THEY ARE BURNING MEMORY!

A STUDY OF INTERGENERATIONAL DISSONANCE

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Fire, a weapon of choice in recent protest action, leaves behind ashes and silence. What voices of meaning could rise out of such ashes? What could they tell us about the future of our still new democracy?

"They are burning memory!" This is what I said to myself in my unmediated first reaction to the television coverage of the burning of portraits 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 of a plaque commemorating Jan Smuts. The inscription was readable from the light of the flames: "Jan Christiaan Smuts. 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, about to be consumed by hostile fire.

Two historic periods seemed to stare at each other at that moment. On the one side, a history of conquest, finally ended in 1994. On the other, another period, begun in 1994, still confronting the unfolding complexities of its own beginnings. The young, circling the bonfire, say that the legacy of Smuts, still so overwhelming, seems to snuff out the possibilities of their own future. They are unable "to breathe", suffocating in the legacy of "whiteness".

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It remains to be seen whether total erasure is possible. "Without memory, it would virtually be impossible to learn," wrote Desmond Tutu in his foreword to a book entitled *Reflections in Prison*[1]:

> 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.

So, when student activists drive on to a campus with tyres and litres of petrol, what are the memories that made them who they are at that precise moment? »

What had they learned, and in what context, that 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 what was the projected memory of the future that would rise out of the ashes?

WHAT MEMORY

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 "black body in pain" needed to be affirmed as human against its dehumanising exploitation during more than a century of captured service to Rhodes's imperial capitalist vision and the rampantly racist view of the world that drove and justified it.

The colonial system established superior-inferior relationships between "white" and "black" humans. In reality, the system dehumanised both. The "decolonial" project intends to expose the less-recognised dehumanisation of "whites", to bring into the open the "uncivilised" heart of the self-proclaimed "civilised". This "uncivilised" part of the "civilised" self has been historically projected onto other humans. The more the "civilised" saw this "uncivilised other", the less they could see the "uncivilised" in themselves.

Part of the "decolonial" project is to change the racist attitudes and behaviour attitudes of "whites" towards "blacks". This also has to do with the perception that South African "whites" did not give up much for the post-apartheid objective of reconciliation. "Whites" seemed to assume that the country they claim to have "built" is desirable to everyone, including the millions of "blacks" who were on the receiving end of its being "built".

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So what is expected of the exposed "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? 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. I would not do what they did to the likes of me: pass laws to compel them into being something else they have not been. But I do want to say four things to them:

- that their pre-1994 social and personal sensibilities are unsustainable in the society that South Africa has been evolving into
- that I, as a "black" person, am part of the numerical and visionary majority that committed to bring this society into being
- that this majority would be the norm of human presence in this new society
- that the substance and mechanisms of bringing that norm into being are supremely negotiable within the constitutional parameters of a new democracy, and the human sensibility that accords moral legitimacy to that constitutional intention. The co-creation of South Africa remains a vital constitutional imperative.

Perhaps this question of what is to be expected of "white" South Africans can partly be answered by asking what is possibly the ultimate question of agency in the new South Africa. What did the "blacks" of South Africa have to become once they had been conquered? The list is long.

They had to give up their social systems as they had lived them for generations; they had to become workers, cheap labour, forced to disperse across the entire southern African landscape. In the process, they became something they may not have envisaged. They learned many languages. They intermarried massively over time, blurring cultural boundaries between them. They became locally cosmopolitan in ways that those who consigned them to servitude could not. Working in "white" people's homes, they were exposed, often in intimate proximity, to the "uncivilised" inside the "civilised". As the economy grew beyond the control of the "whites", the "blacks" inevitably became graduates, teachers, priests, lawyers, scientists, engineers, politicians, trade unionists, journalists, writers, artists, agriculturalists, pilots, professors.

The question of who becomes what after being something they would rather no longer be can be both simple and complex. It all suggests that South Africans were compelled by a set of historical circumstances to cooperate, at first, within a system of structured compulsions. Those who were in the numerical majority and yet violently controlled, compelled to work, and considerably wounded in body and soul have been formally agitating for a new society since 1912.

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state since 1994, and how the social and political features of an oppressive society can be assimilated and reproduced by those once oppressed – such that their relative failure to follow those visionary goals is blamed on the racism of an ageing oppressor who is no longer in power. Visionary agency is given up precisely at the moment that it should be affirmed and intensified.

BEING "BLACK" TODAY

In this context,the current manifestations of"black pain" come across more as an attribute of victimhood than agency. To reclaim agency, a different question has to be asked: *What would constitute relief from "black pain"?* What is "black" wellbeing? What would be the alternative identity and social features of "black" wellbeing when "whiteness" has been vanquished and removed from the scene? 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 Rhodes Must Fall movement unfolded across the country, 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 this, I mean that my disaffection with the current state of South Africa and the visionary retreat I sense cannot be characterised in the terms of "black pain" used by the current generation of disaffected "black" students.

I could attempt a preliminary comparison. Forty years ago, my "black pain"was more a generalised sense of being oppressed across the entire South African landscape. But the apartheid-imposed limitations on my movements were countered by an internal sense of expansiveness that I and many of my peers experienced as the very meaning of "black consciousness". It went hand in hand

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with the intention to achieve "black" wellbeing through our autonomous agency to create a society based on new relationships among ourselves and with all other people.

A "black", externally depreciated in value, discovered profound inner value that sought to replace oppression with freedom for all. My fear of "white" people, no matter how economically or militarily powerful, was replaced by an enormous sense of inner possibility and power. This 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.

Something in the national environment today, articulated on some university campuses in 2016, appears to have reached that inaccessible inner core in "black" students,and appears to have destabilised that core significantly. The affected "black" appears to have

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lost control over the emergent means of self-definition in the evolving, free and democratic social realm. A "black" identity in these circumstances becomes a fundamentally reactive one, anchored in the residual agency of "whiteness", real or imagined.

There is another point of comparison. Forty years ago, the majority of "black" students were required to apply to institutions specifically designated for them. There, they were "black people" first and then "black students". Their colour was a given reality and numerically normal. (Today, "black" students in "historically black universities" are comparatively less vocal as "blacks" than those at "historically white institutions". The capacity to define space for self-expression seems to be a factor that requires greater understanding.)

Forty years later, I feel far more in a "black" country than in a "white" country. I do not feel compelled to be designated "black," and even less so to designate myself as such. The intergenerational dissonance I feel expresses itself even more starkly here: a generation of "black" students who treasure the designation "black" and an older generation that does not experience the same pressure to wear it. This may have something to do with a kind of "groundedness" that is unevenly distributed across the range of environmental and psychological spaces. It is about carrying one's sense of confidence without the indignity of having to justify and fight for it.

In 1973, Chabani Manganyi published his book, *Being-Black-in-the-World*[2]. Reading this book in 2016 raised another set of questions. What if student activists of the Rhodes Must Fall movement had encountered this book in their undergraduate syllabus at any South African university? What if they had studied it together with the writings of Steve Biko, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, CLR James and others? James L Gibson wrote: "Perhaps no »

country in history has so directly and thoroughly confronted its past in an effort to shape its future as has South Africa." This could be expected as the educational preoccupation of a country where learning was at the core of the evolution of identity. I am speaking here of a sense of radical normalcy in what should be a free country. It could have been expected that a new canon would form the base of a shared intellectual culture spanning fiction, biography, autobiography, poetry, drama, history, political science, anthropology, sociology, engineering and science. What would have been the impact of such knowledge on the #RhodesMustFall discourse of "blackness" and "whiteness"?

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 first interactions with Europe. He argues that "being-in-the-world with a black body" and "being-in-the-world with a white body" have similar human aspirations. Both fundamentally share the human necessity to make culture, which, Manganyi writes, "may be understood as constituting the most concrete medium for the structuring of the dialogue between man and the universe". Any differences are indicative of differences in the respective histories of "being in dialogue with the world".

Whenever we take on "racism" and it glares back at us from its pedestal, it seems that we remove our gaze from the condition of "black lives" where they really matter and require our tireless attention. The question that hangs in the air is the fate of the townships where the overwhelming numbers of "black lives" live. When the fires rage and consume school after school, clinic after clinic, train after train, bus after bus, library after library after laboratory; when family lives seem precarious;when tender corruption takes away resources to improve "black

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lives": it is as if "black lives" matter only when they are assaulted by "white" people, not when they conduct the daily business of life, of making culture, right there where the greatest national investment would change the quality of our democracy for the greatest common good long into the future.

Of course, anti-racism action is an important aspect of social activism. The challenge is how to characterise it. I see it as a norm of "being-black-in-the-world", previously contained, 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 bringing down the barriers is a function of a normative expansion that requires greater definition and a

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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 the real agency for shaping the future is overwhelmingly located, so that "blackness" becomes so normal it ceases to exist.

A SENSE OF BEAUTY

I would like to share what I remember most about the events at the Union Buildings on 23 October 2015. It is not the meeting between President Zuma and university vice-chancellors inside, or the thousands of student demonstrators outside; not the president's promise that he would address the students, and that he did not do so; not 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. Nor is it the tear gas, the helmeted riot police behind transparent shields,the crack of gunshots, nor the burning vehicles in the streets. What remains vivid is something far less dramatic, and for that very reason, a treasure of my memory.

I remember the student activists who in the suddenly quiet, ghostly, aftermath of a massive public protest,remained behind to clean up the streets. They pushed, pulled and lifted debris that had been dragged onto the streets. They swept away paper, remains of burnt tyres and other litter of protest. They were calm yet determined, as if they were doing something they felt they had to do.

They could have just walked away from the scene of their drama like many others had done.Why did they remain to clean up? Perhaps they needed to perform a ritual act

(Pic: http://townpress.co.za)

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of conclusion, one that surprisingly invites quiet, potent pondering. Their actions quietly conveyed a message to the public and – I think even more vitally – to themselves. They were activists, they seemed to say, who never abandoned the power of reflection even in the heat of an intense public moment. They actively cared 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 street-cleaning students seem to say, should never be the only memories to take home.

We also take home the memory of how we have to strive to 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 social public is the responsibility of all generations of South Africans. At all times, the social public is the treasured space of community.

I think there is still another message 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 who 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 wrong. They too can impose the single story as a weapon against others, explaining them away, and 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. 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 artwork can be forged? To create 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?

This requires of those who use it a lot more thought, a lot more rigour in the thinking, more thoughtful detail in the doing, more investment in time and focus to understand the rich complexity of people living in the social realm, to meet the challenges stretching across time into the centuries ahead, with South Africa emerging as a successful democracy?

These are questions I leave you with. NA

NOTES

This is an edited version of the 10th Annual Helen Joseph Lecture, delivered on 14 September 2016at the University of Johannesburg. The full transcript is available at http://www.njabulondebele.co.za/2016/09/they-are-burning-memory.

1. Maharaj, M (ed.). 2001. *Reflections in Prison: Voices from the South African Liberation Struggle*. Cape Town: Zebra Press
2. Manganyi, NC. 1973. *Being-Black-in-the-World*. Johannesburg: Spro-cas/Ravan