

AZANIA HOUSE AS A SYMBOL OF THE BLACK IMAGINATION

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One night in mid-March, a friend called me and said: “You have to come down here and see.” It was already around 11pm, but I got up got dressed and went to the University of Cape Town because I had heard the murmurs: “Something is stirring at UCT.”

I arrived on middle campus and the front doors of the famously aloof Bremner building open wide and a large group of people were conversing in small groups in the parking lot and in the reception area. The conversation was about the student occupation of the administration building. The occupation would continue until the University committed itself to decolonising the institution. Starting of course by unseating Rhodes.

The now-gone statue was a symbol of racial oppression and a colonial hangover that UCT was suffering from. The statue, is important in this paper because it provides an entry point into a larger conversation about space and identities are inextricably connected.

In mapping space, identities too are mapped and black identities are among other things heavily constructed around spaces, so where we live, where we work, we travel to and where we go to school. And when you combine these space with race, it become inseparable to questions related to subjectivity, authority, and power that, black people themselves often don't inform.

In the period of occupation while students waited for management to meet their demands, the removal



of the Rhodes stature just one of them, Azania house became an important space for black people to construct their own identities. It was a fantasy world in some ways because it was in a way removed from the white gaze and also from the violent constructions of blackness which other University spaces inform. Azania House served as a space, which refused external forces of these exclusively, mapped spaces – it promised a spatial safety to black identities, which are otherwise formed on precarious grounds. That spacial safety allowed for the imagination of blackness to flourish.

Space is oppressive in multiple orientation (race, sex and gender) - and the University space is intrinsically organised for oppression. It was never built to teach black students or have black people be lecturers and professors . Today the institution, under white management, is taking no real measures to eradicate this spacial oppression, which isn't only physical but is fostered in the psychological.

In this discussion, it must be remembered that in all contexts, geographical space is reflected as historical – that is that the particularities of space are formed through and informed by long histories

of ideologies. UCT is no different despite the liberal white façade it enjoys parading – it is informed by colonial and apartheid ideologies and as such, geographical space at UCT is important in oppressing black identities such as what apartheid and colonial demand of a space. If space was an organising tool for oppression in South Africa's past, then it is more than fair to say that in the “new” South Africa, space should reorganised to ensure equality. The University remains, in my eyes, a social impediment blocking the self-esteem and self-identity of black students as it does for their white counterparts.

It is generally acknowledged that the University space is crucial to notions of self-definition and identity, but among black students, the only definitions we get are that the University is a representation of the sluggish racial progress and the enduring stench of colonialism and apartheid. We are gravely underrepresented in all spheres of the University.

The movement explored the extent of oppression on the black psyche in the University space and the phrase “Black Pain” (which is a real affliction mind you) was invoked over and over as an important aspect of identity formation. It is both cathartic and sad to say that you suffer from black pain and have people look at your with the kind of understanding that comes with experience. It's cathartic because if you say it to another audience, a white audience, you'll get a look that pathologises you and treats your pain like a symptom of some kind of black hypochondria – it's not pathology, it our lived experience.

The real pathology is the psychology of racist whites in South Africa, which, relies on certain racial frameworks created by the polarity of skin colour. What arises out of this polarity is a need to alleviate



internal fears present in white racist psychology and justify the spatial oppression of black people - it arises from a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness and desire.

Blackness was not only imagined in this space, it was also performed - Azania House allowed us to free alternative versions of blackness otherwise denied by UCT.

The University of Cape Town space, where black people as the national majority are underrepresented, breeds anxious black imaginations and the erection of Azania house was an important tool in calming certain anxieties, a rescue remedy of sorts if you will. Blackness was not only imagined in this space, it was also performed - Azania House allowed us to free alternative versions of blackness otherwise denied

by UCT. Azania House had massive spatial (political and ontological) implications and we now know with even more certainty that representation is no longer negotiable.

On a more personal note, to me the black imagination isn't a lens into an afro-futuristic future where the black have inherited the earth nor is it a throwback to pre-colonial Africa where we were all Kings and Queens – the black imagination is rooted in this contemporary moment where we as black people actively seek our identities and formulate them as best as we can outside of whiteness and the questions related to subjectivity, authority, and power that, black people are not involved in forming. Actively fighting whiteness and its supremacy and engaging with one another will feed our imagination. Azania House provided this space to us, she protected young black students from the violent physical and psychological space of UCT and it also forced them to interrogate blackness and what it is. It's time to step away from the table – negotiating our oppression is not an option.

This movement should be read as a stinging indictment about the racial, gendered and class contracts, which govern South African society and the lived experience of South Africans. If for no other reason that because it was started and remains moved by a generation of people who were meant to see south Africa differently – we were meant to live in a racially equal society and see beyond the colour bar. We don't, the benefits of the free and racially blind South Africa that we've been promised haven't arrived in the mail just as yet.

What keeping spaces like the University white does, is that it elevates white opinion of their superiority and increases their fear of black people

making them more ignorant and more dangerous, might I add. As black people we outnumber white people but still find ourselves having to find ways to deal with our oppressors. WEB du Bois spoke about how power is asymmetrical in favour of whites but knowledge of the other is asymmetrical in blacks. It easy to test – ask black people anything about white people's lives even mundane details like how often they wash their hair and we know. But ask white people an equally mundane question and they are usually clueless – they're so poorly versed in any grammar of blackness and it is because among other things space in both its physical and psychological manifestations privileges their position.

Black people have the ability to understand both black and white culture while white people have an understanding of their own white culture and an impaired understanding of black culture.

Azania House wasn't transcending white spaces – it did something quite different. It was self-aware of the kind of time limits it was forced to function under and so it eked out everything from the space that it could. I wasn't there all of the time, but I feel that while I was there it was hard work. It was hard work to conscientise ourselves and one another to the point that we felt it were safe enough to let each other go. A fellow member of the movement said, and I remember this clearly: "We're all fucked up now." And she meant it not that we're bad, but that we can see clearly now and that no returning to any previous state of racial blindness was possible. If anything our sight would develop more clearly and consciousness would open more widely as we forged the path to a nation, which is truly ours: Azania. I'm not saying that it was a house of magic but we equipped each other.

The occupation of the University's Administration and management building, Bremner Building, was a move made in order to get the ear of management. But eventually an eviction notice (which has all sorts of implication in South Africa) was served to individual members of the movement and it further proves the point. Firstly that space is vital in identity formation and secondly, that you cannot negotiate your oppression with your oppressor.