



# Women are proclaiming: 'We belong here!'

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**T**he call for the removal of statues and for visual redress in public spaces has had a resurgence during the #BlackLivesMatter movement, leading to the removal of statues in the US and the UK. This brought with it debates about what should stay and what should go, who should do the replacement and whether we should be "wasting our time" with this process at all.

A few years ago, I would have argued that the money spent on visual redress could be put to better use, but now I contend that we should look at each of our visual symbols and ask what they represent and what we are commemorating by honouring those people.

The names of places and memorials evoke within us feelings and memories, and affect how we belong in or develop an attachment to places. Your sense of belonging is threatened when there are not only symbols, but also policies, structures and people telling you that you do not belong - explicitly or not and intentionally or not.

If we are not intentionally including, we are probably accidentally excluding (assuming positive intent), and women need to be intentionally included. It is about having not only a seat at the table, but also a voice. A voice that comes from a person who is valued and respected for their contributions and for the different experience they bring; a voice that is listened to when someone shares what it is like to live in fear for their life; one that is not questioned when speaking out against sexual violence; and one that is taken seriously when people say that enough is enough.

The voices of women should also be heard in our conversations about visual redress if we're serious about inclusivity, reconciliation and dismantling patriarchy. This should happen in different sectors of our society. As we've seen over the past few years, our higher education institutions have become sites of contestation about the importance of visual redress.

At the height of the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015, students who led and supported the movement at Stellenbosch University occupied RW Wilcocks Building and reclaimed it as Lillian Ngoyi House, after the anti-apartheid activist and prominent leader in the 1950s.

I only now fully realise the magnitude of that appropriation. It was a peaceful demonstration of collective power and agency, yet it was probably more damaging to oppression and patriarchy than any violent act. The students were proclaiming: "We belong here!" This collective shift in mind-set will always be more powerful than any exclusive symbol or structure.

I am not suggesting that renaming any building or memorial after a woman will solve the gender-related challenges we face. What I do hope and believe is that it can spark conversations about a new and imagined future, one where women are not oppressed and killed, but honoured in the same way as their male counterparts.

If we take this as our point of departure, chances are we won't get stuck in endless debates about who sacrificed or achieved the most, as this would be missing the point. When we engage in public spaces, we want cues that remind us of the values that hold our communities together because we attach great meaning to these places.

In 100 years, it may not matter who (read: which woman) exactly we replaced the current guy with. Our criteria for heroines and heroes change as our culture and values evolve, thus the meanings and emotions we attach to the symbols will also change. Yet we will probably derive more meaning from the process of change than from the fact that their names adorn the outer walls of buildings.

Deriving meaning from such a process will also ask us to examine our positioning within historic systems of oppression and exclusion, and to do the uncomfortable work of identifying where we have been and still are complicit in maintaining these systems. We need to create opportunities for the inclusion of others who continue to be excluded, especially women.

Women belong here. They belong on concrete walls with fancy lettering. The time has come for men and their systems to extend the necklace of reconciliation when renaming buildings, memorials and other public spaces. If women accept this gesture, it could be a move towards progress, inclusion, equality and safety.

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