A Student’s Thoughts on the Rhodes Must Fall Campaign

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Author’s note: After having witnessed the protests and debates on campus and having read a few comments on facebook and opinion pieces in the media regarding the campaign to remove the Rhodes statue from Upper Campus, I felt that I needed to make sense of this issue for myself. The following is the product of a late night effort to do so. It must be said that there are a myriad of issues that have come up during the protests, and that I merely touch on a few of them here.

By now, it should be clear that the protests demanding the removal of the C. J. Rhodes statue go far beyond just the removal of the statue itself.

The University of Cape Town is a colonial construct, there is no doubt about it. In that sense, it is a product of its time. It has been built to imitate the ‘great’ universities of the colonial master. Upper Campus, with its colonial ivy-clad buildings, and the neo-classical pillars of Jameson Hall, having been constructed in the image of western academic tradition. Its buildings bear the names of university personalities and benefactors, mostly male, mostly British in origin. This image has largely been kept intact and has gone unchanged for many decades. Even after white minority rule ended, little has been done to alter the European image of the university. Rightly so, some have commented that UCT is no more than a European university at the foot of Africa. The majority of teaching staff are white, and the majority of those are male, and if one listens to students, one would believe that the majority of departments teach western knowledge, relying on western textbooks to do so.

When it comes to the particulars of various departments, I can only really speak of my own. I am a current MA student in the department of Historical Studies. While I believe that ethnic and racial categorisation is problematic, in this case it assists one to highlight the lack of transformation at UCT post-1994, and one only has to look at the History department as an example (I stand to be corrected on the following). Of its 13 lecturers, 11 are male, while two are female. 4 of the male lecturers are non-white, while three of these are of Indian origin. Only one lecturer is of African origin. What is more, (to my knowledge) 4 lecturers are of non-South African, non-African origin. Surely one would want to promote the appointment and employment of South African and African academics before making international appointments?

It must be added that I in no way wish to challenge the academic credibility of the department staff, and I hold many of them in high esteem.

With regard to the history department’s curriculum, during my undergraduate years (2009-2011), the majority of courses I took dealt with western historiographic subject matter, lecturers made use of mostly western case studies, and the literature used was predominantly western in origin. Yes, African subject matter was taught, but as an African history department at an African University, should there not be a greater emphasis on the historiography of the African continent and its people? Surely the curriculum can be set up in such a way as to reflect the African identity of the department and the university without compromising international relevance. Although I have seen a significant effort by the department staff to readjust the curriculum in order to make Africa a more central focus, I cannot help but believe that more needs to be done to transform the department as a whole. If the History department is a microcosm of UCT as a whole, a lot speaks to supporting the current demands by students for broad based transformation at UCT.
Yes there are rankings to think of and UCT’s ambitions to be a world class teaching and research university (as UCT’s management is always quick to lament), but surely a greater emphasis on African knowledge production by African academics is not incompatible with international excellence and relevance?

It is time for UCT to rid itself of its colonial shackles and for it to start to reimagine itself as an African university. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on highlighting and celebrating its African history, such as Archie Mafeje, AC Jordan and Harold Cressy to mention but a few, and more needs to be done to promote African knowledge production by an African university in Africa. Only by drawing on its African identity will UCT be able to confront the academic hegemony of the West, rather than remaining a mere duplicate of western academic tradition, a slave to its colonial origins.