

Online Article

‘Mandela-wash’: How Invoking Mandela’s Name Cannot Obscure Past Injustice

Religious Christians believe that the blood of Jesus can wash away our sins. Secular people who actively participate in, or remain silent about, morally reprehensible acts have to be satisfied with lesser beings. In the case of racial injustices, some of us try to wash our history away by calling as defence witnesses the iconic leaders of the oppressed, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and now, notably, Nelson Mandela. By misappropriating their names and even attributing self-held views to them, minor changes for the good are magnified and failures to effect any meaningful change are concealed through complex processes of displacement and collective denial. I want to consider here the case of ‘Mandela-wash’, which was used so commonly after the end of legal apartheid in South Africa and has found new adherents in Oxford in the debate concerning the legacies and benefactions of Cecil Rhodes.

Mandela-wash in post-apartheid South Africa

Mandela stood for reconciliation and reaching out to all population groups. He shook many hands, held his hands aloft and hugged thousands of people. His capacity to allow others to redeem themselves made him the closest we have seen

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to a secular saint in our lifetimes. Stories of this power abound, but perhaps there is none so touching as the story of Zelda la Grange, a young woman from a middle-class Afrikaner family who became his personal secretary, spokesperson and gatekeeper, and ended up calling him *khulu* [grandfather in Xhosa]. By her own account, she grew up knowing little and caring less about the fate of black people. Yet, when she met Mandela, a sense of guilt at what her fellow Afrikaners had done to him overwhelmed her. As he shook then held her hand, she burst out sobbing and he finally had to stop her by putting his hand on her shoulder and saying, ‘You’re overreacting a bit.’¹

Among la Grange’s many duties, she was tasked with arranging a parade of people, black and white, powerful and powerless, young and old, who were ushered in to meet Mandela at his Houghton residence after he had formally retired from the presidency. After a handshake and, where necessary, a quick Mandela-wash, the sessions were concluded with a photo opportunity. All over South

Africa, CEOs and police chiefs, politicians and nurses, footballers and celebrities, teachers and youth workers proudly display their photos with Mandela. Why did Mandela go along with this? At any moment after 1990, revanchist violence was a constant fear and a terrible cauldron of racial conflict in South Africa could have followed. Reconciliation was not a one-off. It was hard and unremitting work, but it also provided the opportunity to tap those with deep pockets to fund Mandela’s favourite charities – including the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 46664 (named after his prison number), the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund and the Mandela Rhodes Foundation (discussed below).

Zelda la Grange and her colleagues were fielding between 150 and 300 calls and emails a day, so it is hardly surprising that a few chancers and opportunists got past her eagle eye. Here, I want to recall the bizarre and extreme case of Abe and Solly Krok, twin brothers who were trained pharmacists and made pots of money selling skin-lightening creams and quack medicines to the African market. Dinga’s Blood Purifier and Skelm Worm Syrup probably did no harm, but skin-lighteners certainly did. Early formulas contained mercury and most contain hydroquinone, a bleaching agent that can lead to

skin damage, blotches, ochronosis, poisoning and kidney and liver malfunction.² In a wild career that involved fortunes, foreclosures and family feuds, the twins diversified, speculated, invested in glitzy casinos and, in 1993, crowned their financial shenanigans by being convicted of illegal foreign exchange dealings. Nonetheless, they got their feet through Mandela's door, and this photo proves it.³ The Kroks' profile was so bad they were going to need a pre-wash, a stain remover, a good scrub and several hot washes. Undaunted, they eagerly clambered into the washing machine drum and accelerated their journey to acceptance in the post-apartheid order by

bank-rolling the admirably curated Apartheid Museum. This opened in 2001 and hundreds of school parties, and about 140,000 people visit it each year. The Apartheid Museum certainly helped, but Abe and Solly decided they wanted to go for total redemption with a grotesque proposal to create a free-standing bronze statue of Mandela's hand, 'the beacon of freedom'. The disembodied hand would be 23 metres high, half the size of the Statue of Liberty, and would cost R50 million. Fortunately, somebody sensible killed the proposal. The Krok brothers are no longer with us, but their stubborn stains remain. It seems that a Mandela-wash can only go so far.

Mandela-wash in Oxford

Now to Oxford, where a more recent if decidedly etiolated performance of Mandela-wash has been staged. The ethereal and villainous character in the play is Cecil John Rhodes, mining magnate and imperialist. Scene 1 is Oriel College, one of Oxford University's 39 colleges, where Rhodes episodically studied between 1873 and 1881 and scraped a poor degree. Despite his undistinguished record, the experience was sufficiently memorable for him to have left a large donation, earning him a statue hovering over the college's entrance and a laudatory commemorative plaque on a nearby property belonging to the college. Though there remains some doubt about the good faith of the college authorities, supporters of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, re-energised by the Movement for Black Lives, seem to have succeeded in their demand to remove the statue. The curtain is coming down on this scene but trying to tug it back into the wings were the two leading officers of the university who responded to the Rhodes Must Fall Campaign by conjuring up posthumous forms of Mandela-wash.

Enter the Chancellor, Chris Patten, barely shifting his position from the first round of protests in 2015. In his apologia for Rhodes then, he argued that as Mandela had displayed a 'generosity of spirit towards Rhodes and towards history', it was beholden on all Oxford students to reciprocate in kind. They should, moreover, adopt Karl Popper's ideas (a suggestion that quite ignored the many critiques of Popper's critical rationalism). If they did not embrace freedom of thought, he continued, they should 'think about being educated elsewhere'.⁴ In 2020, Chancellor Patten returned



Detail of Mandela's hand, this one from a statue at the Union Buildings, Pretoria

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Former_president_Nelson_Mandela_at_the_Union_Buildings_in_Pretoria_018.JPG

to the fray, declaring that, ‘for all the problems associated with Cecil Rhodes’s history, if it was alright for Mandela, then I have to say it’s pretty well alright with me.’⁵ The chancellor’s rendition of what Mandela believed was based on his recollection of what Mandela had said at a conference at Westminster Hall in 2003.

Enter the vice-chancellor, Louise Richardson, the real head of the university, despite the confusing title. She did not require recollection but claimed that, given his collaboration with the Rhodes Trust, she knew that Mandela would have ‘firmly disagreed’ with the aims of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. In a blog titled, ‘Abusing Mandela to Absolve Rhodes’, Rahul Rao has critically examined the chancellor and vice-chancellor’s comments, while in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* a number of senior Oxford academics have denounced the vice-chancellor’s brief outing as an amateur medium.⁶

The Rhodes Trust and the Mandela Rhodes Foundation

Scene 2 takes place at Rhodes House, Oxford, the headquarters of the Rhodes Trust. To understand the claims of what Mandela would have supported had he been alive, we need to be more precise – first, about what he actually did support and second, the extent of the collaboration with Mandela in relation to the overall activities of the Rhodes Trust. It is also important, by way of background, to clarify that Rhodes House is neither a department nor a college of the university, despite superficial appearances to the contrary. Only four of the sixteen Rhodes trustees are Oxford academics (the rest are mainly city types), while the website rather nebulously

describes the Rhodes Trust as ‘based at’ the University of Oxford. Given that the trust is at, or perhaps just near, but definitely not of, the University of Oxford, this rather begs the question of why the two most senior office-holders of the university felt the need to comment at all on issues that overwhelmingly pertain to the trust. The answer lies in this entanglement. The Rhodes Trust awards about a hundred fully-funded scholarships a year to scholars who, after the usual scrutiny, are admitted to one of 35 Oxford colleges. The Rhodes Trust also does the administrative work to support 22 Schmidt Science fellows and will shortly do the same for a new cohort of Atlantic Philanthropy fellows. These provide useful additions to the university’s graduate and post-doctoral numbers, which have been historically low compared with those of the top US universities.

Now to the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, which the Rhodes Trust funded in 2003 with Mandela’s agreement, much as he had approved the efforts of many other organizations and individuals whom he judged genuinely committed to redress. Considering the energetic performances of Mandela-wash during the latest Rhodes Must Fall campaign, one might have been led to assume that the financial contributions of the Rhodes Trust are ongoing and even munificent. The *Rhodes Trust Annual Report and Financial Statement of June 2019* tells a different story. It states: ‘The primary commitment of the Trust to the Foundation has been the benefaction of £10 million over 15 years, to provide an initial endowment and to meet the running costs of the Foundation. This commitment has been fully settled by 30th June 2019.’⁷ ‘Fully settled’, that sounded surprising. Just in case I

had misunderstood, I also examined the accounts of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, based in Cape Town, which tell an equally dismal story. Expenses continue, alternative donor income is very limited, and the end of Rhodes Trust funding puts the foundation in a precarious position.⁸

So, for all the loud swish-swishing of soap combining with water, the much-vaunted collaboration is a dead parrot – in practice, we are talking of a zombie connection between the Rhodes Trust and the Rhodes Mandela Foundation. Moreover, even when at full pitch, the financial commitment was only £667,000 each year out of an income (in 2018) of £33,762,650 – in other words, 1.98 per cent of the Rhodes Trust’s current income. The Christian tithe (10 per cent of income) and the Muslim zakat (2.5 per cent of wealth) beat this commitment hands down. Again, over fifteen years, only 18 of the 500 Mandela Rhodes scholars in Africa have gone on to win Rhodes Scholarships in Oxford. This record hardly merits conjuring up the first letter of Mandela’s name, let alone pretending that Oxford has had a thorough Mandela-wash. The trust has barely picked up the liquitab.

In a spirited statement released during the recent Oxford protests, the Mandela Rhodes Foundation itself reminded us that Mandela demanded redress alongside reconciliation and vehemently refuted the idea that his name could be used to sustain Rhodes’s legacy:

When Nelson Mandela agreed to co-found the Foundation with the Rhodes Trust in 2003, he was fully conscious of the tension between his own life and legacy and that of Rhodes. He neither sought to sanitise

Rhodes's image nor redeem him through juxtaposing their names. To use the partnership to justify the continued display of colonial symbols is to fundamentally misunderstand it. ... Mandela's message – expressed clearly in the Mandela Rhodes partnership – is not to forgive, forget, and accept the status quo. It is to work together to strive for social justice, and in this it is not only the responsibility of the oppressed: the oppressors, or all those who continue to benefit from oppressive legacies, must also contribute.⁹

Conclusion: denial and acknowledgement

Why, more analytically, do many people feel compelled to engage in Mandela-wash and other forms of evading responsibility? In his influential work on denial, Stanley Cohen argues that: 'There is no need to invoke conspiracy or manipulation to understand how whole societies collude in covering up discreditable historical truths.' Such elisions, he explains, become easier to effect when atrocities are meted out to people regarded as 'unimportant' or 'living in remote parts of the world'.¹⁰ This subtle form of memory loss afflicted the top officers of the University of Oxford. Because it happened a long time ago to people about whom they did not know, they allowed themselves only the most superficial reading of the Rhodes Must Fall movement. The protests are not just about toppling a rather insipid and insignificant statue on the Oxford high street. Dig a little deeper and we can see that the protesters were shining a light into

our own dark hole of collective amnesia, in which many of us living and working in Oxford (me included, of course) are implicated.

On the street and in the statements of the leading figures of the movement, a less visible but no less intense powerful message goes something like this: We Tswana, Ndebele and Shona, we spiritual sons and daughters of the African miners who toiled in the mines of South Africa, we fellow-seekers of knowledge and historical insight are no longer remote or unimportant. We are here among you as professors, researchers and fellow students. We want you to acknowledge us, to listen to our voices and hear our concerns. No more looking away. No more excuses. No more concealment, displacement, denial. No more averting of eyes, No more washing of hands (Covid excepted). No more plugging of ears with fingers. No more Mandela-wash. Face your own demons and your own history.

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Notes

1. John Carlin 'Mandela's rock' <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2008/jun/08/women-nelson-mandela> and Zelda la Grange, *Good Morning, Mr Mandela*, New York: Viking, 2014.
2. For the sad history of skin lighteners, see Lynn M. Thomas, *Beneath the Surface: A transnational history of skin lighteners*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2020.
3. For copyright reasons, this photo cannot be reproduced, but see this link here <https://www.getty-images.co.uk/detail/news-photo/former-president-nelson-mandela-with-solly-krok-and-his-news-photo/91120732>
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/13/cecil-rhodes-statue-row-chris-patten-tells-students-to-embrace-freedom-of-thought>
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/10/black-lives-matter-uk-london-protests-george-floyd-statues-racism/>
6. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4754-abusing-mandela-to-absolve-rhodes> and <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/2020/06/16/lettersthe-rhodes-must-fall-campaign-follows-ideals-nelson-mandela/>
7. <https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/media/44384/rhodes-trust-consolidated-financial-statements-ye-19-signed.pdf> p. 4.
8. <https://www.mandelarhodes.org/downloads/financial-statements/2018-mrf.pdf> p. 39 and passim.
9. Statement on 15 June. <https://www.mandelarhodes.org/ideas/mandela-rhodes-foundation-statement/>
10. Stanley Cohen *States of Denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, p. 12.