

Decolonizing Knowledge And The Question Of The Archive & Podcast ~ Decolonizing The University



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This document was deliberately written as a spoken text. It forms the basis of a series of public lectures given at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), at conversations with the Rhodes Must Fall Movement at the University of Cape Town and the Indexing the Human Project, Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch. The nature of the events unfolding in South Africa, the type of audience that attended the lectures, the nature of the political and intellectual questions at stake required an entirely different mode of address – one that could speak both to reason and to affect.

Twenty one years after freedom, we have now fully entered what looks like a *negative* moment. This is a moment most African postcolonial societies have experienced. Like theirs in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, ours is gray and almost murky. It lacks clarity.

Today many want to finally bring white supremacy to its knees. But the same seem to go missing when it comes to publically condemning the extra-judicial executions of fellow Africans on the streets of our cities and in our townships. As Fanon intimated, they see no contradiction between wanting to topple white supremacy and being anti-racist while succumbing to the sirens of isolationism and national-chauvinism. Many still consider whites as “settlers” who, once in a

while, will attempt to masquerade as “natives”. And yet, with the advent of democracy and the new constitutional State, there are no longer settlers or natives. There are only citizens. If we repudiate democracy, what will we replace it with?

Our white compatriots might be fencing off their privileges. They might be “enclaving” them and “off-shoring” them but they are certainly going nowhere. And yet they cannot keep living in our midst with whiteness’ old clothes. Fencing off one’s privileges, off-shoring them, living in enclaves does not in itself secure full recognition and survival. Meanwhile, “blackness” is fracturing. “Black consciousness” today is more and more thought of in fractions. A negative moment is a moment when new antagonisms emerge while old ones remain unresolved.

It is a moment when contradictory forces – inchoate, fractured, fragmented – are at work but what might come out of their interaction is anything but certain.

It is also a moment when multiple old and recent unresolved crises seem to be on the path towards a collision.

Such a collision might happen – or maybe not. It might take the form of outbursts that end up petering out. Whether the collision actually happens or not, the age of innocence and complacency is over. When it comes to questions concerning the decolonization of the university – and of knowledge – in South Africa now, there are a number of clear-cut political and moral issues – which are also issues of fairness and decency – many of us can easily agree upon.

Demythologizing whiteness

One such issue has just been dealt with – and successfully – at the University of Cape Town. To those who are still in denial, it might be worth reiterating that Cecil Rhodes belonged to the race of men who were convinced that to be black is a liability.

During his time and life in Southern Africa, he used his considerable power – political and financial – to make black people all over Southern Africa pay a bloody price for his beliefs. His statue – and those of countless others who shared the same conviction – has nothing to do on a public university campus 20 years after freedom.

The debate therefore should have never been about whether or not it should be brought down. All along, the debate should have been about why did it take so

long to do so.

To bring Rhodes' statue down is far from erasing history, and nobody should be asking us to be eternally indebted to Rhodes for having "donated" his money and for having bequeathed "his" land to the University. If anything, we should be asking how did he acquire the land in the first instance.

Arguably other options were available and could have been considered, including that which was put forward late in the process by retired Judge Albie Sachs whose contribution to the symbolic remaking of what is today Constitution Hill is well recognized.

But bringing Rhodes' statue down is one of the many legitimate ways in which we can, today in South Africa, demythologize that history and put it to rest - which is precisely the work memory properly understood is supposed to accomplish.

For memory to fulfill this function long after the Truth and Reconciliation paradigm has run out of steam, the demythologizing of certain versions of history must go hand in hand with the demythologizing of whiteness. This is not because whiteness is the same as history. Human history, by definition, is history beyond whiteness.

Human history is about the future. Whiteness is about entrapment. Whiteness is at its best when it turns into a myth. It is the most corrosive and the most lethal when it makes us believe that it is everywhere; that everything originates from it and it has no outside. We are therefore calling for the demythologization of whiteness because democracy in South Africa will either be built on the ruins of those versions of whiteness that produced Rhodes or it will fail.

Read more (PDF-file): <http://wiser.wits.ac.za/AchilleMbembe>

Podcast: <https://archive.org/details/AchilleMbembeDecolonizingTheUniversity>