Tell Freedom

Margriet van der Waal

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Zahira Asmal is the director of The City, a research, publishing and placemaking agency she founded in 2010. Her projects, through engagement and collaboration with governments, cultural institutions, architects, academics, and the public, seek to improve procurement processes and enhance the design of public infrastructure and spaces in South African cities. Asmal has presented her publications, and lectured on design, architecture and inclusive city making, at various forums across the globe. Her current project, See, explores contested urban histories, equal representation in the memorialisation of history and the construction of resilient postcolonial urban identities.

Visibility & Voice in the Creole City

In Cape Town, one of the world’s most socially and economically unequal cities, not all cultures are regarded and commemorated equally. In recent years, protests on campuses and across the city have turned violent, with student and civic activists demanding not just more equitable service delivery, but also greater visibility and presence in the central metropolitan and suburban districts of the city. While conducting research for *Movement Cape Town* (The City, 2015), an anthology I edited exploring the economic, political, social, spatial and cultural movements that have created Cape Town and continue to shape the city, I noted responses from residents of colour who expressed that they frequently feel ignored or unacknowledged in Cape Town. And in instances when they don’t feel invisible, they attested to feeling hyper-visible or exoticised - singled out on the basis of difference. Considering that people of colour constitute 84.3% of Cape Town’s population, it is alarming that so many attest to feeling invisible or unrepresented, as evidenced by the numerous protests across the city. That such oppression is routinely shrugged off or deemed normal signals an urgent need to explore the generative potential in the mixed, creole aspects of contemporary life in Cape Town.

During the era of colonisation, extensive work went into establishing a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate - ‘cleansing’ public space of time and history in places across the world so that the colonisers could construct their own orders, references and visual cultures. Cape Town is a prime example of this - the city’s colonial legacy marks the urban landscape even today. We need to make the shift from the outdated fixity of the colonial city, which is diminishing and damaging, to a more resilient, agile and adaptable creole city based on mixedness and mixing. Outdated ideologies of racial purity and uniqueness are a toxic dead end. Our strength lies not only in diversity but also in transgressive hybridity - fusion and translation of existing forms and representations.

In my work as an urbanist I quickly learnt that it is impossible to make integrated, inclusive cities of the future without openly and honestly engaging with the histories that inform each place. Inspired by the decolonial actions of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, the conscientising street art of Tokolos Stencil and Burning Museum, and the activism of Ndifuna Ukwazi’s ‘Reclaim the City’ campaign, I recently initiated a project titled See which draws urgent attention to the histories, memories and identities that inform the evolving social, spatial and cultural realities of Cape Town. My overall aim with See is to make Cape Town a more resilient city through inclusivity and equity. The work that See produces will not only enhance Cape Town’s discourse but serve as a reference for other postcolonial cities grappling with matters of contested histories and the subsequent cultural and social identities arising out of them. I only recently commenced

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the historical research component of See, so this essay presents questions, provocations and paradoxes rather than firm conclusions. In certain instances, I will present my own speculative points of view in the interest of inspiring further analysis and debate.

Considering my own mixed Persian, Burmese and Indian heritage, I am drawn to the concept of ‘brown’ proposed by Richard Rodriguez and it is through this prism that I write this essay. In his book *Brown: The last discovery of America* [Penguin, 2002], Rodriguez writes:

Brown is impurity. I write of a colour that is not a singular colour, not a strict recipe, not an expected result but a colour produced by careless desire - even by accident - by two or several. I write about a blood that is blended. I write of a brown that is completely free of substance and narrative. I extol impurity, I eulogise a literature that is suffused with brown. With illusion, irony, paradox, pleasure. I write about race in America in the hopes of undermining the notion of race in America. Brown bleeds through the straight line - *unstauchable* - the line separating black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction.

The ability of language to express two or several things at once. The ability of bodies to express two or several things at once. It is that brown faculty that I intend to uphold when attempting to write brownly and I defy anyone that tries to unblend me or to say what is appropriate to my voice.

In Latin America what makes me brown is that I am the making of the conquistador and the Indian. My brown is the reminder of conflict and of reconciliation.

North of the Mexico US border, brown is the colour of the future. The adjective accelerates, it becomes a verb. America is browning. South of the border, brown sinks back in to time. Brown is time.

I was born in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century from that violent collision, from that tender embrace of the Indian and the conquistador and I cannot tell you now who is speaking to you. Whether it is the Indian speaking to you or the conquistador. I don't know where my grandmother ends and my grandfather begins. I raped myself.

When you are as brown as I am the remedy for seeking compensation is an absurdity. I am both villain and victim. I am brown.\footnote{It is this intertwining that I wish to reference in my exploration of the creole city. By Rodriguez’s definition, Cape Town was always brown. As people moved to and through the Cape, there was a blending of bodies, languages and cultures. Why then has Cape Town remained a colonial city that has not embraced its creole spirit?}

Looking Away
I have outlined three moments in Cape Town’s history that have presented the city with opportunities to embrace the creole, but at which alternate paths have been followed.

**British imperialism and the making of Afrikaner Nationalism**

imported to the Cape, from the African continent (26.4%), the Indian sub-continent (25.9%), Madagascar (25.1%) and Indonesia (22.7%). However, Emeritus Professor Nigel Worden points out that despite the claims of most Cape historians, the toponyms (place names) assigned to slaves do not necessarily indicate the place of origin of each slave but rather the region from which they were sold to the Dutch. These were not necessarily exactly the same, although the toponym was usually in the same broad region as the person’s place of origin. This means that a number of the slaves classified as Indonesian are likely to have come originally from the Indian subcontinent. The percentage of locally born slaves increased over time, from 23% up to 1749, to 33% in 1750-94 and 46% in 1795-1807. This confirms that there was an increasing dependence on locally born slaves; indeed Cape Town had almost reached a ‘creolisation moment’ in the decade before the ending of the slave trade. At that time the ‘white’ population was recorded as being Dutch (50%), German (27%), French (17%) and Scandinavian, Belgian, other (5.5%).

According to Worden, the shifting nature of slave importation in the 19th century has resulted in contemporary observers simplifying their characterisation of Cape slaves into two categories: ‘Malay’ and ‘Mozambique’, ‘Malay’ referring to the group of people from a range of places from the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and ‘Mozambique’ referring to a group of people from a range of places including Angola, Mozambique, Madagascar and Zanzibar. Worden writes:

William Bird, the Customs Controller in Cape Town in the 1820s, divided slaves at the Cape ‘into three classes: The Negro, the Malay and the Africander (locally born slaves). The ending of slavery in 1834 brought a further perceptual redefining of its racial characteristics, which has also continued to the present. The racial order of the post-emancipation Cape came to define ex-slaves, along with the Khoe and San inhabitants of the Cape, as ‘coloured’, in opposition not only to the descendants of ‘white’ colonists but also to the indigenous African population of the Cape.

There was a great degree of intermixing in the Cape which is attributed to the skewed gender ratio that existed under Dutch governance. Only a small number of VOC [Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie / Dutch East India Company] employees who sailed from the Netherlands were allowed to bring their families with them, and the Dutch never employed European women in a full-time capacity. Between 1657 and 1806, approximately 454 women arrived at the Cape, as compared to 1 590 male colonists. Also, most of the personal slaves who arrived at the Cape with VOC officials were women. Of the roughly 360 people residing at the Cape in 1658, only 20 of them were categorised as ‘Dutch women and children’, with probably only half that number being women. This means that the very earliest enslaved women who arrived at the Cape, were freed in order to marry Dutchmen at the Cape. According to renowned scholar and activist, Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy, ‘Many white settlers married or lived with Asian women, and their children were accepted in the white community. Marriages between the Dutch and slave women were prohibited in 1685 but people of mixed parentage, even slaves, were allowed to marry anyone, including the white settlers, inter-racial marriage in fact, increased from that time.’ According to renowned scholar and activist, Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy, ‘Many white settlers married or lived with Asian women, and their children were accepted in the white community. Marriages between the Dutch and slave women were prohibited in 1685 but people of mixed parentage, even slaves, were allowed to marry anyone, including the white settlers, inter-racial marriage in fact, increased from that time.’

Does this mean that a significant portion of the ‘white’ population in the Cape at the time were actually ‘brown’ by Rodriguez’s definition? It is obvious why people would have chosen to be classified ‘white’ as it marked their privilege and their place in society in contrast to other brown inhabitants of the Cape. However,

we must not forget that stating only one side of your heritage means to disown the other side - and from here we continuously choose to live out myths of the choices we make or that have been made for us.

Research in recent years may prove that the actual number of ‘whites’ in the Cape at the time was lower than earlier records have indicated in the basis on which people were classified i.e. European ancestry, racial purity and spiritual beliefs. With this in mind, I draw attention to the following three individuals who were early residents of Cape Town.

Simon van der Stel, who is commonly thought of a ‘white’ Dutch settler, was born in 1639 to parents Maria Leviens and Adrian van der Stel. His grandmother was Monica van Goa, a former slave of Indian descent, which means that Van der Stel was in fact a creole Governor of the Cape.  

Angela van Bengale (from Bengal) was brought to the Cape, via Batavia, with her companion and three children (father unknown). It seems that Angela and her family were taken by slave raiders in the Ganges Delta area of Bengal. She was purchased by VOC Commander Pieter Kemp and later sold to Jan van Riebeeck who went on to sell her to Abraham Gabemma upon leaving the Cape. Gabemma freed Angela, and in April 1668, she made the full transition to Cape burgher society when she was baptised as a Christian. Angela married Dutchman Arnoldus Basson, a reasonably wealthy free burgher. Angela and Arnoldus Basson were married for 20 years and had six children together. When her husband died Angela inherited a fortune she more than doubled in the course of her lifetime as well as property on Heerengracht, now Adderley Street, making her the first woman to be granted land in the Cape in her own name.

Anna de Koning was the daughter of Angela van Bengale. She married Oloff Bergh, a VOC general of Swedish origin and they had 12 children together. In 1724 Bergh died and De Koning inherited Groot Constantia, one of the most prestigious properties in the Cape, formerly owned by Simon van der Stel.

Considering the analysis provided earlier, and if the American ‘one drop theory’* were to apply in earlier Cape contexts, would Simon van der Stel and the descendants of Angela van Bengale and Anna de Koning be classified as ‘white’, ‘Cape Malay’ or ‘Coloured’?

Cape Town experienced significant changes under the British occupation as it increasingly became the capital of an expanding British colony. In the 1820s more British officials were appointed and English was increasingly used as the official language. There was a steady immigration of British citizens to Cape Town, especially young men in search of a new life driven by the hope of making their fortunes. At this stage many Company officials and employees had moved to other posts or retired, while some became free burghers. The city was visibly changing and the British began to impose their own orders, references and cultures on the landscape of the city. Despite the numerous economic and political pressures placed on the local residents, this watershed moment must surely have presented an alternative opportunity for the ‘white’ residents to join forces with other Cape residents to embrace and assert their creole condition - their shared mixed ancestry and common language, Afrikaans - to form a resilient cultural, social and economic presence in the Cape. Local residents could have jointly asserted that they were a people to be negotiated with rather than dominated. Instead, the ‘white’ colonists formed two groups - some stayed in the Cape and others moved through the interior in what became known as ‘Die Groot Trek’ (The Great Trek), forging the bedrock of Afrikaner Nationalism which would go on to become more pronounced within the context of increasing urbanisation and secondary industrialisation as well as continued British imperial influence in South Africa during the period between the two world wars.

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South Africa’s Democracy

Attaining democracy in 1994 provided an opportunity for Cape Town to assert itself as creole. It was a defining moment for all South Africans and especially people of colour, who were for too long constrained and defined by others. In addition to ‘Rainbow Nation’ sentiments at the time, which highlight diversity and multiculturalism, there was an opportunity for Cape Town to defiantly state that its true democracy would arise out of the blending of all the colours of the rainbow to entrench it as the brown city that it is.

It was a moment to re-examine the term ‘Coloured’ as a description for a varied and complex group of people. The Truth & Reconciliation Commission presented an opportunity for Afrikaners to proudly claim their brown status, letting go of past shame and embracing a proud creole future.

Capetonians still have the chance to move away from classifications that define what they are not, and explore who they are. Brazilians have numerous terms to describe their ‘mulatto’ population; some are ‘Caboclo’, others ‘Mameluco’, ‘Mestiço’ or ‘Pardo’, depending on a person’s ancestry. In the 20th century, many black Americans shifted from ‘Colored’ to ‘Negro’ to ‘Black’ and, most recently, to ‘African-American’. For Jeffrey Hebert, Deputy Mayor for New Orleans, this evolution to ‘African-American’ is more inclusive of a range of black and mixed-race people.

Attaining democracy in 1994 was Cape Town’s chance to address the myths of the past, even with regard to language. It was an opportunity for the brown roots of the Afrikaans language to come to the surface and to quash notions of ‘die suiwer taal’ [the pure language] which was manufactured by the Afrikaner Nationalist movement. According to author and poet Breyten Breytenbach:

Afrikaans is a profound creole language. It originates from all these sources that we know. It has Germanic origins, and derived from seaman’s languages, blending Arabic Portuguese with Malay influences and Khoi influences. As is typical of a creole language – from this process of hybridisation, which is a refined form of adaptation, came a locally originated language in South Africa. Afrikaans originated as an oral language. The first books printed in Afrikaans were in Arabic script. Afrikaans phonetics were used in madrassahs and mosques in Cape Town for the purposes of the Imams.

Even the word ‘Afrikaner’ originally made reference to the mixed-race descendants of slaves and European settlers. Award-winning South African filmmaker Dylan Valley states in an interview in The Citizen newspaper that there is a stigma for ‘coloured’ people attached to the way they speak Afrikaans. Although the language was created by ancestors of mixed heritage, the Afrikaans spoken by white people came to be regarded as the standard or ‘suiwer Afrikaans’ [pure Afrikaans]. ‘There is definitely a link between colouredness and Afrikaans**. Both the language and the people formation - I don’t think we can talk about a coloured “race” – comes from a result of slavery and creolised identity,’ says Valley.

In the same piece, interviewer for The Citizen newspaper Tsholofelo Wesi writes, ‘How the Afrikaans spoken by white people came to be considered the standard has been commonly argued to have been a construct of a nationalistic ideology of the 19th century and was firmly established by the early 20th century. In Afrikaans [documentary on the Afrikaans spoken by ‘Coloured’ people directed by Valley] Dr Neville Alexander, a political activist, speaks about how Afrikaans in the 19th century was associated with servants and the lower classes, while Dutch was the language of aspiration.

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Wesi goes on to quote Alexander, saying, ‘But from 1875, the Society of True Afrikaners wanted to spread the Bible and Christianity amongst other Afrikaans speakers, the so-called brown people. They began to standardise Afrikaans. All the words which had originated from Malay or Khoi or whatever, with a few exceptions, were left out of the lexicon.’

Afrikaans is the first language of 75.8% of ‘Coloured’ South Africans (4.8 million people), 60.8% (2.7 million people) of white South Africans; 4.6% (58 000 people) of Asian South Africans, and 1.5% (600 000 people) of Black South Africans. Why then, even in South Africa’s democracy, is the Afrikaans language so heavily skewed in terms of cultural production, including literature, poetry and music festivals in the Cape, to ‘white’ Afrikaner communities?

Furthermore, South Africa’s democracy provided the opportunity to correct the cultural iconography and spatial configurations of Cape Town. The city could still join a much larger and global decolonisation movement that questions the cultural prominence and dominance of the colonial presence, especially in the postcolonial, postapartheid democratic African city. According to Wandile Kasibe, co-founder of the Rhodes Must Fall movement, ‘Pathological ideas of race still exist in public life and are glorified in public space with statues of coloniality, which is a form of persistent memory that museumises public space.’

Architect David Adjaye contends that the representation of cultural figures and the collective visual memory of a community in the public domain must not be underestimated. He states:

Cultural figures that are ubiquitously celebrated as enhancing or forming a part of the democracy need to be celebrated in public space and this is part of the visual memory of a community. Historical objects are about reframing. The ones that are not agreed upon or are difficult should be in museums. It is not about forgetting or erasing, but it is about learning. The public realm is about celebrating common democracy rather than a privileged one.

**Prestwich Place**

The discovery of human remains in Green Point in 2003 and 2006 provided an opportunity for a nationwide engagement around the making of cities, especially in relation to the contributions of various individuals and groups. It also provided an opportunity to engage with Cape Town’s history more equitably and determine, as a democratic society, ways in which to remember this history spatially, architecturally, culturally, and through literature and education. While the South African Constitution provides vital social equity in our justice system, very little of its spirit has carried through into the equity of memory, place and people.

Since 1993, the human remains of over 3 000 people have been discovered in and around Green Point and the Waterfront. In May 2003 during construction alongside Prestwich Street, human bones were discovered. There was mass opposition by various groups, including community and religious leaders, Khoisan representatives, heritage sector NGOs and academics, to the exhumations of the human remains, and on 12 January 2004, the Prestwich Place Project Committee (PPPC) lodged an appeal to the Minister of Arts & Culture. Yet the developer and the City of Cape Town proceeded with the exhumation of the remains. On 22 July the Minister of Arts & Culture dismissed the appeal to make way for the development of apartment and office blocks, restaurants, bars and cafés. Currently, the human remains are placed in cardboard boxes and housed in an ossuary at Prestwich Memorial, overwhelmed by a noisy coffee shop.

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17 Prestwich Memorial and Visitor Centre exhibition. 10 November 2017.

The memorial and exhibition give the impression of temporariness. For archaeologist Nick Shepherd this moment was ‘a huge lost opportunity’ which appeared to be more of an ‘inconvenience for the City authorities and the developer’. ‘The sentiment was one of simply wanting to get the human remains out of the way to continue the development agenda of the City of Cape Town,’ he states. ‘The City should not have exhumed the human remains and authorities should have created an open green space with no heavy scripting in order to provide a space for conversation. The site has been neglected, which makes forgetting happen.’ For the creole people of Cape Town the exhumation of human remains at Prestwich stands in a long line of ‘forced removals’ across the centuries, from colonialism to apartheid to the present day.

For Christian Ernsten the resurfacing of human remains in Cape Town was perhaps an entry point for a different reading and representation of the colonial archive, one that challenges the historical record and motivates us to seek a deeper understanding of Cape history - not from a colonial perspective but in relation to broader, more inclusive creole perspectives. He writes in Movement: Cape Town, ‘The resurfacing of the dead challenges the trope of national unity and alerts us to the failure of urban transformation. Yet, these instances also allow for new ways of following the Cape ancestors and new ways of transforming the colonial archive.’

**Embracing the Creole**

It is evident that Cape Town continues to live the myths of the past in the present. Clichés, stereotypes and prejudices have developed based on these myths. Even within the framework of our declared democracy, there is a lack of political will to create a more culturally and spatially equitable city. Residents seem to lack the tools to openly and honestly engage with each other, and Cape Town becomes increasingly polarised.

Where are the creole sites of memory at the heart of the city? Where can the history that animates these pages be seen in the public life of the city, so that all people may learn about their ancestors? How is the creole spirit remembered, celebrated and nurtured? There are minor representations at sites of struggle, but these serve to further script the brown story as one of strife. In certain instances, it is even caricatured. What about the stories of love, creativity and wonder? City administrators ignore and suppress its creole identity, choosing instead to present only the parts that it finds suitable for tourism narratives. The city needs to be open and honest about all its narratives - uplifting as well as horrific. It needs to make these invisible stories visible so as to create a level ground for opportunity and an environment in which all citizens are willing participants. A meaningful look at history will allow the city to refashion the present and write a new story - not only with the voice of the victor that speaks of triumph - but rather the stories of coming together in much the same way that Cape ancestors Angela van Bengale and Anna de Koning did.

Creole consciousness needs to be at the core of the city. Buildings, spaces and event calendars should be imbued with this spirit. Embracing the creole heart of Cape Town through culture, spatial developments, architecture and iconography will empower people, healing past fractures and ridding the city of polarisation. Through this process, people will finally see themselves and their ancestors in the making of contemporary Cape Town.

*The one-drop theory proposed that, regardless of how light one’s complexion or European one’s features, a person was ‘black’ if he or she carried a single drop of African blood.*

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