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Freedom

Cape Town, South Africa's Mother City, is a city of extremes. In a landscape of immense natural splendour and abundance, she moves constantly between the idealistic and sublime to the painful and enraged. Cape Town has seen her people enslaved by their inheritances, emancipated by their civil rights and deeply divided in their lived experiences.

Only 30 years ago freedom was a distant dream for South Africans. Colonialism and apartheid wedged large divisions between people and embedded a sense that one is superior to the 'other'. This – and apartheid's divisionary force and segregationist laws – had severe consequences for people of colour, as it eroded dignity, damaged self-esteem and hampered self-actualisation. It left most people of colour reliant on a paternal government to give as reward and deprive as punishment.

Today, in our post-apartheid age, we deeply value the freedom we have gained, mainly through our progressive constitution, but realise that democracy is forever unfolding and developing. Nelson Mandela's dream of freedom, while achieved for some, remains a

dream for many. Underpinning true freedom is achieving individual and collective agency in society. Only those who have the agency to contribute to creating the kind of society in which they want to live feel true emancipation.

Feeling free

Freedom is very tangible to me. I grew up during apartheid in a stifling patriarchal environment that raised women for a life of mediocrity and not one of opportunity and advancement. I recall how demoralising this was in my youth, and how trapped I felt. The expectation of me as a woman – and especially a woman of colour – in South Africa was to always play a supporting role, but never as part of a league of mavericks, makers and

movers. Instead, I was expected to support and respect 'significant' members of society – these were always male and often white. This tore at my confidence and diminished me constantly.

I also recall the ubiquitous feeling of hope that filled that day in early February 1990 when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and my uncle Kader returned home after a long period in exile. This was heightened a few years later when I had the privilege to stand on the lawns of the Union Buildings for Mandela's inauguration as the first president of a democratic South Africa. I knew then that my life would change forever.

This moment was colossal for the country, and also for me. Had we not become a democracy at this pivotal moment in my life, I would have been further pressured into living life in the shadows of others, trapped in my suppression. Instead, our political freedom enabled me to navigate this difficult terrain, and allowed me to emerge, like many South Africans, a stronger, prouder and more ambitious and resourceful person.

The changes that the democratic moment brought for many people like me at the intersection of education, gender and race, with an entrepreneurial mind and opportunities were significant. These included new personal and professional roles, new avenues for development and growth, new locations and the ability to become a global citizen. Nevertheless, most South Africans, and many Capetonians, have not yet achieved the agency to tangibly experience their own economic, social, spatial and cultural freedoms. The democratic moment was not theirs.

Different freedoms

Is Cape Town a city for everyone? Alternatively, does it, like its history as a colonial outpost, better serve those privileged enough to enjoy the movement of its tides and seasons? Is it

possible to enjoy Cape Town's numerous bounties when the basic needs of so many are not taken care of?

The lives of the city's privileged have been enhanced by a sanction-free economic environment, increased international investment, numerous international sporting events, rises in tourism, a non-pariah status and the enhanced global opportunities that came with democracy. Many privileged gripes might centre on crime, affirmative action, and politics. Of course, as with many privileged minorities across the world, a perception exists that privilege is earned through the hard work of one's family and descendants and is not only inherited.

Despite this, many Capetonians remain economically and spatially isolated. They have inherited their own legacies of marginalisation and dispossession. Cape Town's fabled beauty is a distant benefit to living in the economic periphery with very limited access to opportunity – or often, basic services. The oppressive policies and divisive signs may have come down, but apartheid is very much a lived reality for the vast majority of Capetonians.

Even in our democracy Cape Town's Gini coefficient, a measure of economic inequality, remains high, making her one of the most divided cities in the world.¹ This means that despite poverty being alleviated since 1994, we are still an economically unequal society. Even our revered constitution struggles to make this change. It is a remarkable document that serves as a beacon for our democracy, but all too often its spirit isn't used to guide our daily decisions.

Achieving this shift to inclusivity occurs at a very basic, human and personal level. Saying that freedom for the marginalised is the responsibility of the marginalised compares to saying the protection of our endangered species is the responsibility of those species

and not the entire social ecology as a whole. Achieving social transformation in our city is thus a task for everyone. What are a few of the barriers and opportunities to achieving this?

Invisibility

Colonial narratives across the world are often very similar. In order for colonial projects to be successful, extensive work goes into preparing a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate. This ‘cleanses’ space of time and history so that the colonisers can construct their own orders, references and cultures. In many ways, indigenous communities of the Cape resisted this approach and, as such, the early settlement was depicted as hostile and dangerous in Western texts, graphic material and artworks. Also, indigenous people were depicted as aggressive, either requiring some form of domination or to be made idle. This is substantiated by the need for slaves to be brought over by the Dutch from Indonesia and Malaysia.²

A discourse on a patriarchal, post-colonial, post-apartheid, and decolonised society may mean very little to privileged people living ‘normal’ lives within the comfortable confines of their privilege. Their right to participate socially, economically and culturally in society is a given, and their presence in the public city, broadly defined, is expected and lauded. Their lives are rattled, however, when their deeply engrained privileges and entitlements are tested and affronted, such as in the case of the Rhodes Must Fall movement. Privilege allows you to choose your visibility, while people with little freedom remain in supporting roles with their visibility determined and scripted by others, without its colour, complexity and relevance.

Until disenfranchised people are empowered to represent themselves socially and culturally, in the languages and expressions they choose, they will never be able to shake

the shackles of white patriarchal hegemony. Until marginalised cultures are able to demonstrate on a day-to-day basis how they wish to be seen and treated and why certain oppressive, dismissive behaviour is unsuitable and unacceptable, they will not be comfortable and suitably represented in the city. Especially in a city that routinely considers this oppression as normal and acceptable.

Importantly, we need to remember the past equally and recall that we all have diverse heritages; no single narrative is greater or carries more worth than another. How do we establish the agency for us all to represent our own different histories ourselves (past, present, planned future) in our cityscape?

With this ability and true agency the impetus for violent protest action, which demands visibility and a voice, fades. This destructive cycle of frustration for lack of agency will only end once we all commit to making Cape Town more equitable both in terms of its spaces but also with regards to its cultural references. Protest, however, remains a constant force.

Anger

South Africa has been labelled the protest capital of the world and service delivery protests have risen exponentially since 2004.³ Many of these protests have turned violent, exposing the raw frustration and anger felt by residents. The engrained nature of inequality in our society as engineered over centuries is resilient today, and the demand by people to be seen and heard struggles to permeate these structures.

Protest is, of course, a cornerstone of any solid democracy and in South Africa protests often demand the very same recognition and struggles that Nelson Mandela protested for himself. Has democracy fooled us into thinking that the struggles of the marginalised have changed? The later years of Mandela’s

life appear to have been viewed favourably by the privileged. This compounds to further frustrate those who have not benefited from his legacy. We must not forget, however, that Mandela’s life was long and complex, and his legacies so rich and fluid that a few decades of democracy might not grant us the time to realise. To see Mandela only as the diplomat and peacekeeper fails to demonstrate that he believed in what many still fight for today – dignity, right to space, opportunity.

Social and political commentator Siphokuhle Mathe states, ‘It irks me when white people see the flames of black people’s anger, then use Mandela’s ideas about peace and reconciliation to extinguish them. Firstly, this anger has value. Secondly, how can we talk about reconciliation if the system still entrenches white supremacy? Reconciliation Day should be scrapped as public holiday until such time as the majority of black people feel that reformist policies are starting to translate into equitable justice. It is false to live as if we have arrived at the Constitution’s destination.’⁴

Immobility

When I conceptualised the Movement project in 2014, I outlined a chapter for this book, titled the *Movement of Objects*. As part of this topic, I wished to explore ‘Immovable Objects’ with reference to the colonial statues and memorials that dot Cape Town’s cityscape. I wished to explore the relevance of these memorials with regards to South Africa’s long historical narrative, our democracy and the lives of everyday people. I moved through the city and wondered if all of Cape Town’s cultures were regarded and commemorated equally. I was curious about the activism of the art collective, Tokolos Stencil, that had stencilled ‘Disown this heritage’ on the statue of Jan Smuts. Then, on 9 March 2015, the immovable moved and the statue of British

imperialist Cecil John Rhodes fell at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Rhodes once stated, as cited in the UCT Varsity newspaper in 1967, that he would build UCT ‘Out of the Kafirs’ stomach’ and so it seemed fitting that the movement’s founder Chumani Maxwele, as an initial spark for the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, hurled a bucket of his own faeces at the statue of Rhodes. This was a pivotal moment for social activism in South Africa and UCT in particular. For many young black people in South Africa it was a time of visibility and voice. Not on the streets fighting for services, but on an important academic campus finding a language to engage with white power and alienation. For Mathe, ‘The movement simply wanted to disrupt white, supremacist, patriarchal, heteronormative ableism... it gave members of the movement the language with which to articulate the campus experience. It gave intellectual “self defence” classes to marginalized people on campus.’⁴

‘Finally it provided a space in which to engage white power and alienation. How do you reconcile the fact that you associate with whiteness and assimilate with it and the only way of sustainably living is to appease it?’

For me, the juxtaposition of the brutal first step of the movement (throwing of faeces) alongside an intellectual understanding and engagement revealed the duality and complexity of the peoples represented in the movement.

This is poignantly captured in Sthembile Msezane’s artwork on page 14, where she states that the day Rhodes fell is a ‘moment that captures a process of identity construction, self-assertion and reclamation of space within an African locale that continues to be in flux.’

Given Cape Town’s and the university’s deep inequality, the polarised responses to Rhodes Must Fall were unsurprising. Interestingly, many saw the pulling down



Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell, 2015 by Sthembile Msezane

‘The day Rhodes fell was the beginning of disrupting a legacy that celebrates white supremacy within a South African landscape. This moment captures a process of identity construction, self-assertion and reclamation of space within an African locale that continues to be in flux.

It was never just about a statue. What will future generations remember about this moment?’

of the statue of Rhodes as an erasure of South Africa’s history. This challenged me given South Africa’s long history of colonial dominance over many races and language groups, many of whom, including the Afrikaner right, often wished that the British imperial ideals that Rhodes stood for be erased. But what was most revealing in these responses is that many privileged people were not ‘seeing’ the realities of Cape Town in the day to day, much like the Rhodes statue would have seen from its vantage point. From wealthy suburbs to the Cape Flats in the distance, the city’s inequalities are patent, just too easily ignored and wished away.

This act of pulling down Rhodes was also seen to be very violent. Many white people and privileged minorities identified with what UCT stood for, tradition and erudition. They viewed the tearing down of the Rhodes statue as a violation of that. In some responses I had noted they had viewed poor black students as primitive and in need of discipline and direction – not too distant from the narrative created in the eighteenth century by the Dutch painters.²

Mathe states, ‘The reality is that a confrontation of this structural privilege leads to deflections that suggest black peoples’ destitution as being a result of their laziness or unspoken sub-humanity. There seems to be no interest from white people to relinquish the privilege they think they have earned.’⁴

Make a move

We are in a defining moment. Our previous leaders finely created our political freedom. However, we need to design our own everyday spatial, social, economic and cultural freedoms. We need to define these outside of a colonial and apartheid narrative, by defining it for ourselves. Defining how we wish to be free.

We cannot afford, nor should we be willing, to be complacent. Nelson Mandela once told me that attaining democracy was only part of the journey to freedom. He reminded me that most of the hard work still needed to be done. People like Nelson Mandela and many other individuals made significant movements that led to our liberation. It is a privilege – a demanding one, but a privilege nonetheless – to meaningfully engage with our democracy. We all have the opportunity to write history through the movements we make today.

As residents of and visitors to Cape Town we need to actively reform the city in order to advance both individually and collectively. We need to be activated as public agents for change. We need to join worthy movements and start movements that enact change. We must acknowledge our pasts truthfully and meaningfully. We need to explore these movements with intelligence, mindfulness and dedication. It’s time for us all to make a move – politically, economically, spatially, socially, culturally, even soulfully – to make Cape Town the city we all wish her to be, for all. This publication presents the intensity and complexity of movement and movements that forged and continue to create the city. We need to take the next step for an equitable future. As dramatically captured in Sthembile Msezane’s artwork, we have our challenges, but how will we rise?

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Freedom

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