

RHODES MUST FALL

A COMMENT

By Simphiwe Sesanti

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The statue has been brought down – now what?



Prof Simphiwe Sesanti

The Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has received mixed reactions since it first captured media headlines. There were those who felt it was a fruitless exercise about a trivial issue – the removal of a statue. Others felt that the students were unreasonable, that removing the statue was an attempt to delete history. But this is not how the roaring young lions saw their task. For them, the figure of Cecil John Rhodes was an insult to the dignity of African people, a symbol of their dispossession, and a reminder of their pain. If it was taking time for Africans – who continue to be the face of poverty – to secure their complete freedom, at least there must be no towering figure symbolically rubbing salt into their wounds.

Unbeknownst to many, when Chumani Maxwele, the native who threw the faeces at the statue, performed his deed, some black consciousness and pan-Africanist-oriented students at UCT were already engaged in serious discussion among themselves about what it means to be black and African in a white-dominated space that was perceived to be Eurocentric even as it was promoted as a world-class African university. When Maxwele came to the stage, they instinctively felt that he would be vulnerable and under siege if fellow black students failed to surround him in a show of solidarity. And so, they organised and mobilised.

Rhodes' statue was only a trigger for the articulation of bigger issues. One of them was a call for an Afrocentric education. Scholars like Molefi Kete Asante emphasise that Afrocentricity is not a mere reaction to Eurocentrism, nor the flip-side of it. It must not be taken for granted that everyone – whether its promoters and detractors – understands this. As Asante once wrote, “Afrocentricity is a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity.”

As these struggles were taking place, Miriam Makeba's Soweto Blues kept echoing in my mind: "*Benikuphina madoda xa abantwana bejikejela ezi zimbokodo, benikuphi na?*" "Where were you, men, when the children were throwing stones, where were you?". While the song addresses black men's paralysis in 1976, when children were being crushed by the mighty arm of apartheid, I could not help feeling guilty that the young people at UCT are waging struggles that were supposed to be waged by us, their parents.

It was a personal guilt because I was aware of some courageous black academics who gave support to the young ones. But, as our African ancestors would have it, an opportunity came my way when New Agenda editor Ben Turok phoned me to express his frustration with what he referred to as "a rejection of white students" by the RMF movement. A white student had told him that the movement was holding exclusively black meetings, which brought back painful memories of the 1950s for Turok, reminding him of the hostility of African nationalists within the ANC who rejected white involvement in Congress politics.

Turok strongly believes that a strong alliance between progressive white people and black people is necessary to defeat race-based forces of oppression. This was the case initially with RMF; progressive young white people had supported and joined the movement. Why this change, now? Knowing my black consciousness and pan-Africanism background, Turok invited me to Cape Town to go meet with RMF activists and write an opinion piece. I like Turok because I think that he is a well-meaning white comrade who paid a heavy price through incarceration for his stand against the apartheid system. I told this to the students so that they could decide if they wanted to talk to me or not.

Before our meeting commenced, I saw a white student sitting alone



Picture source: rhodesmustfall.co.za

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nearby and asked one of the young lions if he was a member or not. The answer was yes, as was confirmed when he participated in the meeting. So, if it was not true that RMF has no white members, where do the claims that the movement marginalises white students come from? They told me it was true that they wanted to be alone as black people in some meetings. This let them speak frankly together about their pain without holding back, and without worrying about whether white students would express unacceptable views because, being white, they did

not understand the problem. The white student said that he saw nothing wrong with this approach; all he wanted to do was to give support without imposing.

Coming from my background, the students made perfect sense to me. Coming from his Congress tradition, I can relate to Turok's difficulty. I can empathise with the white student who feels rejected by white people for identifying with the black cause, and then the pain resulting from perceived rejection by blacks.

But I side with the black consciousness approach of the Rhodes Must Fall movement. They also have their own difficulties. Radical black young women are raising serious questions with their male counterparts in the movement. They see and confront the insensitivity of male black consciousness adherents who think and speak in ways that marginalise black women in the struggle. Some think that, in the same way that whites are requested not to participate in blacks-only meetings, black women must have black-women-only meetings. As a black-conscious, pan-Africanist revolutionary, this makes perfect sense to me. [NA](#)