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Black Students Speak Their Minds at UCT: Bantu Biko Alive in Their Frank-Talk¹

Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi

KEENEN HENDRIKS: *My name is Keenen Hendriks;² I am the speaker of Student Parliament and I am the chairperson of this meeting this evening. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the Rhodes statue. We know that it speaks to broader issues as well, but the goal is to hear as many voices of all individuals and their views. We might disagree with views that are said here, but we must listen to each other's views and provide a safe space for people to be able to articulate those views. In terms of the process going forward: first, we will have the SRP President addressing us, just speaking to us about the SRC's views on the statue; then the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Max Price, will speak. Both of them will speak for seven minutes then open the floor to all of you to hear your views to either the SRC President or Vice-Chancellor or your own views about what they feel is appropriate. Finally, this is a university, is a space where ideas matter; I appeal that you do not attack each other or people personally, but to vigorously attack ideas rather than people; debate robustly the ideas. I am going to hand it over my co-chairperson to say a few words.*

BARNEY PITYANA: *Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Barney Pityana,³ I am a former student of the University of Cape Town, and I have the honour to be your co-chair this evening. I have the privilege of being an alumnus of this university and I am here today at the invitation of the University as the President of the Convocation of the University of Cape Town. The first thing I want to say is that I am very proud to be here; I am very proud of the engagement that has been going on at this University. And I think it is historic; it is a historic moment. I know there will be a time when we all remember the significant events in our time in our university. And, therefore, I am here as much as possible to facilitate this debate.*

Then one African male student, **Mr. Sikoto**, stood up and interrupted Pityana. Sikoto's argument was that given Pityana's

input in the article Pityana wrote about wanting the statue to stay on campus, he cannot be objective in co-chairing this meeting. So he suggested that Pityana vacate his position as chairperson [to the applause of the entire house]. Pityana wanted to reply but the students refused to listen to him. He then accepted the request by students that he steps down. He was replaced by student, Rekgotsofetse Chikane,⁴ an African male student. Chikane started by shouting, “Amandla! [Power!],” and students replied, “Ngawethu! [Power to the People!]”

REKGOTSOFETSE CHIKANE: *My name is Rekgotsofetse Chikane; some people call me Kgotsi because they struggle with Rekgotsofetse, it is fine. We are here to have a discussion about the statue on campus that has split the campus that has divided us for no reason, for no reason. Racism should not be something that divides us; we should be unified against it. So today’s discussion is for us to engage on this issue, to expose those who are racist in this institution because they are here! [The house applauded] But most importantly, we are going to have a discussion that, for the first time [Chikane’s emphasis], students are actively participating in because they’ve been allowed to speak truthfully. So once again, my name is Rekgotsofetse Chikane.*

Then Hendriks welcomed the SRC President, **Mr. Ramabina Mahapa**, an African male student leader. Mahapa started by saying, “Firstly, thank you very much for the opportunity. I want to greet everybody and to relieve some anxiety. I won’t be walking out because I know there is a bit of anxiety.⁵ So I am here to engage; the SRC is here to engage. But then it must be said, we have been getting a lot of criticisms for walking out the last time.”

At this stage, Mahapa told the UCT Securities at the entrance doors of the hall, Jameson Hall, “Please open the doors!” [Applause by students] I (author) arrived about 15 minutes late for this meeting and I couldn’t enter the hall; I had to go to the adjacent hall, the Molly Blackburn Hall, where there was a live audio-visual screening of the proceedings. And when we heard the SRC President saying, “Please open the doors,” we all ran outside this small hall and entered Jameson Hall where the meeting was taking place. I must say, I was not surprised to see that the hall was not actually full; there were so many empty chairs especially

in the middle of the hall. But university security must have been ordered to keep most of the students and public outside the main hall where the meeting was taking place.

MAHAPA continued: *Thank you very much, let me continue, as I was nicely interrupted. As I was saying, there are certain students who feel that the university has walked out on them. Sometimes, it is justified for us students to walk-out. Can you imagine students who are facing financial exclusions? The university is not providing them with the necessary funds for them to be able to continue with their studies. Some of us, then, feel it is the university walking out! Imagine those students who have mental disorders on campus and the university not providing for them the essential services for them to be able to succeed! It is the university walking out on them! Imagine those students that are put in male residence while they are identified as a female! [Applause by students] That is the case of a student feeling that the university is walking out on them! So even I, us as the SRC, feel our voices had not been heard! Therefore, we walked out! Because these issues are not new. The issues we have raised are not new. In my own case, last year I wrote quite extensively on the issues of symbolism, on why it is problematic to have the statue there! The issues have always been raised. But the feeling is that the university continued to respond in the same way, by saying that Rhodes has donated money or land to the institution;⁶ therefore, we must pay homage to him and we must glorify him with that statue. And that we find it as utterly unacceptable. You know, it will be quite interesting, for a very long time, people sort of equate transformation with mediocrity, and especially when you are saying, “Let us increase the black academics, let us increase the black students.” I have said once before, and I am saying, “Let us have a complete review of all the people that are professors in this institution without the PhDs! [Mahapa’s emphasis].” [Applause by students] Then, let us have that assessment; let us begin to question white mediocrity because it exists in both cases! And also, as the SRC, we are saying, “Let us have a complete review of the institutional symbolism on the campus. It is not only the statue that is problematic; this very same wall is very much problematic!” Look around you ladies and gentlemen! [Points at the four walls of the hall] What do you see? Do you see a Black (African) person? Do you see a Coloured person, do*

you see an Indian person!? When we come here for the graduation ceremonies, we hear a Latin song that is sung here! We can't identify with that song! [Loud applause by the house] Our living and learning spaces should be diverse and inclusive for us all. Do not bring the issue of "Let us preserve our heritage!" When you created that heritage, we were not here; we were excluded from being here! [More loud applause by students] So, as I come to my closing, we need to create a different narrative in this institution: the institutional symbolism needs to be inclusive; the institutional culture needs to be inclusive. We need more black lecturers. My grand-mother always says that, "You cannot teach a man born blind what the colour red looks like because he does not have the experience of it." And that is the calamity that we are facing, that some of our brothers who happen to be white do not understand our circumstance, no matter how hard we try to explain to them because they lack the experience of it.⁷ We should be creating a campus where all the rights, the respects, the opportunities are open to all. That is the campus we envision, the campus we want to create, where we don't have institutional racism, where everything is inclusive and diverse. Where we are able to contribute to the development of this institution, and be able to be recognised that we have contributed to the development of this university. We need to be creating that. But as we engage, let us ensure that our engagements and discussions do not wrongfully manifest into hate and anger because, then, we are not going to go anywhere as an institution. As an SRC, we have said that we will engage; we will attend those committees because we are working towards a certain goal: we are working towards 8 April 2015.⁸ On top of that, we are working towards radical transformation of this institution; and that will happen. Thank you very much. [Students applauded as he left the stage.]

Chikane (chairperson) called on Dr Max Price, Vice-Chancellor of UCT. As Price walked to the podium, students sang one of the famous struggle songs *Zenzeni Na* ("What Have We Done") for just a moment. If you know the context of when African people sang that song, then you will comprehend the acute relevance of singing it when it was Price's turn to talk.⁹

DR. PRICE: *This is a terrific turn-out; I don't think I have attended a session like this that has been so wonderfully supported by such a*

representative group of students and staff. And so first of all I want to thank you for being here, and I want to thank the students that have triggered this protest because it is only because of the vigorous protest that we have this kind of engaged discussion this evening [some section of the students applauded]. So I want you to know, some of you might think that management, the executive or myself, are the enemy. We see ourselves as fighting for the same cause, wanting to reach the same goal, and we want to make sure that we have joint ownership of this project, that transformation is not seen as a management project and not seen as management resisting. It is something that we all own . . . The pass rates, financial aid, students' accommodation, etc., those things have been pre-occupying us, we have not been pre-occupied with the statue and the symbols; we had not thought that they are of high priority . . . We (University management) did not think that these statue and symbols were of such high priority that they needed to be tackled ahead of what we were pre-occupied with. But what Mr. Mahapa (the SRC President) had highlighted was the need for urgency. We started that process . . . but that is just the beginning . . .

[Students interrupted the Vice-Chancellor by singing, and Chikane asked them to allow the Vice-Chancellor to finish his address]. Price continued to talk and said that this is just a start, once the statue has been addressed, we will commit to the process of the symbols on campus and review them. . .

Hendriks (co-chair with Chikane) opened the floor to students and identified six students.

First, was Amira Konrad, a Coloured female,

AMIRA KONRAD: *I am a 4th year B.A. Theatre and Performance (Creative Arts) student, from Hiddingh campus. This might seem somewhat out of place, but as member of the constituency of the Hiddingh campus performance arts, I believe it is important to engage with issues through dialogue, performance, and creative means, as opposed to just trying to bash each other in social media platforms. It is for this reason, after being bashed in social media platforms for my stance in this process that I have written this poem called "On Exhaustion over a Lack of Understanding":¹⁰*

I am tired!
 God Almighty, I am tired
 of being told that we have to move on,
 that we need to forget,
 that we need to put the past behind us,
 and that *Apartheid* is over.
 They don't understand.
 We never will!
 Our bodies are monuments of centuries of torture,
 trauma,
 terror,
 these exist in us,
 we live it every day.
 We built this country
 slaves
 whips at our backs--
 The Man holding the whip did not build--
 We built.
 Apartheid is not over.
 No magic TRC wand can bippity-boppity-boo! it away
 Our glass carriage is still a pumpkin,
 rotting,
 pulled by rats.
 A polite revolution over tea and crumpets, good Sir,
 'twas the order of the day.

 When could we mourn?
 When could we cry?
 When could we scream for our loved ones lost
 our chances trampled on?

 Please Master, Baas, Meneer,¹¹
 Asseblief,
 Gee my 'n kans om te huil
 vir my ma
 en my pa
 en my susters
 en broers
 gee my'n kans om te huil.

 Let me stand up for myself
 and for those who stood before me.
 Let me march for myself
 and for those who marched before me.
 Let me call out *AMANDLA*
 and raise my fist
 after hundreds of years
 let me cry.

This is a transcript of the first 40 minutes of 2 hours and 12 minute long event. A video is available in its entirety—unedited—on *YouTube* (University Assembly: The Rhodes Statue and Transformation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWVJnBVnyPc&noredirect=1>). The transcript does not do justice to this powerful debate, and it is best that the readers visit the site and see the audio-visuals for themselves. I recommend that they read it with my recent article, also based on this meeting, titled, “Lessons from Rhodes Statue’s Fall.”¹²

Notes

¹ Transcript of the University Assembly: Rhodes Statue and Transformation at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, on Wednesday evening of 25 March 2015 when the institution held a two-hour University Assembly (6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.) to debate the Rhodes statue and transformation at UCT. Dr Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi, PhD, a Researcher in the Monitoring and Evaluation Directorate at the Council on Higher Education in Pretoria (www.che.ac.za), was at the University of Cape Town (UCT) to attend this public gathering and took notes. This is a transcript of the first 40 minutes of the proceedings of this meeting. Video is available unedited on youtube: “University Assembly: The Rhodes Statue and Transformation,” YouTube video, 2:12:47, posted by the University of Cape Town South Africa, March 26, 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWVJnBVnyPc.

² Keenen Hendriks is a Coloured male student. Whilst this transcript recognizes and acknowledges the definition of the term *Black* that is inclusive of the three groupings—African, Coloured, and Indian—as defined by Bantu Steve Biko in his essay, “The Definition of Black Consciousness,” in *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Heineman, 1978), the approach that I will take throughout this paper is to make use of the references of African, Coloured, and Indian in the context of South Africa, simply because race still matters in the South African politics, especially in Cape Town, and I want to be as clear as I can possibly be.

³ Professor Barney Pityana was voted to the Office of President of Convocation at the University of Cape Town on 17 December 2014 at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Pityana is a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (UNISA) and a founding member of the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO), and of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) with Bantu Steve Biko in South Africa.

⁴ See Kgotsi Chikane, “UCT Does Not Believe in Real Transformation,” *Politicsweb*, March 16, 2015, accessed: 15 May 2015. <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/opinion/uct-does-not-believe-in-real-transformation>. Rekgotsofetse Chikane is a son of Reverend Frank Chikane, respected anti-apartheid cleric, former Director

General in the Presidency Office of Thabo Mbeki, and the author of *Eight Days in September: The Removal of Thabo Mbeki* (Johannesburg: Picador, Africa, 2012).

⁵ In the previous meeting with UCT administration, SRC President, Mr Ramabina Mahapa staged a walk-out and was followed by the students.

⁶ See Veli Mbele, "The Fall of Cecil John Rhodes and the Rise of Black Power," *Pambazuka News*, April 2, 2015, accessed: 15 May 2015 <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/94377>

⁷ Pityana, seated at the front, smiled when Mahapa expressed this point; it is understandable, because this is at the heart of Black Consciousness philosophy.

⁸ UCT Council votes in favour of removing Rhodes statue 8 April 2015 <http://www.uct.ac.za/dailynews/?id=9092>

⁹ *Senzeni Na* demonstrating peaceful resistance against White oppression in the struggle in South Africa and is comparable to the song "We Shall Overcome" from the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

¹⁰ This poem can be found here: <https://ameeraconrad.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/on-exhaustion-over-a-lack-of-understanding/>

¹¹ From Master onwards, the poem is in the Afrikaans language. The power of one's language: translated literally it said "*Boss, master, mister/ please give me a chance/ to cry for my father/ my mother/ my sister and my brother/ give me a chance/ to cry.*"

¹² Neo Lekgotla *laga* Ramoupi, "Lessons from Rhodes Statue's Fall," *Getting Ahead, Mail & Guardian*, April 17, 2015, <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-04-17-lessons-from-the-rhodes-statues-fall>.