

Good Hope after #RhodesMustFall

Review of the exhibition *Good Hope. South Africa and the Netherlands from 1600* (Rijksmuseum, February 17th to May 21st), by Nick Shepherd and Christian Ernsten.

We see the back of a head. It is a beautiful head, both recognizable and distinguished. Nelson Mandela! We understand that we are in safe hands. As scholars who divide our time between Cape Town and Amsterdam we approached the exhibition *Good Hope. South Africa and the Netherlands from 1600* with high expectations. And, indeed, there is much to admire. The beautiful panoramas by Robert Jacob Gordon, the eerie portraits of children born after 1994 by photographer Pieter Hugo, and a set of stereoscopic images of the South African War that bring the past to life with startling clarity are some of the highlights. So why did we walk away from the exhibition with the sense of an opportunity missed?

Good Hope tells the story of relations between the Netherlands and South Africa from a date just prior to the Dutch settlement. As the exhibition statement puts it: "What happens when white folks come to live in a black country?". Such a formulation immediately provokes a set of questions. In what sense did van Riebeeck and his fellow settlers think of themselves as "white"? (They didn't: they might have thought of themselves as Dutch, and possibly as Christian and Protestant.) In what sense is South Africa a "black country"? Surely, the story here is about the historical coming into being of ideas of "whiteness" and "blackness" as a result of colonial institutions and apartheid, rather than a retrospective projecting of such identities back in time?

As the curators of the Rijksmuseum must have expected critical commentary as they presented this exhibition to the public they deserve compliments. For example: a vagueness around historical agency is a problem with an exhibition that presents an account of relations between the Netherlands and South Africa is a story of "culture shared and influence reciprocated". The major impact of the Dutch on local lifeways at the Cape had to do with the introduction of racial slavery and the genociding of the Cape San. One suspects that this is not the sense of culture that the curators have in mind. The job of the critic is easy: you stand back and find fault. So let's change gears. Instead of standing back, let's walk together. We want to suggest that the deeper reasons for the exhibition's missed opportunity have to do with the nature of the present moment. Ten years ago the exhibition might have worked. But something has shifted in South Africa in the past few years, and this shift has everything to do with questions of history and representation.

We would argue that South Africa has entered a different era, not the postapartheid, but perhaps the post-postapartheid. The elements of this shift are complex, and include a popular turn away from the ideology of nonracism that drove the liberation movement, and ongoing student protests that have shut

down the country's top universities. South Africa now appears to be a country haunted by unfinished business and by the weight of its own history. The "colonial" has come roaring back, and with it, ideas of decoloniality. The terms of engagement in South Africa have shifted: in public culture, in parliamentary debates, in the university seminar room, around the dinner table. The unavoidable question that follows for curators and audiences is: How do we approach an exhibition like *Good Hope* after the events of #RhodesMustFall (The student-led social movement that began in March 2015 at the University of Cape Town)?

The rest of this short review is an account of how we would explore such a question with our Museology and Heritage Studies students at the Reinwardt Academy and the University of Cape Town. From a formal, curatorial perspective, the exhibition is governed by two ideas. The first is the idea of episodic history. The exhibition is arranged in a series of rooms. Each room deals with a different period, or topic, starting with the distant past and ending with the present. Walking through the exhibition is like a walk through time. This is a conventional curatorial device, but one of its consequences is that as we enter each new room we leave the things of the previous room behind us. Time becomes a line marked by breaks, and what we experience in an embodied way is the discontinuity between periods, presented as discrete historical episodes. The second governing idea is a focus on key personalities. These include Jan van Riebeeck, Paul Kruger, and Nelson Mandela. Again, this is a conventional curatorial strategy, and is useful in that it seems to provide an easy entry point into complex historical moments. On the downside, it tends to obscure social processes and ideas of relationality. Individuals become representative of historical periods.

So how are such strategies challenged by the events of #RhodesMustFall? This social movement began as a series of spontaneous protests against a statue of Cecil Rhodes sited in a prominent location on the university campus. They quickly morphed into a more embracing critique of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid in the university, and in South African society at large. Students asked questions about the Eurocentric nature of knowledge and the university curriculum, about the over-representation of white scholars, and about an institutional culture that they characterized as institutional whiteness. Later in 2015 these critical energies broadened beyond their initial base at the university, and under the heading of #FeesMustFall assumed the character of a national student revolution.

The #Fallist critique of history and representation runs in several directions, but for present purposes there are two points that need repeating. The first is a critique of episodic history, or the tendency to think of history as a series of discrete periods. Rather, the emphasis is on legacies and afterlives. Perhaps their most radical idea is not to think of the past as past, but as present, in the sense that it forms and conditions the contemporary moment. Structures and social relations from the past recur through time, often in new forms and disguises. Hence the return to the idea of the colonial as a way of naming the structural

constraints of contemporary society, and hence the call to “decolonize” knowledge, the curriculum, and society itself.

The second point concerns the perspective from which history is told and imagined. Precisely because colonial institutions and apartheid constructed whiteness as power and blackness as alterity, students in the #Fallist movement question what it means to develop a white gaze on black histories. They talk about white bodies and black bodies in former colonial institutions – universities, museums, galleries – and what it means to navigate such spaces. In this context, the decision to co-curate the exhibition *Good Hope* with hardly any South African – especially black South African – scholars and curators becomes a questionable statement.

The challenge is to think history differently. The opportunity is to use such reflections to pose critical questions about the present. One starting point would be to approach such histories from an awareness of the geo-politics and the body-politics of the persons doing the knowing. Another starting point would be to think of history not as a series of rooms located in the past, but as a living, breathing presence that both burdens the present and acts as a kind of birthright.

One could try to develop a more radical notion of relationality between the Netherlands and South Africa. Such an account might try to connect contemporary xenophobia in South Africa with anti-immigrant sentiment in the Netherlands or connect the globalism of the Dutch East India Company with contemporary forces of transnationalism. Or one could think about how ideas and practices of race developed in the former colonies, get deeply scripted into the story of colonial modernity, in the global north as much as in the global south. In this perspective, South Africa would not be the “Other” of the Netherlands, but its reflected self.

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