# Chapter 11: Spirit of Madiba, Where are You?[1]

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## Abstract

The question of 'where' in relation to Nelson Mandela is one that has been posed in different eras and different contexts since at least the early 1960s, when he went underground to initiate armed struggle against the apartheid regime. A decade after his death, Verne Harris poses the question again, in relation to Mandela as ancestor, as spirit, as ghost. He does so referencing in the first instance the ancient indigenous knowledges to be found in southern Africa, and then, secondly, a certain deconstructive mode of thinking, as articulated in the work of Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida. For both Cixous and Derrida, recognising spectrality, working with it, thinking it, are of fundamental importance to knowledge construction.

Having assessed how Mandela is remembered in different domains and discourses, Harris comes to the conclusion that the ghost(s) of Mandela reside *inside* those who love justice and are doing the work of making a just society. He insists on the plural, for there were many Nelson Mandelas. Mandela the revolutionary, leading an armed struggle while studying Marx and Mao. Mandela the global icon of peace-making and reconciliation. The politician's politician playing and being played by global capital. The scion of an indigenous royal family. The voice of early twentieth century Eastern Cape modernism. The elder full of wisdom but losing grip on a world accelerating away from him. Loving justice, Harris argues, forces one to listen to all these Mandela voices.

**Keywords:** Ancestors, deconstruction, ghosts, Mandela, spectrality

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## Questions

The question of 'where' in relation to Nelson Mandela is one that has been posed in different eras and different contexts since at least the early 1960s. It was heard when he went underground to initiate armed struggle against the apartheid regime, when he travelled through Africa in 1962 securing support for the African National Congress and being trained as a freedom fighter, and then was back in South Africa on the run from the security police. 'Where is Madiba?' 'Where is the Black Pimpernel?' Over 27 years in prison, the question of 'where' seemed to have a self-evident answer, but by the last years before his release the answer was not clear when it was framed in terms of 'where is he ideologically now?' or 'where is he in talks about talks with the regime?' or 'where is he positioned in relation to the rest of the liberation movement?' 'Is he selling out?' And during the 1990s, as he rose to the role of head of state, 'where have the Marxisms and the socialisms of the struggle years gone?'

Now, a decade after his death, the 'where' question is posed about his 'spirit', or *to* his 'spirit'. Of course, such a question provokes a cascade of other questions, which insist on being addressed first. What do we mean by 'spirit'? Is there a spirit of Mandela? Does it exist? How can we learn to listen for the ghosts, the spectres, the ancestors? How can we find them? Too many questions, all of them defying positivist conceptual framing and all of them inviting either provisional answers or more questions.

Let me offer a cautious engagement with such questions, a preliminary approach to them, referencing in the first instance the ancient indigenous knowledges to be found in southern Africa, and then, secondly, a certain deconstructive mode of thinking best articulated for me in the work of Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida. For both Cixous and Derrida, recognising spectrality, working with it, thinking it, are of fundamental importance to knowledge construction. Derrida goes furthest perhaps, charting a terrain best described as a hauntology – an exploration of states and movements of 'hauntedness'. For him it is not clear what ghosts are, but it is very clear what they do. They haunt us. More on this in a moment. Just to note, before turning to indigenous knowledges, Nelson Mandela, the historical figure and the social figure, loomed large for both Derrida and Cixous. More on that at the end of this essay.

## Voices and Ghosts

In the long traditions of the Thembuland which gave birth to Mandela, ancestors are fundamental to the work of making meaning on a life journey and to the

work of securing wellbeing. In this conceptual framing, Nelson Mandela is now an ancestor. Both literally and metaphorically. This 'spirit of Madiba' can be importuned, found, and shown the hospitality that all ghosts demand. Madiba, our ancestor, can still speak. And he does. Metaphorically, this ancestor's voice is still to be heard in public discourses. Still he is invoked, quoted and referenced widely. The tidal wave of books and documentaries on the life and times of Nelson Mandela has still not abated. One is haunted by this voice which for many can no longer speak literally. But for some, in the spaces of ancestral ritual and respect, this voice still speaks, literally.

What is this voice saying? What is the ghost of Madiba telling us? I will return to these questions right at the end. First, let us listen to other voices and other ghosts. The voices of those who dismiss Madiba. And then the ghosts of Marx and of Hamlet's father.

There is a narrative which blames Nelson Mandela and his generation of leadership for all the ills of contemporary South Africa. It is a story most often told by young people; and it was most forcefully articulated during the 2015-2017 FeesMustFall university student protests across the country. 'Mandela sold out Black South Africans', they insisted. This narrative is still to be heard on university campuses, but I think social commentators often exaggerate its scale and its reach. Through 2022 and into 2023 I was part of a research team at the Nelson Mandela University which convened a series of focus groups comprising students and faculty across multiple disciplines, all interrogating a set of questions configured around a central one, namely, 'what meaning does the name Nelson Mandela signify for you now?' Of course, we heard the sell-out narrative and the sense that the name is profoundly problematic today. We also heard voices which either indicated no interest at all in the name Mandela, or who argued that it is increasingly irrelevant to a generation grappling with the multiple challenges of today. And there were those just fatigued by the referential repetitions. Multiple threads. But by far the majority of participants saw both opportunity and responsibility attached to the name, with, to my ear, four compass points:

- For both individuals and the institution, it is not about living **up** to a name. Rather, it is about living a singular responsibility **before** that name.

- Individuals within the institution are called to be engaged fully in building just spaces.

- The institution itself is called to make its spaces just (liberatory) and to contribute to the realisation of a modern African post-apartheid university.

- Research and learning, across all disciplines and fields, should be geared to the making of a just society, and should be shaped fundamentally within an ethics frame.

I'm not suggesting that this study is representative of views in universities across South Africa. After all, the Nelson Mandela University carries a particular name. But it's a useful indicator.

Now to the ghosts of Marx and of Hamlet's father. In 1994 Derrida wrote a book titled *Spectres of Marx*, in which he suggested that the world had discarded the ideas and the conceptual tools of Marx far to hurriedly in the wake of the Cold War ending and the Soviet Union dissolving. He hinted at a brave new neoliberal world haunted by the ghosts of the discarded. And he argued insistently that the concept of justice was unimaginable without a sense of responsibility before the ghosts of those already dead, the ghosts of those being discarded by prevailing relations of power, and the ghosts of those not yet born. So, the call of justice as an archetypal form of haunting. In the final passage of the book, Derrida underlines this connection, even for those who call themselves 'scholars' and 'intellectuals':

> If he loves justice … the 'scholar' of the future, the 'intellectual' of tomorrow should learn it … from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always *there*, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet … [And then, finally, a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the young prince before the ghost of his father:] 'Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio' (Derrida 1994: 176).

The spectral, then, for Derrida, is more than a scholarly pursuit. It is about loving justice, learning to live, discovering that most disturbing of all ghosts, the stranger deep inside oneself. Could this realm be where the spirit of Nelson Mandela is to be found? Could the ghost of Madiba reside *inside* those who love justice?

## Believing in Justice

These are questions which provoke a number of lines of enquiry, of course. Like, what do those who love justice make of a world where justice feels so far removed from the daily experience of so many? What does it mean when a country – the country of Nelson Mandela - has enjoyed the freedom of a formal democracy for 30 years, and still, most of the people who call that country home are reaching for the semblance of freedom as a lived reality in their daily lives? What does it mean when a people – the people of Palestine - have been struggling against different forms of imperialism and colonialism for millennia, and now, in 2024, are facing genocide while the democracies of the world pass resolutions, give interim rulings, and create a dribble of emergency aid? It is hard, I find, in contexts like this, to keep believing in justice, and to keep finding reserves of energy for the struggles ahead.

Perhaps it is particularly hard for me precisely because I lived and worked through the 1990s, when South Africa and the world felt full of possibility, of hope, and of space for transformative work. Mandela had come out of prison and led the processes of negotiation, peacemaking and transition to democracy in South Africa. The Berlin Wall had come down and Germany was busy with the work of reunification and reckoning with its pasts. Truth commissions were being put in place around the world. The Cold War was over. Israeli and Palestinian leaders were negotiating an end to conflict. The United States had emerged from the long years of Reagan and Bush senior and had not yet unleashed on the world its post-9-11 rage. Mandela and Clinton had developed a 'special relationship'.

The ghosts of the 1990s haunt me. Mostly now I am haunted by the realisation that at the time I did not see the deeper structural dimensions of what was happening globally 'beneath' the headline phenomena I've just named. For the 1990s were also the decade in which neoliberalism established hegemony. The work of French economist Thomas Piketty now demonstrates that the great advances in overturning inequality in the early post-Second World War period were systematically and systemically unravelled in the 1980s and 1990s. Leaders like Mandela were being courted, groomed and inducted into the working of global and other forms of capital. A brave new world was being prepared. And, as Derrida saw early on, the ghosts of Marx were haunting scholars and former liberation movements alike.

So, I say again, it feels hard to keep believing in justice, and to keep finding reserves of energy for the struggles ahead. Beyond all these considera-

tions and contexts, in addition, justice, of course, is an unforgiving space. Derrida goes further, seeing it as a space of impossibility.

The thing about justice, and the thing about freedom, is that society never 'has' them. Madiba also taught us this. These concepts only have meaning when they are being worked at, grown, reimagined in changing circumstances, made deeper and more accessible. That's why he warned his readers at the end of *Long Walk to Freedom* that the walk is long precisely because it does not end. There is always another hill to be climbed ahead. There is always another struggle to be fought. Both for societies and for individuals. There are no saints, even amongst those who love justice, who struggle for justice. Madiba taught us this. At best there are sinners who keep on trying.

The thing about justice and freedom is that they are indivisible. Madiba taught us this as well. The purpose of freedom, he argued, is that it be used to secure the freedom of those still in chains. No one can be fully free while their freedom allows – and, most often, depends on – the oppression of others. There can be no freedom that is meaningful, no justice that is meaningful, until all are free. This is why Madiba believed passionately that the freedom of Palestine was inextricably linked to the freedom of South Africa, and every other country. All struggles for justice intersect. We cannot make sense of justice – as a concept, as a deep human longing – outside of intersectionality.
Madiba taught us this, indirectly.

The thing about justice, and this is something that Derrida (leaning on Levinas) taught us, is that it demands a hospitality in relation to those being ghosted by power that is, in principle, impossible. How to invite everybody in who is knocking on the door? How to make space for them all? How to enable them to be more than guests – to belong, to lead, to own? How to redistribute wealth meaningfully in a world of capitalist logics? How to welcome in all migrants in a world of nation states? How to respond to every ghost in a cacophony of spectral voices?

Listening to all the voices is to be in the spirit of Madiba. But what can one hear in a cacophony? What could Madiba hear? Questions.

## *A Luta Continua*

So, where do we find the energy to keep fighting the good fight? What do we need in order to stay sane in the midst of cacophony? How do we not allow the latest news from Gaza or Sudan or Ukraine make us switch off our devices in order to dull the pain? Can we find focus for continuing parliamentary advocacy

work when parliamentary leaders are being suspended for misconduct? Where can we find the belief that it is important that we vote in elections even when we're struggling to come to terms with what our choices are as well as what might happen to our ballot papers? What are our options when neither love nor hope are enough?

I don't have compelling answers to these questions. But I do know that I learned from Madiba that it matters that we not give up. It matters that we keep going. It matters that we do the right thing, irrespective of what the future brings. It matters to humanity that we keep struggling for justice, even if we fail. It matters to the soul of the world, *anima mundi*. In this realm of soul all things are connected, all struggles, ultimately, are one.

This belief - this conviction, this sensibility – informs use of that immemorial phrase, if not slogan, *a luta continua.* It certainly informed probably the world's most successful mobilisation of international solidarity ever – the anti-apartheid movement. The Free Mandela campaign became central to that movement's strategy and tactics. It was within that context that Mustapha Tlili and Jacques Derrida edited the book *For Mandela*, published in 1988 with contributions from some of the world's greatest writers and activists. Members of this group also supported an exhibition of art, which contributed to the building of solidarity in support of the anti-apartheid struggles. In that book Derrida reflected deeply on intersections of justice and law, with Madiba as a lens. Cixous chose the lens of Winnie Mandela to explore multiple lines of enquiry in an essay which later morphed into a full-length book. This group was responding to the call of justice. They were working for liberation by harnessing international solidarity. They were supporting those ghosted by the apartheid regime and its allies. Both Madiba and Winnie were being ghosted in very particular and severe ways. Tlili, Derrida, Cixous and the others were haunted by ghosts. And that haunting manifested as a call to action. A call of justice.

We need this work *for* justice, this action, more than ever before. We need this haunting more than ever before. We need those who are inspired by the spirit of Madiba.

I do believe that the ghosts of Madiba reside *inside* those who love justice. I say ghosts rather than ghost, for there is no one Madiba. As there never is one, singular, self. Who are we hearing? Nelson Mandela the revolutionary, leading an armed struggle while studying Marx and Mao? Mandela the global icon of peacemaking and reconciliation? The politician's politician playing and being played by global capital? The scion of an indigenous royal family? The

anglophile? The voice of early twentieth century Eastern Cape modernism? The elder full of wisdom but losing grip on a world accelerating away from him?

Loving justice forces one to listen to all these voices.

Of course, in order to listen to them there needs to be the amplification provided by research, scholarship, learning and teaching at all levels of society's education and public discourse apparatuses. And here, precisely, is a challenge. The publishing space we name 'Mandela' is an industry, arguably supporting a saturated market dominated by work which reproduces the same basic narrative and the same well-known images. All too rare are the fresh line of enquiry, the unexpected insight, sustained critical analysis, and the deep, deconstructive reading of archive. So, while the body of popular work is huge, there is relatively little scholarly work in the 'Mandela Studies' space. For me, a listing of seminal endeavour in this space is very close to being a case of counting the fingers on one hand.

The ghosts of Mandela will only be heard clearly when there is a fulsome and vibrant manifestation of 'Mandela Studies' – by which I mean a field embracing (and integrating) two frames of signification. The one references a literature, a discourse, a realm of research and a publishing industry focused on the life and times of the historical figure Nelson Mandela. The other frame of signification references that deeper and more transformative space of 'the social figure' – what 'Mandela' means to a society in a specific configuration of circumstances and, of course, to organisations carrying the name 'Mandela'. For both the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Nelson Mandela University the social figuring is all about justice.

Loving justice forces one to listen to all the voices of Mandela. And this demands an impossible hospitality. It invites an embrace of all the ghosts of Madiba in the same way that it enables a holding of all the selves. It won't allow any giving up. It requires us to keep working.

It is still in our hands to make a just world. And the spirit of Madiba can still be with us.

*A luta continua.*

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