

Looking back:

UWC and the redefinition of knowledge production in a changing society

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Professors Patricia Hayes and Premesh Lalu have in this edition of *Signals* provided useful insight into the importance of theory, history, archives and the humanities in South Africa, and how they can help “assist us in building an ongoing capacity to resist oppression and develop a politics of care in the present and future”. Their reflections on how to develop new ideas for the way forward in a country and “post-truth” world mired in crisis invite us to look back for lessons to the 1980s and 1990s when UWC famously started redefining itself as an “intellectual home of the democratic left”, challenging the traditional roles played by universities in South Africa. UWC questioned the whole system of knowledge production in South Africa and changed its mission to serve primarily excluded and marginalised narratives, seeking in the process to develop “an open and critical alignment ... with the political movements and organisations committed to the struggle for liberation”. “The ideological orientation of a university – the social philosophy which it privileges – is often accepted quite unproblematically, as if it were naturally right,” said new Rector Prof Jakes Gerwel, “but UWC broke decisively from a colonially rooted university system that had privileged either Afrikaner nationalism or liberal capitalism”.

The campus became a laboratory for all types of alternative thinking and peoples’ education experiments, and it started giving meaning to its professed critical engagement with the liberation movements. One significant example of this was how the ANC’s Constitution Committee, which played a seminal role in the making of South Africa’s Constitution, relocated

from exile to UWC after the unbanning of organisations in 1990. Buoyed by the upsurge of resistance inside the country, Oliver Tambo had announced in his annual presidential address on the 74th birthday of the ANC on 8 January 1986 that 1986 would be the “Year Of uMkhonto we Sizwe – the People’s Army”. The message was to make apartheid “ungovernable”. But unknown to many, Tambo had also on that very day set up a secret Constitution Committee in Lusaka, giving it an “Ad Hoc unique exercise” that had “no precedent in history of the movement”. Knowing that all wars end at a negotiating table, he instructed his new think-tank to start preparing a constitutional framework for a liberated, non-racial democratic South Africa, so that when that time came the movement would be prepared and holding the initiative. This writer’s latest book, *Dear Comrade President* (the manner in which the Constitution Committee addressed their reports to Tambo) explains how several of its key members – Zola Skweyiya, Albie Sachs, Kader Asmal and Bridget Mabandla – became familiar faces on campus after the return of the exiles. The widely respected Professor Gerwel set up the new custom-designed Community Law Centre in 1990 under Dullah Omar in order for the Committee to proceed in a relatively seamless way in an academically supportive environment with its great task of helping to redefine a country.

In addition, at its first meeting in Lusaka in 1986, the Constitution Committee recommended that the ANC leadership arrange for “a full demographic/political survey of South Africa to be undertaken as soon as possible” so that the organisation could best work out “what kind of electoral and governmental

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systems” would be best suited for the country in future.

This led to two think-tanks being set up surreptitiously via underground channels. SASPRO in Zimbabwe, and a twin inside the country. Once again UWC provided the agency for this to happen. In 1988, I accompanied Prof Gerwel to a meeting at the home of Aziz and Meg Pahad in London where Thabo Mbeki and other ANC figures were present. One of the issues discussed until deep in the night was the urgent need for Gerwel to identify a trusted academic, who could be the “internal” co-ordinator of the new project. It was the age before cellphones or emails, but Mbeki wanted the person to fly out to Harare the next day. UWC historian Randolph Erentzen was quickly summoned and UWC became the national base for the new Centre for Development Studies (CDS). Its purpose: “to research the existing social, political and economic conditions in the country with a view to planning for a future South Africa” - in effect the implementation of the Constitution Committee’s request in 1986, well before the unbannings.

These are two of the many stories of how UWC as an academic institution connected and significantly contributed to the struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s that still need to be fully documented and learned from.

In that time when a country freed and started reinventing itself after three centuries of colonialism and apartheid, I was

fortunate to be involved in another of the transformational experiments on campus. This was the launch of the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa, which emerged as a result of the exploratory projects and the thinking on campus in the years between 1985 and 1990. Started in an empty room in the old library with some overflowing cardboard boxes, Mayibuye itself, in turn, provided a conceptual base for the formation of democratic South Africa’s first official heritage institution, the Robben Island Museum, in late 1996.

The Centre collected a large multimedia archive on apartheid, resistance and social life in South Africa in a very short time. This included an extensive collection of 60 000 photographs, several thousand hours of previously censored audio-visual productions and raw footage, 2 000 oral history tapes and over 200 historical papers collections from individuals and organisations, as well as a valuable art collection, which included the 100-piece Albie Sachs collection of Mozambican art and the valuable the United Nations-sponsored international Art Against Apartheid exhibition created as a “museum in exile” by the French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest in 1983 to be given to “the first free and democratic government of South Africa” one day . It was hung in Parliament under the direction of Gordon Metz in 1995 as a way of symbolically replacing the old apartheid iconography and then donated to the Mayibuye Centre as the National Gallery was not yet regarded as being sufficiently transformed to be given custody of such a symbolically important struggle collection.

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The bulk of the Mayibuye Centre's multimedia collections came from the London-based International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF), the information nerve centre of the international anti-apartheid movement during the apartheid years. When IDAF closed in 1991, the organisation donated its material to the Centre after a visit to the country to determine the most appropriate base for the archives. However, often ignored in the Centre's foundational narratives, was also the intense community and struggle-based enterprise of materials-collection and activity that Mayibuye engaged in. Students and activists would arrive with plastic shopping bags of material they had secreted and could have been arrested for only a short while before, while Mayibuye also received instant support from a wide variety of community, cultural and political groups, ranging from the Robben Island prisoner archives to the Kathrada and Tutu collections and the archives of the National Women's Coalition, SANROC and dozens of small organisations and individuals. As democracy approached, this project (and similar ones like the District Six Museum) were regarded with a reverence that is difficult to convey today.

Driven by a strong transformation vision, the Mayibuye Centre initiated a wide range of programmes and activities that cut across traditional boundaries between “town and gown” or, in other words, the traditional monastic notion of a university separated from the world around it. They included exhibitions, community-outreach initiatives, art projects, film weeks, workshops, conferences and the 80 books published in the Mayibuye History and Literature Series between 1991 and 1998. The Centre's multimedia activities also extended to the production of a video documentary and what was reputed to be the first CD-ROM with local content to be produced in South Africa. These activities and the public history experience of the 1980s and early 1990s opened our eyes to the exciting opportunities to work in diverse, multimedia, multi-disciplined ways and brought across to us the massive impact that the technological revolution accompanying economic globalisation would have on traditional academic practices.

In the year of the zig-zag queues, 1994, the Centre with its skeleton staff and motivated student assistants and volunteers



was responsible for 14 exhibitions, which travelled to 21 South African cities and towns, as well as abroad. A portfolio of work by Sandra Kriel in its collection, dealing with Ruth First, the Cradock Four and other political assassinations, was chosen to represent South Africa at the Venice Biennale. Through Albie Sachs, Mayibuye brought the renowned Mozambican artist Malangatana to paint a mural in the university library. This was part of a new mural trail that the Centre developed on campus, which saw local artists Tyrone Apollis and Sophie Peters also make colourful interventions on staid walls.

The Centre's exhibitions and workshops were part of an active process of analysing, debating and contesting historical representations in the public sphere (including monuments, museums, tourism, culture and the media) at a time of momentous flux and change.

Given the hunger for relevant history after the tight censorship under apartheid, the Centre enjoyed a high public profile and its previously banned material featured ubiquitously in new TV documentaries and history books. Revelations from the

rapidly expanding archive made newspaper headlines and caused the same kind of interest as the opening of the Stasi files in Germany – like the escape plan to whisk Mandela off Robben Island by helicopter, and the revelations about the three volumes of official material on apartheid dirty-tricks activities stolen from security police headquarters, which former Robben Islander Mac Maharaj donated to the Centre.

Besides its engagement with culture and struggle history, the Mayibuye Centre became actively involved in driving change in museums and shaping new national heritage and cultural strategies for South Africa from 1990 onwards. The Centre co-hosted two national workshops on future heritage scenarios and the Director and Gordon Metz became key members of the ANC's new Commission for Museums, Monuments and Heraldry (later known as CREATE), which engaged the establishment South African Museums Association and successfully neutralised the MUSA policy initiative of the old government with interventions inter alia at the Bloemfontein Conference (1991), Culture and Development Conference

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and the SAMA Conference in East London in 1994. They were also appointed after democracy to the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG), tasked by the new Minister with advising on new principles, policies and frameworks for a democratic South Africa, helped write new heritage legislation, acted as the secretariat for the Future of Robben Island Committee, and also sometime as advisers on heritage matters to Deputy Minister Mabandla and the President office.

Just as UWC helped provide support for various think-tanks of the government-in-waiting, this work by the Mayibuye Centre and its staff was a reflection of how the university contributed in the nation-wide spring-clean accompanying democracy. Struggle-linked intellectuals were moving from being radical oppositionists to academics beginning to fulfill the more mundane but necessary role of specialists found in more stable societies.

Even during the transition to power, the Mayibuye Centre project sought to remain a critical intellectual one. During Mayibuye's Celebrating Democracy Festival held in July 1984 when the Director revealed in a paper based on a report smuggled off the island (now in the archives) that tensions had existed among the ANC leadership in the "High Organ" on Robben Island during the 1960s and early 1970s, highlighted by political and personal differences between Nelson Mandela and Govan Mbeki which at times reached "extreme tension and bitterness". Mayibuye was underlining at the very moment of victory the need for openness and for examining ... what everyone knows: that there are complexities, tensions and contradictions in every social movement and set of human relationships. With the rigid censorship of the apartheid era now something of the past, and the victorious liberation movement no longer obliged to maintain the appearance of absolute unity in the face of repression, South Africa has entered a period when the history of the past few decades can (and, indeed, must) start being told in all its rich complexity.

This revelation was a deliberate decision, not appreciated by the Centre's Fellow, Ahmed Kathrada, and others at the time, but it reflected the energy and openness of the Mayibuye's approach.

The Mayibuye Centre director elaborated on the theme of critical debate and thinking at a preparatory conference in relation to the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), when he made the point that "historians must assert the need for openness about the past and the public's right to know".

He said this included the history of the broad liberation movement, including alleged malpractices in the ranks, because "victorious nationalist struggles have a way of producing hagiography". These critical inputs were part of celebrating democracy in line with the way UWC had defined its "intellectual home of the democratic left" engagement and vision.

The work of the Mayibuye Centre reached its apogee with the foundation of the Robben Island Museum in late 1996. As Interim Administrator and then first Director of RIM, the Centre's director was put in operational charge of reimagining, re-purposing and turning into a national cultural institution and UNESCO World Heritage Site this highly symbolic 584-hectare space. After the island had been shut off from the mainland for centuries, the prison doors were symbolically thrown open on a spine-tingling Day One on 1 January 1987. An ex-prisoner (who had once been sent there in chains) and a child turned the key.

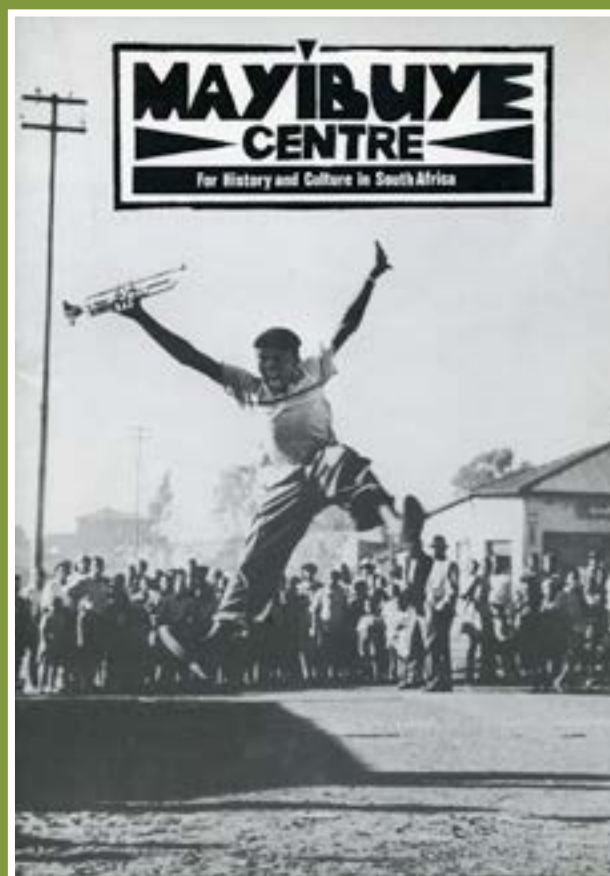
Under a partnership agreement with UWC, the Centre itself was effectively taken up into RIM - so that its collections could provide a ready-made collection for the new museum. RIM's official aim, in keeping with the spirit of the newly launched post-liberation struggle democracy, was to "nurture creativity and innovation and contribute to socio-economic development, the transformation of South African society and the enrichment of humanity". Those soaring goals summed up the spirit of the times in South Africa. One of the four core essences - besides maintaining the island's symbolism and heritage, and keeping it sustainable - was to make RIM "a platform for critical debate and lifelong learning". The detailed story of the making of the museum will be told in a forthcoming book called *Rainbow Dreams* (2021). Projecting the living museum template and experience of the Mayibuye Centre on to a bigger, more meaningful stage, RIM initiated a number of creative projects. At the core of these were educational programmes for school children (3,500 of the initial 8,000 visitors per month), cultural activities, including artists and writers in residence, co-operation with community groups, plans for exhibitions and a publishing series, co-operation with local universities, training programmes to fast track a new generation of heritage workers and linkages with relevant international institutions and programmes. This was part of a serious attempt to create a learning institution and new model for museums, in a system that had been deeply racialised, heavily bureaucratic and which was thoroughly stained with colonial and racist representations and stereotypes of South Africa's past. The RIM staff demographics were unrecognisable from a system that as late as 1990 had no black managers (except in the Bantustans). Through the Robben Island Museum Training Programme run in tandem with UCT and UWC's history department (especially Professors Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz), over 200 heritage workers and graduates gained formal diplomas in heritage management, many going on to take top positions in South African institutions.

With its exhibitions, debates, books, transformative approach and active "barefoot" collecting, the Mayibuye Centre was totally fresh as an academic and heritage project in South Africa in 1990. The timing of its launch and the scope of its networks in the liberation movement and grassroots social or community movements gave it a niche space at a key moment in South African history.

Driven by liberatory visions and the seemingly unending energies of the moment, the Centre opened up new paths in public heritage and made a noticeable public impact. The whole experience reinforced the notion that to be active beyond the proverbial “ivory tower” does not necessarily mean compromising on academic integrity and critical approaches. On the contrary, as we argued then and still do now, it is essential to any critical intellectual project. This was particularly so in South Africa in the early 1990s. The Centre became an institutional base for what would today be the equivalent of a “decolonisation” project at a time when the universities, museums, cultural institutions and scholarship were overwhelmingly and complacently dominated by colonially rooted if no longer openly apartheid-supporting establishments and ideas.

The Mayibuye Centre brought the notion of public history firmly into the intellectual life of UWC and the vice-rector noted in 1995 that it was now “probably the most public face of the university”. According to Professor Premesh Lalu, the Mayibuye Centre was the institutionalisation of Jakes Gerwel’s university of the democratic left idea and it became ‘central to thinking about what atmosphere might exist at UWC’ at a time when the university was “reimagining itself as an institution that would give meaning and purpose to the idea of post-apartheid South Africa”.

Finally, in this issue, Lalu, Hayes and others show that UWC is undergoing another deep cyclical or generational rethink about the role and place of the university in society in a context very different, globally and at home, from those that pertained in the 1980s and early 1990s. In my opinion, energies, initiatives and reflections like these – adapted to the changing times of unprecedented technological advancements, climate change extinction threats, the current limitations of the democratic state and the intellectual ruptures of the past few years – are needed more than ever if the university is to find the new conceptual tools, imaginations, ideas and languages to ensure it remains relevant to the demands of the time.



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