

Ruth First Lecture 2015 by Panashe Chigumadzi

## **Why I call myself a 'coconut' to claim my place in post-apartheid South Africa**

Towards the end of 1997, the year before I turned seven and went to big school, I asked: "Mama, at big school next year, can they call me Gloria?" Gloria is my second name. My mother looked at me, a little confused, and simply said, "No. Your name is Panashe, so they will call you that."

Without the words to explain why I preferred Gloria, I went along with the name that had been so badly mangled in the mouths of my white teachers at my predominantly white pre-school – everything from Pinashe, Panache to Spinasio.

At the age of six I had already begun the dance that many black people in South Africa know too well, with our names just one of the many important sites of struggle as we manoeuvre in spaces that do not truly accommodate our blackness.

I had already taken my first steps on the road to becoming a fully-fledged coconut, that particular category of "born free" black youth hailed as torchbearers for Nelson Mandela's "rainbow nation" after the fall of apartheid; the same category of black youth that are now part of the forefront of new student movements calling for statues of coloniser Cecil John Rhodes to fall, and for the decolonisation of the post-apartheid socio-economic order.

We all know what a coconut is, don't we? It's a person who is "black on the outside" but "white on the inside". This term came into popular South African usage in apartheid's dying days as black children entered formerly white schools. At best, coconuts can be seen as "non-white". At worst, they're "Uncle Toms" or "agents of whiteness".

I've chosen to appropriate the term and self-identify as a coconut because I believe it offers an opportunity for refusal. It's an act of problematising myself – and others – within the landscape of South Africa as part of the black middle class that is supposed to be the buffer against more "radical elements".

Instead of becoming the trusted mediators between black and white, we are now turning to conceptions of blackness and mobilising anger at the very concept of the rainbow nation. The fantasy of a colour-blind, post-racial South Africa has been projected onto us coconuts, but our lived experiences are far from free of racism.

My research has focused on exploring why some coconuts, despite their privileges, are joining their working class comrades in black anti-racist struggles.

But first, we need to deconstruct my use of the word. Judging from calls to my Kaya FM radio interview last week, it's a term that still touches many of us – and

prompts people to wonder why any black person who is not self-hating would use it.

Ouch. I don't entirely agree. Instead, I use the term to refer to an experience of socialisation into what Eusebius McKaiser has termed "white grammar". According to McKaiser, knowledge of "white grammar" is how you would know, for example, that a "sarmie" is a sandwich, or that "bru" and "oke" are white-speak for "mfwethu".

Besides, the coconut experience is not new. For example, University of Cape Town (UCT) professor Xolela Mangcu playfully suggests that Tiyo Soga, prominent anti-colonial figure who was the first black graduate of the famed Lovedale Mission School, might have been "the very first coconut".

Attempts to assimilate are not always successful, and to project coconuts as unthinking dupes of whiteness is patently not true. Many so-called "native elites", ranging from WEB Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, SEK Mqhayi, Rolihlahla Mandela, Mangaliso Sobukwe, Bantu Biko and others have refused to become so-called "agents of whiteness", despite the many incentives to do so.

### **'Two warring ideals in one dark body'**

Speaking of her mission school experience, Phyllis Ntantala, anti-apartheid activist and wife of Professor AC Jordan, the first black lecturer at UCT, said: "[w]ith such brain-washing, it is a miracle we did not all become sell-outs and collaborators."

Anele Nzimande, a member of the Decolonizing Wits movement, says that her experience in white spaces lead her to the following realisation: "You know the truth, it no longer impresses, it loses its sparkle... That's what proximity does. Proximity with whiteness gives you the revelations, it gives you what they are, not what they can be."

This proximity allows us to begin to critique it in ways that aren't as easy to do when on the "outside". African-American scholar Du Bois, in his famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, wrote: "The Negro is ... born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness ... One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."

Du Bois argues that certain pivotal life experiences jolt black people into their "double-consciousness". For him, this happened during a ball, where his dance card was refused by a southern white girl simply because he was black: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like [them perhaps] in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil."

For me, the awareness of the veil came through persistent experiences of racism at my predominantly white private school. I saw how invites to "the farm" from white childhood friends started to disappear once we were in high school, and

how we tacitly accepted that we didn't date each other. In the economic sense, it was seeing that white university mates with similar academic performance found jobs faster than black students did. Importantly, much of this racism was not recognised or articulated until we found the anti-racist vocabulary to name it.

### **You don't belong'**

I personally didn't have a moment that "woke me up". Instead, it was a series of moments: in my final year of high school I began to actively seek out books that dealt with my experience as an African in the world. It felt as though the earth underneath my feet moved and revealed a new world. For the first time I encountered books by African authors. I furiously highlighted sentences and paragraphs, even pages, in books such as *I Write What I Like*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Coconut* and *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

Page after page, I began to see just how alienated I was from myself as an African. I felt that I was the very embodiment of a colonised European ideal. The question that stuck in my mind was: "What would I have been like had it not been for colonialism?"

As a symbolic act of change, after chemically relaxing my hair from pre-school, I shaved my head bald for the first time. This was the external manifestation of the internal rejection of what was white or colonised within me.

So, years later, when poo was thrown at the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the arch representative of European colonial arrogance in the past and present, it struck a deep emotional chord within me. I was not alone. The Rhodes Must Fall protests resonated so strongly with the experiences of black students at historically white universities that other campus movements such as The Black Students Movement at the university currently known as Rhodes (but not for long if we have anything to do with it), Open Stellenbosch and Transform Wits were rejuvenated and formed.

The idea that black youth were politically apathetic was quickly dispelled as the students began the call for "decolonising the university" and, by implication, decolonising the rainbow nation.

I spoke to 10 students involved in the movements.

"You move around with a permanent sense of exile... You don't belong... In your neighbourhood [or] at school... you try and negotiate two worlds which don't come together, set apart geographically, economically," says Wits student Vuyani Pambo of his experience taking public transport from the township of Soweto to St David's College in the elite suburb of Sandton.

Even when schools shifted from having predominantly white student bodies to being predominantly black, they retained the form and culture of white schools. Having attended Woodlands Primary, a multiracial school in Durban, Anele Nzimande later went to Ridge Park College, a predominantly black school. Yet

the experience of alienation remained: “[T]hey would police black girls’ hair. In my primary school we were not allowed braids, which I didn’t see as a problem at the time. In the high school, the same thing... You couldn’t have dreadlocks [or] afros - which is ridiculous.

“They went too far because that is the natural state of our hair... [This was] interesting, because, even though we were in the majority, we were alienated and [we had] a sense of not belonging.”

### **Changing language**

“The subtle experiences of racism have been more painful than the explicit. By subtle I mean, [when you think] ‘was that racist? Maybe I’m exaggerating?’ Those things that make you doubt yourself,” says Thoko Chimbalanga.

It is the language of black consciousness, pan-Africanism, black power and critical race theories that has helped coconuts disregard that sense of doubt, and to develop their own critiques of post-apartheid South Africa.

“Knowing that there is a way in which you can be understood makes it easier. Experiencing violence and not be able to say anything beyond crying ‘racism!’, which your peer will simply dismiss, [is painful],” says Siphokuhle Mathe.

Mathe describes this language as meaning “I can speak for myself, I can stand for myself. I can even belittle white people. It’s empowering that I can dismiss their arguments and call them ‘unintelligible’.”

The language of black consciousness is both a form a self-defence and of relief from the nervous conditions of being black in a white world. How I wish I had the words to deconstruct apartheid ideology to my grade eight liberal white English teacher who had told us, in between reading King Lear, that “apartheid had good intentions behind it. It was just that it was badly executed!”

Now, with an arsenal of words and knowledge, many of us can more clearly and readily articulate near ubiquitous disdain for the rainbow nation, seeing it as Pambo does, as “a gloss... a palimpsest, painting over racism as opposed to eradicating it.”

In this way, coconuts like myself identify as black as a way to find agency, because it allows us to mobilise with others with similar experiences.

### **An experiment gone wrong’**

In the tradition of Du Bois, Soga, Fanon, Mqhayi, Ntantala, Biko and Sobukwe, to be a radical coconut who has chosen refusal is to be a Trojan horse of sorts. Anele Nzimande captures it best: “It is an experiment gone wrong. Because you wanted to create robots who are compliant, who keep the machinery working, the same sort of knowledge production, [but now you have] people challenging what you taught them, no interest in reproducing and want to dismantle it entirely. There is something amazing about that.”

Indeed, the experiences that people like myself have in the “heart of whiteness” are those that many black South Africans do not have. Experiences like when in boarding school we realised that Jade and Sarah thought a swim in the pool was sufficient hygiene for the day, when we had been taught that we were the dirty ones, white people could clearly smell too. Or, how Lauren and Tammy’s mums could do school tuck shop duty because they didn’t have to work, unlike our own mothers. Or, how Mrs Baxter and Mrs Botha told us not to speak “that language” but yet said nothing when the white children spoke Afrikaans.

In these schools we find a certain universalism rooted in the white child and white culture, despite the schools now having black pupils. Formerly white schools include black children under the same assumptions despite the different names, different bodies, different hair, different socio-economic backgrounds. I call it the “add blacks and stir” model. Stir, while continuing with the same structure, same rules.

And this of course is symbolic of the wider rainbow nation project: include black people but don’t touch the underlying structures of inequality that rely on racism.

Coconuts are of course privileged socio-economically by this very proximity to whiteness. And yet, it is those experiences of whiteness as a system that causes us pain.

That is what forces us to realise that no matter how hard we work or how well we speak, we remain black. That is what forces coconuts to become conscious. And in the end, that is what forces us coconuts to join the call for Rhodes to fall.