

NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

100 YEARS OF MANDELA



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(6 March 2019: 19h00)

Dalibhunga

This time? That Mandela?

Colloquium
6-8 March 2019

Opening Address by Professor Sibongile Muthwa
Vice-Chancellor, Nelson Mandela University
18h00: 6 March 2019

Introduction

Programme Director

Chair of Council

HSRC CEO; and his team

NMF CEO; and his team

Scholars and friends

DVCs

Deans

Staff and students

Participants

(to be confirmed)

Honoured Guests

This is a gathering of friends, collaborators, colleagues, co-travellers, and of critical interlocutors to make sense, if this is at all possible, of Mandela; the person chosen by the global community to put a human face to our aspirations for a socially just world. This is the plain, straightforward truth that we are required to deconstruct, that we are expected to problematize ... so as to unweave its simplicity. For, certainly, massive layers of complexities and ambiguities are captured in this statement *and* this position; between veneration and critique *of* Mandela.

The university's name change in 2017, from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University to Nelson Mandela University, at first appears merely to drop a word, or to edit the acronym. The 'M' of Metropolitan, the geo-municipal name, is simply deleted; some may think. Far from it. As you know, the drop of the 'M'

shifts the entire angle, the essence, of the university and our intellectual and social project. My address to you this evening deals with one aspect of this shift. That is, to develop, with partners, you, an academic and scholarly expression of the name 'Mandela'.

In his address on the name change occasion, then-Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa emphasised that we are 'shouldering a great responsibility' by taking on the name of Mandela (Ramaphosa, 2017). Our response has been, as we foregrounded in my inaugural speech, to position Nelson Mandela University as a university in service of society; and all the exciting and productive work that comes with that through our core mandates.

You have picked up from the concept note that guides this colloquium that we make a distinction between Mandela, the person, and the italicized *Mandela*, the social figure. About Mandela, the person, an infinite number of books, films and documentaries already exist. It is an industry, 'arguably supporting a saturated market dominated by work, which reproduces the same basic narrative and the same well-known images' (2018), as Prof Verne Harris argued in his talk at our university last year.

For Nelson Mandela University, the *Mandela* in italics, in a deep sense, refers to the social figure ... the dense location of scholarly work where history and subjectivity make social life.¹ Such reading of *Mandela* is scant, or non-existent; a point also underscored by Prof Verne Harris in his talk that I referred to earlier. He goes on to suggest that 'all too rare are the fresh line of enquiry, the unexpected insight, sustained critical analysis, and the deep, deconstructive

¹ Based on Gordon, A. (2008), *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 8.

reading of archive. Here precisely lies the potential for the Nelson Mandela University to take the lead in promoting what we could call loosely ‘Mandela Studies’ (2018). More about this later.

Shortly after the university’s name change, I began my tenure as Vice-Chancellor. This, at a singular and personal level, ties me directly to the University Council’s profound and, for me, daunting proposal for us to reflect *‘on the moral and social responsibility associated with embracing this name, its implications for our identity and strategic choices, as well as transformations we need to make in order to align ourselves more appropriately to the name’* (2017).

I have, since then, started an extensive listening campaign within the university and with its publics; engaging our academic and support services outfits, the research and engagement entities, and so on. These are continuing. Key to our engagement within and outside the university is the idea of the ‘Mandela’ name. I have presided over a range of strategy discussions on this subject matter, and opened and launched many events, research initiatives, chairs and centres under the rubric of the university’s Mandela Centenary Celebrations. We are generating a renewed impetus for humanising pedagogy in our teaching and learning endeavours; and we are in the process of reimagining ‘engagement’ beyond the bounds of conventional university practices.

Our university is, first and foremost, a university; and it has to execute its mandates as part of its public function, across the sciences, knowledge fields and *in service of society*. It does so against the backdrop of the grand challenges of our time, the challenges that Mandela engaged with almost his entire life. They are well known, with poverty and inequality key amongst them. We need

new interpretive schemes and practices to challenge them. This is the task of the university.

Because we are a university carrying the Mandela name, one way, amongst others, of responding to these challenges, is to become a productive academic expression of *Mandela*, like no other institution of education. Our university should be known as a foremost scholarly formulation of the Mandela legacy, with pragmatic import and real-life programmes that make a difference in the lives of ordinary people.

Far from being about Mandela (the person), the scholarly formulation of *Mandela* (the construct, the embodiment, the touchstone) is the endless, relentless pursuit to bring an intellectual angle to this figure of justice, to generate new praxes for engaging social injustices ... to move the very idea of justice further than *Mandela*.

When we chose ***Dalibhunga*** to signal our engagement *on Mandela*, we had the convening of dialogues, as the name intimates, in mind. But, we also ask, **This time? That Mandela?**, to put upfront our conviction that *Mandela* should be encountered in the plural.

Much of what I am sharing with you in these remarks has been stated in different forms over the past year at our university. However, I would like to make three key arguments that may have a bearing on this colloquium.

One. To work *with Mandela*, the social figure, is to accept that legacy is not a 'static inheritance, but a disruptive re-visitation of the past'². Here I am mobilising the work of Wilder (2004) on two great 'Black' intellectual figures, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. In relation to them, Wilder argues that a legacy, 'neither means that it constitutes a static piece of the past that remains unchanged over time nor that it expresses a harmonious evolutionary unity between the past and the present' (2004: 53). *Legacy* suggests rich possibilities for conceptualizing the relation between past and present so that we can work against the lasting structures of domination. This presupposes an intellectual and practical solidarity with our Continent, and the Global South. *Mandela* invites us to do just this, as a key orientation of a Mandela Studies Programme.

Legacy, in the way we want it to be employed here, refers to all struggles against oppression, here and elsewhere. It also refers to Mandela's context, his co-travellers, Winne Madikizela Mandela and Albertina Sisulu, to name just two.

Two. There is a staleness about our intellectual, social and political imaginations in the higher education sector. All universities, it seems, are now social-justice oriented ... and they throw around the concepts of transformation, diversity, inclusivity, decolonisation, curriculum renewal, and so on, in their 'branding' and 'public relations' exercises.

Nelson Mandela University, at this time, under our leadership, must reject this approach. Our *work* must be the university's branding; it must be able to speak for itself. We must be seen to cultivate humanity, and put effort into engaging

² See Keet, A. (2011), based on Wilder, G. (2004), 'Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation'.

ourselves, and our communities, in as yet unimaginable ways. New forms and modes of thought, and new practices of producing, framing and distributing knowledge and its relationship to society need to emerge.

So, this is the question: how do we work towards transforming this university into one that is indisputably *in service of society*? Ramaphosa offers the answer in his address when he states that '[b]y recognising the legacy of Madiba, by studying what he stood for and what he means to our people, you will fully realise the transformative value of higher education' (2017). *Mandela* is then not just a name for the university, or a signifier of responsibility, but our guide for how we can live up to that responsibility. A Mandela Studies programme, worthy of its name, will meet this challenge head-on.

Three. What does it mean to engage *Mandela* in italics? What does it imply to contest him as a social figure?

Allow me to spend some time on this, please.

There are two ways, probably many more, in which the 'image' of the ghost can be brought into conversation with our idea of the social figure of *Mandela*.

Firstly, Elleke Boehmer, who would have joined us at this event if it were not for a family bereavement, has already explored *Mandela* as a Spectre in the Prison Garden on Robben Island in her 2008 book: *Mandela as a living ghost*, so to speak, as a 'prisoner-for-life'. The prisoners on the island were reduced to spectres, sentenced to life.

She argues:

It was in relation to their ghostly dimension of mere living-on [...] that concepts of justice and dignity were most clearly to be comprehended, unrestricted by the circumstances of finite, ordinary life. As Mandela himself wrote in a key essay, 'National Liberation': '[Here] [o]ne is able to stand back and look at the entire movement from a distance.' (2008: 157)

This ghostly dimension of prison life allowed Mandela and his comrades on the island to formulate sharper categories of justice and human dignity.

In a sense, the living ghost of Mandela during the prison years paved the way for *Mandela*, the ghost after his death.

Secondly, *Mandela* is a social figure in the way Avery Gordon understands the ghost to be a social figure: he haunts us in our endeavours to re-imagine and reclaim the university. Gordon argues that investigating the 'ghost' can 'lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life' (2008: 8). It is this dense site that we want to begin to explore in this colloquium.

Thinking of *Mandela* in this way, through the lens of 'haunting', is also a means of coming to *know* differently. It is part of the necessary transformative labour surrounding *how* we know. It is this labour that will allow us to transform our relationship to society.

Here, then, is a suggestion of the potential power that resides in calling on the social figure of *Mandela* to create anew the university's social justice intentions; and to make transformational and transformative leadership a standard orientation within the university.

Mandela is more than a set of decontextualized values. The figure of *Mandela* mobilises affect, in multiple and complex ways. His haunting of this institution requires that we be drawn, 'sometimes against our will and always a bit magically' (Gordon, 2008: 8), into a constant process of engagement; not only with the traces of the past, but also with the future imagined at the moment of transition. *Mandela* is inextricably entwined with both this past and this future.

The belief in the realisation of this future has largely been lost, along with a global loss of faith in democratic institutions and their promises of a more equal society. It is the social figure of *Mandela*, his ghost, who tells us that this future is not lost ... his future is haunting us; and we must respond.

Janice Radway eloquently describes Gordon's call for a new way of knowing as 'a practice of being attuned to the echoes and murmurs of that which has been lost but which is still present among us in the form of intimations, hints, suggestions, and portents' (2008: xi). It is fitting that we consider *Mandela* as a figure who draws together the past, present and future in a dynamic and productive way; to hear these murmurs, import them into the present, and project them into the future. We hope that this colloquium will be this kind of 'ear'; a form of hearing that can be taken up by a Mandela Studies Programme.

I hope that I, with these three points, have stirred your interest into imagining how intellectually exciting and challenging; as well as socially pragmatic and politically productive, a Mandela Studies Programme can be.

The idea of *Mandela*, the social figure, permeates the work that some of you here are already doing ... we try to keep abreast of these developments because it is instructive for our work as a university; we are pleased that you are here.

A Critical Mandela Studies Programme is already in the making.

Let me conclude

One of the ways in which we intend to *become* a productive academic expression of *Mandela* is through the establishment of a *Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies* (TIMS). This colloquium is a warm invitation to all of you to help us think, do and co-travel this journey with us. We have left open both the 'idea' and 'form' of TIMS, so that it can emerge in our travelling discussions with each other. Critical openness should be a key principle of TIMS, to designate the idea of the 'critical' in Mandela Studies itself.

I, along with my team and colleagues, see TIMS as the principle articulation of my intellectual project as Vice-Chancellor of the Nelson Mandela University. It will work to bring together the academic themes of my inaugural address. These themes being: social justice; poverty, inequality and unemployment; public, transformative leadership; university transformation; non-racialism, equality, human rights and democracy; university, community and society; the Mandela

identity and posture; renewal of academy and curriculum; humanising pedagogy; transdisciplinarity; revitalising the humanities; and student-centrism.

TIMS will be key in framing our university's response to these themes. In particular, it needs to develop a Pan-African intellectual solidarity and scholarship; mobilise Mandela Studies to contribute to redrawing the frontiers between the natural sciences and the humanities; and explore the renewal of humanities in various forms.

The 'real' conversation between the 'natural sciences' and the 'humanities' has not yet begun. TIMS needs to facilitate discussions on how different disciplinary ways of knowing can be bridged; for the natural sciences and humanities to 'pierce' each other's boundaries. Moreover, it needs to be seized by the question: how can such transdisciplinary knowledges be co-created with our publics?

Ultimately, TIMS may be one of the outfits that works in ways that puts the question of what the university is for firmly on the table. To rethink, in deep ways, the purposes of the university endeavour.

At this colloquium, we have many consummate Mandela scholars ... those who have already engaged *Mandela* in italics and in plural. We are grateful for your time, solidarity and expertise. The same goes for our co-travellers, friends and interlocutors from the NMF and HSRC; our students, staff, invited colloquium attendees; and the university's executive and council.

Enjoy your time here at our university; I wish you a productive colloquium.

I am looking forward to receiving the report of this colloquium as a 'guide' on how, through the name of Mandela and its social figure, we can live up to our ambition of a university in service of society.

Many thanks for journeying with us; this is a 'beginning'.

End

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