



THE GRIOT

– WHO'S FALLING WHO?

Keyan G. Tomaselli

Once “Rhodes Must Fall” reached Oxford, that august place where Inspector Morse applies his trade, the matter really did need attention. In the aftermath of the Rhodes statue being dismantled, packed and removed from UCT, UKZN’s forlorn King George V remained paint splattered, looking like a postmodern pajama man in front of the Howard College building, surveying the Durban harbour. His stripes reminded us that student debate (or painting) is alive and well. In contrast, the President Steyn statue at the University of Free State (UFS) remained pristine but, like rhinos, was assigned guards, though President Swart was cut up for supper.

Why was Prez Steyn initially spared the Fall? Quite simply, because he had been rearticulated as a site/sight of reconciliation, where anyone with a gripe could informally meet and talk with the UFS Vice-Chancellor (VC) Professor Jansen in the early morning. I had suggested that King George be similarly mobilised at UKZN. After the defacement, some students had wanted to clean up the King – can’t leave him looking like a carnival prop, they observed. Leave him be, I suggested, we need to be reminded both of the King and of those who defaced him and of his potential for a place for discussion.

The “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign did not quite reach Cairo. But it was stalled at the end of 2015 by the absolutes that impede all students: end of the teaching term, exams and of course, drunken celebrations and the holidays. Politics really does need to stop for the festive season. I wrote a *Griot* column in *UKZNdabaOnline* on the matter, and submitted a document to the hastily convened Heritage and Naming Committee. My Centre for Communication, Media and Society, I reminded, had played a key role along with UDF Vice-President and sometime UKZN student, Mewa Ramgobin, in developing cultural policy for the Convention for a Democratic South Africa in the mid-1990s, which was adopted by the new government.

The proposal was that all monuments should be retained and used for reconciliation, as put into practice by Jansen.

I got a tart response from one UKZN correspondent about colonialism. But the period was not mentioned: Shaka's bloody domination of previously fragmented Zulu clans, or Mzilikazi's breakaway swathe of destruction through the interior, or the dispossession of the First People across southern Africa, or the Trekkers, the Boers, the British and now the Chinese whose alms, language and imperialism is welcomed with open arms by African governments wanting a rich uncle to bail their debt. And, of late, the Guputerization of our economy sold, alleges Julius Malema, "for a plate of curry". But, where are they now that the banks have shut down this form of colonialism?

The issue of course is that history is very complicated and cannot be reduced to binary opposites - Us vs. Them. What we wanted in the cultural policy was to generate debate over meanings, issues and solutions. Here (in the photograph below), a Boer War memorial (foreground) is framed to comment on the British Town Hall as a dialogical comment on Anglo-Boer war tensions. As FW de Klerk argued, drawing forth opportunistic allegations of racism, no-one hated Rhodes more than did Afrikaners whose Boer Republics were destroyed by British imperialism. Rhodes was allowed to remain unmolested during apartheid as a sobering reminder of this.

Simply imposing one historical monologue over others kills the social dialectic, felling history to the point of farce. And how they fell even before fallism: King Shaka was removed from Durban Airport because he was not depicted warrior-like, and the city's elephants sculpture was initially terminated because it reminded someone of Inkatha.

Gandhi was despoiled also as were horses memorialised from the fallen during the First World War. Mandela is now in the sights of some and the *bittereinder* memorial at the Women's Monument in Bloemfontein where 50 000 plus Boer women and children and Black internees are memorialised, is now protected by razor wire from copper thieves.

Add tromping Trump to the mix and one has a continuous late night comedy show – really scary. But this was not enough, so a student burned the UKZN administration block, and did not invoke the Fall of Rhodes but that the University's fees must fall. To be serious for a moment, when students lose the distinction between farce and force, then they are living in a video game that has real world consequences. A visiting professor from Canada told me that his prime source of information on South Africa was Trevor Noah, the new professor of *The Daily Show* in the US: When South Africans are angry they sing and dance (and burn their own civic facilities). Why?

What is it in our cultural memes that promote self-destruction? When I think back to my own student days at Wits, we students politely suggested the de-colonisation of theory, some conducted peaceful sit ins regarding some aspects of campus decoration, and we rarely retaliated to police brutality when they were chasing us across campuses with sjamboks, tear gas, buckshot and fists. And our VCs and deans were in the trenches with us.

They got *donnered* too. Now, students hardly know who their lecturers are, let alone who is running the show. But the show must go on. We are all in it together and that's what UKZN is doing. ■



Photo by Professor Ruth Teer-Tomaselli.

Tomaselli is a UKZN Professor Emeritus and Fellow, and currently a Distinguished Professor at the University of Johannesburg. He is also a member of the Academy of Science for South Africa. The *Griot* is published in the last issue of the month of *UKZNdabaOnline*.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.