

The enchantment of freedom

at the University of the Western Cape

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A vital part of the university's history is its central role in contestation about the public use of critical reason

The history of the modern university is, first and foremost, the history of the unfolding of complex problematics of a planetary condition through established scientific and humanistic inquiry. Defined as such, the work of the university is not only to advance solutions for those problems that interchangeably favour state and public use of reason but also to discover, in the framing of the problem, the very conditions for constructing perspectives about a future that is radically other. In this sense, the demand placed on the university is always doubled, so that its interpretive, analytical, and critical work cuts into the non-identity of past and future. To this extent, the ideals of higher education mimic the processes of research and define the relationship established between the professoriate, the student body, and the university's allied publics. The scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century that followed the unravelling of the institutions of slavery displayed this tendency through a remaking of method by relinking deductive and inductive modes of reasoning in a single effort that gave birth to modern science. Similarly, the humanistic traditions of thought that gained momentum in the wake of the slave rebellion in Haiti in the 1800s and, to a lesser extent, in the Cape Colony in the same period, would test the full implications of the 1789 French doctrine on the "Rights of Man". In the lacuna between the abolition of slavery and the rise of the industrial revolution, new ideas of race and freedom intersected, sometimes with devastating consequences.

Notwithstanding the expansive archive on the struggles over autonomy, the university has been subject to the vagaries of the ebbs and flows that shaped the discourse of freedom for more than two hundred years. When we point to academic freedom as the foundational principle for the pursuit of university knowledge, we often unwittingly call attention to a more entangled and nuanced controversy entailed in contests about the public use of critical reason. For much of the nineteenth century, when the modern university as we know it was being remade, the concept of freedom rested on a spectrum of attitudes towards slavery.

Despite the affirmative foundations of the university, the birth of the modern university obscures the extent to which its modes of reasoning are founded on the racial remains of the transatlantic system of slavery. The notion of race that permeated the institutional sites of the modern university often operated as a silent referent in the exercise of reason and cultural hegemony.

The response to segregationist and apartheid educational policy drew extensively on the discussion of race and education in the post-slavery United States. The choices facing African-American intellectuals and early African nationalist educators overlapped significantly. In the early 1900s, the African-American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois understood the shadowy presence of race in the discourse of the university in profoundly enduring and suggestive ways. "You may," he argues, "dress a query in a thousand forms and complete with a hundred problems, and yet the simple query stands and will stand: shall you measure men and women according to their [personhood] or according to their race and colour?" In 1935, Du Bois rearticulated this view in his opposition to the programme for post-slavery education espoused by his contemporary, Booker T. Washington. The core of the disagreement, from Du Bois's perspective, was whether the descendants of slavery ought to be subjected to industrial schools at the expense of an education that affirms the intellectual development to the full extent of the student's potential and desire. In his critique of the model of the industrial school, Du Bois wished that the segregated schools established for the descendants of slaves be directed towards different educational goals. Far from approving the practice of separate education, Du Bois held the view that the segregation enforced in the USA in his time was no excuse for a lesser development or expectation of the human potential of students. "Thus," he noted, "instead of our schools simply being separate schools, forced on us by grim necessity, they can become centres of a new and beautiful effort at human education."

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W. E. B. Du Bois
*American activist,
historian and author*



Charlotte Maxeke, South African activist and religious leader

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Sol Plaatje, *South African author and intellectual*

**“ Ideas of freedom seamlessly blended
with idioms of jazz, poetry, literature,
art, theatre and film. ”**

The discussion of race and education was to have very significant consequences for the approaches to similar questions for an early generation of African nationalist intellectuals in South Africa. Charlotte Maxeke, the first black science graduate, who was schooled in the USA, as well as Sol Plaatje, John Langalibalele Dube, and S. M. Molema, were each profoundly shaped by the debate on education between Washington and Du Bois. The post-World War I industrial boom and the intensification of segregationist measures with the passing of the Native Urban Areas Act of 1924 amplified the demand for education among an emerging African intelligentsia. Upon returning to Natal from the Tuskegee Institute, John Langalibalele established a version of the industrial schools in South Africa modelled on those established by Booker T. Washington in the USA. But the pressure to set a more ambitious and speculative expectation for black education also had a fair share of proponents in South Africa. Among a generation of intellectuals who travelled to Europe and the USA to study medicine, science, and the human sciences, it was Du Bois who held out a challenge, under the spell of segregation and racial hatred, that potentially aligned education to the promise of freedom from racial and class servitude. Rather than limiting the knowledge to vocational pursuits, and in addition to an education in modern languages and sciences, the segregationist schools would be required to engage in an aesthetic education that would work as a self-affirming strategy to counteract the consequences of violence on the psychic structure. Saddled with institutions that were the product of segregation, Du Bois believed that “a tremendous psychic history would, with proper encouragement and training, find expression in the drama, in colour and form, and in music” (with a small caveat: that this aesthetic development not be seen as “simple entertainment and bizarre efforts at money raising”). The inheritance of this custodianship of the idea of freedom through education from the author of *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) proved critical for struggles against not only colonialism but also against the cynical reasons behind segregation in South Africa and the American South. It would influence generations of intellectuals who carried the torch of humanism amid the rising tides of war and fascism, colonisation and decolonisation.

The elaboration of this tradition of freedom was unevenly inscribed into the ethos of separate universities after the 1960s in South Africa as they respectively sought to find intellectual justification beyond apartheid’s prescriptions of Bantu Education. Inspired by successive generations of critical discourse on race, intellectuals such as S. M. Molema and Z. K. Matthews found that in South Africa the divisions in the university between the sciences and humanities were producing an untenable justification for the hardening political attitudes on the question of race. Whether in the critique of trusteeship or the apartheid programme of separate education, the traditions of the Black Atlantic proved to be an invaluable resource for challenging the grip of racial domination and for sustaining ideas about freedom. Unfortunately, these ideals of freedom were largely squandered and eventually blunted with the twentieth-century remaking of the Euro-American episteme.

They have been similarly squandered by a post-apartheid political project that frequently, and sometimes unwittingly, sees the terrain of higher education as a mere instrument of a technocratic reorganisation of knowledge. Yet the institutions that were the product of a racial order continue to uphold an ever-receding tradition of humanistic thought that seemed to be waning globally at the institutional site of the university in the aftermath of World War II. Embedded in the struggle for freedom, education for these institutions came to mean an ongoing process of the reinvention of the idea of freedom against the backdrop of altered global conditions. The *raison d’être* of those institutions that continue to bear the scars of apartheid as segregated institutions depends extensively on building and inventing traditions of thought of freedom in the manner of the best examples drawn from the Black Atlantic.

The University of the Western Cape is a product of this very process of the invention of the traditions of thought that aimed to align ideals of freedom and traditions of humanism. This was a process of learning to learn from a great, albeit neglected, scholarly endeavour that emerged in response to the inheritance of slavery, colonialism and apartheid. To this extent, the renaissance of the university in the late 1980s at the height of the struggle against apartheid helped UWC to nurture an idea of freedom that was necessary for, yet irreducible to, either juridical or other prevailing notions of academic freedom at English-speaking liberal universities.

UWC pushed ideas of freedom to the limit as it tried to exceed the constraints that forestalled the birth of a post-apartheid society. That poetics would hold the humanities as a fundamental premise of research across the sciences and the applied disciplines of the social sciences, law, education, dentistry and economics.

Paul Gilroy, the scholar who initially mapped the intellectual and aesthetic traditions of the Black Atlantic, notes that humanism’s re-enchantment often combined with projects of resistance in the postcolonial world. Scholars such as C. L. R. James brought together traditions of humanism and Marxism in the formation of a curriculum for black studies. Elsewhere in Africa, the problem of colonialism was threaded through a Latin American discourse of decolonisation and “development of underdevelopment theory”. In South Africa, an expansive debate that cut across academic and activist divides worked to combine strands of Marxism with the traditions of nationalism, third-wave postcolonial feminism, Black Consciousness, and Pan-Africanism as these brushed up against the pernicious orders of race and ethnicity. More than a site to produce a synthesis of competing worldviews, the invention of a distinctive tradition of freedom served as an enabling condition for animating academic debates at apartheid’s separate institutions.

There, in the midst of institutions that Z. K. Matthews described as being under siege in the 1960s, ideas of freedom seamlessly blended with idioms of jazz, poetry, literature, art, theatre and film.

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Under the leadership of Jakes Gerwel, the institution laid the foundation for a process of research that would contribute to the best but often neglected traditions of freedom in the Black Atlantic while also deepening the intellectual formation of generations of students through an affirmative concept of education. A nurturing education was ultimately aimed at preparing the students and faculty to decipher and flip the conditions of constraint into a concept of freedom. This was an education founded on what UWC educationist and philosopher Wally Morrow called “epistemological access” in the 1980s. “Epistemological access” would facilitate critical and theoretical pathways out of a predicament not of UWC’s own making, while sustaining and inventing a tradition of thought invested in an idea of humanism and democratic criticism.

In the 2000s, after the dawn of democracy, the newly appointed Vice-Chancellors Brian O’Connell and then Tyrone Pretorius enabled research that would encompass questions related to the fledgling democratic public sphere and post-apartheid formations. To attend adequately to the demands of a society in transition, the commitment to the inherited traditions of freedom tended towards what Theodore Adorno would call the elaboration of “emphatic concepts”. Like the concept of the post-apartheid, freedom as an emphatic concept discloses possibilities that are not fully actual because experience negates them. At the same time, the concept emerges from the experience of that which is not freedom. In other words, from the institutional site of UWC, the struggle to grasp the meaning of the post-apartheid was guided by having endured the experience of the institutional mechanisms of apartheid since the inception of the institution in 1960. Research in the 2000s set out to invent emphatic concepts to sustain a desire for the post-apartheid.

The time to draw together the range of research endeavours into an overarching sensibility that made sense of the future of South African higher education from the perspective of an institution such as UWC had arrived. In the process, the institution found itself at the forefront of the invention of community dentistry and community law as well as being a frontrunner in the fields of public health and medical biosciences, renewable energy, astrophysics and ecological sustainability. It became a bastion in the debates about food security and land reform and a beacon for holding out the promise of a post-apartheid future that is at once postcolonial and open to building on the best traditions of humanism in the Black Atlantic. It had also established itself as a critical voice in debates about the making of public institutions, such as community museums and national heritage institutions, often renovating research methodologies while leading the way in the education of a next generation of public intellectuals. Whereas much of this work was widely debated and internationally cited, the institution had yet to articulate fully and comprehensively these interlinked research questions as interventions about making a post-apartheid future. More than preserving the best of what we have learned, the onset of this collective research agenda at UWC strays into the space of a global history of the modern university to reclaim a spirit of education that the world sorely needs if it is to survive the current planetary crisis.

To the extent that institutions are capable of outliving the trauma of apartheid, and to the extent that they work steadfastly to undo the legacies of race and ethnicity that infected every sphere of education under apartheid, UWC’s collective research efforts are interwoven in the long genealogy of a discourse of freedom drawn from the end of slavery to the present. At one level, the responsibility that follows requires that its research agenda be aligned with a notion of the curriculum as the very foundation of the university, constituted primarily through the pedagogic encounter between students and faculty. At another level, for the university to lead the way to an invention of the unprecedented, there is a need to reconstitute the relations across the arts and sciences that will deepen and extend the idea of freedom upon which the viability of a post-apartheid and postcolonial society rests. Most crucially, there is a need to revitalise the debate about the meaning of freedom. There could be no better place than UWC to harness freedom’s potential.

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W. E. B. Du Bois, "Does the Negro need Separate Schools," Journal of Negro Education 4, no. 3 (1935): 335.

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For an example of how this gave effect to a discussion of a first-year undergraduate course titled Debates in the Making of the Atlantic World, see Leslie Witz and Carohn Cornell, "It is my right to participate in the subject": History 1 at the University of the Western Cape," Social Dynamics 20, no. 1 (1994): 49-74; and for a discussion of a first-year undergraduate course titled Debates in the Making of the Atlantic World, see Premesh Lal and Carohn Cornell, "Staging Historical Argument: History 1 at the University of the Western Cape," South African Historical Journal 34, no. 1 (1996): 196-210.

Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics. Translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1966).



According to the historian Arlette Farge, “The archive lays things bare, and in a few crowded lines you can find not only the inaccessible but also the living.” She continues: “Scraps of lives dredged up from the depths wash up on shore before your eyes. Their clarity and credibility are blinding.” What is it about the archives that produces this clarity and credibility? And what is the value of the archive, specifically of those archives we hold at the University of the Western Cape (UWC)? What do they mean for the humanities, both on our campus and far beyond? How does the memory within them burn, as Georges Didi-Huberman puts it?

In 1992, the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa opened at UWC. The nucleus of its collections came from the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) in London, documenting political detention and anti-apartheid solidarity work. Soon other activists and organisations entrusted their archives to Mayibuye, which was housed in the lower level of the UWC university library. From 2000 the Mayibuye collections came under joint custodianship of the Robben Island Museum (RIM) and UWC.

What are these riches that lie at our feet? Archives are the place “where history itself acquires form and visibility”. They create the world in miniature. But these are very specific forms, visibilities and miniature worlds: those of the people who participated in the struggle to liberate South Africa from apartheid and the longer history of political, social and economic exclusion based on race. As a consequence they were often banned, detained, and sentenced to imprisonment or exile. The Guide to Collections in the Historical Papers Archive gives a sense of the remarkable range of donations by activists from different political movements to the archives. They comprise various papers, correspondence (sometimes from prison), minutes of meetings, political education classes given in guerrilla training camps, lectures given to international audiences, drafts of autobiographies and other manuscripts. A small sample of donors includes:

Dadoo, Dr Yusuf Mohamed. 1930s–1983, 10 boxes.
Asmal, Kader and Louise. 1975–1987, 63 boxes.
Jaffer, Zubeida. 1958–1991, 1 file.
Kasrils, Ronnie. 1980s–1990s, 1 box.
Kathrada, Ahmed. 1960s–1992, 133 boxes.
Mbeki, Govan. 1960s–1992, 2 boxes.
Lalu, Premesh. 1980s–1990s, 15 boxes.
Vasson, Mukesh. 1949–1980s, 3 boxes.

Archives are the place ‘where history itself acquires form and visibility’; they create the world in miniature

The archive also holds the lives that the activists sought to bring attention to, or intervene in, as a matter of urgency. They mobilised against forced removals, against police brutality, against capital punishment. Activists were part of existing organisations or formed new organisations to campaign against exploitation, lack of education, gender discrimination, and the isolation and impoverishment caused by the political detention or death of family members. The archive holds materials that are about the extension of care, something very appropriate in these present times of hardship and isolation. Here is a small representative sample:

Centre for Adult and Continuing Education. 1980s, 402 boxes.
South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union. 1954–1990s, 324 boxes.
Grassroots Publications. 1980–1989, 55 boxes.
International Defence and Aid Fund. 1960s–1990s, 4553 boxes.
United Women’s Congress. 1980s, 5 boxes.

Many of the donations comprise rare pamphlets of banned movements, the ephemera of meetings and funerals, and an abundance of newspaper cuttings. Activists and their supporters wanted to build and maintain a cohesion, they wanted to prevent the struggle becoming dissipated.