

"Of Coconuts, Consciousness and Cecil John Rhodes: Disillusionment and disavowals of the Rainbow Nation"

Towards the end of 1997, the year before I was to turn 7 and go to big school, my parents and I began preparations such as interviews, buying the uniform and making sure that I could dress myself. With everything ready, one thing seemed to be missing: "Mama, at big school next year, can they call me Gloria?" (Gloria, by the way is my second name.) My mother looked at me, a little confused and simply said, **"No. Your name is Panashe, so they will call you that."**

Without the words to explain why I felt that this new 'calling' name was necessary, I went along with the Shona name that had been so badly mangled in the mouths of my white teachers at my predominantly white pre-school - everything from Pinashe, Panache to Spinasi.

At the age of six I had already begun the dance that many black people in South Africa know too well. Our names are just one of the many important sites of struggle as we manoeuvre around our blackness in spaces that do not truly accommodate us in our fullness as black people.

I had already taken my first steps on the road to becoming a fully fledged coconut. That particular category of 'born free' black youth that were hailed as torchbearers for the 'Rainbow Nation'; the same category of black youth that are now part of the forefront of new student movements calling for Rhodes To Fall at our universities and in South Africa.

It is these very Coconuts that have been increasingly disillusioned by and have pushed back against the notion of the Rainbow Nation. We were a conduit for the country's absolution from the real work of reconciliation as we were shipped off, Woolies skhaftins in tow, to the likes of Pretoria Girls High and Michael House. Yet, it is this very generation, supposedly robed in the privileges of democracy, that is now 'behaving badly' and 'militantly'. Instead of becoming the trusted go-betweens between black and white, we are turning to conceptions of blackness and mobilizing anger at the very concept of the Rainbow Nation. The fantasy of a 'colour-blind', 'post-race' South Africa has been projected onto us Coconuts, but our lived experiences are far from free of racism.

In fact, commenting on the Rhodes Must Fall protests, political activist Andile Mngxitama made this wry comment on Twitter (12 March 2015): "White racism forces the coconut to see themselves as part of the great black excluded and their proximity to whiteness makes them assets."

Interesting.

My research has focused on exploring why some 'Coconuts', despite their privileges, have become conscious and are joining their working class comrades in black anti-racist struggles. Tonight, I will provide an analysis of my interviews with ten Coconuts. However, before I can do this, it seems we need to deconstruct my use of the word. Judging from calls to my Kaya FM interview last week, this is a word that

still touches many of us on our studio and have people wondering why any black person, who is not self-hating, would use it. If anything as a person who has been called a coconut all my life, I should be the one to be offended, but nonetheless, let's start with that deconstruction:

We all know what a coconut is, don't we? It's a person who speaks like this. It's a person who is 'black on the *outside*' but 'white on the *inside*'. This term came into popular South African usage in apartheid's dying days as black children entered formerly white schools. At best, in the language of Black Consciousness, Coconuts can be seen as 'non-white'. At worst, Coconuts can be seen as 'Uncle Toms', 'agents of whiteness', the so-called 'house negroes' in Malcolm X's (1963) 'house negro-field negro' dichotomy.

Ouch. I don't entirely agree. Instead, I use the term to simply refer to an experience of socialisation into what my fellow Coconut Eusebius McKaiser has termed 'white grammar' by virtue of having had a former model C or private school education. According to Coconut McKaiser, knowledge of 'white grammar' is how you would know that, for example, a 'sarmie' is a sandwich or that 'bru' and 'oke' are white-speak for 'mfwethu'.

Besides, the Coconut experience is not new. We could even date it back to the earliest colonial contact. For example, UCT Professor Xolela Mangcu playfully suggests that Tiyo Soga, prominent anti-colonial figure who was the first black graduate of the famed Lovedale Mission School, might have been, "the very first Coconut".

Of course, attempts to assimilate are not always successful, otherwise I wouldn't be standing here. To project coconuts as unthinking dupes of whiteness is patently not true. Many Coconuts or so-called "native elites", ranging from W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, S.E.K. Mqhayi, Rolihlahla Mandela, Mangaliso Sobukwe, Bantu Biko and many more have *refused* to become so-called 'agents of whiteness', despite the many incentives to do so.

Speaking of her mission school experience, Phyllis Ntantala, anti-apartheid activist and mother to Pallo Jordan and wife of Professor AC Jordan, the first black lecturer at UCT, said: "[w]ith such brain-washing, it is a miracle we did not all become sell-outs and collaborators." Likewise, at a Tiyo Soga memorial unveiling in 2011, former ANC President Thabo Mbeki exclaimed: "[i]n all conscience, Tiyo Soga, one of the very first among the modern African intelligentsia, should have become a slavish agent of the oppressor and exploiter. Against all odds, he **refused!**"

Indeed, I choose to appropriate the term 'Coconut' and self-identify as one because I believe it offers an opportunity for *refusal* and this very refusal allows for a radical anti-racist politics to emerge. In the first instance, it's an act of problematising myself within the socio-economic landscape of South Africa as part of the black middle class that is supposed to be the buffer against more 'radical elements'. It's the recognition of how someone like myself "who speaks so well" and "is not like other black people" can be so easily co-opted into maintaining the inequalities of post-apartheid South Africa.

This recognition opens up the possibility for refusal of co-option and thus the space to make use of the unique positioning of those of us who have borne witness to and experienced the very intimate details of whiteness in all its mundane manifestations as we slept at each other's houses and went on school trips

together. Anele Nzimande (Personal communication, 2015), who is a member of the Decolonising Wits movement, says that this experience in white spaces lead her to the following realization:

“You know the truth, it no longer impresses, it loses its sparkle...That’s what proximity does. Proximity with whiteness gives you the revelations, it gives you what they are, not what they can be.”

The proximity, the almost-but-not-quite-intimate relationship with whiteness allows us to begin to critique it in ways that aren’t as easy to do when on the ‘outside’. African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, in his famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, offers us a way to understand what is at play with his conceptualisation of Double Consciousness and the Veil. In 1903 he wrote:

“the Negro is ...born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world..It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness...One ever feels his twoness —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,.”

These warring ideals are resolved in the process of coming to a ‘consciousness’ of what it is to be black in the past and present. The concept of the Veil describes the economic, social, cultural or otherwise, divide between the dominant ‘white’ world and the dominated ‘black’.

Importantly, Du Bois argues that certain pivotal life experiences jolt black people into Double-Consciousness’. For him, these first realizations came during a ball, where his dance card was refused by a Southern white girl simply because he was black:

“Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like [them perhaps] in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. ”

For me, the awareness of the Veil came through persistent experiences of racism at my predominantly white private school. In the social sense, I saw how invites to ‘the farm’ from white childhood friends started to disappear once we were in high school, and how we tacitly accepted that we didn’t date each other. In the economic sense, it was seeing that white varsity mates with similar academic performance found jobs faster than black students did. Through this, the myth of meritocracy, that if we worked hard enough, spoke well enough, we would have the same opportunities, was revealed. Importantly, much of this racism was not recognised or articulated until we found the anti-racist vocabulary to name it.

I personally didn’t have a moment, as much as a series of moments that finally “woke me up” and set me about on a journey to consciousness. In my matric year, I began to actively seek out books that dealt with my experience as a black person, as an African in the world. It felt as though the earth underneath my feet moved and revealed a new world. For the first time, I encountered books by African authors. I furiously highlighted sentences and paragraphs, even pages, in books such as *I Write What I Like*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Coconut* and *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

Page after page, I began to see and, most importantly, *feel* just how alienated I was from myself as an African. I felt that I was the very embodiment of a colonised European ideal. How **proud** the colonial-apartheid architects would have been with this native subject of theirs! The question that stuck in my mind was: “What would I have been like had it not been for colonialism?” Why was it that I not only articulated myself better in English, but, more painfully, that I actually thought and dreamt in it?

As a symbolic act of change, after continually chemically relaxing my hair since pre-school, I shaved my head bald for the first time. This was the external manifestation of the internal rejection of what was white or colonised within me. Of course, yinde lendlela: I still speak like *this* and I’m probably more Thabo Mbeki, than Jacob Zuma in my Africanness., but we shoulder on.

So, years later, when poo hit the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the arch representative of European colonial arrogance in the past and present, it struck a deep emotional chord within me. I was not alone. The Rhodes Must Fall protests resonated so strongly with the experiences of black students at various historically white universities that other campus movements such as The Black Students Movement at the university currently known as Rhodes (but not for long if we have anything to do with it), Open Stellenbosch and Transform Wits were rejuvenated and formed. The idea that black youth were politically apathetic was quickly dispelled as the students began the call for “decolonizing the university” and, by implication, “decolonizing the Rainbow Nation”.

I spoke to ten students involved in the “decolonization” movements, primarily at UCT and Wits. Although the movements are predominantly led by black working class students and their concerns, I spoke to the Coconuts among them in order to find answers to why they are behaving so badly by joining their comrades and choosing the path of refusal.

To begin with, the experience of the physical Veil between the so-called black and white South Africa was a familiar experience for many of the Coconuts.

“It felt like staying in a homeland.” That is how UCT student Li’Tsoanelo Zwane describes the experience of taking of an hour bus ride from her family home in Gugulethu to Barclay House Primary in the elite Cape Town suburb of Claremont. For Wits student Vuyani Pambo, the daily experience of taking a taxi from Soweto to the elite St David’s College in Sandton lead to what he so eloquently calls a “‘bipolaric’ experience and reading of the world”. He says further:

“You move around with a permanent sense of exile... You don’t belong... In your neighbourhood [or] at school...you try and negotiate two worlds which don’t come together, set apart geographically, economically, in a way that they never meet and here you are, communicating both in the physical and the psychological, in the questioning and answering of these two spaces.”

On the other hand, there were schools like Sacred Heart College that actively sought to embody the Rainbow Nation. It’s described by former pupils Rekgotsofetse Chikane and Thoko Chimbalanga as unique in that it was one of the first multi-racial schools in the country and housed the children of many struggle veterans. Rekgotsofetse says:

“It was not a typical private school. From grade 0 to matric you are bombarded with the message that everyone is equal, whether it was race or religion. Which is fantastic. It was a Catholic school, which at one point, had more Jewish than Catholic students, and at another, more Muslims.”

Yet, despite these early experiences, Thoko and Rekgotsfetse find themselves moving away from that Rainbow Nation ideal and as members of decolonisation movements that seek to centre blackness.

Some schools were far less committed to becoming the demographic embodiment of the Rainbow Nation. Siphokuhle Mathe went to Cape Town's Westerford High school, ranked as the top State school in South Africa by the Sunday Times in 2009. When he arrived in grade 8, he was one of six black African pupils out of 180 students. This was not an unusual experience for him, as he had attended the feeder primary school where black students had never exceeded more than 10% of the student population. Likewise, Siviwe Mhlana was in the minority throughout her years in Port Elizabeth's elite schools, as for, example in her 2012 matric year at Pearson High School, there were not more than 25 black African students out of 150.

Even when schools shifted from having predominantly white student bodies to being predominantly black, they retained the form and culture of white schools. Having attended Woodlands Primary, a multiracial school in Durban, Anele Nzimande later went to Ridge Park College, a predominantly black former model C school, but despite this, the experience of alienation remained:

“[T]hey would police black girls hair. In my primary school, we were not allowed braids, which I didn't see as a problem at the time. In the high school, the same thing....You couldn't have dreadlocks [or] afros - which is ridiculous. They went too far because that is the natural state of our hair... [This was] interesting, because, even though we were in the majority, we were alienated and [we had] a sense of not belonging.”

Now, hair is of course a big focus of control at all schools – regardless of race. It is a marker of the power of schools to regulate and discipline. However, there is a **particular** racialised dimension at play here. The hair regulations, like many other school policies, are created with the assumption of the pupil as a white child. The assumption of pupil with ‘hair that falls’ and ‘hair that is neat’ and, and if it can't do so naturally, it can and *must* be made to do so.

It is this engagement with rules and policies that police blackness that forms part of what often forces Coconuts to begin to “awaken to the invisible Veil”. Of course, this awakening is not a uniform experience. However, a common theme amongst students was that of a process of discovery. As Vuyani Pambo notes: “there was no moment or rupture, it was [a collection of] moments that can be seen as a moment...that leads one to consciousness.”

In speaking to fellow Coconuts what becomes clear is the power that anti-racist language holds as they begin to navigate their existence individually and collectively in the post-apartheid landscape. This is

particularly important to tackle the kind of ‘Nervous Conditions’ induced by the subtle racism that is so notorious in these formerly white spaces. In Thoko’s words:

“The subtle experiences of racism have been more painful than the explicit. By subtle I mean, [when you think], “was that racist? Maybe I’m exaggerating?” Those things that make you doubt yourself.”

It is the language of Black Consciousness, pan-Africanism, Black Power and critical race theories that has helped Coconuts to disregard that sense of doubt and to develop their own critiques of post-apartheid South Africa. Both Siphokuhle and Anele compared the power of gaining knowledge and the language as a form of “training”. In particular, Mathe says:

“Knowing that there is a way in which you can be understood makes it easier. Experiencing violence and not be able to say anything beyond crying “racism!”, which your peer will simply dismiss [is painful]. It means I can speak for myself, I can stand for myself. I can even belittle white people. It’s empowering that I can dismiss their arguments and call them ‘unintelligible’. I can be a threat, [because] I have attended self-defence classes.”

It is at once a form a self-defence and of relief from the insanity of the Nervous Conditions of being black in a white world. How I wish I had the words to deconstruct apartheid ideology to my grade 8 liberal white English teacher who had told us, in between reading King Lear, that “apartheid had good intentions behind it. It was just that it was badly executed!” Instead, I could only clutch for words and sit with the frustration of doubting my instinct that he was wrong.

Now, with an arsenal of words and knowledge, many of us can more clearly and readily articulate near ubiquitous disdain for the Rainbow Nation, seeing it as Vuyani does as “a gloss.. a palimpsest, painting over racism as opposed to eradicating it.” Similarly, Enhle Khumalo thinks of the Rainbow Nation as follows:

“[It’s] a very violent term. I think it can only be violent to a black person, in terms of the nuance it produces. To say a “Rainbow Nation” forces a black body into a certain position, saying, “it is celebrated, allow it”. If you don’t celebrate or praise, you are antagonising against a superstructure. It reduces a lot of the underlying politics of post-apartheid South Africa. Our relationships, socially, politically, cannot be dealt with through the concept of the Rainbow Nation.”

When Thoko Chimbalanga says that “race matters to me to the extent that people continue to use it against me”, she echoes Du Bois who said that: “The duty of the Americans of the Negro descent, as a body is to maintain their race identity...until the ideal of human brotherhood has become a **practical** possibility.”

In this way, Coconuts like myself identify as black as a way to find agency, because it allows us to mobilise with others with similar experiences. Enhle, who, by the way, went to Rodean, one of the country’s most prestigious all-girls schools, had the strongest words on race:

“I don’t have the agency to denounce race, I have to identify as black. When I walk into a room I am treated as a nigger.”

Knowing what we know now, 21 years into our democracy is it really surprising that we have a Rodean nigger? In these schools, we find a certain universalism rooted in the white child and white culture, despite the schools now having black children. Former model C and private schools include(d) black children under the same assumptions despite the different names, despite the different bodies, despite the different hair, despite the different socio-economic backgrounds. I call it the “Add blacks and stir” model. **Stir**, while continuing with the same structure, same rules, same teachers, same traditions, same school songs and same curricula. And, of course, this is symbolic of the wider Rainbow Nation project: include blacks but don’t dare touch the underlying structures of inequality that rely on racism.

These “Conscious Coconuts” are clearly disrupting that model. The fruitfulness of the Double-Consciousness that Coconuts possess, or the “assets” that Mngxitama alludes to, lies in the possibilities for refusal. A refusal of co-option into maintaining an unequal South Africa.

In other words, in the tradition of Du Bois, Soga, Fanon, Mqhayi, Ntantala, Biko, Sobukwe, to be a radical Coconut who has chosen refusal, is to be a Trojan horse of sorts. Especially, when it’s no longer shocking when a comrade says “nationalise the mines”, but of course, it is surprising when a Coconut who is “not like other blacks” says “give back the land.” Anele Nzimande captures it best:

“It is an experiment gone wrong. Because you wanted to create robots who are compliant, who keep the machinery working, the same sort of knowledge production, [but now you have] people challenging what you taught them, no interest in reproducing and want to dismantle it entirely. There is something amazing about that.”

In answering the question why some Coconuts become conscious, Vuyani Pambo alludes to Du Bois’ Double Consciousness when he says: “You have the vocab because you have the direct experience of white bodies beyond the systematic violence that whiteness presents to us.”

Indeed, the experiences that people like myself and my Rodean nigger have in the ‘heart of whiteness’ are those that many black South Africans do not have. Experiences like when, in primary school parties, Sue and Jo-Anne’s moms used to stay for the entire duration of parties at *our* house, but for parties at *their* house they insisted that Mama “just leave them and come back at 5”. Or, how in boarding school we realised that Jade and Sarah thought a swim in the pool was sufficient hygiene for the day, when we had been taught that we were the dirty ones, white people could clearly smell too! Or, how Lauren and Tammy’s moms could do school tuck shop duty because they didn’t have to work, unlike our own mothers. Or, how Mrs Baxter and Mrs Botha told us not to speak “that language” but yet said nothing when the white children spoke Afrikaans. Or, or, or.

Coconuts are of course privileged socio-economically by this very proximity to whiteness. That is the Rainbow Nation that we live in. And yet, it is those experiences of whiteness as a system and as a physical

embodiment in our teachers and classmates that cause us pain. These are the experiences of ‘inclusive’ whiteness that can never truly accommodate us in our fullness as black people and instead force us into chameleon status as we constantly manipulate our accents and our hair and our names and our entire ways of being in order to be acceptable. That, is what forces us to realise that no matter how hard we work or how well we speak, we remain black. That, is what forces us to realise that we are still niggers. That, is what forces Coconuts to become conscious. And in the end, that, is what forces us Coconuts to join the call for Rhodes to Fall.

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