

COMMENT

Time to address invisible disabilities

DANE ISAACS, CANDICE GROENEWALD and KRISTEN DEANE

OVER the past few decades, there has been increased recognition of the importance of creating societies that are more inclusive for people with disabilities.

One avenue through which this has occurred is through the design of toys particularly dolls or characters that are intended to 'represent' people with disabilities.

For example, toy agencies have produced dolls with prosthetic legs, Lego characters in wheelchairs, and teddies with one arm shorter than the other. Agencies have also produced characters to represent a person with autism, and more recently, on April 30, 2023, Mattel launched the first Down syndrome Barbie, which subsequently hit South African stores on October 19.

The importance of such investments that move an inclusive agenda forward is uncontested. Launching the Down syndrome Barbie has certainly challenged the age-old narrative of beauty, ie: the able-bodied, equally proportioned, slender physique that should be aspired to; although this continues to be promoted in various industries, such as the fashion and modelling industries. However, even with this welcomed shift, it remains important for us to further challenge how we think about disability in society today.

We believe such a significant move is needed within disability studies and understanding of disability within South Africa. Presently, when we think of a person with a disability, generally, we consider someone with an observable disability. Similar to the toys previously described, this is evident in the signage commonly used to depict disability in South Africa ie, the blue-and-white icon of the human in a wheelchair that is used to allocate certain spaces for disabled individuals.

This icon only encourages the belief that being disabled can only look one way. Many businesses in South Africa also require 'evidence of disability' through medical certification and these practices exclude the many South Africans living with invisible disabilities. Invisible disabilities are non-visible or what some call 'hidden' disabilities that are not immediately noticed unless disclosed. Some examples of invisible disabilities include scoliosis, hemiplegia, epilepsy, and stuttering.

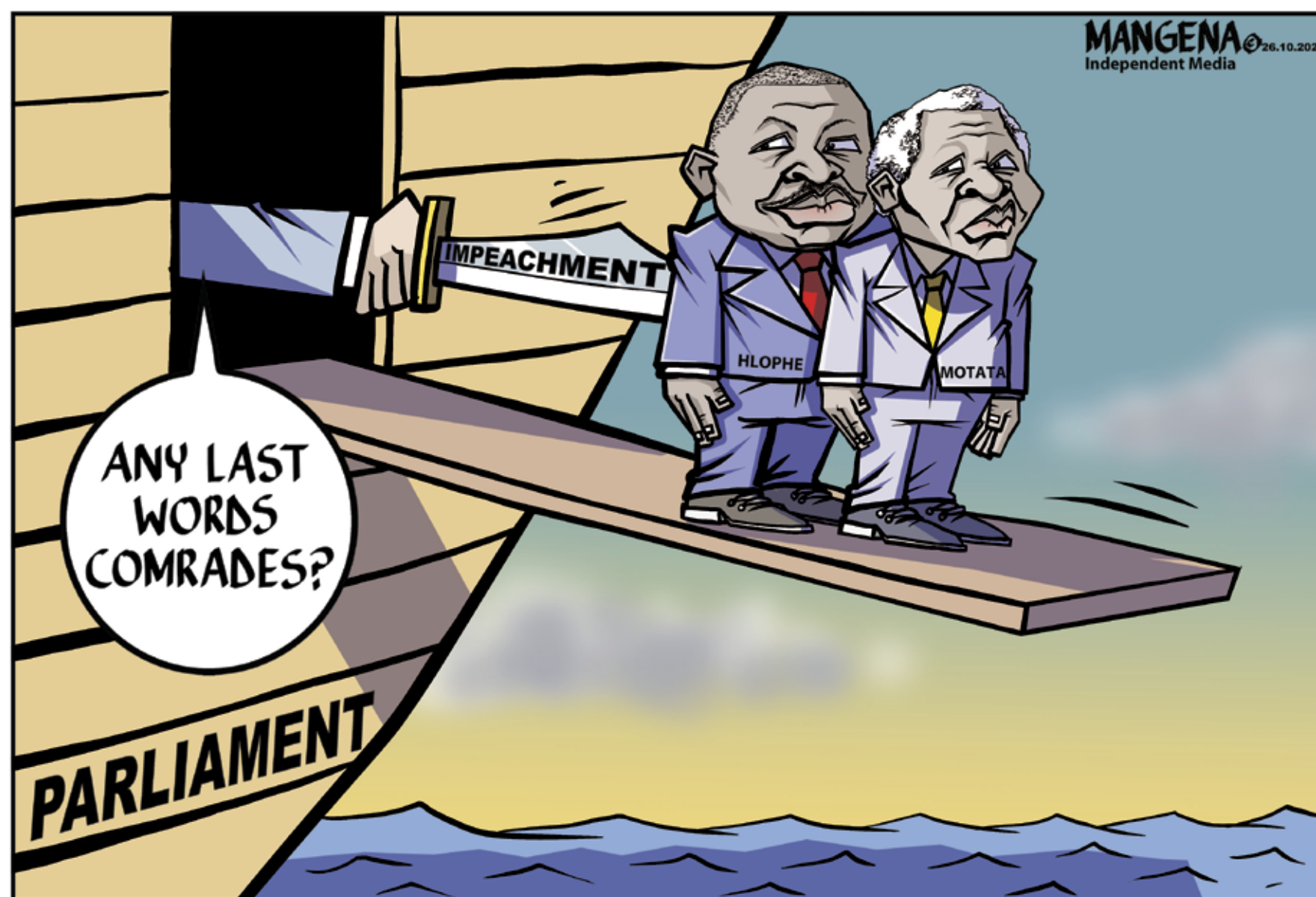
Questions then arise about how we, as individuals, families, society, and within different sectors like academia, research, practitioners, civil society, and government, can create opportunities to not only make visible the invisible, but also how the needs of people with invisible disabilities can be prioritised.

Conversations, policies, interventions and actions of social justice as it relates to disabled individuals in South Africa, need to be revised and reshaped to include the experiences of people living with invisible disabilities in South Africa.

More importantly, transformation needs to happen alongside and in consultation with those living with invisible disabilities. Policymakers, practitioners, and academics are encouraged to draw on the lived experiences, and therefore expertise, of persons living with disabilities to formulate policies, programmes, and interventions that would adequately address the needs of individuals with diverse disabilities. Failure to do so will leave the oppression, discrimination, and exclusion of these individuals unchallenged and unaddressed.

Next year, we as a nation will be celebrating 30 years of democracy and freedom. However, disabled individuals in South Africa, will not be able to participate in the celebration of democracy and freedom if their experiences and rights continue to be undermined at various levels of society. In order to maintain a democracy that encourages equality, it is a necessity for us to consider the lived experiences of individuals with various disabilities. By doing this, we will be able to live in a country of insightful knowledge that will encourage freedom and inclusion..

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Museums must account for historical injustices

They were a colonial tool to narrate white supremacist ideology

COMMENT



WANDILE KASIBE

ARE museums the correct correctors? What moral authority do they have over issues of restitution and the unfolding politics of return?

These questions come as museums with colonial baggage all over the world are being taken to task for the role they have played in perpetuating colonial crimes.

Some of the oldest museums have in their collections skeletal remains of the vanquished communities who were deemed lesser human beings solely on the basis of their languages or darker skin pigmentation.

In the colonial context, the two – language and darker skin colour – were exploited as signifiers and markers of difference between the “civilised” and “uncivilised”.

In this unequal distribution of power relations between the settler and indigenous communities, to be dark meant “inferiority”, and that inferiority earmarked native peoples for colonial violence of land dispossession, cultural annihilation and other forms of aggression.

In the Museum of Natural History and Ethnography, in particular, the politicised difference lay at the heart of what Frantz Fanon calls, the “language of pure force”.

It constitutes what John MacKenzie characterises as the “scientific face of the scientific endeavour, the point of contact between scientists and public exhibition, between empirical collection and theorisation, and between such scientific discourse and popular understanding”.

Raymond Montpetit alludes to the fact that it became a locus where “other cultures were viewed as exotic and their very strangeness invited examination, comparison and collection”.

“From this standpoint conquests, empires, collections and museography were closely interrelated ... the victors seized the treasures of their vanquished enemies’ collections and brought them home to put them proudly on display in their own museums.”

And what Montpetit demonstrates to us is the fact that museums are not apolitical and innocent spaces untouched by the biases of dominant cultures, but are instruments through which the bourgeoisie influence public opinion.

In the early European expeditions to geographical terrains such as the Cape, North America, Canada, New Zealand and many other areas where settler communities had an encounter with indigenous peoples, there was a corrosive gaze (the dehumanising way in which white Europeans viewed indigenous people) that was at play.

And in places such as southern Africa, the gaze was two-fold; on one hand the Khoi-San people were ironically labelled “intruders” and thieves in their own land, and on the other, the Europeans saw potential “trade partners” in indigenous people, based on European deception and aggression. And with the benefit of history and hindsight, we have come to realise yet another truth, that it was this European deception and aggression that led to the Khoi-Almeida confrontation of 1510 and, 149 years later in 1659, the Khoi-Dutch confrontation occurred.

As a result of the early ferocious interaction, Europeans concocted the dehumanising description of the Khoi-San people which was passed on by travellers such as Dias, Da Gama, Van der Does and Jan van Riebeeck who had travelled before them to the Cape. In his diary, Van der Does said of the Khoi-San: “They are short in stature, ugly of face, the hair on the heads often looking as if singed off by the sun ... their speech is just as if one heard a number of angry turkeys ... little else but clicking and whistling ... and indeed it looked as if they would have eaten some of us, since they made little ado of eating raw guts, from which they had a little scraped out the dung with a finger.”

Strother argues that “it was the European inability to recognise the Khoi, with its many clicks, as true language that lay behind the initial creation of a separate discourse on the Hottentots”.

In fact, without the involvement of language in the colonising processes, we would be talking about a completely different narrative today.

In *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, Walter Mignolo argues: “People without letters were thought of as people without history, and oral narratives were looked at as incoherent

and inconsistent.”

It was the clicks in the Khoikhoi language that Strother suggests led Voltaire to argue that “their vocal organs are different from ours; they make a stuttering and gobbling that is impossible for other men to imitate”. And further to this, Joseph-Xavier Boniface dit Saintine is quoted as having stated: “This bizarre and very difficult language resembles no human speech, and, by its hissing, its croaking, its shrill cries, its inarticulate sounds, it appears to serve as the natural link between the language of men and that of the animals.”

David Chidester concludes: “If the Khoisan lacked a human language, European observers could feel that they were entirely justified in abandoning any attempt to engage them in conversation.”

Linguistically, Europeans saw their language as superior to that of the Khoisan and every click in the Khoisan language became the point at which difference was weaponised against them. So from the onset Europeans never saw indigenous people as equal to them.

As an expression of the colonial empire, the modern museum was built as a tool not only to cement this colonial monolingual narrative, but also to act as a citadel of looted artefacts, skeletal remains, human tissues and many other injustices emitted on the African and indigenous people in the name of “science”.

Museums in South Africa and across the world, including the Museum of Natural History in New York, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and many others committed the violations as part of the global enterprise to feed an asymmetric global world order built on white supremacist ideas of a super race and perceived black inferiority.

Today, in the era of global human rights and “decolonial” consciousness that asymmetric global world order is being questioned together with institutions such as museums that gave it credence in the first place.

I am persuaded that all the colonial crimes against humanity committed by museums through unethical acquisition of skeletal remains, body tissues, objects of cultural significance and many others, must be brought forth to the full glare of history in order for the museums to take full responsibility for their own involvement in the colonial continuities.

I must commend the president of the American Museum of Natural

History in New York, Sean M Decatur, and the board of trustees who after realising that their institution is a colonial crime scene in that it has in its collection about 12 000 human remains that were acquired unethically, has called for an investigation into the act of injustice.

It is reported that, “one particular collection is the remains of five black adults from a 1903 Manhattan cemetery for enslaved black people”. And that, “the museum also carries the most extensive collection of 2 200 Native American remains, which was expected to be returned to their home county 30 years ago”.

Among the unethically acquired human remains are approximately 18 heads of Zulus that are said to have allegedly been entered into the museum through unethical means.

As the museum conducts its investigation almost coding off its exhibition displays marking them as colonial crime scenes, I would also like them to acknowledge the pain of Ota Benga, the Mbuti from the Congo who was once made a “living” specimen within the four corners of this mega museum when he was made to wander in the museum before he was taken to be caged with an orangutan at the Bronx Zoo in 1906.

I also commend the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Lonnie G Bunch III for his act of courage for choosing not to conceal this evidence of historical injustice committed on people when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC was uncovered to be in possession “of at least 30 700 human body parts, including 255 brains, from people in countries such as the Philippines, Peru, Germany and the US”.

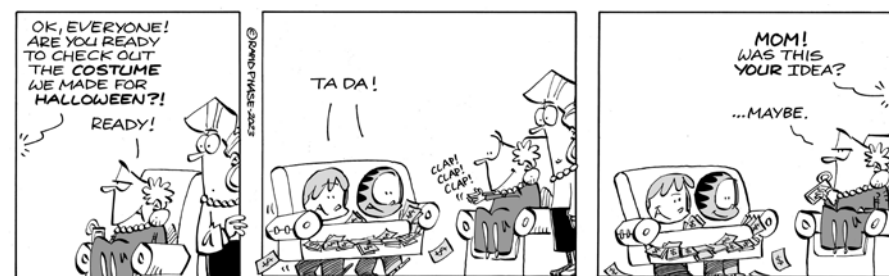
And this list also includes skeletal remains of South Africans from Port Alfred who were smuggled out of the country under what was called “A skull for a skull” exchange between the Smithsonian Institution and the Albany Museum.

To effectively address the historical injustice in museums, I call for the establishment of the Museum Truth, Repatriation and Restitution Commission (Museum TRRC) for the task of correcting the wrongs of the past cannot be left to museums alone, because the institutions with tainted past have no moral authority to be correct correctors.

Dr Kasibe is the EFF Western Cape spokesperson, media and liaison officer. He writes in his personal capacity.

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OPINION

EDITORIAL

DA DOES NOT VALUE WOMEN'S WELL-BEING

THE DA's silence and failure to distance itself from its MP Glynnis Breytenbach's distasteful remarks towards acting public protector advocate Kholeka Gcaleka could barely come as a surprise for a party that saw nothing wrong with its leader's disparaging comments about his ex-wife.

Instead the DA's Women's Network jumped to John Steenhuisen's defence when he used words we refuse to repeat in this editorial out of respect for those affected.

A party that takes the plight of women in this country seriously wouldn't have hesitated in reprimanding him and demanding that he withdraw his statement and apologise.

Breytenbach's vitriolic attack on Gcaleka last week insinuating that her ascendance to the top was a result of her being in a relationship with her boss while at the National Prosecuting Authority, and the DA's failure to act against her, confirms everything you need to know about this party.

Even more shocking, yet not unexpected, is the fact that women MPs in the DA were among those who walked out of the parliamentary debate in support of Breytenbach who had been ejected from the House.

History will remember them as politicians who not only could not stand up for themselves and their views, but as individuals who rather chose the side of the party even when it is morally wrong to do so.

In future, you may hear them shouting for other parties to vote with their conscience while they could not defend another woman from being attacked.

We applaud organisations such as the Legal Practice Council and the National Association of Democratic Lawyers (Nadel) for denouncing Breytenbach's remarks and calling them derogatory and stereotypical.

Nadel aptly puts it when they say: “In a country striving to eliminate sexism and discrimination against women, especially in senior positions within the public and private sectors, such comments are unacceptable and regressive. Nadel firmly believes in gender equality and condemns any form of discrimination or prejudice against women in the legal profession or any other field.”

With next year's elections fast approaching, the DA cannot be entrusted with the well-being of the country if it undermines the well-being of the nation's women.

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