



Colloquium
Dalibbunga: This Time? That Mandela?
6 – 8 March 2019
Nelson Mandela University
Port Elizabeth
Summary Report

Introduction

The *Dalibbunga: This Time? That Mandela?* colloquium was hosted at Nelson Mandela University in collaboration between the university, the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This colloquium was aligned with the Mandela Centenary Celebrations, as well as the historic name-change of the university in 2017. A range of *Mandela* scholars were invited to provide critical animations on the *social figure* of *Mandela*.

Mandela and TIMS

The colloquium was a significant step in a process of conceptual thinking around what it might mean for a university to be named after Nelson Mandela on the one hand; and how such thinking can find expression in the university's relationships with its publics, communities and society on the other. This process put forward the idea of *Mandela* in italics, as a social figure, that dense location of scholarly work where history and subjectivity make social life,¹ and suggested that this figure always be encountered in the plural. The colloquium was also meant to explore the possibilities of a critical *Mandela* studies programme and to formulate the

thematic groundwork for the idea of a *Transdisciplinary Institute for Mandela Studies* (TIMS).

Opening Event

The opening event on the 6th of March framed the colloquium through three key inputs: from NMF Chief Executive Mr Sello Hatang, HSRC CEO Prof Crain Soudien, and the Vice-Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University, Prof Sibongile Muthwa. These inputs foregrounded, most explicitly in Mr Hatang's speech, the responsibility towards transformation that comes with taking up the legacy of *Mandela*.



They also, in different ways, tied critical *Mandela* studies to the function of the university and, by extension, the grand challenges faced by society. These speakers called for a socially engaged university,

and the Sociological Imagination, 8.

¹ Based on Gordon, A. (2008), *Ghostly Matters: Haunting*

although in different ways. Prof Soudien spoke of the construction of a ‘radically inclusive university’ and mobilized Ernest Boyer’s concept of ‘engaged scholarship’, while Prof Muthwa, in her opening address, referenced her inaugural speech call for a university *in service of society*.



The notion of the ‘*Ghost of Mandela*’ and the agentic concept of ‘*haunting*’ as key to our social justice work, as suggested by Prof Muthwa, raised the question of how *Mandela* as a social figure could be a productive and generative way of engaging with pressing societal challenges and allow us to transformatively re-imagine higher education. ‘Far from being about Mandela (the person), the scholarly formulation of *Mandela* (the construct, the embodiment, the touchstone) is the endless, relentless pursuit to bring an intellectual angle to this figure of justice, to generate new praxes for engaging social injustices [...] to move the very idea of justice further than *Mandela*’, she argued.



The Idea Behind It All

The introductory panel on the morning of the 7th of March, Prof André Keet, Prof Crain Soudien and Prof Verne Harris, spoke about ‘The Idea Behind It All’. This introduction pushed off from the inputs from the launch evening, as well as the concept note for the colloquium. The three contributors to this panel highlighted the gap in the scholarly work on *Mandela/Mandela*. It was explained that the intention behind the colloquium was to create a platform for a range of disciplines to engage with the idea of Mandela, his life and his legacy. As Prof Harris highlighted, despite the fact that Mandela is written about so extensively, the narrative of Mandela as hero and symbol of freedom and democracy is dominant, and there is a need for more robust and critical work to unpack our understanding of *Mandela/Mandela*.



The introduction was a challenge in a variety of ways, highlighting the challenges and provocations of the inputs the night before, the disciplinary challenges facing *Mandela* studies, a challenge to commit to courageous, critical and rigorous scholarship, and to approach *Mandela/Mandela*, and concomitantly social justice, in a spirit of innovation. As Prof Soudien asked of the audience: ‘Do we have the opportunity here to dare into this space?’ The spirit of a courageous engagement with various academic and social challenges was one that animated the entire colloquium.

Mandela@MustFall

The first panel session of the colloquium, following the introduction, put *Mandela* directly into conversation with social justice in the contemporary moment through the title ‘Mandela@MustFall’. The moderator was Ms Nobubele Phuza, with Ms Patronella Nqaba, Ms Sumaya Hendricks and Mr Pedro Mzileni providing the provocations, and Advocate Tembeka Ngcukaitobi doing the sense-making.



This subject raised the contemporary criticisms of *Mandela/Mandela*, often associated with the student generation and the student movements. Once again, the function of the university was a central theme, with the issue of neoliberalism and commodification of education emerging as significant. This was tied into the commodification of Mandela himself, as a dancing grandfatherly figure in the post-apartheid era. This session made clear that *Mandela* is a site of significant contestation, as his own appropriation and representation is tied to social issues such as neoliberalism and protest. Advocate Ngcukaitobi foregrounded the importance of properly historicizing and contextualizing *Mandela/Mandela* in order to navigate these contestations, and suggested that the process of understanding Mandela should be undertaken with compassion.

Significantly, this panel also raised the idea of Mandela as a revolutionary, by considering

him in relation to the FeesMustFall movement. At the heart of much of the recent criticism of *Mandela/Mandela* has been the fact that his radicalism has been sublimated through representation, or that his revolutionary history has been erased by his commodification. Advocate Ngcukaitobi, as a legal historian, characterized Mandela as the ‘original fallist’, highlighting his insistence on justice over legality. The contestation around this narrative of Mandela as revolutionary was illustrated within the colloquium itself, as, in the final panel, Prof Xolela Mangcu, through a historical reading of Mandela’s upbringing and influences, refuted the idea. He argued that Mandela belonged to a group of African educated elites whose actions were militant rather than revolutionary as a response to being rejected by British society. This contestation is clearly a rich vein for inquiry into the complexities of *Mandela* and *Mandela*, and the ways in which *Mandela* studies can explore ideas about revolution and social change.

On ‘Making’ Mandela

The afternoon panel was titled ‘On “Making” Mandela’, with Prof Soudien as moderator, Prof Ciraj Rassool as provocateur and Prof Relebohile Moletsane as sense-maker. This panel was concerned with how *Mandela* has been constructed, particularly through biography and autobiography. Alongside this, the theme of the function of the university was once again integral to the conversation.

Prof Rassool framed biography as a means of producing history and as a form of critical inquiry. He characterized South Africa as a biographic order, and noted the political implications of the contestations of biography, which might be explored through the auto/biography of *Mandela/Mandela*. He pointed out that the cultural study of *Mandela* has largely been limited to him as symbol, neglecting the important study of the

cultural politics of biography. Prof Rassool's presentation thus posed auto/biography as a significant potential theme for Critical *Mandela* Studies and TIMS.

The plurality of *Mandela* was clearly demonstrated in this session, through the various biographic iterations of Mandela/*Mandela* traced by Prof Rassool, and Prof Moletsane's outline of the multiple aspects of this figure: its textuality, materiality and commodification. Prof Moletsane also foregrounded questions of how we learn about Mandela/*Mandela* and linked this to decolonization. Apart from biographies, she proposed that we can also understand Mandela/*Mandela* through 1) the feminist notion of a pedagogy of desire and 2) object representation.



The Archive

The final panel on the morning of the 8th of March was on 'The Archive'. This session was moderated by Prof Verne Harris, with provocations provided by Prof Mangcu, Mr Joel Netshitenzhe and Prof Carolyn Hamilton. Through the lens of archive, this session also touched on the issue of biography and history. Prof Mangcu asserted that to produce a decolonized curriculum, it was necessary to write biographies of important black African figures by African scholars that avoided reductive framings of history. Central to writing these kinds of histories, this session revealed, was the archive.

Mr Netshitenzhe posited the archive as a living system, with its construction (what is included and excluded, how it is contextualized, who decides on access to it, and so on) having profound political and social ramifications. To write these new kinds of histories/biographies, it was asserted that it was necessary to fundamentally overhaul the archive. In this regard, the discussion focused on the ways in which prevailing relations of power determine the ways in which the archive is constructed.

The question of archive, Prof Hamilton proposed, is the question of knowledge itself. She linked the overdetermination of the figure/phenomenon of *Mandela* to the contemporary debates on the Mandela archive. Also prominent in the discussion was a line of enquiry about *Mandela* and the nature and history of African modernity.



What now?

The 'What now?' session at the end of the colloquium put forward various suggestions for TIMS. Some significant issues that emerged or were reinforced were: Mandela as part of a constellation rather than being understood as simply an exceptional individual, *Mandela* as a social phenomenon, *Mandela* as a figure who raises big philosophical and spiritual questions, the oral tradition in relation to the construction of history, questions around *Mandela* and decoloniality, woundedness, and issues of social elitism.

Importantly, the issue of gender was also raised. It was noted by Prof Moletsane that the panels were dominated by men. A discomfort was expressed by various parties, sometimes in the question sessions as well as outside of formal discussion, that the gendered aspects and problematics of Mandela as a patriarchal figure of authority were not adequately addressed at any point during the colloquium. What emerged was a sense that the exclusive focus on *Mandela* excluded feminist concerns. Thus, an implicit theme emerged around the tension between *Mandela* studies and feminist scholarship and activism.



***Mandela* and the Arts**

Another implicit theme was *Mandela* and the arts. This emerged from the two art exhibitions – the one in the Art Gallery on Bird Street, the venue of the colloquium, entitled *we are present*, that was made in response to the colloquium, and the *Provoke/Ukuchukumisa/Daag-Uit* exhibition, which was also in collaboration with the colloquium. Through the interaction between the colloquium and these exhibitions, the question of transdisciplinarity and ways of knowing were raised in profound ways.

The *we are present* exhibition portrays the work of staff and students in the visual arts that reflects their own understanding of *Dalibhunga* through their professional crafts. The concept note for this exhibition frames it as a ‘collective of designers, photographers,

sculptors, printmakers, painters and ceramists [making] a visual contribution to the scholarly dialogue of what it means to us to be at *Mandela*, and of *Mandela* as this time’. It was also specifically framed as part of ongoing disciplinary conversations about the nature of making art in the contemporary context. In other words, the exhibition, like the colloquium, was specifically raising questions about the relationship between academic disciplines and social change, as well as questions of knowledge creation in relation to transformation. Reflecting the colloquium’s broader focus on transdisciplinarity and multiple ways of ‘reading’, the exhibition included not only a variety of different art forms, but also different approaches to the arts, from expressions of socio-political consciousness to purist desires to create beautiful forms.



The *Provoke/Ukuchukumisa/Daag-Uit* exhibition spoke to the multitude of perceptions, images and discourses associated with the name Nelson Mandela, across time and space. This was thus a way of responding to *Mandela* in the plural, but through the medium of art. Furthermore, the themes of this exhibition were meant to provide a space to interrogate, reflect and redefine the Mandela name and legacy as a strategic inheritance and responsibility. The launch of the exhibition engaged *Mandela* through food, song and dance. Notably, the food was prepared by Ms Xoliswa Ndoyiya, Mandela’s chef during his presidency and

beyond, who was also the guest speaker. She provided a personal perspective of Mandela as a man who loved home-cooked food and had both a deep humility and great sense of humour. This added a personal and intimate take on Mandela, a reminder of the human being behind the social figure of justice, the president, the sometimes revolutionary, and the commodified embodiment of the ‘rainbow nation’.



Concrete proposals

The following concrete proposals were made around the idea of TIMS:

- Prof Ihron Rensburg: That the colloquium had not spoken about the ‘vocation’ of Mandela – the calling to follow Mandela’s example in academia – and that this could be a theme for TIMS.
- Ambassador January-Bardill: That the circle needs to be broadened and these conversations and contestations need to be expanded into the university community.
- Prof Mangcu: That TIMS should 1) have a programme on biography and leadership and 2) find a way to be part of the broader community, such as convening spaces for discussion.
- Prof Hamilton: That, in the short-term, it was a necessity for the controversial debates around Mandela/*Mandela* to be given serious critical attention and for

the difficult discussions and research around him to be rigorously performed.

- Prof Rassool: That *Mandela* studies should ask 1) ethical questions, 2) social questions and 3) historical questions. He also suggested that TIMS needed to be grounded in the regional identity of the Eastern Cape; and be viewed as a project to rethink the ‘humanities’.
- Prof Soudien: That some amount of experimentation was necessary in order to develop critical *Mandela* studies in a productive way, but that this experimentation would need to be balanced by a certain pragmatism.
- Prof Harris: That the Nelson Mandela Foundation would provide strong support for TIMS, but would not take up a gate-keeping role. He proposed a kind of ‘banditry’ in the archive in order to get access to important records to investigate some of the controversial topics around Mandela.
- Prof Keet: That TIMS should contribute to the renewal of the humanities and the repurposing of the university. He also emphasised the importance of the transdisciplinary aspect of the institute.



Thematic Areas for Scholarly Work

- The idea of a critical *Mandela* studies programme tied to the TIMS proposal has received substantive, yet critical, support as well as intellectual

justification across the panels and contributions. Despite the complexities that will inevitably tag this 'project', participants consider it a worthwhile differentiator within the higher education space given the gap in scholarship and academic programming on this score.

- Summary of main thematic areas:
 - a. *Mandela*, feminisms and intersectionality
 - b. *Mandela*, social justice and 'the university'
 - c. *Mandela*, transformation and decoloniality
 - d. *Mandela*, knowledge production and 'the sciences'
 - e. *Mandela*, modernity, auto/biography and history

- f. *Mandela* the 'revolutionary'
- g. *Mandela*, context, critique, contestations and 'the archive'
- h. *Mandela* and the arts
- i. *Mandela*, political economy and neoliberalisms

