

REPRESENTING MADIBA: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Verne Harris

Although I like to think of myself as a scholar, I am also a functionary. I started doing work for Nelson Mandela in 2001 and became a full-time employee of the Nelson Mandela Foundation in 2004. I am embedded in the space named “Mandela”. So, I am not impartial in relation to Madiba. I come with a certain positionality.

I find it easy to separate out in my mind Nelson Mandela the iconic public figure, on the one hand, and the human being, Madiba on the other. The former is fundamentally a construct, a tapestrying of fact, fiction and adulation. The latter is the man I got to know through nearly a decade as his employee. The former, ironically, brings out the worst in everyone, including me – the allure of association with celebrity on such a grand scale, the desire to use the influence of such association, the temptation to want just another piece of it. The latter, Madiba the human being, I learned to love and to listen to with the greatest care.

I don't recall ever being entranced by the icon. Yes, in the 1980s he became the symbol of my aspirations for a liberated South Africa. Yes, in the early 1990s I looked to him as my leader and regarded him as the kind of person life throws up only very rarely. And yes, as a public servant throughout the first post-apartheid government I revelled in his presidency and savoured, for the first time, the patriotism he sanctioned.

But I had seen the evidence of fallibility, and I had experienced flaws of leadership (collective as much as individual). For instance, the ravages of what I call a seduction of the movement by capital, starting in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s. Or the unseemly haste with which ‘reconstruction and development’ was replaced by neo-liberal frames and strategies. The inadequate response to reports of systematic destruction of records by the apartheid state after 1990, and the introduction of a moratorium on records destruction only in December 1995, too late to prevent a massive loss of documentary memory. The embrace of a concept and a practice of reconciliation arguably geared to a quick fix rather than a long haul. The mandate for ‘the arms deal’. And so on.

The legacy of Nelson Mandela, for obvious reasons, is contested. More fundamentally, it is not singular. It is always already manifold. For legacies are never simply received; they are only ever made and re-made. Of course, such a proposition would require an extended analysis to substantiate. Suffice it to acknowledge that for me it flows from a deconstructive frame — to quote Jacques Derrida:

To inherit is not essentially to *receive* something, a *given* that one could then *have*. It is an active affirmation; it responds to an injunction, but it also presupposes an initiative, the signature, or countersignature of a critical

selection. To inherit is to select, to sort, to highlight, to reactivate...There is legacy only where assignments are multiple and contradictory, secret enough to defy interpretation, to carry the unlimited risk of active interpretation. (Derrida, J. 2002. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, pp.110-111)

For any institution carrying a responsibility in relation to the legacy of Nelson Mandela, such an understanding removes the terrible burden of attempting to preserve and promote 'the legacy'. At the same time, it poses the daunting responsibility of "the signature, or countersignature of a critical selection."

One of my tasks since 2004 has been to read every book and view every movie or documentary relating to the life and times of Nelson Mandela. If I look somewhat haggard, my eyes a bit glazed, it is because this task keeps growing and is most often very boring. The publishing space we name "Mandela" is an industry, arguably supporting a saturated market dominated by work, which reproduces the same basic narrative and the same well-known images. All too rare are the fresh line of enquiry, the unexpected insight, sustained critical analysis, and the deep, deconstructive 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".

This is not the occasion to dig deeply into what is a vast body of work. In the time available, I want merely to outline what seem to me to be the most salient attributes, dynamics and trends. Seven points. Most obviously, this industry, this literature, this discourse, is dominated by voices that are male and white. No surprise of course. An inordinate number of these are either non-South African or South Africans based outside the country. This is especially striking in the realm of film – you can count the number of black voices on the fingers of one hand. In the realm of books, you'd need maybe two hands.

Secondly, the space is characterized by an extraordinary number of coffee-table books and what I call 'sweetheart quick-buck' films. There is money to be made.

There is also an extraordinary volume of authorised work. Authorised directly by Madiba, his lawyers, the family, or the Nelson Mandela Foundation, or indirectly through support and other forms of assistance from the Foundation. It's surprising how many authors and filmmakers want *association* with us – in other words, they ask us for more than professional help. A myriad texts and screenplays have been checked and corrected by us. For a decade and a half now, my research team and I have been doing this. And to be honest I encourage people not to be constrained by us – go do your own thing, I urge, be critical, and don't feel beholden to either Madiba or his organisation. Because authorised work – whether direct or indirect – has severe limitations. On the other hand, authorisation secures privileged access. More often than not a seal of approval is required to see an archive, to get an interview. Fatima

Meer's close friendship with Mum Winnie secured her extraordinary access to family archive for her Mandela biography. Anthony Sampson's researcher James Sanders was able to trawl the state's prison archive for the first time when working on his authorised biography.

Access to archive in South Africa is a problem. This is the subject for a long paper. Let me say just a few things. In terms of Madiba's personal archive, in the custody of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, he gave a mandate for access to be given without fear or favour. And yet legislation (like the Protection of Personal Information Act) constrains the Foundation in all kinds of ways. Access to the broader "Mandela Archive" too often is determined by who one is connected to. And access to records in the public archives system in South Africa is severely constrained by deep dysfunction in great reaches of that system (see for instance the findings of the 2015 State of the Archive Report -

http://www.archivalplatform.org/images/resources/State_of_the_Archive_FOR_WEB.pdf). How is it possible that Madiba's 2010 Promotion of Access to Information Act request to the Department of Justice for access to records relating to himself was belatedly responded to with an indication that the Department had no such records? How is it possible that the Foundation's research team, while working on *Dare Not Linger*, an account of Madiba's presidential years, was led from pillar to post in trying to access records of the presidency in the period 1994–1999? To the point that we worry that many of those records are either missing or being deliberately hidden?

That is four points I've made. A fifth now. Many of Madiba's friends, family, comrades, associates, employees, warders, security personnel, and so on, have written memoirs in which Madiba actually **is** the story. There are many insights to be found in these memoirs, many good stories, but for me the word 'appropriation' looms large here.

Sixth point. While the body of popular work is huge, there is relatively little scholarly work in the Mandela Studies space. For me, a listing of seminal endeavour in this space is very close to being another case of the fingers of one hand. In 1986, Mustapha Tlili and Jacques Derrida published a book of important essays in honour of Madiba. Ciraj Rassool and Elleke Boehmer have both done significant work. The 2014 *Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* includes a number of seminal reflections. As does the 2017 special edition of *The Black Scholar*, edited by that fantastic academic Victoria Collis-Buthelezi (now working out of the University of Johannesburg). And in this year, the centenary year, alongside a flood of sweetheart work is emerging very exciting work more or less stimulated by the 'Mum Winnie moment'. I could say a lot about that, but let's leave it for question time. Just to say that I know of several scholars working right now on books related to Mum Winnie and Madiba, including Shireen Hassim, Sisonke Msimang, Xolela Mangcu and Jonny Steinberg. Their names alone signal what could be a sea change.

My seventh point. The realm of fiction. In my view, very little to talk about here. (Although one could argue, of course, that so much of the Mandela industry production has been more fictional than factual. Think of the movie *Goodbye Bafana*). In terms of important novels, I would name just three (fingers of one hand): Helene Cixous' 1988 *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*. Njabulo Ndebele's 2003 *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. And Lewis Nkosi's 2006 *Mandela's Ego*. Many poems have been written in honour of Madiba, of course. Praise poems. Songs. But we need far more critical work from our creative artists.

I'm drawing to a close. I'd like to end by going back to beginnings. So, where did the Mandela Industry begin? For me it started with the book *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, published in 1964 by the ANC with Heinemann. Of course, behind the book was a decision by the leadership to use Madiba as a symbol of struggle. To elevate him as the voice of a movement. (Of course, there never is an absolute beginning. We could go back to the Rivonia Trial. Or to the Defiance Campaign.)

Over time, from prison, Madiba became part of this elevation project. It's interesting to read again a letter Madiba wrote to Fatima Meer in 1971:

Most successful men are prone to some form of vanity. There comes a stage in their lives when they consider it permissible to be egotistic and to brag to the public at large about their unique achievements. What a sweet euphemism for self-praise the English language has evolved! Autobiography...

Four years later Madiba was working on *Long Walk to Freedom!* Why that text was not published until the 1990s is a long story – maybe a subject for question time? When he came out of prison, almost immediately, in 1990, he started working again on the book and on an authorised documentary (with Angus Gibson and Jo Menell). How was that even possible in the clutter and strain of the transition years? (How is it possible that my team has identified over 50 errors of fact in the book *Long Walk to Freedom?*) Again, in 1998, as he entered the final year of his presidency, he sat down to start drafting a memoir of the presidential years. There is a lot to be said about this, of course, but I'm simply making the point that Madiba was deeply invested in getting 'the authorised story' out. In representing himself.

It is time to dig deeper. To excavate what is in the archive. To deconstruct the representations in authorised space. We need more scholarship, more representations of Madiba outside the domains of whiteness. The initiative needs to be seized from what I call the hacks, the groupies and the hustlers.

I am watching what the Nelson Mandela University is doing...