



*Dalibhunga*¹
This time? That Mandela?

Colloquium
6-8 March 2019

Concept Note

What Mandela for what time? The question presents an aporia, an impasse. Who is the Mandela we import from history and ‘what’ is the Mandela approaching us from the future? And, what kind of imageries and imaginaries of Mandela? For whom? For what purpose? There are many Mandelas, and more to come, since legacy is not a “static inheritance, but a disruptive re-visitation of the past”.² We may consider the propensity of history to centre the ‘big man’, that is, to explain Mandela, and we can mobilise the discourse of the saviour in the Mandela historiography to elucidate his influence. Further, calling on our politico-cultural and socio-economic analytical resources, there, sometimes, is a sense that we have figured Mandela; there is a sense that we have figured him out. We express this in the myriad of biographical, non-biographical writings and thoughtful/less social media representations. Nevertheless, there is the niggling, awkward acknowledgment that we all carry in the present: *Mandela* defies figuring. The italicised *Mandela* here signifies the shift from the person to the *social figure*: a figure of justice.

Perhaps, knowing *Mandela* as an ‘impossibility’ may be a more strategic way forward for us currently. That is, we must grapple with the idea of *Mandela* as a definitive figure of justice in order to move the very idea of justice further than *Mandela*. Amidst a sea of biographical work on Mandela, and the infinitude of commemorative acts *about* and *for* Mandela (place names, institutions, etc.), critique accompanies veneration for him. Not because of *Mandela*, but often for the reason that a global and national mediatised Mandela came to be the icon of ‘the struggle’ and thus carries the representational burden of the perceived failure of the reconciliation project in the absence of a non-racial and inclusive narrative of progress since 1994.

To grapple with the idea of *Mandela* is an injunction to persist in trying to do so as an ethical imperative; it is to open up the infinite possibilities of justice. This is, amongst others, primarily an engaged-scholarly task with practical import. That is, the labour of praxis calls upon us to disclose the interpretive schemes and associated social practices that we can distil from

¹ This is the name Mr Mandela was given at the age of 16 once he had undergone initiation, the traditional Xhosa rite of passage into manhood. It means “creator or founder of the council” or “convenor of the dialogue”. See Nelson Mandela Foundation. <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/names>

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



Mandela to cultivate humanity in the interests of socio-economic equality: productive work on this is already available³ but we are yet to come together as a community of scholars and practitioners, as the name ‘Dalibhunga’ intimates, to excavate *Mandela*. Such excavation of *Mandela* will inevitably encounter Mandela in the plural, across time and space: *This time? That Mandela?*

To this end, Nelson Mandela University, together with the Human Sciences Research Council and the Nelson Mandela Foundation, are hosting a colloquium from 6-8 March 2019. The colloquium is organised around the following themes: rights, democracy and justice; cultural memory and the politics of the present; inheritance, legacy and commemoration; and representation, signification and iconism. These themes will permeate the discussions and scholarly contestations of the colloquium which is planned around four sessions and two exhibitions (see attached programme).

The framing objective of the colloquium is an exploration of the social figure of Mandela as the dense location of scholarly work where history and subjectivity make social life,⁴ in the present; and its implications for formulating a Critical Mandela Studies Programme with real, pragmatic import to engage with the grand challenges of our time.

Starting at 18h00 on 6 March 2019 with a welcoming dinner hosted by the Vice-Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University, Prof Sibongile Muthwa; and then moving through four sessions, the colloquium will conclude at 13h00 on Friday, 8 March 2019.

With thanks

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³ See for instance Barnard, R. (ed.) (2014). *The Cambridge Companion to Mandela*.

⁴ See A. Gordon, 2008.