

They are Burning Memory

10th Annual Helen Joseph Lecture

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“They are burning memory!” This is what I said to myself in my unmediated first reaction to the television coverage of the burning of the pictures and portraits of some of historical figures and other commemorative objects by protesting students at the University of Cape Town earlier this year. By the time I had downloaded some images from the internet my reactions had become a little more mediated.

One of the images that struck me was that of a plaque commemorating Jan Smuts. The inscription on it was readable from the light of the surrounding flames on their way towards it. “Jan Christiaan Smuts,” it read, “1870-1950 ‘His life was gentle, and the Elements / So mixt in him that Nature might stand up, / And say to all the world: This was a man.’” And then in two languages: “ERECTED BY THE PEOPLE OF THE CAPE. OPGERIG DEUR DIE MENSE VAN KAAPLAND”. The grandeur of a Shakespearean recall, enlisted to commemorate the life of a man described as a British Commonwealth Statesman, military leader and philosopher, was about to be consumed by hostile fire.

Two historic periods seemed to stare at each other at that moment some hundred meters or so below the pictorial icon of the Jameson Hall. On the one hand Jan Smuts, the second Prime Minister of South Africa, regardless of the complex history of his leadership, stood representing

the legacy of a history of conquest, finally ended in 1994. On the other hand, stood one of the nascent moments of another period of history in South Africa, begun in 1994 and still confronting the unfolding complexities of its own beginnings. The young of this period circling the bonfire of their making, were asking questions about Smuts whose legacy they say retains a power still so overwhelming it seems to snuff out the possibilities of their own future. They are unable "to breathe", they have been saying, suffocating in the legacy of "whiteness" whose grandeur to them was at that moment equal to the ashes that the plaque was about to become.

In the unfolding events it became clearer that the incineration of collected "white"¹ "colonial" objects as embodiments of "whiteness", was the onset of a declared process to "decolonise" the University of Cape Town, and rid it of aspects of its legacy that made for a campus environment in which those for whom such a legacy was not built, and which they felt, consigned them "to silence", found it impossible "to breathe". Thus the pictorial memory of "whiteness", an attribute of imperialism and colonialism in this part of the world, would symbolically

¹ In this lecture, words such as, "black", "white", "whiteness", and "blackness", are in quotes. With that device, I am wilfully distancing myself from them and the pain and suffering they have wrought on human beings around the world since the onset of the trans-atlantic slavery some four centuries ago.

and practically be devoured by fire and be reduced to ashes, its visual presence erased, and its historicity rendered invisible.

It remains to be seen whether total erasure is possible. Human memory exists independently of its physical representations. You will find it in the realms of mind and imagination. In my book, total erasure is not possible. But what people do with such commemorative representations, setting them up, removing them, or destroying them, is part of the story of human history that from time to time will occur.

“Without memory it would virtually be impossible to learn,” wrote Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu. “We could not learn from experience, because experience is something remembered. I would forever have to start at the beginning, not realising that a hot stove invariably burns the hand placed on it. What I know is what I remember, and that helps to make me who I am.” These remarkable words Archbishop Tutu wrote in his foreword to a book entitled Reflections in Prison, published in 2001.² It is as if this godly man wrote these words for me to help me think through a difficult subject of our times.

So, when student activists drive on to a campus with tyres and litres of petrol³ and later a bonfire is made of paintings and photographs, what are the memories that made them who they were at that precise

² Reflections in Prison. Mac Maharaj (Ed). Cape Town: Zebra, Robben Island Museum, 2001. p.vii

³ Case No: 2648/2016 The High Court of South Africa (Western Cape Division, Cape Town)

moment that their fire consumed artefacts of people they deemed representatives of something disagreeable from the past? What is it that they learned and the context in which that learning took place which led them to that moment of cognition to feel compelled to take the action that they did? What was the connection between who they were, or thought they were, and who they envisaged they would be after the act of burning? What was the memory of the past whose representations were being burned and the memory of the future that would rise out of the ashes?

At the heart of the call for the “decolonisation” of UCT was a more elemental source of student disaffection: being “black” in a “white” world. The #RhodesMustFall movement projected ‘blackness’ as a critical element in the discourse of protest against the “whiteness” of Rhodes’s legacy and the resilient effects of that legacy. The “black body in pain” needed to be affirmed as human against its dehumanising depreciation as exploited labour over more than a century of captured service to Rhodes’s imperial, capitalist vision and the rampant racist view of the world that drove that vision through elaborate justifications it set up.

The colonial economic system and its politics established and developed superior-inferior relationships between “white” and “black” humans respectively. It is common to approach this relationship from the direction of its agency: “whites” oppressing “blacks”, or civilised and humanised “whites” oppressing “uncivilised”, “dehumanised blacks”.

In reality, the system dehumanised both. It is the less recognised dehumanisation of “whites” by the very system and order they created, which it is the intention of the “decolonial” project to expose. It seeks to bring out into the open the “uncivilised” that is buried deeply in the heart of the self-proclaimed “civilised”. It is this “uncivilised” part of the “civilised” self that has been historically projected onto other humans and declared as the essence of who they were. The more the “civilised” saw the “uncivilised other” the less they were able to see the “uncivilised” self inside of themselves.

It is to be assumed that part of the “decolonial” project is to change the attitudes of “whites” towards “blacks” by getting them to abandon racist attitudes and behaviour associated with them as a group. This also has to do with the perception that South African “whites” did not give up much to make the post-apartheid reconciliation objective more successful. “Whites” seemed to assume that the country they claim to have “built” is desirable as it is to everyone, including the millions of “blacks” that were on the receiving end of its being “built”.

So what is expected of the exposed, “civilised colonial”? Is it remorse, guilt, identification as African, adopting Bafana Bafana, moving from the “white” suburbs to the “townships”, giving away a portion of their wealth in some way (whose accumulation is fundamentally questionable historically on moral and ethical grounds), adopting African names, learning African languages, “transferring their skills” ...? The list

of what may be expected of them and what they could become, is long. But there is only one thing they could do that makes a lot of sense to me.

The list of things they could become is really their business, I cannot tell them how to conduct that business. I would not ask them to do what they did to me and the likes of me: that is, tell them who to become and pass laws to compel them bring them into being something else they have not been. But I do want to say that the pre-1994 social and personal sensibilities the “whites” evolved is unsustainable and no longer achievable in the society South Africa has been purposefully evolving into since 1994. That I, as a “black” person, am part of the numerical and visionary majority that committed to bring that society into being; that this majority would be the universal norm of human presence in that new society, but that the substance and mechanisms of bringing that norm into being are supremely negotiable within the constitutional parameters of a new democracy, going hand-in-hand with the human sensibility that accords moral legitimacy to that constitutional intention. So, the co-creation of South Africa remains a vital constitutional imperative.

Perhaps this question of what is to be expected of “white” South Africans in a society where they are no longer the numerical minority that commanded overwhelming political, economic, and social power, can partly be answered by asking another question, possibly the ultimate question of agency in the still new South Africa. What did the “blacks” of South Africa have to become, or became by default despite

the odious intentions of their conquerors, once they had been conquered? The list is long.

They had to give up their social systems as they had lived them over generations before; they had to become workers, forced to disperse across the entire Southern African landscape as cheap labour. In the process, they themselves became something they may not have envisaged: some spinoffs of considerable value for the future where they were compelled to live. They learned many languages; they intermarried massively over time, blurring cultural boundaries between them; they became locally cosmopolitan in ways that those that consigned them to servitude couldn't; working in "white" people's homes, they got exposed, often in intimate proximity, to the "uncivilised" inside the "civilised". Then as the economy grew out of the control of the "whites" that "built" it, the "blacks" inevitably became graduates, teachers, priests, lawyers, scientists, engineers, politicians, trade unionists, journalists, writers, artists, agriculturalists, pilots, professors, across the entire spectrum of state endeavour.

The question of who becomes what after being something they would rather no longer continue to be can be both simplistic and complex all at one. It all suggests that South Africans compelled by a set of historical circumstances to cooperate, at first, out of a system of structured compulsions, later the energies released by such compulsions became too powerful to be contained by compulsion. Those who were in the numerical majority and yet violently controlled and compelled to work,

and over time considerably wounded in body and soul, have been formally agitating for a new society since 1912.

Against this background, a critical and sobering learning in state transformation since 1994 is how easily the visionary goals evolved over a century of struggle could be forgotten within a short space of time, and how the mechanisms of maintaining an oppressive society can be assimilated by those once oppressed, and reproduced as a feature of political and social behaviour such that their relative failure to create a new society according to the visionary specifications that have driven the struggle for that society for over a century is blamed on the racism of an ageing oppressor who is no longer in power. Visionary agency is given up precisely at that moment that it should be affirmed and intensified.

Against this context “black pain” in its current manifestations comes across to me more as an attribute of victimhood than of agency. To reclaim agency, a different question has to be asked. What is it that would constitute relief from “black pain”? There had to be a notion of “black wellbeing” and supportive conditions for it to be affirmed so that it might flourish. What were the features of the alternative identity and social value of “black” wellbeing after the termination of “black pain” when “whiteness” had been vanquished and removed from the scene? What is “black” wellbeing? In what kind of society would it flourish? Who would bring that society about? Would there still be “blackness” after the demise of “whiteness”?

As the RhodesMustFall movement unfolded across the country, what I heard from it came across as familiar, but also different. There was a resonance similar to what I and my generation said some forty years ago. Yet, the resurgence of “black consciousness” in the third decade of a free and democratic South Africa confronted me with what I can describe as an intergenerational dissonance, by which I mean that the terms of my disaffection with the current state of South Africa and a visionary retreat I sense as being underway, cannot be described in the terms of “black pain” that characterises the disaffections of a segment of the current generation of “black” students.

For a start I could attempt a preliminary comparison. If “black pain” is a current reality on our historically “white” campuses, forty years ago, my “black pain” was far less campus based than it was a result of a more generalised sense of being oppressed across the entire South African landscape. The apartheid imposed limitations on my movements were countered by an internal sense of expansiveness I and many of my peers experienced as the very meaning of “black consciousness”. It went hand-in-hand with the intention to achieve “black” wellbeing through achieving some autonomous agency in creating a society based on new relationships among ourselves and with all other people.

A “black” being externally depreciated in value discovered profound inner value which sought to replace oppression with freedom for all. My fear of “white” people, no matter how economically or militarily powerful they may have been was replaced by an enormous sense of inner

possibility and power which did not in any way minimise the brutal reality of what could happen to me were I to fall into the hands of the “white” system, as Steve Biko did. Despite the overt power of the racially oppressive system, there was something in me beyond its reach. But something in the national environment today, articulated on some university campuses in 2016, appeared to have reached that in accessible inner core in “black” students, and appears to have destabilised that core significantly such that the “black” so affected appear to have lost control over the emergent means of self-definition in the evolving, free and democratic social realm. A “black” identity in the circumstances becomes a fundamentally reactive one, anchored in the residual agency of “whiteness”, real or imagined.

There was another reality to contend with. The majority of “black” students in South African higher education forty years ago were registered in “historically black universities”. They were on campus as a manifestation of what it was required of “black” people to do if they wanted a university education. They were required to apply to institutions specifically designated for them. There, they were “black people” first and then “black students” after. There, their colour was a given reality requiring little justification. There was something numerically normal about that situation. Being “black” at a “historically black” campus was the norm.

To day, “black” students in “historically black universities” are comparatively less vocal as “blacks” than those at “historically white institu-

tions". The matter of numbers and the capacity to define space for self-expression seems a factor that requires greater understanding. Forty years later, in a country in "black" hands for twenty-three years, I feel far more in a "black" country than in a "white" country. In that country I do not feel compelled to be designated "black," even far less so to designate myself as such. The dissonance I feel expresses itself even more starkly here between a generation of "black" students who treasure the designation "black" and an older generation that is less insistent on the designation and does not experience the same level of pressure to wear it. Perhaps this dissonance may have something to do with a certain kind of "groundedness" that is unevenly distributed across the range of environmental and psychological spaces. It is about carrying your sense of confidence wherever you are without the indignity of having to justify and fight for it.

In 1973 Chabani Manganyi published a book he entitled Being-Black-In-The-World. Reading this book in 2016 got me to ask another set of questions. What if student activists of the #RhodesMustFall Movement had in large numbers encountered this book in their undergraduate syllabus at any South African University they had randomly chosen to attend? What if they had studied this book together with the writings of Steve Biko, Franz Fanon, Walter Rodney, or C.L.R James and other related books as part of a "canon" of curriculum fare in a country so remarkably described by James L Gibson: "Perhaps no country in history has

so directly and throughly confronted its past in an effort to shape its future as has South Africa.”⁴

The story of such confrontation would have been expected to be the educational preoccupation of a country in which learning was at the core of the evolution of identity. I am speaking here of a sense of radical normalcy than of prohibited subversion in what should be a free country. There are many more books which it could have been expected would form the base of a shared intellectual culture across the body of knowledge spanning fiction, biography, autobiography, poetry, drama, history, political science, anthropology, sociology, engineering and science. What would have been the cumulative impact of such knowledge on the #RhodesMustFall discourse on “blackness” and “whiteness” and other related issues, within the radical normalcy of a post-1994 pedagogy, as its effects acted themselves out in protest?

In Being-black-in-the-World Manganyi conveys a grounded faith in the elemental nature of human transformations that have been going on in Africa since the continent’s at first curious and then violent interaction with Europe. He argues that “being-in-the-world” with a “black body” has similar human aspirations as “being-in-the-world” with a “white body”. The fundamental similarity in both these experiences of being-in-the-world is in the shared human necessity to make culture which, writes Manganyi, “may be understood as constituting the most concrete

⁴ James L. Gibson. Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation? Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2004. p.1

medium for the structuring of the dialogue between man and the universe." If there are any differences, they are differences of lifestyle indicative of different ways in the respective histories of 'being in dialogue' with the world.

It seems as if whenever we take on "racism" and it glares back at us on a pedestal, we remove our gaze from the predominant condition of "black lives" where they really matter and require our tireless attention and the question that hangs in the air: what is the fate of the townships where the overwhelming number of "black lives" live? So when the fires rage and consume school after school, clinic after clinic, train after train, bus after bus, library after library, laboratory, and family lives seem precarious, and tender corruption takes away resources to improve "black lives", it is as if "black lives" matter only when they are insulted or shot at by "white" people, not when they conduct the daily business of life, making culture, right there where the greatest national investment would change the quality of our democracy for the greatest common good for a long time into the future.

Of course, it would be a mistake to come to the view that anti-racism action is not an important aspect of social activism. The challenge however is in how to characterise it. I choose to see it as part of how a "being-black-in-the-world" kind of norm, previously contained, is spreading beyond the township into the nooks and crannies of the South African landscape and its social configurations. That it encounters barriers means that it is on the march, and that bringing down the barriers is

a function of a normative expansion that requires greater definition and a determination to set the conditions of its character in place. It is a historic reality that has to be anticipated by all those South Africans who have been on the favoured side of history.

It is time to recognise that the norm of human presence in South Africa is “black”. That recognition is central to understanding where real agency for shaping the future of South Africa is overwhelmingly located, and that “blackness” becomes so normal it ceases to exist.

I would like to share what I remember most about the events at the Union Buildings on 23 October, 2015 as I followed them. It was not the meeting between President Zuma and university vice-chancellors inside, or the scenes of thousands of student demonstrators outside; not President Zuma’s promise that he would address the students, and that he did not do so; not the impact of his failure to do so which saw crowds of protesters growing restive from waiting without end in the hot sun until they began to push down the perimeter fence that stood between them and the President. If he wasn't going to come they would have to go to him. Nor is it the tear gas, or helmed riot police behind transparent shields; not the crack of gun shots, nor burning vehicles in the streets. What does remain vivid in my mind is something far less dramatic, yet for that very reason, a treasure of my memory.

What I do remember vividly are the student activists who in the suddenly quiet, ghostly, aftermath of a massive public protest, remained behind to clean up the war-zone streets. Many fellow protestors had left

in all likelihood with the memory of their protest and the violence it would most likely be remembered for. The cleaners of the aftermath pushed, pulled, or lifted away debris that had been dragged onto the streets. They swept away paper, ashes of burnt tyres and other litter of protest. They were calm yet determined as if what they were doing was something they felt they had to do.

Why did they remain to clean up when they could have just walked away and put behind them the scene of their drama like many had done? It seemed they needed to perform a ritual act of conclusion that surprisingly invites quiet, yet potent pondering. Their actions were a quiet speech conveying a message not only to the public, but I think even more vitally, to themselves. They were activists, they seemed to say in their action, who never abandoned the power of reflection even in the heat of an intense public moment. They actively cared not only about what they thought of themselves, but also what society thought of them. The scenes in which the anger and rage of protest stood face-to-face with the potential terror of official, state violence, the public-street cleaning students seem to say, should never be the only memories to take home.

Also to take home is how at the end of what was legitimate public action is a memory of how we have to strive also to constitute or reconstitute the social public at the very moment that we feel impelled to question it. These students tell us that the social public is never to be altered in destruction and then abandoned. To restore and reaffirm the so-

cial public is the responsibility of all generations of South Africans.. At all times the social public is the treasured space of community.

I think that the activists cleaning up the public space had another message to send in their actions. Destruction, they seemed to remind us, is wired heavily into the workings of the colonial that is being assailed. The assimilative nature of powerful oppressions can be reproduced by those that fight them, unwarily drawing them into a vicious cycle. Those that have been victims of the single story, can easily lose the sense of the beauty they yearn for in their struggles, and give in to the ugliness of means gone so wrong that they too can impose the single story on others as a weapon of explaining them away, thus casting away the responsibility to know them. In the public space to free the human from the historical distortions of race, South Africans need to continue to affirm their idealism.

Since the bonfire of artworks at UCT, fire as a weapon of protest has spread throughout the higher education system, and rekindled beyond. And so, when the portraits of the “colonials” have been burnt, the timeless questions remain: what is the future of the townships? What is the link between that future and schools and universities? What is the link between Sandton and Alexandra? When will the fires be tamed, and what will it take to tame them, so that new art work can be forged; to created new industries and forge inventions to meet the needs of a people in intimate dialogue with their new world? What will it take to tame fire, and to remember that fire can be a companion to invention; and that

for fire to play its companion role, requires of those who use it a lot more thought, a lot more rigour in the thinking, a lot more thoughtful detail in the doing, a lot more investment in time and focus to understand the rich complexity of people living in the social realm, meeting head-on the challenge of thought and imagination stretching across time into the centuries ahead, South Africa emerging as a successful democracy?

These are questions I leave you with.

14th September, 2016