

When Rhodes met Mandela: History breaks down into images, not into stories¹

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Introduction

1987. I left, the way I arrived. But heading in a different direction. As I stuck my thumb out near Makana's Kop, I realised Rhodes University, was 'only the outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks: more or less numerous from one state to the next ...'² On the opposite hill, the 1820 Settlers Monument loomed.

I could not get copies of the pieces of paper that I had accumulated over the years at the university. I did have in a sealed envelope a letter of recommendation from Professor Edward Higgins, head of the Department of Sociology. I did know its contents but was hoping it would indicate to a prospective employer that I was a suitable boy. The trajectory sketched out by Higgins was one travelled by many, many university students in South Africa in the 1980s. Often though different impulses influenced how one got to travel on a particular road to '*politics*'.

What happened in the narrow stretch of turf named Rhodes University in the previous eight or so years?

I suppose it is the conceit of every generation to think that *it* was the one that affected, if not quite changed, its *alma mater* most. I am not so sure what change means any more and will leave the theorists, comrades and historians to talk in objective terms about structures of governance, transformation and so on.

While I allude to these issues, personally, I can only make sense of the eighties at Rhodes by talking about feelings. I say this upfront because if 'history is a narrative constructed from the perspective of a present... then what one chooses to focus on in the past, what elements one privileges... are largely determined by present preoccupations'.³

The Beginning

What makes up a life; events or a recollection of events?
How much of recollection is invention?⁴

I arrived in Port Elizabeth in February 1979. Waited at the airport for the Leopard Express to Grahamstown. Engaged a brother and sister from Durban also en-route to Rhodes University. We talked rugby. I never played but knew the game. My father had taken me as a kid to Kings Park. Often there were not



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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I have known MR ASHWIN G DESAI for the last nine years as an undergraduate student, as a post-graduate student and as a tutor and teaching assistant in this Department. Mr Desai is one of the most affable and charming young men I have met in my long career. In some ways, he is the personification of the old medieval motto, viz., "Firmiter in re sed suaviter in modo". However, Mr Desai is a man of strong, unshakable convictions which he publicly defends and for which he has twice suffered imprisonment. Yet, this experience has not embittered him or taken the fire out of his opposition to the evils and injustices flourishing in South African society.

As far as the discipline of Sociology was concerned, Mr Desai proved to be one of our better students - well above the class average. He obtained three degrees at this University, viz., B.A., B.A.(Honours) and M.A. In addition, during this period, Mr Desai was active in students affairs and, in times of unrest, he emerged as one of the more credible student leaders.

Because Mr Desai is a man of wide and deep sympathies with a keen appreciation of the lot of the underdog, he sometimes fails to come to grips with the profounder aspects of Sociology. I have in mind, in particular, his Master's thesis which was a rushed job, so much so that it was returned to him for substantial revision and editing. It was not question of Mr Desai not being the master of his subject-matter, but rather it was a case of Mr Desai having too many irons in the fire and devoting insufficient time and attention to this one specific task. Like many student activists, the intellectual life had to take, so to speak, a back seat.

I regard Mr Desai as an academic investment; he is a man of undoubted intellectual potential and I consider him capable of pursuing doctoral studies provided he puts sociology first and relegates political activism - no matter how worthy the causes - to a very low rung on the ladder of priorities.

Like all of us, Mr Desai is a man of his time, sub-culture and chronological age. As is the case with so many committed and concerned young sociologists, Mr Desai tends to believe in the totally redemptive power of politics and he would do well to ponder Lord Shaftesbury's remark that "Politicians are chameleons and take the colour of a passing cloud". Unfortunately, many young sociologists, like Mr Desai, give their prime loyalty to audiences or values outside the academic community and fail to develop a professional interest in, and approach to, sociology, forgetting that the line between sociology and ideology is often an extremely thin one. There is no doubt in my mind that when Mr Desai realises that rhetorical sloganeering is no substitute for sober analysis and, furthermore, when Mr Desai finally grasps the fact that sociology is not the ideological ammunition dump for the revolution, he will undoubtedly make progress as a sociologist. Indeed, he has the ability to become a good sociologist - it all depends on what he regards as his priorities.


Professor E Higgins

more than five or six of us in the non-white section. My father's heroes, mine too, were the 1974 Lions. I kept that particular sentiment to myself during the conversation.

The Leopard Express arrived. The driver, an old black man, told me blacks were not allowed on the microbus. The brother and sister looked away. A sympathetic white man dropped me on the freeway. I felt nothing really.

I had no idea how far Grahamstown was. About thirty kilometers was my estimation. Evening was fast turning to night, as I stuck my thumb out again and fixed a smile to my face.

It was around this spot that a friend, Anusha, was, a few years later, to be hit by a car while hitchhiking. By the time of her accident, we had stopped talking. She had participated as a beauty contestant in Rag. She had made a brave speech about racism and apartheid. But it did not matter. Black students boycotted Rag. She had crossed the line. The warmth and love she had given me in the short time we had spent together were, in a word, erased. Days before her death, our paths crossed on campus. I passed her without a hint of recognition.

Little did I know, as a car slammed on brakes next to me, that Rhodes would be a laboratory of (ex)communications.

Little did I know that the politics of the time provided the perfect cover for my inability to respond to affection in relationships with women. How I struggled when a 'lover' cuddled up. 'How dare she mix sex with intimacy?', I kept unconsciously asking. Was it a throwback to my childhood? Was it the 'street-corner' of my teenage years that spoke about women with such loathing?

I jumped in the back seat. My bladder needed relief. But for thirty kilometers, I could hold on. Thirty, forty, fifty kilometers flashed past. I asked in soft voice: 'How far is Grahamstown?' 'Another fifty kilometers'

I thought I was going to be robbed. They seemed like nice people. My dagger was in the bag in the boot. My bladder was straining. My mother likes to tell my friends about how I would never wet the bed as a kid. I would jump off the bed and pee on the floor and jump back into bed. I burst into the Adamson House Common Room, looking for the toilet.

Some older guys approached me. 'Do you drink?' 'A little, sometimes', I stammered. A half a bottle of Vodka was thrust into my hands.

From the age of 14, in Himalaya Hotel, I was a regular at the Supper Club. The plan always worked. When a slow song was played and the couples closed their eyes, I would work the tables. Gulping. At lunchtime on Friday, the breaks at Chatsworth High were longer because Muslim students went to Mosque. We sat in the bushes outside Pelican and drank a bottle of Brandy Ale: R1.08. At the age of 16, I had jumped over the wall into Auntie Ivy's shebeen in Leopold Street and stole her brandy and drank it by myself. At 17, I was a waiter at Admiral Hotel. There, the patrons would insist on giving me a drink as a tip. I, who had spent the last five years in a stupor, was being asked, do I drink? I

drank it all. My granny always said ‘first impressions are important, my boy’. Summoning as much nonchalance as is possible with one’s legs crossed, I asked, ‘Is there more?’

‘Non-white’ male students were segregated into Adamson House. Women went to Prince Alfred. About 30 males that increased to just over 50 in 1980. This arrangement was as fundamental to subsequent political eruptions on campus as the works of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. Here we had a ready-made platoon, barracks and rear-base.

The (Class) room

There were lectures to attend. Sometimes. In the classroom, things were generally dull. In Industrial Sociology, we had a guy called Coetzee. Not J.M., so the young women students were safe. Our minds were not, though. He read from his notes in a voice that seemed designed to cover his Afrikaans accent. Lecture after lecture was devoted to an interminable discussion of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and Parsonian functionalism with its emphasis on self-equilibrating systems, value consensus and neglect of the central issue of who holds power. Few of us felt self-actualised by any of this, nor did it all quite fit together. Jackie Cock really challenged. She taught institutions. Education. How do class and race hierarchies reproduce themselves? We met in Jackie’s class with Bernstein’s elaborated and restricted codes, J. W. B. Douglas’s ‘The Home and the School’. They fed directly into where we came from, what we were up against. Jackie Cock is still applying those now forgotten principles of sociology. Challenging in the law courts and in the streets the vestiges of a narrow sexuality, an activist in the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and exposing the oxymoron of corporate social responsibility.

Mervyn Frost in politics was the antithesis. While professing to be a liberal and thus open to new ideas, he was ideologically myopic – displaying a virulent anti-Marxism. He got arrested in a march. Made a painting, I think of it. It was his first and last march. Later, as many of us grew obsessed with replicating the Bolshevik Revolution in South Africa, combing through and debating the *April Thesis* for years on end in suitable conspiratorial tone and dress, his cynicism towards populist rhetoric was to become a valuable reference point. I am sure somewhere in Middle England he must smile at the prospect of all the ‘Bolsheviks’ in his class that now peddle their wares at the World Bank and give sage advice as directors of merchant banks. The aging but still imposing Terence Beard read from *Leviathan* – the ‘war of all against all’, of life being ‘nasty, brutish and short’. It was so relevant to the South Africa of the 1980s. But in Beard’s clipped Oxford accent, it was difficult to stay alert. But to be fair, many of us were not particularly interested. Hobbes was proposing that you can have elections, but then the people must give the person (even a parliament) total power. Absolutism through democratic means that brings people together into a single unit, a Commonwealth: the Leviathan. Leviathan, a scary, mighty

sea-creature in the Book of Job, whose path you should never cross. The Leviathan – ‘one person of whose acts a great multitude... have made themselves every one the author’. We had no idea that the future (Thabo Mbeki and Essop Pahad), was round the corner.

Althusser became quite a presence too. Keyan Tomaselli had some influence on this. At first, many of us became interested in this challenge to economic determinism. But were there real differences between structural Marxism and Parsonian structural functionalism? Was it not convenient to follow the Althusserian dictum that knowledge is the outcome of theoretical practice? That social change is a ‘thing’ that just happens or ‘history without subject’? After all, Rhodes, with its own dictum, ‘small is beautiful’ was quite adept at keeping ‘experience’ outside the doors of learning. Or is this too harsh? Was it just a question of intellectual faddishness, come a decade late to Africa from Europe?

Took a class with Julian Cobbing. We vaguely knew of his reputation ‘as history as de-bunking’. Clearly undergraduate students brimming with a potted history pigeon-holed into Marxist frameworks were not his cup of tea. Did he really suffer from the British disease of empiricism, or was that corridor gossip? Marianne Roux. Our beloved doctor of sociology. Her flying off the tangent, her quirkiness, her ability to cut down social distance (although this could be a problem if you sat at the front of the class, as one would constantly duck the spittle), her lack of assuredness, makes her unforgettable. She was the one who introduced us to the liberal versus neo-Marxist debate. What was the debate all about? The liberals were of the belief that as capitalism took off in South Africa, apartheid would wither away. The neo-Marxists argued that apartheid and capitalism were functional to each other. Some of these theorists, because they believed that apartheid and capitalism were inextricably linked, embraced the dogma that the destruction of apartheid would lay the basis of a socialist outcome.

Does it all matter that my generation are all liberals now and are at that stage of our lives when we want to write our history (if only to distance ourselves from it) then to be part of making history?

Increasingly though, our introduction to analysis-in-class did not feature heavily in our lives. It was the ‘outside struggle about race privilege that took precedence.

In 1980 the black students decided to join the growing schools boycott across the country. Our residence, caught up in a kind of group psychology, thought we could have an impact too. It was actually quite powerful. About 50 students, playing Pink Floyd, boycotting classes, while the campus went on as normal. Largely, middle class kids, at an expensive white university, prepared to give it all up. There was a sense of race solidarity. Many of the schools from which black Rhodes students had come were on boycott. We were with them. We were them.

Students from Cape Town, Soweto, Port Elizabeth, Ixopo, Umtata. Nobody really from back home, 'no one to link my present with my past, no one to note my consistencies or inconsistencies. It was up to me to choose my character, and I chose the character that was easiest and most attractive'.⁵ Agitator. Activist. Enforcer. Talker. Swagger. Black. A few months before two of us from the residence had decided to break ranks and try out for the university soccer team. It was just a fortnight or so before the inter-varsity between Rhodes and the University of Port Elizabeth (UPE). We made the second team. But then, the administrators at UPE announced that black students could play on their fields but could not attend the dance. We withdrew from the team expecting solidarity from our fellow white Rhodians. Wishful thinking. The episode became a powerful weapon to argue against playing for campus teams. For a while this incident was written up in black student history as a deliberate ploy to expose the hypocrisy of administrators and students at Rhodes. The truth is that we so much wanted to kick a football on a level playing field. But if UPE had allowed us to dance, would my trajectory have been different? Despite the strictures of apartheid, identity could still be a slippery thing in the 1980s.

The administration asked the warden to telephone parents. To impress upon the old people that we would lose a year. Probably would not be allowed back. Most parents had made tremendous sacrifices to get their children to university. Some older students had already lost a year of study at 'bush' universities. The administration was determined to break the boycott.

The resistance started to collapse. Class aspirations trumped race solidarity. The journalism practical examination was early on. I boycotted it. With the summary end of the boycott, I lost out. The administration was unsympathetic, especially as I was already a 'trouble-maker'.

My aspirations to graduate with a B.Journ were over. In any case, the journalism department was a strange place. There was a cartoon on the department notice-board with a journalism student being asked by Joel Mervis, the then editor of *The Sunday Times* what his qualifications were: he replied, a B.Journ from Rhodes. Mervis replied: well we will have to overcome that handicap. Given the level of journalism Mervis might have been onto something. Was affecting an ironic mien though really the way to fight a system as crude as apartheid?

The local demands of the 1980 boycott centered around the end of the permit system. It was a requirement for black students wanting to study at 'white' institutions. We also demanded action taken against those who attacked black students and an end to segregated residences and financial support for black students from the local townships.

It would be interesting to know what the percentage of black kids at this University that come from financially poor backgrounds is now. Sure, most students could do with a bursary and many can't afford any more beer or airtime

at the end of the month, but how many of these are from model-C schools with C-Series parents? I suspect our claims to transformation are, like reports of the death of apartheid, highly exaggerated if we take class and not race as the dividing line. Or are we so brow-beaten by the clamouring of the new elite that we just accept their blatantly self-serving and parasitic model of affirmative action as our own admissions policy. Is Rhodes just as craven before this government as it was before Vorster's in facilitating the *volkskapitalisme* of a very small minority?

Organising

1980. The residence was overrun. A Security Branch raid. I was arrested. Why? Others were also rounded up. Guy Burger, Ian Mgijima, Ihron Rensburg, Alan Zinn, Devan Pillay, Chris Waters.

I landed in Swartkops Police Station. I knew nothing. Could write very little. The SB thought I was a hard nut. They called in what they referred to as the 'panel-beater' squad. They knew their job.

Just as suddenly, I was released. They had made a mistake. The Captain, Siebert, gave me a chilling talking to – saying that George Botha's⁶ blood was still on the bottom floor of the headquarters and reminding me of Steve Biko's fate in the same building. I had heard of Biko but, since I had come to Rhodes to chase women and soccer-balls, I didn't really care. Until then. I knew very little about the history and philosophy, the theory and practice of politics. But being a detainee changed that. The Unity Movement gave me literature to read. Soon many of us in the residence were reading books on South Africa's political history. Especially, the journal of the Teacher's League and the language of 'Herrenvolk' and 'kragdadigheid'. The articles though were predictable and preachy. There were no tools of liberation. No weapons. Nothing to build a memory of the future.

By the end of 1980 the rudiments of organisation were starting to emerge. Earlier on, the Phoenix Cultural Society [PCS] was given life. It had Unity Movement influence. This meant that there was much militant posturing and navel-gazing but very little action. Many hankered for more than the policing of each other to prevent 'collaboration' that defined this organisation's politics. After long discussions, the Black Students Movement [BSM] was formed. I became its first president. It was a catch-all organisation that had mainly black consciousness and Charterist influences. But in truth, the reason for being of the BSM was simply black students getting together in a hostile and alienating white environment.

By now, Adamson House was seething with rebellion. Wild drinking sessions. Banned literature on the move. And a growing reputation for defending ourselves against racist white students.

I do not want to romanticise this environment. There was a machismo here. Sexism. Bullies who preyed on the mild. The mild who had no protection. A

long way from home, unable to turn to the authorities for protection. All of us, boys nearly men, no discos, no sport, no community. An iron cage imposed by the system, willingly policed by us.

And then there was the Warden, Moosa Motara. He had views on inter-race, inter-religious relationships. Banging on doors, reporting those who dared to have parties in their rooms after the designated hour. The Taliban had come early to Grahamstown.

Calibans. Cursing. Where white Prosperos failed, there were others. A group of black theology students who lived in Livingstone House were brought in to stay with us. To temper the excesses of the Res. We called them the God Squad. But there were no Damascus Road turnings for us. Nothing was going to haul things back.

The administration conducted an investigation and came to the conclusion that there were 54 thugs in Adamson House. Dr. Derek Henderson, the Vice-Chancellor was hurt. 'They were challenging the government, taking in more and more black students. Is this how we repay trust?' Among his administration, there were whispers of Prosperos exasperated by Calibans: 'A devil, a born devil, on whose nature/nurture can never stick'. But Henderson was a computer scientist. He made calculations. We had earlier called for desegregation of the residences and the administration's position was that it was against the law. All of a sudden the residence was broken up. By 1981, we were filtered into the white residences. The collective space for meetings was broken up and many black students found the need to acculturate into the dominant setting.

It may be hard to imagine in this day and age but back then university campuses were 95 percent white. It may be even harder in this day and age of white Zimbabwean victimology to imagine a classroom invasion by white Selous Scouts and their kin. Led by this vicious 'Rhodesian element', some white students took to insulting and threatening black students. The administration turned a blind eye.

When I think back at the 'liberals' that dug in on all sides of the Rhodes administration, I want to be sympathetic. Especially, in the context today where 'comrade socialists' are doing somersaults and the leaders of the erstwhile MDM (Mass Democratic Movement), hatch economic programmes made in secret and present them as non-negotiable. But were the 'liberals in the administration' the opposite of the Security Branch down High Street?

In J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* he first counterposes, the 'humane' Magistrate and the murderous Colonel Joll. Later, the Magistrate reflects: 'For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less'.⁷

Symbolic violence. Cultural arbitrariness. The wearing of academic gowns to dinner. The amnesia that we came from different places, stratified by race. The tenuousness of the permit. The high table. High tea. The fork and knife.

Weapons!

Circa 1982. Came out of the cafeteria with two friends. Lying in wait were a group of white students. It was night. The first punch made me wobbly. The second one took away my memory. But I found that I was the one charged for stabbing a fellow student, in what I experienced as an unprovoked attack. Life expulsion loomed. The right-wing in the law faculty licked their lips. There was only one independent witness on which the balance of probabilities rose or fell. A white guy, Ian Rothery. He had claimed in his statement, that he saw a slashing knife. Flashing life. Could it have been a Parker pen? Technical arguments. Dermis. Epidermis? How deep? Rothery recants. Not sure. Professor Schaffer, the prosecutor declares him a 'hostile witness'. The scale tips against us again. Until, out of the blue, Hector Wandliss, in priestly garb, with Bible in hand, takes the stand. A silver pen, he proclaims, he is sure. There is truth and there is justice. Justice won the day.

Location

The sport issue was crucial. By boycotting the university teams, it forced us into the townships. The Phoenix Football Club (PFC) affiliated to the township league. Every weekend we would make our way to Foley's field in Joza Location. The ground would be packed. Everybody wanted to beat the university team.

The team was open to all Rhodes students. An outstanding goalkeeper, Peter auf der Heyde, joined PFC. He earned the nickname Peta Balac after the Chief's goalkeeper. Peter's move was more than symbolic. White lefty students had a soccer team called the Sex Pistols and played together on the campus. Other lefties played rugby for Rhodes. Their argument was that they contested SRC elections and the like and needed to ingratiate themselves with white students.

But there were other reasons. The comfort zone. Fear. It was not as if there were no role models. The Watson brothers had illuminated a path in Port Elizabeth. Why did no one follow at Rhodes? After all, it was a place where there were progressive students and a vibrant NUSAS branch.

One of the most disconcerting sights was to see hundreds of black people come to the campus to watch the rugby team play. Cheering the bodies they served everyday in the residences. As black students organised, so the workers almost mysteriously stopped attending.

Ironically, it was NUSAS itself that was the barrier – 'Whites organise whites'. But it was more than that. NUSAS personnel saw themselves as the resource people, ideas people. That was the relationship with black people. At a

distance. But indispensable and able to exert a sort of editorial control over what the restless natives got up to. All the while their monopoly of the progressive conscience of the university was intact and, I got the impression listening to their strident but careful denunciations of fellow whites, that they rather enjoyed the moral high ground. For its own sake. It was almost chic to be a lefty. Ironically, it suited them to privilege the need for racial redress above anything more thorough-going. For many, with important exceptions, there seems to have been a recognition that they would never be able to safely enjoy the cultural and economic capital they were to inherit until the impetus to Black revolution – apartheid – had been done away with.

As more black students came from private schools, sons and daughters of those working the levers of Bantustans ‘and taking advantage of deracialising capital’, common perspectives started to emerge.

The soccer venture of black students had progressed. Phoenix was broken up and players joined individual township teams. I began playing for United Teenagers. It was an experience of a lifetime. For the first time being ‘black’ was real. More than boycotts, fighting racists, reading Biko. I was black and becoming conscious. Campus politics slowly receded, as many of us became more involved in the rhythms of the township. The Grahamstown Youth Movement (GYM) was formed.

Every now and again, campus interventions would be made. Rag became a focus. It was a time of drunken debauchery and racial attacks would always increase. A debate was set-up. We broke into the Rag offices the night before. Took the files, photocopied them and returned them. Over 70 cents of every rand collected was spent on parties and the like. The debate in the Main Hall was a blowout for the pro-rag lobby. The next day we marched against the floats. Violent battles broke out. The cops sjambokked protesting students. White students helped arrest black students. Rag lost its innocence. NUSAS students started to join a growing, exciting non-racial gathering. Jeremy Price, a former SRC vice-president, Mandy Wood, among others, left NUSAS for this growing non-racial gathering, an informal network fast becoming a movement.

What activism and debate did not to any significant degree involve were the governance structures of the university. We had a vague idea that there was a close correlation between big capital and the university. This was epitomised by the Chancellors during the 1980s and early 1990s. Basil Hersov from Anglovaal and then Gavin Reilly of Anglo-American. It was probably appropriate that the inheritors of Cecil John Rhodes’s theft were deployed to look after his other legacies. In retrospect our somewhat anecdotal and mechanistic analysis of the time is borne out if one looks at the list of honorary graduates. Big capital figures prominently with ‘liberal’ politicians that worked within the system. Both Ernest and Harry Oppenheimer, Raymond Ackerman, Peter Searle, Sir De Villiers Graaff, the State President at the time of the declaration of the Republic Charles Robberts Swart who received a doctorate in 1962,

Julian Ogilive Thompson. It says something that in 1994 that both Govan Mbeki (he was refused in 1992 when the ANC was still posturing a progressive economic programme) and Michael O'Dowd got doctorates. Mbeki, a mythical figure among the 'radical intelligentsia', O'Dowd the darling of big capital. For Mbeki 1994 beckoned defeat in victory. For O'Dowd victory in defeat.

And post-1994 a discernible shift is noticed in the new rulers. Surnames like Mbeki, Ginwala and Asmal start to figure in the list of honorary graduates. With Jakes Gerwel as Chancellor, the university is able to link political legitimacy and its attachment to capital. Gerwel, Mandela's Director-General, educationist and now a new entrant into the game of black (self)-empowerment that feeds off the trough of old white capital and the privatisation (oops, restructuring) of state assets. It does help that the new political class is anointed with the mantle of anti-apartheid and even liberation fighters. As Max du Preez has laconically commented in *Pale Native*: 'When Harry Oppenheimer died in 2002, all honoured him, including the ANC and the Mbeki government'.⁸ Ernest Renan got it half-right when he wrote, 'The essence of a nation is that all individuals have things in common, and also that they are obliged to have forgotten many things'.⁹ What he should have added is that you have to remember things in new ways too.

Should we have taken the governing structures of the university more seriously?

The Tri-cameral Parliament

We did take other structures seriously. In 1984, the state introduced the tri-cameral parliament. As the tri-cameral parliament proposals began to take hold, the UDF had very little visibility in the Eastern Cape (EC). We followed the debate around participation in proposed referendums. Stories filtered through that the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) wanted to call for a referendum and to participate in calling for a no vote. The Eastern Cape Charterists were generally against participation. All the different groups legitimated their arguments by calling on their different 'voices' in exile. Here we had the most senior political leadership in the country, close to the everyday struggles, veterans of banning orders and prison, having to legitimate their positions by insisting they received their directives from London, Lusaka, Lesotho or Swaziland. It was quite hilarious at the time but the long term consequences were serious. Later, when I returned to Durban, I realised how important one's spatial location was. If one accepted that one was fighting for hegemony within an 'ethnic enclave' then this was prioritised. How this translated into the building of non-racialism or was perceived outside of the enclave were at best secondary issues. This is why participation in the South African Indian Council (SAIC) or even referendums was flirted with as it was a way to show the community was progressive and at the same time earn one's seat at national executive level.

In the end the state balked at holding referendums. However, the UDF in the region were unable to translate the politics of refusal into a sustained campaign. Despite some posturing the Port Elizabeth unions could not move beyond syndicalism. We on the campus generally refused to participate in running from Res to Res getting signatures for the UDF's proposed million signatures. This was much to the de facto leader of NUSAS, Roland White's, disgust as he was now a regional treasurer of the UDF and if he could not deliver a constituency at least he could deliver some signatures. (White is presently using his skills learnt as treasurer of the UDF at the World Bank). By this time many on the campus had long moved beyond a militant abstentionism. A merry band of students decided on our own initiative to spread out into the hinterland of the Eastern Cape, calling for a boycott. It was my first introduction to the depth of 'coloured' poverty and the callousness of white farmers.

The Labour Party (LP), led by Allan Hendrickse was a well-organised powerful force. Enormous bodyguards who also doubled as thugs always surrounded him. Backed by the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), we stormed a Labour Party meeting. They knew some of us already. Inderan Pillay and myself were arrested a week before handing out anti-tricameral pamphlets. After a high-speed, scary ride in the back of a police van, we were threatened at a makeshift police station, a caravan actually, and released. We managed to wreak some havoc at the meeting and beat a hasty retreat to Grahamstown. It did give Russel Ally a chance to drive at speed. His father was a well-known racing driver, and clearly Russel thought these skills were hereditary.

That was a curtain-raiser to a more sustained campaign. Every weekend for about a month, we went to places like Queenstown, Adelaide and Alexandria. Some twenty cars would spread out. It was an autonomous effort of middle class kids on a mission. In Port Alfred, we came across the bleakness of poverty. Walked into one house, a man sat alone. The only piece of furniture was a bed. He pulled out a bag from under the bed. Fading photographs. Of better times. He was once a worker in the motor industry in Port Elizabeth. Injured at work, he was paid R250 and told the he would be re-employed when he could walk again without a limp again. 'Look, here, I can'. Like much of the country's manufacturing industry, the motor sector was going through a rocky period. Here was another unknown statistic, paying the price. As the disinvestment drive picked up a gear, 4000 workers would lose their jobs at the Ford engine assembly factory in Port Elizabeth. He reported for work after six months and then every three months thereafter and finally gave up after seven years of false promises. 2004. Ford and General Motors are back. Minister Alec Erwin, who encouraged them to leave, welcomes them back.

Reconciliation

Truth. We did not bother telling him about boycotting the tricameral parliament. It did not make sense.

The Labour Party, as we became effective, got more vicious. One tactic they liked was to throw buckets of urine on the anti-tricam canvassers. Benita Whitcher got one full in the face. Many years later when we tease her about it, she still gets pissed off.

In Port Elizabeth, a busload of armed LP thugs surrounded us. We retreated into the home of Neela and Basheer Hoosen. Audrey Brown stood her ground though on the verandah and returned the insults. They backed off. Her vocabulary was better. Audrey was later to find fame as a presenter on SATV's police file. Given my lifestyle, and the new government's penchant for criminalising almost all forms of dissent, I sometimes had a vision of my mug-shot appearing on police file and Audrey reading my name. It's probably the only way to get on TV if you not from government with Snuki (phd, Bulgaria) in charge.

The LP was really a group of gangsters led by a coward, Allan Hendrickse. He was about to go down in footnote as the man who swam on a 'Whites Only' beach and then apologised to Rubicon Botha for it. But as I write this, President Thabo Mbeki invested him with high national honours, the Baobab Award.

Question Time

Back on the campus, the rift between the loose grouping of black and white students and NUSAS was widening. But the debate was more than about race. The loose groupings were starting to develop a critique of the ANC/UDF. Was the ANC committed to fundamental transformation? What was the continuing influence of Stalinism? Why should the struggle only find authenticity if it were given the stamp of approval from Lusaka? Should not the internal groupings dictate the nature and pace of the struggle? Where was MK as the townships rose up?

Running through this was the idea that our organisations should pre-figure the society we were trying to build and exemplify the values we hoped it would have. We became the focus of attention. The NUSAS leadership were able to identify the 'problem elements'. Olivia Forsyth (later exposed as an apartheid spy) reached into NUSAS, COSAS and the UDF. Roland White too emerged as a key figure. Both were very powerful. Behaving in tandem like 'common-sergeant-majors', instilling fear and so eliminating 'embryo oppositions'.¹⁰ It was only in 1996 that I read Fanon.

First, the label UDF-militant was spread around. It roughly translates into Thabo Mbeki's trademark insult, 'ultra-leftist'. Apparently, the former NUSAS leader, Auret van Heerden, was a prime mover. Some of us had seen the literature, but had never been particularly militant.

Well-known black student leaders were deployed to enforce discipline. Simphiwe Mgoduso and Saleem Badat arrived to give us a 'dressing-down' and jar us back into the fold. Simphiwe stayed a few days. One day we were walking down Albany Road. A street-kid was running around a police-van, pursued by a rotund, red-faced policeman. No matter how much he tried, the cop could not get hold of the child. People were gathering and laughing. Suddenly the policeman ordered me to help him. I refused. He threw me into the police van. Simphiwe disappeared and never returned to Grahamstown.

One of the major fights within the BSM was about the exclusion of black students on academic grounds. The liberal [dis]guise lay revealed. We accepted you into the university, now perform. Science exclusions were high. Many students had never seen a laboratory. They were competing with students who came from the most highly endowed private schools in the country.

We wrote articles, debated with the administration and marched. I realised then that those who did not recognise race, claimed to be non-racial, could entrench racial privilege and stereotyping. On one particular occasion, we occupied the administration on behalf of those students excluded. The vice-principal, Professor Brommert, addressed us. He told us those students who had illnesses, accidents and so forth were given consideration. One of the marchers got up and told Professor Brommert that one of the excluded students was involved in an accident but was excluded. Professor Brommert scanned the file said, 'There is nothing in the file here showing an accident'. The student replied, 'The accident is Bantu Education'. Professor Brommert, somewhat hard of hearing, and not very bright, looked at the file, and said, 'The student has not produced a certificate to verify that she had such an accident'.

Out of these mobilisations, and in the face of both administration and faculty reticence, an academic support programme was born. We can be proud of that. But, now, in these days where education has been massified, where the acquisition of knowledge has been MacDonaldised and departments (sorry, cost-centres) where critique (sorry 'arcane and irrelevant studies') are being eroded (sorry, 'rationalised'), I find myself hankering after the rigorous academic standards demanded by certain of our lecturers. There is no way, under a Marianne Roux or Jackie Cock, that one could pass sociology three and take up a position in the civil service and still be as politically and historically illiterate as the crop of graduates are these days. Forget the enquiry into MBA's, half the MA's in this country should be revoked.

Back to Class

It was inevitable that some of us would be attracted to the union movement. Black workers at Rhodes, feeding off the increasing assertiveness of Black students, started organising. When a third year student, Colm Allam, wanted to research the working conditions of Rhodes workers, the administration's

response was hysterical. Over and above, his supervisor's head, the university withdrew permission.¹¹

During the anti-tricameral campaign, some contact was made with the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU). Smarting against allegations that they were 'workerist', NAAWU got involved in the campaign. They wanted to maintain their independence and refused to work under the tutelage of the UDF. But the move out of the factory was half-hearted. The NAAWU leadership was to pay heavily for its hesitation in consolidating community links and higher levels of political consciousness. But these were difficult times for the union as General Motors and Ford decided to withdraw from South Africa. The consequences of the campaign, the human cost involved, the machinations of the motor companies, await their historian.

Back on campus in the mid-eighties there were discernible shifts. The profile of black students was changing. Black students from private schools arrived. Black students whose parents were trespassing into white 'group areas' and the corporate world and who were prickly about race exclusion but quite aware and keen to maintain class divides. Why should they want to play on township fields, the very place they were escaping? They had spent three to four years on the beautiful fields of St. Andrews and Michaelhouse. They had white friends from school and were integrated into the culture.

From our side, the SACOS 'no-participation' position had no flexibility. As the number of black students grew, could we not have campus sport under the banner of SACOS? No. To play on the fields was to collaborate. But the township facilities were just not enough.

At a SACOS national meeting, we were told by one of the leaders, when we questioned the strategy of non-collaboration, that the ultimate aim would be to stop playing sport altogether. Oh, okay, so that's the revolution! There was be-suited smugness here.

There were other 'black holes' too, in our 'liberation'.

Wounds. Jeremy Price. A gentle soul with incredible media skills. Vice-president of the SRC, NUSAS loyalist. But he started to drift. Into the world of black students and black politics. But this was a very macho place. Soon Jeremy's behaviour started to change. He was much more aggressive. He got into a fight and was stabbed. He had black girlfriends. We became extremely close friends. There was though, a perpetual sadness to him. About four years ago, one of the most beautiful woman to grace Rhodes in the 1980s, Nia Magoulianiti, said she saw Jeremy on a Greek island. 'You do know he is gay' Yeah, right, I thought. Anybody who does not want you, is gay. Beauty and vanity.

Last year we spoke. He lives in the US now. He still could not mention it to me. He said that his lover had just ended their relationship. The lover was worried that Jeremy would jeopardise his political career. In the fight for 'liberation now' much was repressed. In this black world, there was little space for

discussion of sexuality and intimacy. For me it was normal because it was simply an extension of my upbringing.

Much has been written by the likes of Hein Marais¹² about the flowering of autonomous anti-apartheid rebellions. What he does not capture, cannot, are the sacrifices, the imaginations, the excitement of this time. The cruelty, the genuflection to 'the line' of those who sought to smash these 'almost movements'. Deterritorialisation? Reterritorialisation? One of the problems with the broad sweeps in which the transition gets written (even the critical ones) is that they occlude more than they reveal.

That is why people must tell their stories. For the stories told, however small their immediate impact, is a process of illuminating a past history that is not simply the story of the heroic new ruling class who liberated us. Even if they are 'biased', missing of some detail, they 'are so very valuable. They allow us to recognize the interests of the tellers, and the dreams and desires beneath them'.¹³ Above all they provide a signpost for those who hanker, are prepared to struggle for more than non-racial neo-liberalism. Witness the Minister of Public Service and Administration, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi in the aftermath of the 2004 elections. Fraser-Moleketi declared that the election results showed that the masses of South Africans have 'declared that no amount of sophistication or camouflage by the opposition can make them lose sight of *their* liberators'.¹⁴ The history of the defeat of apartheid gets rewritten as a struggle conducted by the ANC, the people, passive recipients of a 'gift' from 'their liberators'. And so the process must continue, of the people, waiting patiently and unquestioningly as 'their liberators' make available the fruits of liberation. The effect of this 'sleight of hand' where people are asked to believe that their struggles against apartheid were not the 'real struggle' and that the 'real struggle' was delivered to them by semi-divine beings is often under-estimated in writings on political transitions. It feels as if semi-divine heroes were able to make the world in the past but that in our fallen age we just have to get on with the job of trying to survive in the world that we've been given. Almost always it is the new power-wielders and emerging elite that demand or try and invoke this reverence for The Struggle. This is no accident. They are then able to use the almost magical power of these mysticised heroes and struggles of the past to disguise their very concrete betrayals, the increasing deprivation of the poorest and to delegitimize the struggles that are being fought in the here and now. 'The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it... people want to be masters of the future... to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and histories are rewritten'.¹⁵

Shit, if only we'd been taught Fanon rather than Nkrumah, we'd have understood better what was happening. As space was being closed down, as autonomous, creative and liberating actions were siphoned off into a single nationalist stream, we started to develop doubts. As all political imagination

was forced within the four-corners of the Freedom Charter and Oliver Tambo's Christmas message, 'a few of us were moving on'. Ironically and unbeknownst, we were swapping the sullied suit of postcolonial nationalism for the strait-jacket of actually existing Trotskyism. On reflection, one of the reasons for this slide was our obsession with issues of power and domination. Lenin.

From the Black to the Red Line

Some of us were recruited into a reading group. Lenin and Trotsky. Soon I discovered that we were Trots involved in something called a permanent revolution, and our weapon was a party run by a central committee. The attraction to Trotsky was propelled by a 'received' Marxism of society passing through stages, (deterministic laws of history). This translated into a political programme that socialism could only emerge after capitalism had fully developed the productive forces of society through the 'revolutionary role' of the bourgeoisie. Trotsky offered a skipping of stages, a challenge to the two-stagism of the SACP. This is why we fell in love with the Bolshevik Revolution for it was a living example that had confronted the Marxian laws enunciated in *Capital*. We wanted to make history, not be told we could not do as we pleased. We were at an age and a time when it made no sense to talk about the limits of the possible. Ironically, in the form we received it, Trotskyism trampled on this adolescent exuberance.

For the Trots, open political activity like participating in marches, petrol bombs, was frowned upon. Reading was the thing. Security, was our perpetual concern. But if we valued secrecy above all else, how would we win the masses to our ideas? If we stood aside from the mass struggles, how would they be won over? Did not Marx warn against confronting the world 'with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is the truth, on your knees before it!'¹⁶

And what about a hierarchy that would have made the Catholic church uncomfortable, inscribed in the way we organised? But these questions were not easily asked. To whom did you address them? In any case the thrill of reading and interrogating, *What is to be done?*, *State and Revolution*, and *The Transitional Programme*, overwhelmed the questions. For a time at least. We never read Gramsci: 'for the purpose of human history, the only *truth* is the truth embodied in human action, that becomes a passionate driving force in people's minds'.¹⁷

But this idea that history had somehow endowed a chosen few to articulate and direct the struggles emerging from below sat uneasily. All political interventions became planned, speeches emptied of all emotion. The vanguard denies creativity, spontaneity, even joy. Our meetings were funereal. I preferred Irish wakes. The readings were interesting but the emphasis on recruitment and encadrement, alienating. We could not develop real warm relationships because ticking away was whether the person was worthy of recruitment to the next level or not. The meetings and organisation reminded

me so much of my upbringing. The home was gloomy and always enveloped with a hint of sadness. Somehow the family was involved in some greater goal. It was cold and clinical.

So I, physically and psychologically, moved out of the organisational gaze. Trying to marry infantile disorder with left wing communism. To build something in the community around Grahamstown. To make, to be part of 'trouble'. I went to live in Max Pax on the edge of the coloured township. Next door we tried to build a resource centre.

We met activists who were linked to SACHED in Cape Town. We started driving to Cape Town to meet and organise reading materials. We met with a fascinating group of young women organised into the Students of Young Azania (SOYA). The women on campus that were involved, were still very conservative. On one occasion I was brushing my teeth and one of the SOYA woman came into the bathroom and ran her bath and jumped in. She then proceeded to want to have a conversation with me about the meeting the night before. I had never really encountered liberated black women. Around the age of 13, some of us began to hustle *Scope* magazines. Semi-naked white women. No Immorality Act to worry about. The law was literally in *our* hands. Three or four of us would masturbate in a backroom. Who came quickest. I was good. It was a habit I never kicked. No matter how I tried. One girlfriend at Rhodes, lying back on the bed sucking on a juice, called me Minute Maid. I took it as a compliment.

Before the centre started it was burnt to the ground by the Security Branch.

An 'inglorious' end.

By the beginning of 1987, I was effectively marginalised on the campus. The number of black students had increased and the kind of hegemony required to police a politics of 'boycottism' was impossible. We increasingly alienated those who wanted to take advantage of what Rhodes had to offer.

Also 'goons' speaking in the name of Lusaka were effectively marginalising dissident voices both on the campus and in the township. Black consciousness supporters were hounded and many had to retreat out of the township and take refuge on the edges of 'Sugar Loaf'. Stories of a 'hit-list' of leftists, drawn up allegedly by the 'movement', circulated in East London.

Things reached a head at the funeral of 'Bully', a member of GYM who was shot by police in Joza location. ANC supporters insisted that we not allow any Unity Movement, BC or SACOS speakers. We stood our ground. But the knives were out literally and figuratively. For many this was a period of retreat. Violence against non-ANC fighters hung in the air. Rumours abounded that at the scene of the murder of the Cradock Four an AZAPO T-shirt was found.

By 1987 I was not only marginalised but physically broken. In January 1987 the Eastern Cape section of the 'Party' had been summoned to Cape Town for a dose of 'democratic centralism'. Kumi Ponasamy, Naomi McKay and myself

headed off in Naomi's Ford Escort. With Kumi at the wheel we met a horrendous accident just outside George.

Kumi was in a coma for over 40 days. He lost an eye and had brain damage and lost part of a foot. Naomi had serious internal injuries. I also had all broken bones. Naomi and I landed at a farm hospital. My arm hung limply and blood dripped through a Checkers bag.

Kumi. The 'Party' sent a cadre to look after him. Kumi had hidden a large cache of banned literature. The cadre and Kumi's wife began an affair and left East London with Kumi's son.

Straining against the discipline of the reading group, the marginalisation and broken body, I sought mass politics again. Was this a reading of the situation, ego or principle? Was it all of them? Little did I know how much the avenues 'back' had been closed down. The 'whispering campaign' exposing my left wing tendency, the openness of my critique of Stalinism, of two-stagism, of the Freedom Charter, moved off the campus and permeated the township.

The second state of emergency was declared. As I was preparing for a May Day rally, the Security Branch (SB) pounced. I was staying at the back of Nancy Charton's. She was a retired politics lecturer. She was full of life and warmth. By now the SB knew from the likes of the Olivia Forsyth that some of us were not central to the UDF/ANC. But we had no idea that the groundwork for dealing with 'mavericks' who may just upset future, dimly envisaged CODESAS, was also being laid. Crises of hegemony can lead to surprising outcomes. Capital, the Nats and the ANC were already trying to ensure that the outcome would be pre-determined. Negotiations, coinciding with a fresh wave of detentions?

Often, despite all the reading and sophisticated understanding of Marxist texts, all the Left has is conspiracy theory.

Luck. Friends see me get arrested. Vaainek. A detainee gets beaten by other detainees for being a supporter of Black Consciousness. Is this the conduct of liberation fighters? The panoptical gaze operated not by wardens but by the gatekeepers of the revolution. The Trots abandon me. Didn't they tell me to keep my head down. Now, I am a security risk.

2004

What the liberation struggle therefore produces is its own gravediggers.¹⁸

Why has this generation of the 1980s, so privileged to have had the grandest education possible, to have been part of vibrant debates, taken 'other' paths? To turn Gramsci on his head. A time of the War of (self) Movement, a War of (self) Positioning. The trend is too broad for one to make individual vilification.

Forget the economic debates. Our life choices don't reflect a belief in the justness or sustainability of neoliberalism. Just the opposite, we know the system is unjust and occasionally we will go so far as to say so. But it is the

subjective gratification provided by the individualism of liberalism, that so beguiles. After confronting liberalism for a decade, how Rhodes must smile, as we return as its tools.

Did the education at Rhodes win out after all?

In any case, we were always Janus-faced. We had one eye on Mandela, those notions of sacrifice, freedom, integrity and the other eye on Rhodes, with the notion of self-enrichment, on building empire's fields.

And now that we have the Mandela/Rhodes Foundation headed by Jakes Gerwel and run by Rhodes alumni, Shaun Johnson?

In his speech, inaugurating the foundation, Mandela, whilst castigating those who dared to bring apartheid reparation lawsuits against American multi-nationals, commented, 'I am sure that Cecil John Rhodes would have given his approval to this effort to make the South African economy of the early 21st century appropriate and fit for its time'.¹⁹ Appropriate for whom? Statistics South Africa, a government agency made public a report in October 2002 that revealed that black 'African' household income had spiraled downwards by 19 percent between 1995 to 2000, while white household income increased by 15 percent. Households with less than R670 a month income that stood at 20 percent of the population in 1995 had increased to 28 percent. The poorest half of all South Africans earned only 9.7 percent of national income, down from 11.4 percent in 1995.²⁰ Pensions decreased in real terms between 1991 and 2000.²¹ Inequality has been exacerbated by the lack of state support (like a social wage) with over 13,8 million people in the poorest 40 percent of South Africa's households not qualifying for any social security transfers.²² At the same time, while taxes to the rich have been cut and unemployment reaches catastrophic proportions (youth unemployment of 50 percent), basic services like transport have been privatised, water and electricity have been corporatised and the state has demanded 'user fees' for school, health care and other services.

It is an economy where there is a quick cross-over from politics into making money in the private sector. It was something Rhodes was a master at, blurring the edges of political office and personal enrichment. There are opportunities for the enrichment of people whose political connections get them onto the various boards – Umgeni Water in Durban, The Johannesburg Water Company and so on – and who are paid on highly lucrative incentive schemes that reward them for increasing profit. So it goes. When water and electricity are finally privatised local elites stand to become very rich as the ANC demands that multinationals partner with aspirant black capitalists. Siphon Pityana, former foreign-affairs Director-General, is one of a long line of MP's and Director-Generals that have directly entered the private sector. He joined banking giant Nedcor and now heads a black investment company. Pityana's investment company quickly acquired 30 percent of Aberdare Cables. Co-incidentally, Aberdare's main business is with Eskom and Telkom, two

parastatals in the throes of privatising, while at the same time raising the stakes with suppliers on black empowerment. Pityana is also a member of the NEPAD business group steering committee. Eskom, of course, has extensive business interests in Africa. 'This trend is no accident. As Pityana explained... director-generals and other senior public servants bring with them an understanding of public-policy intentions, high level involvement in transformation and a track record of bringing about large-scale organisational change. They also have networking advantages'.²³ And the feeding frenzy is set to continue. Leading members of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) have linked with white mining magnates in a 'get rich' scam. (*Mail & Guardian*, March 26 to April 1, 2004).

Mandela's Cecil John Rhodes once wrote: 'I contend we are the finest race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings what an alteration there would be if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence... Africa is lying ready for us, it is our duty to take it'.²⁴

Post-1994 South African corporates have moved with speed into Africa. South African businesses are 'running the national railroad in Cameroon, the national electricity company in Tanzania, and managing the airports located in or near seven Southern African capitals. They have controlling shares in Telecom Lesotho and are leading providers of cellphone services in Nigeria, Uganda, Swaziland, Tanzania, Rwanda and Cameroon... They control banks, breweries, supermarkets and hotels throughout the continent and provide TV programming to over half the continent'.²⁵ Accusations of malpractice keep piling up. Cellphone giant MTN faces charges of operating illegally in the DRC; Shoprite Holdings of dumping sub-standard goods on the African market. Darlene Miller's research on Shoprite-Checkers in Zambia paints a picture of crude apartheid-like working conditions and racism.²⁶ In November 2004 workers at Shoprite Checkers in Malawi went on strike. Some workers claimed to be paid as little as R23 a week. The strikers were demanding a 400 percent increase but were forced to call off the strike as hundreds of Malawians responded to a Shoprite Checkers advert to take the strikers' jobs.²⁷

The UN Report on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources in the DRC named seven South African companies. Beauregard Tromp commented that South African businesses have been quick to use Mbeki's foray's into Africa to cut deals 'sometimes by hook or by crook'.²⁸ And as Sahra Ryklief put it: 'Mbeki's African Renaissance is the best thing that has ever happened to South Africa's (still overwhelmingly white) capital in a long time'.²⁹ A recent study of JSE Securities Exchange listed companies doing business in Africa revealed that their profit margins are two and even three times more than profit margins in South Africa.³⁰

Would Rhodes approve of our new sub-imperialist role in Africa under the guise of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) that aims to subject the entire continent to a self-imposed structural adjustment programme?

Apartheid was built on the notion of white superiority and blacks as the inferior 'other'. Have we now turned that inside out? Is composing the new South African nation premised on our superiority over the rest of Africa? As Peter Vale puts it, 'the idea of the rainbow nation, the new South Africa signifies a cleansed beginning for the country's people. But the celebration shows there is a darker side... the constructed face of national identity, the harbinger of nationalism used for the purpose of privileging'.³¹

Biko whose life's trajectory is so bound up with his exclusion from staying at a Rhodes University residence warned in 1972: 'this is one country where it would be possible to create a capitalist black society, if whites were intelligent, if the nationalists were intelligent. And that capitalist black society, black middle class would be very effective... South Africa could succeed in putting across to the world a pretty convincing, integrated picture, with still 70 percent of the population being underdogs'.³²

Mandela stands tall at the citadel of excess, the symbol of Rhodes's legacy, Sandton City. And now that Rhodes has met Mandela, what exteriority is left?

What is to be done?

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Rhodes University From Apartheid Vastrap to African Swing

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Introduction

I arrived at Rhodes University in Grahamstown at the age of twenty-one to do a Journalism degree. The year was 1976 and I heard for the first time a name that I would never forget – Soweto. By the end of the decade it was a cycle of teargas, gunshots, barricades, riot police and funerals. In Grahamstown funerals became the hub around which the wheel of violence and death continued to spin. The police would shoot a marcher/bystander/householder; it did not really matter, during a funeral procession. The angry residents would erupt in outrage and more people would get killed. The next week, another funeral, more teargas drifting across town. Alfred ‘Blaai’ Soya, Violet Tsili, Boyboy Nombiba, Freddie Tsisli, Tununi Nxawe, Nikele Mjekula, were just some of the people who died in 1980, when I was doing my honours and working as a journalist on the *Herald* newspaper in the Grahamstown office.

Grahamstown did not let you escape into the myopia of the white suburbs distant from the townships as in other parts of the country. The proximity of settler city and township led to a constant awareness of all the manifestations of assault and counter-assault, of the attempts to implement and to resist the apartheid grand plan. For me the most frightening thing at that time was the absolute polarisation between black and white in Grahamstown. The township was barricaded and a no-go area for any white person. The anger was so palpable as to have a physical presence, a kind of static in the air. On the other side the often young white riot police rode around town in their hippos, buffels and vans, their fear as tautly cocked as the shotguns and R1 rifles they brandished. I felt the edge of both. I was arrested and manhandled by a nervy bunch of the cops for singing in the street (disturbing the peace) with a bunch of friends after celebrating the end of exams with a few shots of tequila. Another time I was surrounded and threatened by a group of black youths while trying to hitch-hike out of town.

Mass removals, detentions without trial, torture and deaths in detention. I remember when Steve Biko died we fasted for a week. I was cultural councillor on the SRC and Chair of the NUSAS re-affiliation campaign. At the end of 1980 a number of fellow students and Guy Berger were detained. Guy was sentenced to a few years in Pretoria Central for furthering the aims of the ANC. Jacky Cock had a stick of dynamite thrown through her window in a well

orchestrated attack (the lights for the block were extinguished during the operation). By that stage I had decided not to do any more army camps, after narrowly missing being sent to Namibia for three months during the last three-week camp I attended in 1978 in northern Natal.

Rhodes University

I spent a day reading through old student newspapers to prepare for this paper. Apart from the nostalgia the thing that struck me most forcibly was the abnormality of it all. Only ten years of democracy and the memories have already started to fade. In the 1970/80s Rhodes University was a scary place. The majority of staff (academic and administrative) and students were actively racist. This is not surprising as a large number of predominantly white administrative staff were from the local (white) settler farming, civil service (including the police and military base), and business community. The majority of male students had just come back from two years of military indoctrination and service in Namibia, Angola or Rhodesia. The University had to build ramps for wheelchairs because of the number of ex-combatants that had had their legs blown off by landmines or by their fellow soldiers.

Many of these young men were suffering from post-traumatic stress (the so-called Vietnam syndrome). There was no counselling available for them. My own brother, who was part of the ill-fated Angolan campaign to take Luanda in the early 1970s, suffered from nightmares for years and eventually drank himself to death. Tension ran high on campus; fights in the various bars around town were commonplace, a coloured student friend of mine had a thunder flash thrown through his window, gay students were beaten up, many students worked for the security and military police spying on their fellow students and liberal/left lecturers.

I don't want to exaggerate the situation. There was also a sizeable group of people, lecturers and students, who were committed to non-racialism and a more equitable distribution of wealth. Who were committed to transformation of the university from a Eurocentric little Oxford with all its colonial trappings to an institution that would be part of and reflect its place in Africa. When I talk about colonial trappings I am not bandying about empty slogans – in the 1970s we had to wear academic gowns to our dining halls every night, where we would be served by black waiters in uniform, the warden and his/her acolytes would sit on a raised platform at the high table dispensing discipline and favour, rooms would be cleaned by black servants, drunken beauty queen-bedecked rag processions would raise money for the 'less fortunate' and graduation ceremonies aped those in Britain down to the last detail. I remember being shown around Oxford University by a friend a few years ago and being struck by the uncanny resemblance of the dining halls to Rhodes halls. All that dark wood!

I was involved in a number of initiatives to move the university towards a non-racial African future, and to get young white South Africans to commit themselves to that future. In 1978 I was the cultural councillor on the SRC and the chair of the NUSAS pro-affiliation committee. Rhodes had for a number of years dawdled along in splendid isolation and the left on campus was determined to get the university back into the national student organisation. NUSAS was at that stage running a national campaign, 'Education for an African future'. After a heated campaign that saw the anti-affiliation campaign spearheaded by the SRC president (now Advocate) Izak Smuts, the pro-affiliation faction lost the referendum. There were 984 students against and 849 voted in favour. Rhodesian students played a major role in the anti-affiliation campaign. The poll was a very high: 79 percent.

The Rhodes Journalism Department conducted a survey of students after the referendum. The study was designed to measure the level of information – not opinions – through eleven questions to which there was a right or wrong answer. The questions were based on information that both the pro- and anti-affiliation campaign organisers believed that students needed in order to make a rational decision.

The survey found that:

- 68 percent of respondents were ill-informed (scored five or less out of 11);
- 10 percent were unable to answer any of the questions;
- 79 percent did not know the NUSASs president's name;
- men were more informed than women;
- South Africans were more likely to vote for affiliation than Rhodesians;
- Those voting in favour of affiliation were more informed than those voting against.

Asked to comment on the results of the survey, Journalism lecturer Graham Watts put it succinctly: 'A more homogeneous, educated community with easy access to information would be difficult to come by. I would not hesitate to describe the referendum vote as abominably ignorant. The question remains – what did these people base their decision on?'

A fair question. For me these students, especially those voting against affiliation to NUSAS, were an excellent example of what went on in the broader white community in both South Africa and Rhodesia. They voted as they were told by those in authority, with the pack, against the ungodly, left-wing communist terrorists (that NUSAS was seen to be promoting) to preserve white privilege and the colonial lifestyle and to keep black Africa at bay. Rhodesia is Super! And golly, the last thing you wanted was for facts to get in the way!

Another initiative I was involved with in 1979 became known as the 'Quad Squat'. With a group of likeminded members of the hedonist left (as our particular group was known), we snuck into the main admin quad in the early hours of the morning, through the majestic arches designed by Sir Herbert

himself and erected a squatter camp on the beautiful green lawns. We used old corrugated iron and tents, and also set up numerous carefully prepared notice boards outlining our concern with the Eurocentric and irrelevant content of the university curriculum. We stuck banners and posters around campus advertising our protest squat, and when the university awoke from its slumber, there we were encamped and ready for action. The mode of operation was to hand out pamphlets to passing students and staff and to engage them in debate about the merits of studying romantic English poets while people were being forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to Bantustan resettlement camps such as Glenmore on the Fish River near Grahamstown. In fact the impetus for the Quad Squat was provided by another Journalism Department survey amongst students, where one bright young spark when asked about the Glenmore resettlement camp said he thought that it was a Scottish biscuit!

Response to the Quad Squat was predictable. A few lefty lecturers gave their lectures in solidarity in the quad, while others allowed guerrilla theatre in their lectures ('security police' arresting black students and dragging them forcibly out). The university security officer ripped down posters around campus and Dr Henderson the Vice-Chancellor in his usual fashion didn't take action against us but also didn't support the protest. The more liberal professors while also not actively supporting the protest, expressed their approval in the press afterwards, mainly on the ground of freedom of speech, etc. Those opposed were probably best represented by the sentiments of Professor Edward Higgins of the Sociology Department:

As I see it, Monday and Tuesday's squatting exercise represented some kind of collective ego trip by people who, while they may be genuinely concerned about the injustices in our society, are probably suffering from a colossal guilt complex. In the squatting business I found the means methods unacceptable and unacademic. Such disruptive episodes should not be tolerated by serious academics.

Conservative students variously threatened to attack and destroy the camp (we slept there overnight), water bombs were thrown at us, and a counter-demonstration in support of 'colonialism' (complete with black servants, cigars, bashers, blazers and bowls) was held on the second day. The event culminated with a mass meeting addressed by sympathetic lecturers. Right-wingers heckled with racist interjections such as 'why don't they keep their townships clean', to which Jeff Peires replied with great passion, 'Because they're too busy cleaning your fucking house!'

The last word came from Andre Brink (Head of the Afrikaans/Nederlands Department at Rhodes at that time) who said:

The cause of such a protest is worthy and should be brought to the attention of as many people as possible. An act is something that requires total commitment, and even sacrifice. A gesture is something performed by an actor without the necessity that he should take full responsibility for it. I feel this demonstration was more a gesture than an act.

He was probably right. Many of the participants of both the NUSAS 'Education for an African future' and of the Quad Squat are now living in Sydney, Geneva and London. Not all, mind you. Larry Strelitz, Guy Berger and I are still here, in the same town at the same university. I wonder if that qualifies as an *act* in Andre Brink's eyes, that is, requiring total commitment and sacrifice.

An interesting addendum to the relevance/Africanisation crusade is an experience I underwent a few years later when I was lecturing in the Department of Development Studies at the University of Bophuthatswana. The results of a research project conducted through the Institute of Education in conjunction with some English teachers at local schools came up with some surprising results. Questioning the ability of students in a rural African context to understand the olde English, the historical context and the cultural references that abounded in the classics (Hardy, Shakespeare, etc.) prescribed by the Department of Education, researchers suggested some Af Lit alternatives. The teachers and parents, on the basis that the aforementioned classics constituted 'real education', vociferously rejected these home-baked offerings. As Kurt Vonnegut is fond of saying: *so it goes*.

Back at Rhodes, the real question of course is what has changed since the 1970/80s.

Well, the teargas, buffels, and funerals have gone, along with the morally challenged slime balls like the Edwards brothers and Olivia Forsythe.¹ So too have the waiters in the dining halls, rag and the Athies Auction (an event where female first years students were auctioned to the highest bidder to be their slave for the day). Clifffie Abraham's liver also finally gave up the ghost. The administration, academic staff, students, and university council have transformed and are moving towards an acceptable level of racial equity, more so in some areas than others. Many students are from other parts of Africa. Many academics are doing research in and have connections with other African universities/countries. A small number of academics are working with local NGOs and community groups as well as with local, provincial and national government to implement second-generation socio-economic rights (such as land, governance, poverty alleviation and local economic development). A number of institutes are working on areas such as English in Africa, social development, social and economic research and educational outreach programs in schools. Loosely affiliated institutions such as CADRE and PSAM are playing an important role in HIV/AIDS research and public service monitoring respectively.

But the institution is a long way from being an African university. Role models are still Britain, USA and Australia. The restructuring of the South African tertiary sector and the loss of the East London campus to Fort Hare has contributed further to the isolation of Rhodes Grahamstown from its Eastern Cape environment. In Eastern Cape government circles the focus is very definitely on the new Fort Hare. It is seen as a major opportunity to create a new

vibrant African university with strong research, training and policy-formation links with the provincial and local government. Many regard Rhodes on the other hand as an ‘academic university’ in the somewhat elitist ivory-tower sense. Adding to this perception is that as the crisis in the Eastern Cape Education Department deepens, the university is becoming increasingly inaccessible to the majority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially in the rural hinterland of the province.

In conclusion, we need to ask ourselves what we mean by ‘Africanisation’, especially within an increasingly globalised world and an international academic context. At a minimum it means that Rhodes should move fairly rapidly towards a situation where its staff and student profile matches the broader demographics of the country. It means that a large part of our educational focus should be to provide educated and skilled people firstly for the Eastern Cape, secondly for the country, and thirdly for the continent. It means that our research should have a similar orientation. All this needs to be done without compromising the ability of staff and students to interact with international universities or the recognition of their degrees in other parts of the world. It will be a long haul that will have to conquer the twin peaks of inertia and vested interest. With others, I have pulled on my boots and packed my pitons.

Notes

1. Some of the more infamous security police spies at Rhodes.

***Comprehensive Listing of Participants in the
Colloquium 'The Critical Tradition at
Rhodes University', August 2004,
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