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A Search for the Human in the Shadow of Rhodes

Siona O’Connell

Given the events of the last few months by students and staff that pivoted around the successful removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue on April 9, 2015 at the University of Cape Town (UCT), I am at a loss to comprehend my lingering cynicism that transformation has yet to be examined in all its complexities at this premier tertiary institution overlooking the city of Cape Town. The ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ campaign to remove the statue drew attention to the complexities of the word *transformation*. This term has emerged in the post-apartheid landscape as a deliberately vague rubric indicating that something may and should change, though, as recent events indicate, we are not precisely sure what that something is, or who is scripting and directing the narrative.

Since the removal of the statue, social media on the transformation issue has abated, corridor conversations have given way to the urgencies of getting through the semester and the calls for curriculum change have seen a flurry of new committees in a haste to get on with it all. What the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ student-led campaign called attention to was that despite our best efforts to extricate ourselves from a power structure at this institution that bears little resemblance to the demographics of post-apartheid South Africa, no amount of education, money, or ostensibly good intentions has been able to eradicate the continued denial of our value as human beings. Time and again some of us find that who we are—our histories, pasts, memories—are disavowed.

The gesture of removing the statue is of significance in many ways for the university, but I have deep concerns, though, that this gesture will remain precisely that—a gesture. The real hard work of thinking about decolonizing knowledge demands that the institution—from the University Council, Senate, executive management, and faculty to all support staff—be uncharacteristically self-reflexive and critical in altogether different ways. If we are to understand differently, then this criticality becomes crucial as an imperative to destabilize dominant and established narratives that have landed us in the position in which we now find ourselves,

struggling to make sense of a present whilst doing so with the tools of the past. We will need to re-think ideas of subjectivities and Western modes of truth, history, and identity. We will have to take the archive of the oppressed seriously, an archive that talks about the local, the mundane, and the particular as entry points to how we consider questions of loss, trauma, power, contestation, and affirmation.

These approaches are important not only for South Africans but also for the rest of the African continent if we are to position this institution as a place of learning that imaginatively foregrounds Africa as its point of departure. This exercise must, then, examine those spaces of absence that paradoxically exist in the physical space of the academy. It should look for and theorize those histories of oppression that exist in the shadows in search of a reconceptualization of the humans that appear to be lost in indistinguishable shades of grey in the buildings situated on Rhodes's hill.

These questions are far larger than the removal of statues, the re-arrangement of works of art, or the renaming of roads and buildings. Rather, they speak to responsibility, freedom (academic and otherwise), equity, inclusion, and exclusion, drawing attention to the stark shortcomings of existing diversity and transformation policies. The lived experiences of those marked by being on a particular side of history continue to play out in all sorts of ways in the day-to-day life of the university. Conceptualizing privilege beyond purely economic terms, the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign drew attention to the inescapable realities of being Black in a White world. We are reminded of these realities as the lives of millions of Black South Africans continue to be scripted by the color of their skins.

The urgent question of transformation welcomes a series of questions, including those of ideologies of race as well as multiple and open-ended meanings of history. By thinking about the past, imagining history as being in the present, embedding these narratives in comparable and theoretical discourse, we are offered the chance to interrogate previously silenced understandings of oppression. This, in turn, will argue for a disruption of familiar and conventional tropes of knowing and being. The business of transformation does, however, demand a journey into those other lives and experiences that offer a way of living after oppression and

will, as well, become a writing of a history of lives that continue to be lived. What transformation of this sort offers is a glimpse into those other ordinary narratives that have not been recognized and which have not been acknowledged by history. These points to silences and omissions on the part of history, and which further serve to maintain and expand a certain set of power relationships and hierarchies.

This must be the context of any discussion about transformation and knowledge practices and higher education in South Africa. For me, particularly at this time in South Africa's history, our work in understanding the human must center upon the study of the human and freedom, ideas that have everything to do with the critical analysis of the world in which we live. This involves working through those difficult questions about who we are, how we live together in difference, and what we consider the human to be, both in life and in death, and spans across all fields of study. Particularly for us, with our own oppressive past, the question of the human, therefore, becomes important. It becomes critical when we talk about the study of Africa. And it becomes crucial for those involved in science and technology, too, as together we think about what precisely it is we are trying to do, what kind of country and continent we are trying to build, and on what foundation it rests.

The question of the human speaks about the past in the present, and it demands a radical look into ways of life and sets of practices—a look that asks whether we are really free. We need to think about the divide between the sciences and technology and to acknowledge that that how we think about the shape and form of the academy is really to think about the human. It demands that we think through the lines between emancipation, liberty, and freedom, as well as understand that freedom needs to be conceptualized as something other than separate from the living of ordinary lives

Only time will tell whether the latest affair will be relegated to the annals of UCT as the “Statue Affair” in much the same way other university affairs of particularly darker shades, including the Mafeje Affair of 1968, the Mamdani Affair of 1998, and the Centre for African Studies Affair of 2011. These affairs reflect an established pattern that draws attention to the inability of this university to transform itself as an institution that values all its

publics. They highlight the reluctance of this liberal university to be bold in a contemporary South African moment that demands a radically new way of thinking.

At best, the charge leveled at the institutions that have failed to transform in any meaningful fashion may be seen by some as a well-intentioned oversight. Others may be inclined to see it as nothing short of a dereliction of duty and an unforgiveable betrayal of the promise of 1994. Whatever the perspective, and regardless of how difficult the process of real change may be, the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign will serve as a crucial intervention in this particular time and space, providing a much needed armature from which to think through the persistent realities of colonial and apartheid afterlives.