

J'accuse – in the heart of White silence.

Thank you for allowing me to address you on this Heritage Day.

And, members of the Phoenix Committee: thank you for allowing me to walk with you the path toward this year's memorialization of your forced eviction from Simon's Town.

After much agonizing I decided to title my address:

The importance of being here in the heart of white silence

Yes, white silence, here in Simon's town is what I accuse the great majority of the citizens of Simon's town of.

But let me start elsewhere first:

You are gathered here on this day to recall the pain and trauma of your forced removal from Simon's Town. You are brave, because those who perpetrated apartheid or inherited the burden of apartheid are not standing with you. This year you have dared to express yourselves through the *wag-'n-bietjie* mosaic benches, here in this heart of white silence. Through the mosaic memorials you assert your humanity. By so doing, you, besides proclaiming that your history shall not be forgotten, speak, each year, also to those who may one day show contrition or express shame in this heart of white silence.

And lest I be accused of self-righteous indignation, I want you to know that this shame befalls me too. I grew up on the side of white privilege – in Johannesburg in my case.

The installation of these benches will, we trust, remind us all that we only have a shared future if we reflect, stand back and know that we as a nation, dark and light complexioned, victim and perpetrator, are all shaped through our colonial and apartheid background. We live in a country that once traded in human beings and when this became impossible to carry on with, the powerful found new ways, yes, found colour and class as the next best means to continue to get rich off the backs of other people. South Africa was the last country on earth to abandon race and colour of skin as the foundation of its social order. Yes, this country has the dubious distinction of being the laggard globally in conceding to equality.

Our history here at the Cape has in the main been a his/her story of horror, of deprivation, discrimination and physical assault on those treated as lesser human beings. Women of the underclass suffered most of all. Working as kitchen staff women could reckon on the colonial man who was the family father in the living room, wanting "a little extra in the kitchen". The traumatic question, "Who am I? What was done to my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother?" discomfits thousands of families to this day.

You who are the majority of those attending here today know well the trauma that continues to haunt your families. The injury inflicted in the past is a trauma that combines rape, economic robbery and even a desire to rob you of your self-worth.

Let no-one be fooled: 25 years since the advent of majority rule, Cape Town continues to define itself through apartheid divisions. This City manages and adjudicates budgets for Black, Brown and White areas without a plan to undo the past. The absence of City planning that incorporates fulsome redress in which class and race divisions are reversed and compensated for, is a travesty. The way that Simon's Town advertises itself on the internet equally is a travesty – no mention of the violent past when you were evicted.

It leaves me with no other path than to accuse. J'accuse! J'accuse, I accuse the citizens and the public representatives of Simon's Town of deafening silence when it comes to these wrongs. I accuse you of perpetuating the colonial, slave and apartheid past with your absence, maybe your arrogance or outright racism. J'accuse!

French writer Emil Zola made J'accuse famous 120 years ago in circumstances of French racism in what is known as the Dreyfus affair¹.

But here today:

You, the families once violently evicted from Simon's Town have found a new way to remind the passerby of this past; you call on us to remember, so that we are not condemned to repeat the evil that once took place here. Your choice of the South African shrub or tree called *wag-'n-bietjie*, is indeed most apt. The *wag-'n-bietjie* owes its name to its curved thorn that makes you reverse before you are free of its hook. To unhook oneself when entangled you need to reverse before you can go forward. A literal translation of *wag-'n-bietjie* would be, wait a minute. We might also say: hang on a moment and let us reflect! *Wag-'n-bietjie* is also known as the buffalo thorn (*ziziphus maronata*). In isiXhosa and isiZulu it is known as *umphafa*. May the seed of your idea, evoking this tree or bush as a symbol, encourage people throughout our land of the need to always better reflect on our past before we can go forward.

You are - through these mosaics - showing South Africans throughout our land a new way to reflect before we can go forward. May your act prove to be prophetic, may it contribute to healing and may it ultimately get the former perpetrator, or defender, or passive beneficiary of apartheid to come and sit with us on these benches to acknowledge the wrong that was done. May guilt or fear, hatred or animosity be overcome by one day sitting together to talk and where those silent today acknowledge and admit their complicity.

But that is not now! Those who perpetrated, defended or passively benefitted are, in the main, not with us today. And to me that is a problem. I am ashamed that you have to put up these benches here, that you have to memorialise your past in

¹ *J'accuse!* has become a common generic expression of outrage and accusation against someone powerful. Emil Zola first coined this at the time France acted hypocritically over what is known as the Dreyfus affair.

Simon's Town by yourselves. You should not have had to put these benches here alone!

My indignation is directed at the white population, and today at those who live in Simon's Town. It is them that I accuse. It is them that *J'accuse* is directed at. It is they who, if had they have humility, should re-think their history. They should have stood here today, acknowledged their complicity, directly and indirectly, whether former resident or recent immigrant to Simon's Town . They should be standing here, reaching out a hand to you who are present.

Allow me to make a brief analogy with Germany.

In Germany some, not many, ordinary citizens have come to terms with acknowledging the WWII atrocities committed in their name against Jews, Sinti, Gay/Lesbian people and those physically or intellectually challenged. These German citizens plant Stolperstein, or stumbling stones, on the pavements outside their home or place of work. Each stone has an inscription that recalls the name of the person or persons once evicted from the place of their residence and transported to a concentration camp where they were killed, solely because of their race, etc. The Stolperstein is intended to make you "stumble" every time you leave home or return home; it makes all those who pass by stumble, and through the inconvenience you are prompted to recall the injustice that was once committed at that house or shop. There are now 70,000 Stolpersteine in Germany and surrounding countries. The important point about the stumbling stones is that the 'perpetrator' community have acknowledged their responsibility and shame for the racist policies that once existed there. The descendants of the perpetrators, through this act, seek to say: never, never and never again shall such atrocities be allowed to happen in our name.

Instead here in Simon's Town today it is not the perpetrator but members of the victim community who implore us to reflect and remember. In a better world, people of Simon's Town would have been partners with you of Ocean View and Gugulethu and the other places you were driven to. They might have seen this as a way to join a discussion, indeed an angry and tough but necessary discussion, across the huge social divide in our country.

Without question It is fine and good that you who were harmed seek to memorialize the injustice that was done here. It is good that we from civil society, that is people like me, are extending a small hand to be and stand with you.

BUT

- It is not fine that the vast majority of Simon's Town is today ignoring this.
- It is not fine that unlike the German Stolperstein example, here we have the victim seeking to remember while those who represent the perpetrator community turn the other way.
- It is not fine that the statue of a dog known as Just Nuisance enjoys greater memory than the families evicted from here.
- It is not fine that no politicians, from whatever party champion this event with us.
- It is not fine that the City did not pull out the stops to give you permission to locate the memorial benches at their six localities that indicate the places where you were driven away from in Simon's Town once.

I find it uncomfortable to have to stand here and point my finger at the majority of white folk here in the heart of silence.

It is high time the well-to-do community, here in Simon's Town, show tangible remorse for the past that was and always remains ours. This community might imagine that they can get away with it with a stiff upper lip hoping the accusations will eventually go away.

But I say to them: Your silence is not going unnoticed. Your silence becomes eloquent enough when you say over the braaivleis fire, *They (the people of colour) should get over it!* Or when you proclaim, *Stop delving into the past and let's look to the future!* Or when you say in the faces of Black schoolchildren and their teacher, *Let them enter through the side door of the Museum lest they steal the trinkets on sale!* Or when a speaker in his opening remarks of a meeting says, *We have a problem with baboons in Simon's Town, and some of them wear clothes.* – These are examples from recent times. Those who have privilege here are stalling the progress that this country deserves. Those who say nothing or those who vent their racism openly or coyly when amongst their own, continue to destroy the fragile truce that governs our country.

I don't condemn every Simon's Town resident. There are brave and good people who live here, willing to put a plaque on their own front door to remember those forcibly and violently evicted from the house they live in or the plot they live on. They deserve our respect. May their numbers grow in time.

If I have a hope it is that the children of those who refuse to say sorry today, will come and sit on these benches and one day recant for the failure of their parents. In the absence of such contrition today, I hope you, who represent those who were wronged here in Simon's Town 50 years ago, will keep the benches, to always remind all that injustice has consequences. May these beautiful mosaic benches serve the purpose of one day breaking the white silence!
