KRONOS
southern african histories

MAY 2026 VOLUME 52 http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2026/v52a14

History History: Journeys, Jostlings, Relationships and Practices

RORY BESTER
Department of Historical Studies, University of the Western Cape
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5451-2392

LESLIE WITZ
Emeritus Professor, Department of Historical Studies, University of the Western Cape
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0502-1463

Abstract

This article presents a dialogical conversation, reflecting on engagements with history in South Africa. Using the concept of 'desire lines' – informal pathways travelled and retravelled by multiple voices – the authors map the complex relationships between the past and the present across four interconnected domains: family histories, popular and people's histories, museum curation, and the practices of teaching and learning history. The conversation explores how whiteness, Jewishness, and colonial genealogies produce ambivalent, contested identities that resist the fixed classifications of apartheid, while also illuminating how radical politics and activism were negotiated within the intimacies of family life. Traversing personal biographies and public histories, the article examines the museum as a critical site of postcolonial repositioning, drawing on Leslie Witz's *Museum Times* to interrogate colonial house museums, object histories, restitution, and community memory in Cape Town. The article further reflects on collaborative educational initiatives – including the Museum and Heritage Studies programme co-hosted by the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the Robben Island Museum, and the subsequent Zeitz MOCAA & UWC Museum Fellowship – as experiments in democratic, participatory, and dialogical historical practice. Methodologically, the conversational format itself enacts the ways in which historical knowledge is relationally co-produced rather than individually authored.

Keywords

Biography, public history, museums, restitution, provenance, education

All the contents of this journal, except where otherwise noted, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC-ND).

Introduction

In this conversation we reflect on personal, scholarly, and political engagements with history in South Africa, moving through some of the complexities of how we understand the historical. It is an exchange that maps out some of the many journeys into and out of our relationships with the past. Rather than make a simple distinction between history as an 'outside' view into the past, and heritage as an 'inside' view out of the past – with all of the associated assumptions about the former's critical distance and the latter's emotive and identity-based sense of the past – we seek to understand our various relationships to the past as a series of 'desire lines',[1] as informal pathways that get travelled and retravelled by a multitude of voices. Implicit in this notion of desire lines is that it always implies a 'yearning' for other kinds of pathways,[2] and in relation to the past, yearning for new pathways themselves and the new forms of telling along these pathways. These pathways running back into a sense of the past, and also out of this sense of the past into the present, are multiple, overlapping, intersected and always changing. The desire line is a conceptual framework for the spirit of this conversation's journey from the inside of family histories to the outside of social histories; the jostling between popular, people's and public histories; the relational histories between the object, it's 'house' and the museum; and suggests how the practices of learning histories are seeding the possibilities of museum futures that are democratic, collaborative and dialogical.

These various journeys, jostlings, relationships and practices in turn overlap and intersect with some of the many conversations that are the focus of the Remaking Societies Remaking Persons (RSRP) Forum. This includes the ways in which whiteness is not only mobilised by fear and secrecy but also makes and remakes persons in relation to their family histories in apartheid South Africa. In the example from this conversation about avoiding military conscription as an act against this imposition of whiteness, the complex negotiation of radical politics within family life becomes the oftentimes overlooked personal history that sits in the wings of social history's more imposing sense of radical trade unionism, class and whiteness. Here, leaving home can also be leaving one kind of history at the front door to make space for other histories that are shared, and especially through forms of activism. In the desire lines of making and remaking the historian's personal and political pathways into the past, there is a constant crisscrossing between the intellectual labour of thinking history

1 Originally coined as a term in urban planning to describe a provisional rather than official pedestrian pathway, Nick Shepherd and Noëleen Murray rethink the term into a South African context in their introduction to *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (2007). Picking up on this in his Afterword in the same edited volume, Martin Hall suggests that a desire line is 'an informal path rather than an official route; an intersection that reveals notions of space, memory and identity in the post-apartheid city; contested spaces of power and privilege, identity and difference; palimpsests of historical experience; lived spaces in the everyday performance of urban life'. See N. Shepherd and N. Murray, 'Introduction: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City', in N. Murray, N. Shepherd and M. Hall (eds), *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City* (London, Routledge: 1-18); and Martin Hall, 'Afterword: Lines of Desire', in N. Murray, N. Shepherd and M. Hall (eds), *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-apartheid City* (London, Routledge: 287).

2 P. L. Brown, 'Ideas and Trends; Whose Sidewalk Is It, Anyway?' *The New York Times*, 5 (January 2003). https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/weekinreview/ideas-trends-whose-sidewalk-is-it-anyway.html; cited in Shepherd and Murray, 'Introduction', 1.

and the activism of doing history. One of the complications that shadows these negotiations of whiteness, and which also run through the personal histories that inform this conversation, is that whiteness is never simply an ahistorical inheritance. As this conversation demonstrates, Jewishness in South Africa has occupied an ambivalent position: legally incorporated into whiteness while socially marked by histories of exclusion, migration and precarious belonging.[3] Likewise, genealogies that traverse both European ancestry and descent from a manumitted enslaved person unsettle the fantasy upon which apartheid classifications depended. In these senses, whiteness appears less as a fixed identity than as a continual labour of alignment, disavowal and performance.

In the 'history from below' of popular histories, the desire lines of liberation struggle in people's histories, and public history's negotiation of its relationship to the newly democratic state, the museum has emerged in the contemporary moment as a notable site of this positionality in relation to the past. This is the central theme of Witz's book, *Museum Times,* which sparked our conversation.[4] The museum times which Witz identifies and accounts for in South Africa since the 1990s materialise out of a dynamic between popular history and people's history to encompass both multiple publics and critical engagement with the post-apartheid state. These public histories complicate questions surrounding remaking the nation and remaking museums. In Cape Town, in particular, a city that is full of colonial house museums, desire lines reach into the complexities of curating spaces deeply embedded in community memory. They also intersect with the object histories that bring ethics and restitution into a conversation framed by questions of responsibility and activism in the public historical discourse of making and remaking personhood. How we engage with the democratic potential of museums rather than deferring and defaulting to older, colonial forms of museum practice in part resides in the potential of learning histories. This has seen not only the collaborative programming of the Museum and Heritage Studies programme between the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the Robben Island Museum (initially also involving the University of Cape Town), but also in its inheritor, the Zeitz MOCAA and UWC Museum Fellowship programme, where the experimental potential of museums as sites of critical engagement, ethical practice, and participatory meaning-making are constantly articulated.

A note on format: The conversational format that follows below deliberately avoids repeating speakers' names at every exchange and does not separate the shift in voice into discrete paragraphs. This is a methodological choice rather than an editorial omission. Conventional dialogue formats stabilise authorship by anchoring statements to identifiable subjects and in so doing re-inscribe hierarchies between speaking and listening positions. The format of this conversation works against that convention by treating utterances as dialogically produced. The conversation is presented as a field of enunciation in which statements emerge through response, uptake

3 See D. Posel, *Darker Shade of Pale: Shtetl to Colony* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2025).
4 L. Witz, *Museum Times: Changing Histories in South Africa* (Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2022).

and revision rather than from self-contained speaking voices. By loosening the textual markers of attribution, the text foregrounds relationality over individuality and renders authorship provisional and distributed. The aim is not to obscure responsibility but to shift attention from the identity of the speaker to the processes through which meaning is co-constituted, and thus to unsettle the assumption that historical knowledge originates in singular voices alone. In this conversation, utterances are understood as relationally produced rather than individually owned. By loosening the visual markers of attribution, the text foregrounds thinking-in-conversation – overlap, uptake and revision – and shifts attention from who speaks to how meaning is made between speakers.

Family Histories

Rory Bester: Where did you go to school? Leslie Witz: I went to Carmel College, a Jewish day school in Durban. It was a liberal school in relation to issues of race in South Africa, but it wasn't liberal in relation to Zionism, which I only found out later when I started university. At school there was an unquestioned acceptance of Zionism. Most of the authors in Hebrew literature were Zionists, and in Jewish Studies we were always asked whether all the Jews were a nation, and we were meant to answer yes. *Do you still practice your faith?* No. The only thing I really practice is the one-day fast, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. We also get together as a family at the Passover seder. *So not even the Ten Days of Repentance or Rosh Hashanah?* No. *And why Yom Kippur specifically?* I don't atone for my sins against God, but I do like the idea of fasting for 24 hours. *Did your parents practice the faith?* Not much at all. *Where did you parents come from?* My father came from Lithuania by ship in 1929. He was 17. My mum was born in Johannesburg. Her parents came out from Latvia. I don't know when. In fact, I know very little about my mother's family. *Why is that*? She didn't tell us very much. *Do you know more about your father's history?* I know more about his family. But I tried to find exact records of my father in Lithuania, but I can't find them. The reason is that my father was born in 1912, when Lithuania was a part of Russia, so he was born Russian. Lithuania was briefly independent between the end of the First World War in 1918 and the German invasion in 1941. If I'm going to find out if he was Lithuanian, I must look at the archives in that short period for something like an application for a passport to travel to South Africa. But maybe he travelled on his older sister's passport because she was on the same ship. It took until 1952 for him to be naturalised as a South African. *That seems like a long time*. It's not clear why. Milton Shain has written about antisemitism in South Africa at that time,[5] but the Nationalists also welcomed people from Europe who looked 'white'.

5 Milton Shain's trilogy of books on antisemitism in South Africa include *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (1994), covering the period from the 1880s to the 1920s; *The Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa, 1930-1948*; and *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present* (2023). See M. Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Charlottes, University Press of Virginia, 1994); M. Shain, *The Perfect Storm: Antisemitism in South Africa, 1930-1948* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2015); and M. Shain, *Fascists, Fabricators and Fantasists: Antisemitism in South Africa from 1948 to the Present* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2023).

So, I'm not sure why my father's naturalisation took so long. *Was your father's name Anglicised when he came to South Africa?* My father's surname was Yoselowitz (sometime spelled Ioselovich). But his siblings have different surnames. *How did this happen*? There is a likely version and the mythology. The likely version is that surnames were recorded differently at the port of entry, even when related families arrived together. The mythology is that my father's sister marries a no-goodnik who burnt down his shop to claim the insurance to pay off gambling debts. To protect their sister my father and his brothers take the blame, leave for Mozambique and then come back in South Africa under different names. *Family histories so often have at least one mythology. Not in the sense of a Greek or Roman sacred story but rather as something that binds a family together around an uncertain and sometimes secret truth and also acknowledges that everything is not what it seems. What is the role of these mythologies in family histories?* This story though is not like you want to claim a mythology that is about covering up criminal activity. It's a secret that you don't share, and in this sense it's unlike traditional mythologies that are usually told and shared. These stories are oftentimes overheard rather than being told directly. I didn't hear the story from my father. I heard it from my cousins. This generational re-telling doesn't fit with their parents' version and what they believed. My cousins broke the silence of the secret but then as most people do, they told me not to tell anyone else. *The family mythology I remember from my childhood is that two Bester brothers came to South Africa in the late 1600s. One never married and the other married an enslaved person. It's a half-truth that holds a 'white' family's discomfort and fear that their all white might not be all right. Because the truth is that only one of those Besters came to South Africa and he did marry someone whose enslavement had been manumitted.* In both your story and my story, it's about fear and shame. It's also about what it means to become a white South African. My father always had a lot of fear. Fear was in his life. The things that would make the authorities get hold of him. Of authority. Of the police. Of a pass raid that would find someone sleeping with the person he'd employed. It was a fear that he would be sent back. *You recently reviewed Neil Roos' book*, Ordinary Whites in Apartheid South Africa: Social Histories of Accommodation *(2024).*[6] *In the review you note the distinction between your own scholarly work on the public performance of whiteness in festivals and museums and Roos' on the sometimes less visible bureaucratic forms of producing whiteness, or what you call 'cohering the attitudes and behaviours of those who came to be classified as "whites"'.*[7] *You especially draw attention to Roos' implication of his father and uncle in how the state marshalled delinquent whiteness first through the Work Colonies Act of 1949, and then its replacement, military conscription, both of which manipulate senses of fear and shame about being outside accepted norms of whiteness.* The chapter on the work colonies is the most astonishing one in the entire book. His father and uncle never spoke about it, and it's something Roos only

6 N. Roos, *Ordinary Whites in Apartheid Society: Social Histories of Accommodation* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2024).

7 L. Witz, 'Review of Roos, Neil, Ordinary Whites in Apartheid Society: Social Histories of Accommodation. *H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews*, (November 2024). https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=61123

discovers when he finds their names in archival material related to the work colonies. While the book is more about Afrikaans-speakers than English-speakers and doesn't deal with the immigrant experience of conforming to whiteness, I commented in my review how Roos and I were both at the edges of whiteness, especially in our both avoiding military conscription through university studies.

Social Histories

So, after finishing school in 1976 you went straight to the University of Natal in Durban. My major imperative at the time was to get out of conscription into apartheid's army. I intended to major in psychology but found behavioural psychology dull and predictable. I dropped it after second year and ended up majoring in history. As I moved from third year to Honours the radical debates in South African historiography were shifting from one between the liberal and Marxist traditions to an internal Marxist one on the nature of the capitalist state. This was all happening in the context of wider student and academic politics. There were liberals and radicals in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the Black Consciousness movement. Steve Biko, who earlier had been a medical student at the university, was killed in detention in 1977, and the academic Rick Turner was assassinated in 1978. While there was a radical grouping around Turner, there were also conservative trends. The Department of Political Science at the time I was a student had been taken over by right wing fascists. The History Department was also quite conservative, though overall I would say had a liberal persuasion. *Is this what made you go to Wits University in Johannesburg to do a master's degree?* I'd started reading the work of people like Charles van Onselen and Phil Bonner, both of whose work was underpinned by Marxist historiography and both of whom were at Wits. So, I left home and went to Johannesburg to do a masters. *What was your research topic?* I did my research on Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers Union.[8] I was interested in labour organisation and the unionisation of black workers. Politically this was the time of the emergence of the Federation of South African Trade Union in 1979, and later the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 1985. I was also interested in this figure – Sachs – who was taking white Afrikaans garment workers on trips to the Soviet Union in the 1930s. *It's a provocative act against the state's efforts to marshal whiteness around the 'volksmoeder' that Neil Roos also explores in his book.* The garment workers in Johannesburg at the time were predominantly white Afrikaans women (which then starts to shift around the time of the Second World War). Sachs even organised his

8 Solly Sachs, a Lithuanian Jew who came to South Africa with his family as a teenager in 1914, was general secretary of the Garment Workers' Union from 1928 to 1952. After being banned from engaging in union activities by the South African government in 1952 he went into self-imposed exile in 1953. For an autobiographical account of his union work, see S. Sachs, *Garment Workers in Action: History of the Garment Workers in South Africa to 1952* (Johannesburg, Eagle Press, 1957). See also L. Witz. *Servant of the Workers: Solly Sachs and the Garment Workers' Union, 1928 –1952* (MA thesis, Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984); and L. Witz, 'Solly Sachs, the Great Trek and Jan van Riebeeck: Settler Pasts and Racial Identities in the Garment Workers Union, 1938, 1952'. In Annie Coombes (ed), *Rethinking Settler Colonialism* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006), 45-62.

own women's 'kappie kommando' organisation that espoused socialist values. It's not surprising that in 1948, when the National Party came to power, one of its first commissions of inquiry is against the Garment Workers Union. *What brought you to Solly Sachs?* Before marrying my father, my mother was a secretary in a clothing factory in Johannesburg. She often spoke about Solly Sachs who visited the factory. She was more radical than my father, and not nearly as fearful and afraid as him. *Do you think him being a first-generation immigrant and her being a second-generation immigrant was a factor in their fearfulness and lack of it?* Partly, yes. But my mother was around friends with more radical leanings in the clothing industry. There was a radical element within trade unionism at the time, a love of the Soviet Union and its promise of a better world. When my parents married in 1956 my father strongly discouraged my mother from seeing her best friend, Rose Simpson, because she was a communist. He was that fearful of this association.

Popular Histories

How did you avoid military service after your master's degree? I'd bought a ticket to leave South Africa for London when I interviewed for a temporary job at the University of Bophuthatswana (UNIBO). Because it was a so-called 'independent' homeland in the logic of the apartheid state, technically I wasn't in South Africa and could avoid conscription. I taught history there for two years. And then I got 'deported' out of Bophuthatswana. I found out when I opened the *Sunday Times* while on holiday in Cape Town at the end of 1985. My name was among a list of ten people being deported. I was summoned to the rector's office to be issued with a deportation order by the policemen present, and to the appeals later at the palace of the President of Bophuthatswana, Lucas Mangope. It was a bizarre conversation, in the presence of the entire homeland cabinet. The president asked why we were there. We said we didn't know. He said we should atone for what we've done. Again, we said we didn't know what we'd done. He said he couldn't tell us. It was like a scene out of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and was over in about 30 minutes. *Coming back to South Africa must have raised the spectre of military service again*. I didn't tell anyone I was back in South Africa. I managed to get a job at the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED). I tried to stay as anonymous as possible and somehow my tax records were never picked up by the government. But I'm always worried. It's 1986. It's a terrible time. There's a State of Emergency. Everyone was being watched. *What did you do at SACHED?* I was employed to do the Write Your Own History project, together with the History Workshop at Wits University. *The work of writing history at this time – in the context of life under apartheid and the role of academic work in the anti-apartheid struggle – entails a complex set of positions and alignments with few possibilities for intersection and overlap. The Wits History Workshop was an important site within this context. How would you characterise the debates about the writing of history at this time?* The big debate at the time was between the social historians and structuralist historians. On the one side was E.P. Thompson's 'history from below', culture and consciousness, which influenced the Wits History Workshop, and the work of

Phil Bonner, Peter Delius and Luli Callinicos. Charles van Onselen was also there but he didn't work as much collaboratively. And on the other side were Althusser and Poulantzas, and their structuralist arguments about class and capital. But this position was mostly argued by people in exile. Belinda Bozzoli was initially in this camp but quite dramatically moved over to the social historians. At the time there was also a debate between workerist and populist histories, with the Wits History Workshop aligning themselves with the former and the United Democratic Front (UDF) affiliated organisations largely aligning themselves with the latter. *How did you personally navigate this?* My work was about popularising history. It was an extension of E.P. Thompson's history from below and associated with both the trade union movement and worker education. I produced a slide-tape show for the Wits History Workshop called *Garment Workers Unite*, based on my master's research. *What was a slide-tape show?* It's a slide carousel of images that is moved forward by an inaudible electronic pulse on a synchronised cassette tape recording that also includes voice commentaries and music on the slides. It was a cheap technology to use and produce – much cheaper than making a film – and big in the Wits History Workshop. There was a group that came out from the US, with special permission from the ANC (because of the cultural boycott), to help the Wits History Workshop with the production of slide-tape shows. *After SACHED, and then a short time lecturing at the University of South Africa (UNISA), you joined Khanya College in 1988. Khanya College occupied a unique position within the activist landscape in the 1980s, notably the ways in which it enabled pathways into university education.*[9] It was a bridging college between school and university. In lieu of a matriculation certificate, students completed two university courses that would enable them to get into university. The courses were done at Khanya College's campuses in Johannesburg and Cape Town and accredited by the University of Indiana. This is where I met Ciraj Rassool. He was the African History Coordinator in Cape Town, and I had the same role in Johannesburg. We met for the first time at a People's History Day organised at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where I think I had come to speak about the Write You Own History project.[10] That was our coming together. He got a post at UWC in 1989, and I joined UWC in 1990. By this time Gary Minkley had also joined UWC.

People's Histories

In coming from Wits to UWC you moved between two institutions that were approaching history quite differently at the time. At Wits it was popular history, and at UWC it was People's History.[11] *How do you understand the difference?* I came from a Wits

9 See, for example H. K. Adriansen *et al*., Khanya College: A South African Story of Decolonisation. *The Conversation,* 10 October 2017. https://theconversation.com/khanya-college-a-south-african-story-of-decolonisation-85005.

10 At the time the UWC People's History project was led by Nicky Rousseau. It focused on liberation struggles, resistance histories, the rupturing of communities under apartheid and student research into all these areas.

11 See G. Minkley and C. Rassool, 'Orality, Memory and Social History in South Africa'. In S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1998).

History Workshop background in popular history. This was the history from below in projects like Write Your Own History and was very much part of the academic project of social history. It included a number of initiatives to popularise academic work, including *Fight Where You Stand* booklet and slide-tape show, video productions, and open-day performances for community and worker organisations. People's history, on the other hand, was more linked to the histories of political organisations and the liberation struggle. It included a critique of popular history for prioritising the work of professional historians who 'popularise' history.[12] People's History was really in place when I arrived at UWC in 1990. It was led by Nicky Rousseau and included at various times André Odendaal, Gary Minkley, Ciraj Rassool and Madeleine Fullard. People's History was more explicitly linked to struggles for liberation. It's very much history as a lesson for liberation. In the department of History at UWC it functioned in two ways. One was to get students to do research around their own communities, and the other was to have a way to manage the large number of students – there were over 3,000 undergraduate history students at UWC at the time. In each undergraduate year students did people's histories projects, with third-year students tutoring the first years. As an undergraduate student at UWC you did Western History, African History and People's History. While People's History was in all three years of the undergraduate curriculum, there was also some resistance to it being 'proper' history. Because so many students were teaching in the programme as part of the 'each one teach one' pedagogy, there was a perception that academic standards weren't being maintained. People's History also resulted in four volumes of the educational resource, *Let Us Speak of Freedom*.[13] This approach is also reflected in the National Education Crisis Committee's *What is History? A New Approach to History for Students, Workers and Communities* (1987).[14] *What happened to People's History at UWC?* There were thousands of students and not enough resources. The bulk of the resources went into developing African history and Western history. So, People's History became unmanageable. It was cut back from being a three-year programme to a third-year programme focusing on research skills and developing histories of Cape Town, which was much more manageable. By 1994 things had also changed politically and people started wondering whether the idea of the 'barefoot' historian was the way to go. And then Nicky Rousseau and Madeleine Fullard left UWC to go work for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). André Odendaal had also left to start the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture. The idea of a museum at Robben Island was floated, and it's also the beginnings of our entanglement with Public History.

---

12 See G. Bloch, 'Popularising History: Some Reflections and Experiences'. Paper presented at the History Workshop conference, University of the Witwatersrand, February 1987. URL: https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/4ad3f49a-e81c-4e24-9167-f2940455f5a5/content; and N. Rousseau, 'Unpalatable Truths' and 'Popular Hunger: Reflections on Popular History in the 1980s'. In J. R. Forte, P. Israel and L. Witz (eds), *Out of History: Re-Imagining South African Pasts* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2016), 53-72.

13 University of the Western Cape. *Let Us Speak of Freedom* (Bellville, History Department, University of the Western Cape).

14 See National Education Crisis Committee, *What is History? A New Approach to History for Students, Workers and Communities* (Johannesburg, Skotaville, 1987).

Public Histories

Did Public History replace People's History? It doesn't replace People's History, but it does take up elements of People's History. Where People's History imagined a public out there eager to embrace history as a moment of liberation, Public History thinks more about who the public might be. So, an idea of 'public' was already part of People's History, which made the department amenable to thinking about how its work engaged and resonated with publics. *To what extent do you think People's History worked with a single idea of a 'public', shaped in part by a sense of solidarity against apartheid, and that Public History, especially after 1994, introduces the possibility of multiple publics?*[15] That the idea of the people's struggle was a singular idea is reflected in the sense that everybody had the same purpose. The purpose was liberation and freedom. What becomes important after 1994 is that those who had fought for liberation were now in charge of the state. The big question that then emerged is what happens to our engagement with the new state? What happens to the engagement with history when those in power were graduates of People's History? There was a scepticism that perhaps the new history would just follow whatever the new government wanted. And then what UWC brings to the debate is not only the idea of the plurality of publics but also that we need to engage rather than do a stand-off in the face of the new state. In the question of how public history emerges at UWC there is always a critical engagement with both apartheid history and with a new nationalist history. *In thinking about the emergence of Public History in the context of the Department of History at UWC, it's important not to forget that Public History was also a self-positioning in relation to other History departments, notably Wits, which finds its first articulation at the Wits History Workshop's 'Myths, Monuments and Museums' conference in 1992.* [16] At this time Graeme Bloch had already articulated a critique of social history that asked who was writing this history, and who was speaking on behalf of whom.[17] As we move into the 1990s and start thinking about what is going to happen to history writing in a post-apartheid era, Gary, Ciraj and myself start to shift our views on Social History and start thinking about the notion of Public History. It was a major shift. The 1992 conference was about what was going to happen to museums and memorials in post-apartheid South Africa. There was a lot of tension at the conference. It was a time when many museums were sending faxes to the ANC asking what they should do. In that moment there was even a hesitancy from some Wits university academics about a new public history.[18] *Why from Wits?* Because they were afraid that it would no longer be the work of the academy to popularise history. At

15 The concept of multiple publics, how they are imagined and called into being, and how they contest each other is historicised in M. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, Zone Books, 2002).

16 The conference paper was published as C. Rassool and L. Witz, 'The 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival: Constructing and Contesting Public National History in South Africa', *The Journal of African History* 34 (3), 1993, 447–468. The article is republished as a chapter in L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2017).

17 See Bloch, 'Popularising History'.

18 L. Witz and C. Rassool, 'The Dog, the Rabbit and the Reluctant Historians', *South African Historical Journal* 27, 1992, 238–42.

the conference in 1992 we presented a paper on the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival. This is our first public statement about Public History. *After the 'Myths, Monuments and Museums' conference, how does Public History find its feet in the department?* With South Africa opening to the world and tourism becoming a big focus area, there was little public discussion around the images and stories being represented through tourism. We began to research and write about tourism in different ways, especially around the role of sites of history in tourism. We also started an Honours course called Tourism and Public History.[19] Some members of the Mayibuye Centre staff were a little unhappy with us at this time because we were also critical of some of their heritage and museum interventions.[20] *What is the nature of these interventions?* In addition to participating directly in processes and discussions around the future of Robben Island, the Mayibuye Centre became involved through the development of heritage policy. First there was the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) Report in 1995, and the second was the national government's White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage in 1996. *The white paper essentially translated the ACTAG Report into policy, right?* Yes, and while there were sections on heritage, there was very little actually in the main report on museums.[21] It was much more interested in how to reconfigure the administration of arts and culture in South Africa.

Learning Histories

But it is out of this context of critique that you also begin collaborating with the Robben Island Museum on a post-graduate qualification in museum and heritage studies. Robben Island opened as a museum on 24 September 1997, after closing as a prison in 1996. *I didn't realise it functioned as a prison so late into the 1990s.*[22] Yes. Staff from the History Department at UWC went to the island in 1995 as part of a special consultation to engage with processes that were taking place around the development of a museum. We were instructed not to engage with the prisoners. When the Robben Island Museum (RIM) opened in 1997, André Odendaal, who set up the Mayibuye Centre and Archive at UWC, was appointed as its first acting director and decided they needed a university-accredited heritage studies programme. A cross-disciplinary committee from UCT, UWC and RIM was convened to put together a programme. It included people from Archaeology, Education, Fine Art, History,

19 This course is still taught today in the Department of Historical Studies, albeit with a slightly altered focus, as Museums and Public History. In the trajectory from undergraduate to postgraduate study in South Africa, the Honours degree is a one-year postgraduate degree sitting between a three-year undergraduate degree and a master's degree that usually starts in the fifth year of study.

20 The entity that formally became the Mayibuye Centre at UWC in 2001 was originally formed in 1992 to receive the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) collection of anti-apartheid materials, which had been accumulated between 1956 and 1991. Other material and collections were added to Mayibuye before UWC, and the newly formed Robben Island Museum (RIM) signed an agreement in 2000 to incorporate the Mayibuye Centre into RIM as its Collections Unit. For an analysis of the history of the Mayibuye Centre, and more particularly the incorporation of the IDAF archive's into Mayibuye, see G. Frieslaar, *(Re)collections in the Archive: Making and Remaking the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) Archival Collection*, (PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2015).

21 There was a separate report on museums, which appeared as an addendum to the main ACTAG document. See U. Küsel, *A New Policy for the Transformation of South African Museums and Museum Services* (Pretoria, ACTAG, 1995).

22 The maximum-security prison, which included political prisoners, closed in 1991 and the medium-security prison closed in 1996.

History of Art from UCT, and English and History from UWC. *Why English at UWC?* Because David Bunn and Jane Taylor were in the department then.[23] The idea was to develop a core course in which everyone would teach and then for each institution, including Robben Island, to offer their own electives. The programme started in 1998 with 40 students with funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). Ciraj and I ran the programme, including the core course on critical issues in museum and heritage studies. UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art offered an elective in curatorship, and their History of Art department offered one on the politics and aesthetics of collecting. Ciraj and I offered an elective on tourism and public history. Because many of the students lived on Robben Island, the courses were taught at Michaelis, which was in the city. With funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, we later established the African Program in Museum and Heritage Studies and moved the classes from Michaelis to the Centre for African Studies on UCT's main campus. Ciraj even had an office there. We also received funding from the Ford Foundation. *The programme was happening at an exciting time in exhibition and museum-making in South Africa, even on Robben Island itself, where Zayd Minty curated an important early exhibition,* 30 Minutes *(1997),[24] and Ashwell Adriaan and Roger Meintjes curated* Cell Stories *(1999).[25] What brought the programme to an end?* There are two things that occur. The first is that UCT withdraws from the programme, claiming that it's becoming too expensive to run, there is little enthusiasm for the programme in the Faculty of Arts, and they are not experts in heritage or museums. Of course, what UCT then does is immediately start its own heritage and curating programmes. We moved the UWC/RIM museum and heritage studies programme to the Centre for Humanities Research at UWC in Bellville and continued teaching it for several years. When the funding from Rockefeller and Ford fell away, we relied on the Robben Island Museum to provide bursaries for students. But then they decided they wanted to use the money in different ways. Without funding for scholarships, we couldn't run the programme. It ended in 2015.

---

23 Jane Taylor had curated *Fault Lines* (1996) exhibition at the Castle of Good Hope as part of a broader research project to explore artistic engagements with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). For more information on the exhibition, see L. Witz, C. Rassool and G. Minkley, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2017), 106-108; and for a detailed discussion of Clive van den Berg's work on the exhibition, see A. Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), 264-265.

24 Nine artists – Willie Bester, Kevin Brand, Lisa Brice, Lionel Davis, Tracey Derrick, Randolph Hartzenberg, Brett Murray, Malcolm Payne and Sue Williamson – responded to the Visitors Block adjacent to the harbour where the ferry docks. The Block includes cubicles where prisoners met visitors, restricted to speaking about family matters and only in languages the prison guards could understand. In the 'Up or Coming' section on *Artthrob*, there was a lament that tourism policies on the island were limiting visitors to the exhibition, but it noted that 'from December 15, a new scheme will come into effect. Would-be visitors will pay R100 for the return ferry ride from the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, and will be free to wander round the prison area of the island, including the Visitors' Block which is situated right next to the harbour.' https://www.artthrob.co.za/december/fr-9712.htm. The exhibition opened on 19 October 1997 and included a small catalogue with a text by Jeremy Cronin. See also Artthrob, '"Thirty Minutes" on Robben Island'. *Artthrob*, October 1997. https://www.artthrob.co.za/october/fr-9710.htm.

25 *Cell Stories* took place in 38 cells and included portraits of the prisoners, a personal object and oral history or their personal experiences. For more information on and analysis of the exhibition, see N. Solani, 'Memory and Representation: Robben Island Museum 1997–1999' (MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2000); Coombes, *History After Apartheid*, 77–79; P. Nesje, *Representing the Past in the Present with the Future in Mind: A Close Reading of the Cell Stories Exhibition at the Robben Island Museum* (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2005); and L. Witz, *Museum Times*, 161-193.

House Histories

What was happening more broadly with public history in this period? So, in the nearly 20 years that we ran the Museum and Heritage Studies programme, Public History also grows and becomes more involved with museum making, and especially the form of the history museum. Ciraj Rassool became involved with the District Six Museum and the governance of Iziko Museums, and I got involved in the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum with Noëleen Murray.[26] Graduates from the Museum and Heritage Studies postgraduate diploma programme got employed at museums and also went on to do MA and PhD degrees in the Department. What started to emerge was a strong graduate programme in public history and visual history in the Department. But as our postgraduate programme grew our undergraduate numbers were dropping. The postgraduate students, and the research and publishing in public history, and also visual history, saved the Department. We escaped the major rationalisation UWC was undergoing in the early 2000s. *With the focus on museums, why was it a public history rather than a purely museum studies programme?* Because we wanted to also engage the heritage sector, which included talking about the institutions of heritage making beyond the museum, like the South African Heritage Resource Agency (SAHRA). We understood history and heritage as forms of public history in the processes of heritage making. We were interested in how heritage could invite different ways of doing public history at heritage sites. *So, working against what Laurajane Smith calls the authorized heritage discourse perpetuated by people in positions of power and authority?*[27] *And in this sense were you pushing towards some sense of critical heritage studies in South Africa?* Yes, an engaged critical heritage studies that didn't just authorize a discourse. While Smith was interested in changing heritage from below, we wanted to think about how heritage is structured and governed and then to change it at that level. We were thinking about it particularly in relation to tourism. *What is the difference between a history museum and a site of history making?* Well, obviously they coincide but a site is not necessarily a museum space. It's something that's associated with an event or a person in history. But there are museums like District Six and Lwandle that are difficult to disentangle or disengage from their sites. In effect they are site museums. I suppose the ultimate new history museum is the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, which is not on a site as such. Yes, it's on the edge of Crown Mines, but that hardly affects it, except when you go onto the roof and look over the mines. So, it's a history museum. It's an interesting question because what about the Iziko Slave Lodge? It's a site but it's not really the Slave Lodge. It used to be the Cultural History Museum with a whole variety of displays and then when its name was changed to the Slave Lodge in 1999, they put up exhibitions related to enslavement. But the site, in effect, cannot be used as the place

26 This thinking around the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum culminated in N. Murray and L. Witz, *Hostels, Homes, Museum: Memorialising Migrant Labour Pasts in Lwandle, South Africa* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 2014).

27 More explicitly, Smith understands authorised heritage discourse as 'a professional discourse that privileges expert values and knowledge about the past and its material manifestations and dominates and regulates professional heritage practices. See L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London, Routledge, 2006), 4

of the Slave Lodge. To curate that space as a slave lodge is so difficult because it has nothing in the fabric that remains of the slave lodge to enable its curation as a site. So, I suppose it's about the fabric or remnant of the place where the heritage is created and sustained. Another good example is the Slave Church in Long Street, Cape Town,[28] which was recently researched by RSRP fellow, Robin-Lea Karating.[29] When it was declared a national monument in the 1970s, it gets recognised for its fabric but there's no association with its past of enslavement. *In this sense of site, then, are the Iziko house museums sites of history as much as they are museums?* Yes, I would say those are sites of history. *Do you understand the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum as a house museum?* Very much so. But there are three parts to this museum. The community hall, which was redone and has nothing to do with the original space. It's the primary exhibition display area, although it's now increasingly used as a community hall as well. Then there is a walking tour of Lwandle that the museum offers. But it is mainly the third aspect, the restored hostel, that is a house museum. We performed the house museum by deliberately curating it as such. We exchanged goods with local people in the area, like beds and fridges, and also went to second-hand shops to get old bicycles, radios, gramophones and magazines. This was all part of the dressing up. *So, it is about a sensibility rather than a specific period then?* Yes, it's not set in a specific time. *It's like Groot Constantia, after the fire in the 1920s destroyed most of the original house contents, with everything in the house now is just part of a 'dressing up'.* Koopman's de Wet House is still set in a specific period in time. *What do you mean by 'performing the house museum'?* It's a site that enables the museum to present and perform its history. It's not a depiction of the site as it was originally, but rather how the museum can script the site. And the different rooms in the museum, in effect, perform that. The museum can tell different stories in different rooms. It follows the model of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City. There's a particular understanding of knowledge making in this relationship between the museum and its history. *Are museums sites of knowledge making or are they spaces that present knowledge made elsewhere? Is the way that you performed the house museum at Lwandle a form of knowledge making in and of itself, or is it a performance of knowledge made elsewhere? And not only here, but also in the other museums that you discuss in your book,* Museum Times *(2022)*. It's difficult to disentangle the two but interesting to think about in relation to Lwandle. The Wits History Workshop popularised a lot of the story of migrant labour in South Africa and this general knowledge is brought to Lwandle, partly because nobody has done extensive historical research of Lwandle itself. So, in this sense Lwandle tells a local story that is framed by a national story

28 Built by the African Missionary Society between 1802 and 1804, the Slave Church in Long Street is the oldest indigenous mission church that originally served Cape Town's enslaved community. With forced removals, a new church was built in Belhar, and the original building was sold in 1971 but then declared a national monument and restored by the provincial government before being opened as a museum in 1979.

29 Under Leslie Witz's supervision, Robin-Lea Karating completed a PhD at UWC that included research on the Slave Church in Long Street. See R.-L. Karating, *Unearthing Presence in the Artefacts of Slavery at the Cape: The Production of Archaeological Narratives in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2025).

about migrant labour on the gold mines that was popularised by Luli Callinicos.[30] We're getting into the slippery category of the 'community museum' here but what it also does is work with the people and stories within Lwandle's communities. The District Six Museum has a huge history and is more easily able to find material and bring people into the space. With Lwandle there were initially very few people who engaged with the idea of a community memory project, which complicates the museum and what it does. What Lwandle does is create a museum community rather than a community museum. It's a museum community for people who want to embrace the space, be part of the project and bring their stories. They bring their knowledge and their specificity. In Hostel 33 at Lwandle we re-created a shebeen in one of the rooms. When one of the residents saw this, he said this would have been impossible because it was a residential space. The 'shebeen' would have happened in the passage. While he brought his knowledge of where people lived and how they engaged within the space, the museum didn't embrace his knowledge, as its primary use of the hostel needed to be as part of the performance of the museum. These are the difficulties of museum communities.

Object Histories

So, it then becomes about refusing one kind of knowledge (about a historical place) in favour of another kind of knowledge (that is about the performance of the museum space). Was the complexity of this experience of the memory of place similar to the memory of the objects that you exchanged with people? The exchange of the objects was illustrative of the complexity of the memory because it's about how people use objects and think about these objects in the present. People wanted to keep their fridges; they wanted to keep their beds. They didn't want to give them to a museum, even with the offer of exchange. *The memory is scarce, unlike with District Six, where the museum was able to more easily accumulate objects as part of its process of making itself. More broadly, what then is the complexity of the object within public history?* The notion of objects in public history is that the object is not a site of origin. It's not the place where history begins. Using Tony Bennett's notion of the museum as a laboratory of meaning-making objects are always in the process of making.[31] Objects are always on the move. *If they are always on the move, what does this mean for the provenance of objects? How much does provenance, and especially the accumulation of knowledge about an object, work against this ability to move?* This is why I have a hesitation around provenance. It implies a beginning. *But provenance studies have re-emerged in a big way in relation to repatriation and restitution debates.* Provenance can become a rarified practice in repatriation and restitution politics, that somehow this is where the

30 As part of *A People's History of South Africa*, Luli Callinicos wrote three volumes on the history of migrant labour in South Africa. See L. Callinicos, *Gold and Workers, 1886-1940* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980); L. Callinicos, *Working Life, 1886-1940: Factories, Townships, and Popular Culture on the Rand* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987); and L. Callinicos, *A Place in the City: The Rand on the Eve of Apartheid* (Johannesburg. Ravan Press, and Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1993).

31 See T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, Routledge, 1995), and T. Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London, Routledge, 2004).

real meaning of the object resides. My sense of public history is about questioning the object as fact. Objects have multiple beginnings, and the importance of public history is that it destabilises the object as an artifact.

It has different meanings and different associations. With repatriation and restitution provenance becomes a political issue to expose an unequal exchange, and even more than this, a looting. *If the question here is about whether or not to embrace provenance as a political strategy, isn't it also a question of how one constitutes belonging, both for those who are in possession of the object and those who want the object returned?* That's the difficult question, especially when constituting the return as an ethnic or national project based on geographical or political configurations today that didn't necessarily exist in the nineteenth century. *These questions of provenance are implicated in a politics of beforeness, of how you construct what was before, because provenance implies, as you say, a beginning that was before.* Yes. How you choreograph what you call beforeness is a question of public history. It can open up the possibility of a very different type of provenance research that continually questions the power and authority to constitute and fix meanings in institutional and governmental settings more broadly. *How then did Public History feed into the Remaking Societies, Remaking Persons (RSRP) project, which brought together museum and heritage studies, and forensic history into a single forum?* RSRP was like a history of Public History, and one of the things it did was reflect on how we're engaged with it. It brought the human body into the space of public history, which focused on critical questions of history-making in public, and especially in relation to restitution. It also recognised that broader restitution processes were becoming big questions in museums around the world, that the idea of holding and keeping objects could be questioned. Fundamentally, it questioned whether you should need to hold onto objects as a museum, that the fetishisation of the object is something that could be questioned. These are all questions that emerged from Public History. It questioned the ways in which the object, and especially the ownership of the object, is at the centre of the museum. *By taking Public History into the terrain of restitution, it introduced a different kind of activism to the work that history does in public.* There's an impulse to become more involved in restitution, especially for Ciraj Rassool and Nicky Rousseau, as well as the postdocs, Samuel Longford and Sophie Schasiepen. But also, for many of the students involved in the project. It wasn't something to stand back from and say this is the way restitution should happen. As we didn't stand back in relation to museum and heritage making. Ciraj became the key figure here, trying to intervene in and open more questions around objects and meaning-making. He engages with provenance, but in your words, he's thinking about 'beforeness', and what it means to think objects and history- making beyond just the return of these objects. So more than the repatriation of objects, it's about destabilising the object and its meaning. But this work of opening history doesn't always succeed because there are always counter-positions, especially from the state and world heritage organisations such as UNESCO, all of which makes it a very difficult process. The lurking danger is that you become a functionary of those organisations that have very limited notions of provenance, repatriation and restitution. The way that Ciraj is pushing for an openness to these politics

comes from Public History. *You mentioned earlier that RSRP brought Public History into a relationship with the body. What is the body in public history?* The human body was always in Public History in the sense of the people who are the publics and their engagements with history. So, there is the human body that was engaged in these spaces of heritage and museums. But there is also the ethics of the body in Public History. What do museums and heritage spaces do to people's lives, their associations with spaces and objects? How do we engage ethically in this context? With RSRP, it was more directly in relation to discussions around restitution, but that is just one part of it. More broadly, it's about how we engage ethically in these spaces that consider the ways in which different human bodies have different meanings, memories and responsibilities. It's an ethics of responsibility.

Museum Histories

In the examples you've cited here in relation to Public History, and the case studies you cover in your book, Museum Times*, there is a profound sense of grappling with Public History in the South African context. Is your sense of Public History unique to the South African context, or do you see it happening in other contexts around the world?* There are many public history programmes in United States, UK and Nordic countries, even a public history association, but in general they tend to focus on the popularisation of history – questions related to making history more accessible, getting audiences through the doors, having people understand things, having the most impact and growing new audiences. When Ciraj Rassool, Gary Minkley and I formulated a notion of 'public history' in the book, *Unsettled History* (2017),[32] the questions were different. We thought about meaning-making, the voices in a project, doing it in responsible ways. So quite a lot of what I do is bring politics and poetics together into readings of exhibitions. *You speak about responsibility. What is the responsibility of Public History?* In very crude terms I would say the responsibility is democracy, not in the sense of voting but rather in a questioning of the singular view. In a museum, for example, it's about the responsibility to not provide simple answers but rather encourage engagement that is about disagreement and new questions. *Even in spaces like science museums?* Absolutely! Mark Dion does that all the time in the way he asks questions about collecting and classification.[33] *In* Museum Times *you work with a particular sense of historical consciousness in the two decades after 1994 in Iziko's South African Museum and South African National Gallery, the District Six Museum, Red Location Museum, and the Castle of Good Hope, for instance. How would you characterise this particular interest and focus?* One way to respond is to say it's auto-

32 See L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2017).

33 Mark Dion is a conceptual artist who critiques the ways in which especially science and natural history museums produce and present knowledge. For critical engagements with his artistic practice see M. Endt, 'Beyond Institutional Critique: Mark Dion's Surrealist *Wunderkammer* at the Manchester Museum', *Museum & Society* 5(1), 2007, 1-14; J. Steinhauer, 'Mark Dion: The Science of Art', *The New York Review of Books*, 16 December 2017. https://www.nybooks.com/online/2017/12/16/mark-dion-the-science-of-art/; and F. Vilches, 'The Art of Archaeology: Mark Dion and His Dig Projects', *Journal of Social Archaeology* 7 (2), 2007, 199-223.

biographical. It's about my engagement with history. And in nearly all the case studies these are the museums that I've worked with in some way. So, it's part of my autobiography of becoming a historian. It goes back to the start of our conversation about Marxist history and social history, and what a history from below really means. It's thinking about and understanding the underclasses in society, what happens in that moment when those underclasses have control of history-making, and what possibilities are available for a different history. 1994 was an amazing opportunity for new ways of history- making. As a time in which those who have been oppressed seemingly have got control of the state, it's a major moment for museums. I'm interested in what happens to museums in that moment. My argument is that there has been a tendency to rely upon older forms of museum- making in this period. New structures and museums have gone up but the institution of the museum itself and what it does with its objects is hardly ever questioned. What democratic potential was there in that moment that could rethink what museums do? Just showing histories of the liberation struggle is not radical. There is a bit of pessimism in my book that these categories and classifications have largely remained in place.

Museum Futures

What is the future of museums? The optimistic version. Not the pessimistic one. Which I suppose you address to some extent at the end of the book, in the way that you look to art museums. The art museum is a site of really interesting experiments. Whatever one might think of the *Miscast* exhibition, it was an amazing experiment and an important moment in African museum history. Art museums have the potential of being more open to provocations. I'm not suggesting that art museums have all the potential and other kinds of museums are closed off. No. That's where Annie Coombes seems to end up in *History After Apartheid*, suggesting that ultimately art is the potential site of liberation. But art history has its own boundaries and limitations that are just as closed off as any other discipline or field. What is interesting about the new museum programme with Zeitz MOCAA is the potential of holding understandings of art but also questioning those understandings through Public History.[34] It brings Public History questions to artists and curators who don't always ask these questions. *The programme brings history and art together in a different configuration to conventional understandings of art history.* Yes, it has the potential to enable a coming together that is exciting. There will always be a tension about why this programme is in a history department. But actually, a history programme brings a different reflexivity. Ideally the students in the programme shouldn't only work at Zeitz MOCAA. *Because it's a 'blank canvas', without what you referred to earlier as having a 'fabric', which makes it too easy?* Yes. As part of what they do in the fellowship they should also spend time

34 Started in 2022 and funded by the Mellon Foundation, the Zeitz MOCAA and University of the Western Cape (UWC) Museum Fellowship is a one-year pan-African programme that brings a cohort of students from across the continent to complete a postgraduate degree in the Department of Historical Studies at UWC and an intensive work placement at Zeitz MOCAA that focuses on critical questions in curatorship, museum studies, public history and heritage.

at museums that have contestations and specific communities at their centre – like the District Six Museum or Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum. It will be good for them, and good for these other museums. Because I worry that the history museum will follow a pessimistic trend of becoming unimaginative sites of factual meaning where objects are just treated as artifacts. The history museum should be a liberated museum that establishes and invites different communities into forms of engagement and participation, that opens up questions rather than closing them off, that thinks about objects in terms of what you called their 'beforeness', and that is committed to what Ciraj Rassool refers to as being museums that are defined by the difficult and contested processes of museum and community-making.