 'to speak'. An alternative word could be 'khulumisenzo', a combination of 'Khulumis': 'to negotiate' and 'senzo', 'to act'.
9. See, for example, the Wikipedia entry for safe space: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/safe-space> or the toolkit for creating safe spaces for youth: <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org>.
10. For example, Tools for Wellness (www.toolsforwellness.com) offer a Safe Space EMF Protection Device for clearing spaces of electromagnetic bombardment. The company www.safespaces.co.uk provide custom made furniture for special needs.
11. There are computer software companies offering products. For example, Perimetrix SafeSpace™ claims a full-spectrum confidentiality protection and data integrity: <http://perimetrix.com/> or the Cnetsoftware: http://download.cnet.com/SafeSpace-Free-Edition/3000-2239_4-10717732.html
12. For example, see the eight minute trailer for the film *The Color of Fear* by Lee Mun Wah (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yt-o8RZpxT8&feature=related>). The film explores different issues of race in the United States through a dialogue between eight men of different ethnic backgrounds. In this particular trailer, a non-white participant responding to a query from a white participant is perceived as having lost clarity and logic in his narrative, indicates a lack of etiquette through bodily expressed aggression and is generally understood to be 'out of line' in a safe space.
13. See a description of the author's own emotional turmoil during and after the workshop (Macdonald in press).

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