

YOUTH BETWEEN IDENTITY AND THE MARKET: HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN A HISTORY “BRIDGING” LECTURE ROOM

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Abstract

The way youth speak about the past can offer important clues to how they conceptualise and emotionally negotiate the present, specifically their sense of place in a changing world and the security of their future within it. This article considers the case of youth admitted to a university through a ‘bridging’ programme to reflect on dilemmas of identity and class mobility facing South African youth. Based on participant-observation, working with a world history curriculum designed for educationally disadvantaged students, the researcher illustrates how widely-circulating public discourses about race and history have infused the moral and generational pressures black students report to be a constant source of tension in their lives. Their social positioning on the cusp of upward social mobility in a nation characterised by persistent, racialised economic inequalities is experienced both as a privilege and a burden. Tensions between, on the one hand, a proclaimed loyalty to communitarian interests and identities and, on the other, a desire to showcase full participation in new cultures of consumer materialism are resolved through dichotomous ways of speaking about the past. In these narratives, “History” is the term utilised for speaking of a past of traumatic events, black victimisation and social legacies which must be overcome; “tradition” is a word invoked to empower a positive sense of continuity and to fix a seemingly more secure and generous location in the present. Both languages of the past offer narrative resources for students who are negotiating a rapidly changing national and global context.

Keywords: Historical consciousness; Youth identity; Collective memory; Post-Apartheid Generation; Narratives of the Past.

Introduction

Tension between the moral claims of cultural authenticity and liberal universalism is frequently represented in temporal language as a struggle between “tradition” and “modernity”, or the “old” and the “new”. Yet such struggles have themselves come about through historical processes which, ideologically and structurally, are constitutive of modernity and the uneven sources of power from which authority may be drawn.¹ In this article, I argue that young black South African students are employing distinctive historical grammars to express tensions that flow from their generational and social positioning as frontline subjects of historical redress in a “new” South Africa. If we regard students not merely as learners of history, but also as bearers of a lived sense of history, an emotional politics of youth becomes visible. Some scholars have conceived of “a larger “Gramscian” task” facing historians: the need “to link the politics of history-writing to the sense of history active within contemporary cultural and political movements”.² This task must start with the concerns of youth, both in their position as students at all educational levels and as a generation with aspirations shaped by the world they inherit.

Young university students in my history lecture room appear to find themselves in an anomalous relationship to the past. Positioned between the new national ideology of unlimited opportunity and the hard social facts which constrain achievement, the burden they bear becomes evident in the ways they speak about the past. I argue that what emerges from engaging South African university students in discussions of global and local history dramatises the ways narratives of the past inform the moral, economic and political strategies that youth have available to them as they negotiate a world of profound social inequalities.

Pedagogical context: A post-apartheid “bridging” classroom at UKZN

My reflections are grounded in observations during two years of teaching a world history curriculum in the ‘bridging’ programme at a South African university, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Micol Seigel has argued that world history is primarily a pedagogical pursuit, with the aim of

1 These observations have been fundamental to critiques of nationalist ideology for example by E Gelner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983); T Nairn, “The modern Janus”, *The New Left Review*, 94, November-December 1975.

2 R Johnson *et al* (eds), *Making histories – studies in history-writing and politics* (London, Hutchinson, 1982), p. 10.

offering young people the tools to understand large scale change and provide a historical context in which to appraise it:

Students' receptions of world history are essential measures of the field's success, for teaching is world history's primary reason for being. The classroom is the site of its conceptualization and elaboration... "World history, as it exists today is, above all, a pedagogical field." The classroom is its proving ground.³

Yet, students' responses to world history also offer a window to the intellectual and moral sense they make of their own generational and social location within national change. In the context of a university programme in which students have been selected as part of an official policy to redress an unjust national past, student responses are shaped by an awareness that they are the focus of broader concerns.

The students in my lecture room have grown up in an era known as “post-apartheid”, a still-ubiquitous phrase that designates the present not only in the terms of the past but, more significantly, a past that has yet to be overcome. “The past lingers and its arm is long,” observed Charles Villa-Vicencio, the then director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁴ He was speaking specifically of atrocities committed by the apartheid state and the problem of memory suffered by its survivors. Political repression—with 60,000 political detainees imprisoned between 1960 and 1994, 130 judicial hangings, and widespread torture, disappearances, assassinations, and pre-election violence – continues to traumatise survivors and the families of apartheid's casualties. Yet the long arm of this past reaches beyond acute individual memory. Its legacy is entrenched in social and spatial divisions and profound economic inequalities patterned by race and class and in the local epidemiology of the HIV/Aids pandemic.⁵ For the “born-free” generation – those born in the late 1980s who are too young to remember life under apartheid – these new realities generate their own historical imaginary and problematic of memory.⁶ In this sense, of course, legacy does not merely refer to the material conditions and social relations of the present which emerge from the regional past. It resides also in the way this past is conceptualised and

3 M Siegal, “World History's narrative problem”, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 84(3), 2004, p. 436. His quotation is of B Weinstein in ‘História sem causa? A nova história cultural, a grande narrativa e o dilema pós-colonial?’ *História* (Sao Paulo), 22(2), 2003, p. 194.

4 C Villa-Vicencio, *Sunday Times*, 23 April 2006.

5 For an authoritative account of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in this region, see the definitive SS Abdool Karim and Q Abdool Karim, eds., *HIV/AIDS in South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005).

6 P Gobodo-Madikizela, “Remembering the past: Nostalgia, Traumatic memory and the legacy of apartheid”, *Peace and Conflict: The Journal of Peace Psychology*, 18(3), 2012, pp. 252-267.

in the kind of historical agency that is made imaginable in public discourse.

Since 1994, many civic organisations, churches and governmental bodies have worked towards nation-building and development through policies designed to promote reconciliation and to address social divisions. The continued popularity of the ANC – once a liberation movement, now a ruling party – rests in part on what it delivers in terms of reform and economic transformation, and on the visible success of its national redress policies. South Africa was widely celebrated for its relatively peaceful transformation and long-term vision that was evident in the highly public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission headed by Bishop Desmond Tutu.⁷ Subsequent measures to redress past injustices have been implemented in various ways, including in the restructuring of tertiary education.⁸ Bridging programmes were a development introduced at a number of universities, including the newly constituted UKZN.⁹

In the last two decades, the integration of urban schools combined with a rapidly growing black middle class, has ensured that the racial demographics of university student bodies have become more equitable. For its affirmative action aims, racial designations based on apartheid-era categories are tabulated by the education department at the national level.¹⁰ The vision of the bridging programme, however, has also addressed itself to socio-economic inequalities. Yet, because disadvantaged and rural youth remain isolated from educational resources, alternative access routes to tertiary education have been created for learners who show academic promise and whose substandard matriculation scores are attributable to impoverished schooling rather than organic ability.

A pre-first year bridging curriculum for the Humanities and Social Science on two campuses at UKZN was designed to increase these students' chances of success in their studies. Every year, between 125-150 students are admitted as its beneficiaries. In operation since 2001, the programme has offered module-based and credited support for improvement in written English and

7 C de la Rey and I Owens, "Perceptions of psychosocial healing and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa", *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 4(5), 1998, pp. 257-270; F Du Bois and A Du Bois-Pedain, eds., *Justice and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008).

8 T Barnes, "Changing discourses and meanings of redress in southern African higher education, 1994-2001", *Centre for Civil Society Research Report*, 38, 2005.

9 M Makgoba, "Opening wide the doors of learning: The University of KwaZulu-Natal's new access policy recognises that value and potential can be found in many nonconventional places", *Mercury*, 6 December 2004; UKZN, *Policy on Undergraduate Access and Admissions to the University of KwaZulu-Natal*, 2004.

10 T Waetjen, "Measures of redress: Defining disadvantage in a University 'Access' Programme", *South African Review of Sociology*, 37(2), 2006.

numeracy, and through introducing computer literacy, as well as research and study skills. In addition, a two semester world history module entitled “Africa in the World” functions as a content course through which students are challenged with academic demands typical of those they will face in their subsequent years of study. The module “Africa in the World” has introduced key, interdisciplinary concepts and debates about knowledge and its production through the medium of an Afro-centric world historical survey.¹¹ For two years I coordinated the world history module, with a yearly enrolment of about 115 students divided into six smaller lecture groups. During this period, and after when I returned to mainstream teaching, I was struck by the rich expressions of concern about history and identity that students brought with them into the classroom. Both the course content and the structure of the programme invited high levels of participation and discussion. It was from these daily interactions, as well as content in written assignments, that I drew the interpretations argued here.

The analysis offered is based on ethnographic observation during the course of my teaching. While further and more systematic classroom-based research is warranted, a methodology of participant-observation was sufficient to suggest trends in the language and discourses that students draw upon to speak about the past. In the following sections, I give descriptive content to some of the observations shaping my analysis and offer an interpretation of the current social pressures and aspirations that inform my students’ search for authoritative ways of speaking about the past.

Targets of redress and subjects of history: ways of speaking about the past

A “typical” student in my bridging classroom was Bongiwe Madlala¹² who sat with her friends towards the front of the class. First in her extended family to attend a university, she – like most of her peers – struggled to pass her classes, to familiarise herself with new, academic discourses, to master the heavy work load and the demands of writing clearly in English (not her mother tongue). She appeared at ease in the university environment, though in consultation she admitted to feelings of inadequacy and even fear. From a peri-rural upbringing, a sense of fashion was clearly of immense concern to Bongiwe, as were other symbols of upward mobility. She sported the latest urban dress

11 J Parle and T Waetjen, “Teaching African History in South Africa: Post-colonial realities between evolution and religion”, *Afrika Spectrum*, 40(3), 2005.

12 A pseudonym. I present an individual portrait to assist in making these general observations more personal.

and hair styles. Her cell phone was positioned to be conspicuous, even when not in use. She and her friends reported to enjoy rap artists like 50 Cent and Jay-Z, as well as local Kwaito music, and to be fans of reality TV shows such as *Survivor* and *Idols*. Bongiwe simultaneously vocally and proudly identified herself as a “Zulu traditionalist”, which in no way affected either her penchant for global cosmopolitan fashion nor her identity as an evangelical Christian (a religious orientation that is common in her peer group). She revealed herself, in autobiographical writings, to be in possession of the special gift of hearing her ancestors speak through her dreams and has regularly interceded for family members and friends. This gift has awarded her a valued reputation amongst members of her home community. She related that her ancestors are an important means of connecting with her lineage and sense of who she is, a vital aspect of her inherited past that informs her present.

Bongiwe’s claims about herself, both verbal and visual, highlight the crucial, and frequently oppositional, pulls of identity and the market between which she must continually negotiate. On the one hand is the reality of a globalised economy, new commodities, and the prominent public discourses of development and nation-building which promise new opportunities for black youth denied to previous generations. Students like Bongiwe have expressed their desire to participate in this reality not only in their pattern of consumption (and enjoyment of specific fashion, music, technology) but in their ambitions for jobs that will lift themselves and their families out of poverty and make them players in the formal economy. On the other hand, there is the pull of local, cultural identity and students are vocally adamant in their pledges of loyalty to these roots, and genuinely pained by the cynical rejection they hear in descriptions of their generation as a “lost nation”: they were vocal and clear about situating themselves in the pride in being black, being African, being Zulu. Bongiwe and her peers face the task of navigating the pressures both to be successful in the formal, globalising economy and to be rooted in communitarian identity.

The nature of these pressures are historically located and do not indicate an essential polarity. Moreover, the task of bringing together emergent tensions appears to be a common experience among first generation university students in most regions of the world. Certainly there is certainly nothing contextually specific or African about being situated on the cusp of class mobility, or about the pulls between different normative approaches to knowledge and the social world. What complicates this picture, and makes it distinctive to this context,

are the formidable realities of inequality and social division.

I argue that the way these youth speak about the past reveals what it means to be in possession of a formal history that exists only to be overcome, redressed, reconciled and rewritten. The way they express their sense of the past indicates that history has failed them, both as a subject of study and as a force circumscribing the lives of most disadvantaged people in South Africa. There are alternative narratives of the past that are kinder and more personal, and that offer more. Yet, what emerges is a dichotomy that characterises a larger ideological division in public life: the impasse between cultural and civic authority that increasingly manifests as an explanation for continuing – and often violent – divisions of gender, ethnicity and nationality.

“The problem of our history”

In classroom discussions, two principal narratives emerge about the past. One narrative is related to “history”, both in its designation as a discipline and in reference to a South African, national past; the other narrative concerns cultural tradition and is related primarily to a more particular sense of local identity. Each of these narratives seems to do a kind of moral labour in relation to the dilemmas of social position experienced by the youth.

The students used the phrase “The problem of our history” as a coy way of referring to apartheid and its legacy. Persistent social problems in contemporary South Africa, such as poverty or enduring spatial, race-based segregation for example, may be invoked as “The problem of our history”. The students referred to their own experiences of material disadvantage, or those of others, in this way. For example, a student typically might say something like, “I want to be a social worker because I want to be a solution to the problem of our history”.

“Our history”, in a temporal sleight of hand, flags all that is so obviously *still* wrong with the present. It is also a diagnosis or explanation; the spatial scope of the claim is national. “Our history” indicates that the speaker is asserting her national belonging, her claim to a broad South African identity. In some contexts, the phrase seems to be a diplomatic means of inviting me (a North American foreigner and therefore excluded from the “our” in “our history”) to recognise injustices about which students do not wish to be more explicit because they know them to be obvious.

The phrase “The problem of our history” also expresses a concept of legacy, and is poignant acknowledgement by these young people that the challenges they face, and are trying to overcome, are of a making that precedes their birth. History, in this way of speaking, represents an abstract, impersonal and cruel agent that continues to plague the community. It is not a body of knowledge or a series of events to be analytically probed or theorised. It is rather a force that has created specific social and personal troubles. In this presentation, history has no specific time frame: it is the omnipresent ether of lived, contemporary problems.

History, then, is most often a pessimistic reference. This may offer some insight into reasons why numbers of school learners studying history for matric flounder. My students quite clearly do not wish to be pessimistic about their circumstances, national or personal. With terrors of HIV/Aids, as well as socio-economic pressures which dramatically impact upon their young lives, the students collectively present a front of optimism. At times, this appears to mirror the denialism that until 2008 characterized the ANC national leadership’s responses to AIDS and other crises.¹³ National public discourses have offered an idealistic sense of the opportunity and the fortunes inherent in belonging to a “new South Africa”. Television advertising proclaiming a “proudly South African” identity, “alive with opportunity” have promoted a sense of continued national optimism.

Students take this very seriously. The new South Africa, they have insisted, is indeed a “Rainbow Nation”. Bongiwe and her peers attached much value to visual manifestations of racial harmony, which they attributed to their own generation’s capacity for rationality and good will. So, for example, when given the assignment of bringing to class and discussing a media image they think represents what is going well in South Africa, a large number of students brought images of black and white children playing together. Yet, they do not speak of such developments as the fruits of “history.” The collective struggle which ended apartheid is rather situated as the celebrated reason for leaving the past to itself – that is, not a event within history but a leap away from history. Images of multiracial harmony, according to my students, confirm that South Africa has “moved on”, left “history” behind. Why dwell on what happened before? Like pop-psychologists of national consciousness, they assert that “you shouldn’t live in the past”. When I have pressed individual students to tell me why they don’t like to think about South African history,

13 N Natrass, *Mortal combat: AIDS denialism and the struggle for anti-retrovirals* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007).

they have said, as if it is a confession, that it makes them sad; sad, in a personal way because they think about what their parents and grandparents suffered. The connection between the past and its continued legacy of inequality is clear to them, but history is something best left behind, something to “forget and forgive” – a cliché that rolls off tongues with great conviction. Indeed, with a few exceptions, students seem to be bemused by my insistence on the importance of history, as if such interest is morbid or exotic. They see history not as a continuous human story which they are part of, as agents, but as a tired discourse of black victimhood, inviting emotions of anger, sadness or even shame.

If history is one narrative that expresses a particular relationship between time and community, tradition is another. The phrase “our history” refers to an illegitimate past, a past which only serves to explain the social problems of the present. In contrast, “tradition” is a word used to describe a legitimate narrative of the past, and this is claimed in the language of “culture”. Cultural tradition makes sense of the past in a positive way, a way that authorises knowledge about the past not on the basis of “what” is known (through books, lectures, empirical data, etc.) but on the basis of “who” one may claim to be (African, Zulu, Christian). Culture or ethnic claims offer a way through which students may consider their personal links to the past also in a way that provides confidence about the moral agency such links require. Unlike the disempowering legacy of “The problem of our history”, cultural tradition is a discourse of empowerment. The word “tradition” delineates both a community and personal identity and invokes a past based not on chronology and change but on continuity and moral authority.

In the classroom, a student might proclaim herself to be strict followers of tradition, or will speak of “us” or “we” or “our” in ways that refer alternatively (and sometimes interchangeably) to Zulu, African, black, religious, or more local cultural imperatives. As if inviting me into some confidence, kindly conveying to an outsider who knows no better, they might explain reasons for a particular perspective or view as consistent with “our culture”. This is meant to preclude debate. It is viewed as invoking a reality that has been privatised and, therefore, outside of public dispute. It is a source of authority regarded as under the protection of an ethos of multicultural tolerance and respect. In the face of a controversial classroom discussion topic which brings into potential conflict the public discourses of legal rights and the privatised discourses of culture, tradition may emerge to defend an exception to the

more widely accepted assertion. For example, while democracy is defended as an absolute good, the idea of equal rights for same-sex couples is often held by the students as being antithetical both to “our culture”, i.e. to African and Christian doctrines.

“Tradition”, in my students’ usage, is put forth both as a narrative of the past, drawing on the authority of history, and as loyalty to particular identity or family context. Perhaps, because culture describes a domain that has been largely atomised and privatised, in part through legal-political and economic processes attendant with South Africa’s particular racialised capitalist development path, it is not surprising that it has such utility as a conveyer of personal certainty. Its legitimacy is also derived from the claim, made by many students, that apartheid was a system that set out to rob Africans of culture and traditions. For these multiple reasons, tradition accommodates a positive and intimate claim on the past. In a manner I found disturbing, my students often appeared determined to confirm what Mahmood Mamdani indicts as a racist or colonialist assumption in literature about Africa – the idea that Europeans have history while Africans have culture – which his important book *Citizen and Subject* sets out to problematise as an ideological effect of colonial legislation.¹⁴

The contrast between an affirmation of one discourse of the past and a deep mistrust of the other is not a unique feature of my classroom. Indeed, this tension and the way it provides a strategy for populist power in South Africa is becoming increasingly apparent. I wish to focus on two concerns within a more limited framework. My first concern is for students, who in their personhood is invested the task of redressing the injustices of history but whose resources for success (specifically their disadvantaged educational preparation) are hampered because of that history. The dichotomous way of relating to the past increases the individual burden they bear: on their educational achievements are placed the hopes of community and family for a better economic future. In the ideological climate that purports endless new opportunities and a past that is no longer deemed relevant except as something to “overcome”. Success and failure appear to rest on the individual alone. In this sense, as Marx might allow, the past is weighing horribly and unfairly on the brains of the young, and the challenge of coping with these expectations is immense.

¹⁴ M Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: Contemporary African and the legacy of late colonialism* (London, James Currey, 1996).

A second concern is with the broader social climate in which claims about the past, linked to moral authority, are wielded by powerbrokers in a climate of intense social deprivation and inequality. The continual public re-making of dichotomous temporal categories of “traditional” and “modern”, which unevenly authorise “culture” and “citizenship” – often in racial terms – serve to mobilise political thinking around persistent social divisions and inequalities.¹⁵

Coping at the “ground zero” of redress

The idea of living in a new era – partitioned from an oppressive history – is pertinent to the students’ self-understanding as beneficiaries of a redress programme. As targets of redress, they aim to find a secure place in the new national economy and see themselves as the embodiment of what a new, reconciled national reality has to offer. Infusing their ideas about their own momentum are attendant discourses of development and modernity. The students used the word “modern” to describe their orientations and tastes as consumers, as well as their quest for education. They believed themselves to be at the crest of a wave, a generation for whom once-locked doors of opportunity are now open. If history is a record of what is best left behind, the present is a free market. Their ambitions reflect this: many arrive with the kinds of aspirations (TV presenter, entrepreneur, fashion designer, etc.) in which we see the influence of an *Idols* Reality TV competition model of opportunity and success; others arrive as firm believers that the new determinant to personal biography is a university degree. On their personal performance and prospects rests the weight of redress – for they are the agents of reparation and reversal, their success is meant to help right the wrongs of “our history” at that national level.

This burden was visible to me in my lecture room. Although attendance is required, students tend to flounder in doing even basic tasks on time. A few students disappear for weeks. Up until very recently, far too many had young deaths in their family, often more than one in a short time span. This has been the silent reality of HIV/Aids. Quite a few have become ill themselves. Some absences, however, are attributable to less drastic causes – social life and the usual adjustments to first-time independence from home. As students in many parts of the world do, some are coping with self-esteem issues, complex

¹⁵ O Bass, K Erwin, A Kinners and G Maré, “The possibilities of researching non-racialism: Reflections on racialism in South Africa”, *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies*, 39(1), 2012, p. 34.

family economic situation, acute trauma and depression. Many of these kinds of conditions are explained by students within paradigms that fall outside of secular or science-based discourses. A few students each semester tell me they have returned home to receive traditional medicines which will aid them in overcoming their personal or academic challenges. Success and failure are frequently understood through a paradigm in which witchcraft, instigated by another's jealousy and ill intent, must be addressed.

One student's plight stands out as particularly revealing but was not unusual: this student faced several challenges with a sight-related disability, and learning and language difficulties. His hope was to become a social worker, but he continually failed in even basic assignments within the bridging programme. At one point, he disappeared for two weeks and then returned full of confidence: he had been away at home to see a practitioner of traditional medicine, participating in a ritual, that required the presence of his entire family, to eradicate the bewitchment that had been placed on him by someone who was jealous and who wished for his failure. This healing and cleansing, he said, would now enable him to move unencumbered by evil intent so that he could work more effectively towards academic success. Despite his hopes and the protective medicine he wore on his body, he failed his exams and subsequently faced exclusion from UKZN.

This instance revealed how, for young people, new opportunities may be accompanied by new anxieties. A young person enrolled in university is certainly likely to be a target of widespread envy. Moreover, when admission to university is through the mechanism of affirmative admissions, this can frequently be a source of self-consciousness for bridging students, who feel stigmatised as if they have been labeled "remedial", and who experience this stigmatised status as racialised. Given these complicating and overdetermined layers, it is unsurprising that students may feel that their successes are not universally celebrated, and that their failure might be best explained by the ill will of others, requiring spiritual intervention for success.

What this and other challenges demonstrate is the high stakes of academic success to many young people in South Africa, particularly those from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. The youth in my bridging classroom are, in important ways, at the vortex of the watchword campaign of transformation, vanguards of a collective hope in the future and an enduring liberal faith in education as the principle path to social upliftment. Yet, with such high stakes, students awarded alternative access via bridging

programmes shoulder a burden of risks and losses. They face accumulated debt, the possibility of failing to obtain a degree, and national trends of high unemployment. But they are also compelled to negotiate the censure of local community. Many of my students inform me that their generation is viewed by their seniors as displaying a distressing sense of individualism and personal entitlement. As one student put it: “We the youth are being defined as a lost nation, caught up in white men’s desires”.

Pressure to achieve does not (merely) emerge from individual ambition – on these students rest the hopes of family and community. Personal circumstances are affected by social location and the current historical moment. This is why, though the student described above represented his healing and cleansing as “traditional” (and thus legitimating it as rooted in a cultural past—as well as racialising it as an essentially “African thing”), it highlights the flexible, contemporary and responsive nature of local culture and cultural identity. It is in itself a central aspect of the landscape of modernity in South Africa, part of a changing global context. This example also shows how my students, in negotiating the uncertain opportunity for upward social mobility, make use of the various powers available to them in social worlds which are misleadingly represented as dichotomous and as belonging to distinctive cultural realities and time-frames.

The distinction that my students draw, both in their conception of the past and in the way they move between social spheres, represents a discourse and conception of time that is widely accepted. What emerges in the classroom is a reflection of broader social conflicts and concerns. As the next section demonstrates, struggles over authoritative ways of speaking about the past shape other social struggles in South Africa.

Tradition and modernity in the marketplace of history

What is at stake can be appreciated through just one example. In July 2007, a twenty five year old woman named Zandile Mpanza was assaulted in the T-section of Umlazi, a township in Durban. She was stripped of her clothing and beaten, and her home was burned to the ground. The explanation offered by her attackers was that she was wearing trousers. She had violated a local code—a code decreed by some of the men living in the worker hostels – that forbids women in the area to wear pants because they are not culturally traditional.

On the one hand, this can and should be understood as a straight-forward case of criminal violence and, in particular, an instance evidencing South Africa's notably high rates of violence against women. On the other hand, it is a case that reveals the high stakes relating to unresolved questions about the principles upon which South African democracy rests and, more specifically, the nature of the authority legitimating these principles. The assault on Mpanza in Umlazi represents one instance, among many others, in which liberal universalism (premised on a discourse of individual rights) is pitted against assertions of cultural identity and community (promoted as the necessity of pluralism and tolerance within a multicultural society). Relations of gender and the status of women were a visible and violent site of this conflict. One citizen, who was against the wearing of pants by Zulu-speaking women, argued that:¹⁶

[t]he protection of human rights should not supercede our right to protect our culture, identity and our image as Africans in line with our noble ideal of African renaissance. What happened in T-section is but a prelude of more challenges to come which will seek to define our democracy... The question still remains to the woman: was the wearing of pants worth struggling for to the extent of paying such a heavy price?... Those who seek to engage in the struggle to wear pants must understand the consequences of embarking on a struggle... .

The stand off between assertions of cultural tradition and assertions of democratic rights is not easily resolvable. But resolution is further hampered by a misleading premise that informs both sides, a definition of modernity that embraces a linear and socially developmentalist conception of historical time. Traditionalists claim moral authority from the communal past; supporters of rights appeal to the modernist civic values of equality and rights among individuals. While feminist theorists, historians and political philosophers have demonstrated the ideological power that this dichotomy offers various brokers of patriarchal and populist mobilisations, it is the conception of history that operates at the level of common sense in South Africa to explain various social divisions and tensions. Yet, struggles between the grammars of "tradition" and "modernity" most certainly do not belong exclusively to post-colonial Africa. The processes by which culture is privatised and, simultaneously, divorced from the domain of the secular state and public interest, may be viewed as constitutive of the wider history of modernity and of liberal society. The social changes brought about by the transformations of capitalism, the formation of classes, of sovereignty in the form of nation-states, industrialism, science and technology – and the conflicts and violence

16 SM Dlangamanla, Letter to the *Mercury*, 28 August 2007.

these have wrought – invite comparisons between local and remote examples. Contestations between knowledge and social organisation claimed either as “traditional” and or as “modern” are ubiquitous, whether they operate around the family, education, knowledge, law, labour power, land title or moral behaviour. The progressivist and linear frameworks of social time that uphold these contestations themselves have histories. Local encounters with imperial conquest, the processes of class formation and capitalist development, technological changes, revolution, and other processes of change, provide ample subject matter to challenge the modernisation myths that give “tradition” its moral authenticity.

The impulse might be conceptualised as a historicised cosmopolitanism, in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s conception of this term.¹⁷ It can highlight diversity of global experience without reifying the categories of “peoplehood” that appear so easily to become the faultlines at which hard-won unities fracture. It must also deracialised world history. Africa, in world historical narratives, still frequently compounds the idea that prior to conquest, Africans had cultural rather than historical agency. The perception that “culture” can explain the behaviour specifically and exclusively of African people is a powerful and enduring expression of racial ideology, and is utilised currently and unashamedly by people of all colours in South Africa.¹⁸

Young people are living in the apartheid ideology’s shadowy legacy. The current government is re-inscribing ethnicised cultural boundaries along the same gridlines of indirect rule and Bantustan-polities that were created by colonial and apartheid states. The ANC has recently initiated a tribal courts bill, which would place additional juridical power in the hands of apartheid created “Traditional Authorities” and would make it an offense for “subjects” under their jurisdiction to seek alternative legal counsel from civil courts.¹⁹ Instead of being denounced as a politics of divide and rule, a familiar strategy of managing socio-economic divisions through the mechanism of identity, it is legitimised as Afrocentric and revalorised as a feature of “Indigenous Knowledge Systems”. What makes this racial politics possible is a reified sense of African history as a cultural domain – privatised and exceptional.

17 KA Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers* (London and New York, Norton, 2006).

18 For example, ANC Party president, Jacob Zuma, drew heavily on cultural explanations to explain his sexual behaviour during a trial in 2006 when he had been charged of rape. He was subsequently acquitted of this charge.

19 L Ntsebeza, *Democracy compromised* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2006).

While “tradition” and “culture” are re-inscribed in the poor, rural areas, the search for new and positive pasts is a national project in South Africa, and the histories promoted at an official level reflect an optimism for multiple kinds of ideological cohesion: national, continental, universal. The ANC government has ensured curriculum changes in history education. The apartheid lens of separate development and civilisational hierarchy has been replaced by a triumphalist agenda, with a teleological unfolding of an ANC-led democratic transformation. The creation of monuments, museum exhibitions and heritage sites create public recognition of anti-apartheid struggle and of histories that had been repressed and distorted by official history under National Party rule. Attempts to make visible and affirm the national contributions of apartheid-defined groups (Coloured, African, Indian) have been part of this effort.

The early Mbeki period was also characterised by pan-Africanist optimism, heralded as an African Renaissance, which saw the establishment of the African Union and the New Economic Programme for African Development (NEPAD). Interest in the library of Timbuktu and in early Chinese maps of Africa that predate European cartography helped to defer Eurocentric understandings of global knowledge production. In an even broader humanist framework, which of course has not precluded continental and nationalist celebrations, has been the recognition of critical World Heritage Sites within South African boundaries. These have included the Ukhahlamba Drakensberg mountains in which important rock art is preserved and the Sterkfontein Caves, the Cradle of Humankind, from which key fossils of early australopithecine ancestors have been uncovered. South Africa has a richer heritage repertoire than most from which to construct historical narratives to inspire, unify and build. Such narratives are powerful, and they offer a multi-centred approach to history – national, continental and global – which is a useful approach for an Africentric approach to world history. But these narratives are also visibly deployed as party- or market-driven, the latter in the context of South Africa’s tourist industry. They do not invite a critical scrutiny of the apartheid past, or the legacy of rampant social inequalities that young people must negotiate. Such narratives do not address the present circumstances that they experience as “The problem of our history” and they serve to reaffirm, not challenge, a notion of the past constructed on an ahistorical, privatised cultural tradition.

Ideas about redress and reconciliation are of course positive but they are often accompanied by the disconcerting proclamation (about which there seems to general agreement in my class) that “people need to just forgive and

forget”. Such platitudes confirm a view of history as a highly specific injury. The mistrust of historical knowledge and the avoidance – the apparent urge rather to “put it behind us” – reveals, I am convinced, a kind of trauma and untouchable grief. In contrast to a past defined in the terms of history, it seems that culture is a past that is both knowable and generous. The students draw on it when they want to invoke a firm moral anchor. As articulated by my students, it is a discourse of authenticity and personal distinction and for this reason is a resource in the uncertainty of new ideas encountered in the university context.

Conclusion

The ways youth express historical consciousness reveal a generational optimism but also an era-specific burden. I believe this to be indicative of the failures of reconciliation and redress (on the one hand) and cultural tradition (on the other) as historical narratives through which young South Africans navigate present day social inequalities and divisions. These particular conceptions of historical time and of the social world reflect a partitioning of historical realities that should be related to each other, much more directly and critically. Pressures for reconciliation and celebrations of redress have affirmed the past as primarily a moral narrative in which historical agency is conflated with identity. Moreover, it reifies and affirms culture as a privatised reading of the past, beyond critique or debate and outside historical time.

Public invocations of tradition are relevant to historical studies because they are claims about the past and how the past should be interpreted. Tradition, in this sense, is itself a theory of history. As such, it offers both an epistemological challenge to empirically-based historical methods and to the nationalist foundations of school history curricula and target outcomes. Similar to religious understandings of the past (for example, the Christian “creationist” history of the universe) which compete with evidence-based accounts, cultural accounts of tradition can be deeply felt, and considered to be a matter of morality, belief or faith more than a matter of knowledge.

History education has an obligation to consider the ways that the conflict between identity and rights affects the young in and out of the classroom, not only at the level of political organisation, but also at the deeply personal level of the self. Like lecturers, history students occupy overlapping identities that are confirmed through simultaneous and authoritative but often divergent

interpretations of the past. This bears on how they inhabit the present and how they relate themselves to community. Historical consciousness is an urgent political concern in South Africa today. The challenge of exploring the different senses of the past which are alive in the classroom and in society more broadly is what makes world history so relevant to the project of social transformation in the future.