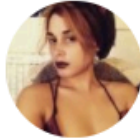


Selective Memory And Nelson Mandela



by: **Mia Arderne**

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On Sea Point Promenade, there remains a large and facile hunk of metal. The huge pair of stainless steel sunglasses by artist Michael Elion is a tribute to Nelson Mandela called 'Perceiving Freedom'. Gaze through the oversized glasses and, if you look past the joggers sweating, you'll see Robben Island far in the distance. As a country, South Africa has deliberately chosen to celebrate and remember Nelson Mandela as an elderly man. Graceful, healing, smiling, reconciliatory, post-Robben Island Old Mandela: this is the man on our T-shirts, the man big brands build marketing campaigns around this time of year.

What about Young Mandela? The uncomfortable answer is that Young Mandela isn't as palatable. Nelson Mandela was a powerful man, both young and old. But Young Mandela mobilised bombing campaigns and founded the militant UmKhonto weSizwe in 1961. He fought for his cause in a very literal way. Why isn't he on our T-shirts? Mandela with the resolute scowl and the boxing gloves, who was willing to take up arms for the cause?

Nostalgic South Africans are not so sure about that Mandela. We don't like to think about *that* part of the struggle. The mythologised passive Mandela (what Benjamin Fogel calls 'an abstract signifier of moral righteousness') belongs in the same place as the misguided notion of the rainbow nation: both ideas ignore parts of personal and collective political history. As a nation, we don't really honour his complex personas or his principles - we celebrate them selectively.

But are attitudes towards Nelson Mandela beginning to change? Are we starting to view him from a more emotionally sober place where we can question the way he engaged with African foreign policy and economic policy? In light of newer political movements like Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall adopting the larger decolonisation framework, Mandela's legacy is being questioned. He is no longer the ultimate icon of leadership for South Africa's new generation of youth. The legacies of other radical struggle icons like Solomon Mahlangu and Steve Biko were more essential to the fallist movements. Here's just one example:

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cocoanguni Found this in the Wits library. Every single day he lives. This following quote has been the centre of many conversations I had this week: "Black man you are on your own" #stevebantubiko #helives #bikolives #blackconsciousness #forall

17 MONTHS AGO



The deification of any human being can be dangerous as icons emerge in response to context. No man's a god, and making Mandela into a god is a denial of his full history. While it's important to be weary of empty Mandela-branded everything, and see it for exactly what it is, perhaps we shouldn't think of legacies in terms of sacredness and desecration. Perhaps we should learn/laud and critique/re-evaluate in equal measure as contexts shift, retrospect widens and narrows; it tempers and reforms.

TAGS:

HISTORY | MANDELA | MANDELA DAY | MANDELA LEGACY | NELSON MANDELA