

Body at War: Rhodes in Nelson Mandela University

Siphokazi Tau

The #RhodesWarAtNMU solidarity protest held at Nelson Mandela University in March 2018 affirmed once more, the permanent state of vulnerability that victims of gender-based violence have to live with.

The solidarity protest followed the expulsion of two anti-rape activists from Rhodes University in November 2017, after they allegedly kidnapped two rape suspects from their rooms. This action by the anti-rape activists being as a result of the university not taking action against the alleged sexual offenders on campus, after the social media circulation of the infamous Reference List, consisting of eleven alleged rapists (Wittles, 2016).

The naked/slutty¹ protest was staged by group of anti-rape activists known as *The Collective*² around Mandela University's Madiba shirt sculpture (a sculpture representative of the famous Madiba shirt). The shirt forms part of the university's public art legacy programme which is affiliated to the Vision 2020, which is a deliberate interrogation of the university's identity to "determine strategic priorities that will secure the long-term sustainability of the institution".³

The sculpture which is representative of Mandela University's vision of UBUNTU is intended to be a reminder and inspiration for one to practice UBUNTU as Madiba did.

The UBUNTU ideology is an African principle that "all humans are equal in their humanity" (Ramose, 2001). It centralizes the idea of the collective over the individual, in fact to live according to the UBUNTU principle, I would suggest that one would have to abandon themselves completely and only speak of themselves in relation to others. This relationship between the naked/slutty body, protest and place is important to note in understanding the discourse that *The Collective* brings to the surface particularly in engaging UBUNTU.

¹ Slutty wear in protests are used to critique the idea that rape is associated with clothing and the dress of the victim as that which provoked and justifies the attack.

² The Collective was the inclusive term used by the female and male bodied activists who formed part of the solidarity protest to refer to all those who joined the solidarity protest.

³ Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Vision 2020 Strategic Plan. Available at: <http://sustainability.mandela.ac.za/carbon/media/Store/documents/Home/Vision2020-Strategic-Plan-2010.pdf>

Sultana (2014: 158) reminds us that bodies demonstrate communication and because of that, the body houses various contestations. This thus implies that as the violated (raped) body may be symbolic of shame and humiliation, it can in the same breath use its nakedness and vulnerability as a “weapon of resistance” (Sultana, 2014: 163). *The Collective*, in positioning the naked/slutty body at the Mandela shirt, is critiquing the value of UBUNTU as understood by the establishment (Mandela University and other universities), particularly demanding “the restoration of their humanity” (see Ramose, 2001).

Subsequently, the protestors in their nakedness are questioning the idea of the female body and the societal expectations placed upon it. Sutton (2007) reminds us that the female body is often viewed as a commodity and is continuously subjected to being sexualized. The body reconstructs its position in the face of the power (the university, the patriarchal sculpture of Madiba), it takes shapes and forms that are non-binary; on its conditions, it is naked on its own account, the body has affirmed itself, it resists the power (Deveaux, 2016).

This idea of reconstruction is important to note as bodies which can suffer humiliation, can through re-signifying themselves, embody a different meaning, that of resistance (see Sultana 2014). In this one-hour protest and demonstration, the body, black and naked lies on the ground, silent and bare. Displayed for all to place their gaze on its supposed inactivity and of stillness. The body in this protest, the naked body lies on the ground, ‘stationary’, next to this sculpture representative of human dignity. The body in this protest is a language in and of itself.

Contrary to this analysis, the body in this act of supposed ‘stillness’, is in actual fact imposing itself on the audience. In *The mute always speak: on women’s silences at the TRC*, Nthabiseng Motsemme (2004) suggests that expressions of silence by women (living with violations) need to be interpreted as a language in itself that is of pain (physical and mental) and grief (loss of consent). The politics of space and what that space is meant for is in tension with what the body decides to do within that space. The university space, as an intellectual hub, is challenged by the naked body that confronts, firstly, what an intellectual space is supposed to appear like and the pedagogy one would then use to spark an intellectual debate. Secondly, I suggest that through challenging this perception of an intellectual space, the body challenges the inherited perception of the naked black body. The black body I suggest is critiquing its ‘value’ in relation to the value of UBUNTU that the Madiba sculpture represents.

The silence is deafening, the body lies in the scorching sun for an hour, bare, displayed for all to see, for the power (patriarch) to dare to come at it. It speaks to those who did not have the strength to fight, it speaks solidarity, it screams that you are not alone, and where your voice fails you, the body will go to war for you. And so, as our bodies go to war, when we protest and make political demands without uttering a word, the space where it chooses to demonstrate, those spaces become elements/attributes to staging the political, the space becomes political too.

These bodies, although political and powerful, are still precarious, they are delicate and insecure in the same breath. Butler (2009) reminds us that precarity is associated with gender expectations and norms. And how one appears in the public will determine who will receive or not receive protection by the law and establishment (Mandela University and other universities). *The Collective*, in staging the demonstration, exposes the inconsistency and absurdity of hypervisibility.

Hypervisibility is linked to the idea of one being the “visible other and that otherness becomes your defining characteristic. When people see you, they don’t see you – they see your visible characteristics and don’t move past that.” (Sostar, 2017). What this suggests, is that the female body has to be in constant negotiation with the space in which they find themselves in. In essence, when *The Collective* argues that there is an entitlement that people and in particular men feel towards women’s bodies, which manifests through gender based violence, there is a need to defy “this entitlement that is created by patriarchal systems that we are brought up in, we are reclaiming our power back” (Nangamso Nxumalo, from *The Collective*).⁴

The courageous demonstration by *The Collective* reminds us that at times acts of courage at their core require us to be vulnerable, it necessitates that we are deliberate, that we are militant, even as a few, it reminds us that sometimes wars are won by the underdogs.

That courage reminds us that we are “wordless without another” and that not all just wars are understood as that at first.

⁴ Personal interview with *The Collective*, by Siphokazi Tau

References

Butler, J. 2009. Performativity, precarity, sexual politics. Lecture given at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. June 8, 2009.

Deveaux, M. 1996. "Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault." Feminist Interpretations of Michael Foucault. Ed. Susan J. Hekmen. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press. 1996. Print.

Motsemme, N. (2004). The Mute Always Speak: On Women's Silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Current Sociology*, 52(5), 909–932.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392104045377>

Ramose M B. (2001). An African perspective on justice and race. *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy*, 3. <http://them.polylog.org/3/frm-en.htm#s7>

Sostar, T. 2017. 'Self-care and Visibility', Blog: 'navigating your story self-care, self-discovery, self-expression'. Aug 7, 201. Available at: <http://tiffanysostar.com/>

Sultana, P. 2014. Body and Terror: Women's Bodies as Victims and Perpetrators of Terror. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, [S.l.], v. 1, n. 1, july 2014. ISSN 2349-8064. Available at: <http://sanglap-journal.in/index.php/sanglap/article/view/38>

Sutton, Barbara. 2007. "Naked Protest: Memories of Bodies and Resistance at the World Social Forum." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8.3 (2007).

Whittles, G. (2016) 'Rhodes Alleged Rapist Reference List A Violation Of Human Rights', *Eyewitness News* 04 April 2016. Available at: <https://ewn.co.za/2016/04/22/Rhodes-reference-list-a-violation-of-human-rights>