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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

University ‘dude walls’ must fall

Órla O’Donovan

What’s up with the dude wall, and other questions?

Recently I attended one of the weekly public concerts hosted by University College Cork (UCC) as part of its community engagement activities. Although the music was sublime, like every other event I have attended in the Aula Maxima, I was distracted by the portraits of former university presidents looking down on the assembled crowd. The question posed by US journalist Rachel Maddow when invited to present awards at a ceremony in New York’s Rockefeller University came to mind (Greenfieldboyce, 2019). What’s up with the dude wall? But also, what do university dude walls do? What place, if any, have dude walls in contemporary public universities that aspire to break with their troubling heritages of elitism and extractivism, and promote more equitable and democratic futures? Decolonization movements have taught us that these are not frivolous questions.

Useful and useless historical university matter

In keeping with the international tradition of academic portraiture (Wright, 2022), in UCC all the dude wall portraits are of elite white men, many of whom were medical professionals. The wall archives not only who but what kinds of knowledge have been privileged by the university. The oldest portrait of is of Sir (*sic*) Robert Kane, a chemist and medical doctor who in 1845 became the university’s first president. Previously called Queen’s College Cork and established when the British colonial strategies of submission through dispossession and famine were at their height, the university was originally an institution of empire, open only to men students, and primarily a medical school in the service of British militarism. Now deemed useless or obsolete, many other artworks and artefacts from the early years of the university have been disposed of, moved to the university’s heritage services’ storage facilities, or have gone missing. The 19th and early 20th century medical and natural history museums have been dismantled. Included amongst these museum displays were what medical historian Manon Parry (2021) refers to as ‘risky’ artefacts, material remains of universities’ and museums’ entanglements in regimes of use, extraction, and exploitation of poor, ‘othered’ and colonized communities that, increasingly, are being removed from public view. For example, in the days of Robert Kane, the teaching of anatomy relied on human remains obtained from the poor who died in the Cork workhouse. Other examples recorded in the UCC archives are an ‘Inca’s skull’ gifted in 1897 to the Professor of

Natural History for display in the college museum, and specimens of 'human monsters'. For Parry, because 'the work to address centuries of abuse and discrimination as well as their contemporary manifestations is ongoing and complex, removing [risky] objects … has become a simple, and in my view insufficient, strategy to circumvent critique'. But portraits of university presidents are not deemed to be risky or obsolete and the tradition of displaying them continues. The most recent addition to the UCC collection was made in 2023. The university's website tells us that the portraits 'form a coherent display of the institutional history of the University' and visitors 'can appreciate the heritage and history of the display in the august surroundings of the Aula Maxima'[i].

Learning from Rhodes Must Fall

When supporting the student-led Rhodes Must Fall Movement at the University of Cape Town, the decolonial scholar Achille Mbembe (2015) reminded us of a function of the economy of symbols of which the now-toppled statue of Cecil Rhodes was part, namely, 'to induce and normalize particular states of humiliation based on white supremacist presuppositions.' A 2019 study in the Yale School of Medicine points to the success of institutional portraiture in inducing such mental states. Many students experienced the portraits as visual affirmation of the institution's values which they identified as whiteness, elitism, and maleness, and as communicating 'This institution was never meant for me' (Fitzsousa et al., 2019). In addition to signalling who does and does not rightly belong, dude walls assist many institutions' futile efforts to masquerade as replicas of Oxford and Cambridge, the enduring models of the university.

For Mbembe, decolonizing the university starts with the rehabilitation of buildings and public space, a process that is inseparable from the democratization of access. It is a step towards the creation of conditions in which members of communities traditionally excluded or tolerated can have a sense of belonging. These conditions must necessarily extend to significant public investment in higher education, and the decolonization of knowledge that requires recognition and refusal of extractive and violent epistemic habits sedimented into the disciplines of the contemporary academic industrial complex. These habits are evident in the social sciences and humanities in research that collects the 'pain stories' of members of communities of overstudied Others for the accumulation of academic, cultural and financial capital (Tuck and Yang, 2014). Recent rehabilitative measures taken in Yale (Konkwo et al., 2022), such as the inclusion of portraits of women academics, risk sustaining the meritocratic myths of liberal individualism encoded in academic portraiture that obscure the operations of privilege and the inevitably collective nature of knowledge production. Rather than tinkering with them, dude walls must fall.

I favour ending the institutional habit of dude walls and moving historic academic portraits to universities' heritage storage facilities, but where these facilities become

important open sites of learning, understanding, and reckoning with troubling institutional inheritances and painful pasts. These heritage facilities could become akin to the museum-graveyards envisaged by Mbembe (2015) where statues of white supremacists are laid to rest, but not in the spirit of burying them as the harms done by universities cannot be undone and their past inevitably haunts their present. The historical collections representing both people and things the institution encouraged students to look up to and down on can assist struggles for radically different university 'alterlife' futures, to use Michelle Murphy's (2018, p. 113) term, struggles for universities and their archives 'to exist again *but differently* when already in conflicted, damaging, and deadly conditions, a state of already having been altered, of already being in the aftermath, and yet persisting.' Learning with academic portraits could be enhanced by their storage in the company of risky archival matter. Bringing the portraits face to face with those materials would help us remember and learn with, instead of honouring, dude walls.

Working with archival collections for an alterlife

Recent initiatives in medical education that involve working with archival collections could be instructive for community development education and university-wide education more generally. This year the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland offered a module to medical students called 'Pathologies through time: Health then and now'. Working with archival matter, the aim of the module was to increase students' knowledge and understanding of the historical context of current healthcare practices and medical knowledge. Inspired by this, might we develop modules with titles along the lines of 'Social pathologies through time: The academic discipline X then and now'? Working with dude wall portraits together with risky university collections, the aim of these modules would be to increase our knowledge and understanding of the histories of current university disciplines' knowledge production practices, and their inheritances of hierarchical and categorical thinking. Achille Mbembe (in conversation with Goldberg 2018, p.206) reminds us that separation mania has been crucial to the history of capitalism: 'the compulsion to put things in order as a precondition for extracting their inner value. It is the compulsion to categorize, to separate, to measure and to name, to classify and to establish equivalences between things and between things and persons, persons and animals, animals and the so-called natural, mineral, and organic world'. Fundamental to the economic and epistemic logics of capitalism is the compulsion to separate what is useful from waste. The collections could help us recognize and refuse inherited habits of categorization, separation and distinctions between useful and useless people, things, and knowledges.

University dude walls must fall, but let's learn with them. And not by looking up.

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[i] See https://www.ucc.ie/en/heritage/places-and-spaces/aula-maxima/