

‘deep wounds... left... in hearts
and minds’:
South African Public History

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It could be that a wave of violent student unrest from 2015 to 2016 provided the impetus to bring public history practice more to the forefront in South Africa’s thinking about how to use its troubled past. The protests started with a demand to remove a statue of colonial empire-builder, Cecil John Rhodes, from the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus, but escalated into a nation-wide movement demanding free higher education. At the end of 2016, most universities in the country had shut down irregularly, scrambling to salvage a whole academic year. Spear-headed by black students who claimed that university environments remained untransformed areas of social exclusion to them, the movement exposed the simmering rage

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experienced by young people at the slow pace of change in dismantling the old, racially-defined social order in South Africa. They never lived under its direct rule but experience its legacy on a daily basis. The student who started it all by throwing faeces on the statue claimed: 'It is a black cry, a cry of the workers, a cry of the staff and a cry from the students.'¹ What started as a direct attack on the statue as a symbol of 'institutional colonialism' found deep resonance across the entire country.²

Professor Mahmood Mamdani, former head of UCT's Centre for African Studies, has become an outspoken voice in outlining what would truly transform the character of South African universities.³ Using examples from newly-independent East Africa in the 1960s, he called for a radical break from western models in the production of knowledge. Universities, he stressed, are a western creation, based on disciplines which each have their own sets of rules, but function in isolation from each other. To become truly relevant to the African post-colonial context, intellectuals should break through these barriers and work in more interdisciplinary ways, thinking out of the box and grappling with their own local realities. Too much theorising from the West should not substitute for hands-on knowledge production, he warns.

What Mamdani proposes is familiar terrain for public historians. Public history practice as a methodology has long highlighted the importance of active participation with its intended audiences. Michael Frisch's vision of 'shared authority' has become a starting point for many who accept the value of not only seeking information about peoples' feelings and experiences, but also producing 'scholarship that is at once intellectually trenchant, politically meaningful and shareable with the communities from which it comes.'⁴ Thomas Cauvin cautions that while studying the past requires sources and interpretation, historians should not only be writing for each other but 'also for and with others.'⁵ But in South Africa, the skills of public history professionals have not been widely embraced.

The period since the beginning of democracy in 1994 has been characterised by a deep stand-off between 'history' and 'heritage'. Following the British usage, the term 'heritage' overlaps considerably with activities that elsewhere are viewed as 'public history'. Since 1994, government-led initiatives, classified as heritage, exploded in popularity on a level that took most in academia by surprise. Many professional historians recoiled from what they saw as superficial, government propaganda, trying to artificially forge a new national identity by controlling how the past was remembered. Some took up the task of critiquing the heritage sector through various forms of new Heritage

Studies.⁶ Still others embraced the challenge, using the tools of public history to ensure that the best attributes of academic historical inquiry found a home within the vast new heritage sector.

But academic history generally failed to attract a new generation of young black talent, pre-empting robust debates about society's greatest anguish. For example, the heartfelt plea of anthropologist Ben Magubane in 2007 has remained largely unaddressed. He said: 'We should not forget the deep wounds that it [colonialism] left in the hearts and minds of its victims... History books never confronted what it meant for black folks to be treated as non-persons in the country of their birth.'⁷ Historians' focus on international theory, he argued, 'revealed a gross misunderstanding of the African reality and especially the nature of Africans' struggles.'⁸ His depiction of black peoples' exclusion from the corridors of knowledge production foreshadowed what would eventually explode in the student unrest in 2015.

As a public historian who served in local government as an elected representative for fifteen years, as well as on the National Heritage Council at its inception, I view the gap between history and heritage as unnecessarily exaggerated. It can be narrowed by reflecting on the evolution of uses of the past during the first two decades or so of democracy and by appreciating the good efforts that have been done by several public historians. The current student upheavals expose the unfinished work of confronting three hundred years of institutionalized racism. Underlying the much-criticised discourses on 'nation-building' and 'commemoration' lies a fundamental need to recover the dignity of the African people. This includes confronting and uprooting painful experiences of racism, taking into full consideration the reality of deeply-rooted economic inequality. This is an agenda that remains important yet has seldom been confronted in academic publishing about uses of the past, while it remains in the forefront of government policy.

Out of my faith in public history practice, I embarked some years ago on an exploratory research exercise to learn what leading practitioners might consider the best examples of public history in the service of the people. This included interviews with colleagues and visits to a few sites. It was not a comprehensive survey, but intended to serve as a beginning to consider what does work in a highly contested terrain, as will be discussed below. This article first deals with the broad outlines of the history versus heritage confrontation. Then it moves on to highlight a few case studies where the barriers have been effectively overcome.

Historians in the Shadow of Heritage

Most within the history profession in South Africa agree that the discipline experienced something of a 'golden era' when it found an active role in the struggle against apartheid during the 1970s and 1980s. The University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg set up its own History Workshop, modelled after its British counterpart, working within Marxist social history theoretical frameworks. Starting in 1977, the History Workshop promoted populist and worker histories through new research using much oral history, the production of user-friendly publications, holding conferences and seminars and running cultural days on campus to celebrate the diversity of African cultures.⁹ By all definitions this was robust public history, described as 'exhilarating' with 'an air of daring', remembered for opening up new realms of complexity in speaking of the past, while using it to empower people to find the courage to overthrow the oppressive regime of the present.¹⁰

In Cape Town, people deeply concerned with the history of District Six formed a foundation in 1989 to tell its story in their own way. This was a racially-mixed residential area, bulldozed because it did not fit in with the apartheid plans for total segregation. Through tireless efforts, the foundation worked with historians from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to establish the District 6 Museum 'as a vehicle for advocating social justice, as a space for reflection and contemplation and as an institution for challenging distortions and half-truths.'¹¹ At every turn, the public participated in special projects and designed the content of the museums' exhibitions. Both the History Workshop and the District Six Museum embodied the principles of democratic participation in constructing meaning from the past, particularly by the oppressed. Both started operations under serious threat from the apartheid state, which only heightened the value of their inclusive and democratic principles.

Expectations that history would take off after the start of democracy in 1994, however, were not realised. In fact, the opposite happened. Leslie Witz recalls how when he started teaching at UWC in 1990, history enrolments stood at three thousand students, but then eventually levelled off at between two and three hundred.¹² Historians scrambled to understand why the disaffection came so quickly and ran so deep. Veteran historian, Colin Bundy claimed, 'the last decade has been disquieting, even demoralising – for South African historians.'¹³ Historians who had been deeply involved in struggle history found themselves now 'at a loss'.¹⁴ He suggested that the sharp drop in interest in history after 1994 might be a symptom of a widespread unwillingness

to look back, and a tacit agreement to rather look forward, as articulated by government leaders of the day.

In fact, government overtook the business of engaging with the past at a pace and with an energy that left many academics behind. It quickly moved to support a number of innovations, often designed to help forge a new positive national identity under the umbrella term of 'nation-building'. But it also aimed to affirm the value and dignity of the pasts of the majority of the African population who had been generally written out of historical records. Government held high expectations of what could be achieved through a different kind of use of the past to bring 'empowerment, restitution and social justice.'¹⁵ An official definition of what is included in the heritage sector reveals its wide reach:

The national heritage system in South Africa consists of Museums, Monuments, Heritage Sites and Resources; Geographical Place Names; Heraldry and National Symbols; Archives and Public Records; and Libraries and Information Services. It is made up of tangible and intangible heritage resources as well as Living Culture in the form of cultural traditions, customs, oral history, performance, ritual, popular memory, social mores and knowledge of nature and diverse natural resources.¹⁶

For members of the general public, the term 'heritage' often reflects the subtle, intangible parts of their own sense of identity. In a recent feature on celebrity views of heritage, Sibongile Khumalo, a prominent singer, said: 'I am deeply attached to my heritage. It helps me understand myself and my positions in the world. It helps me make sense of my past and also shapes my worldview of what is and what can still be.'¹⁷ Chef Siba Mntogana adds: 'My heritage is my language, values, morals, view of the world, the food I grew up eating; it's my culture, my traditions, belief systems and customs.'¹⁸ Trumpeter Hugh Masekela claimed: 'My heritage is inborn and indelible.'¹⁹ This deeper understanding of heritage has been largely missed by academic historians, who focused more often on its tangible side.

The evolution of the heritage industry and its critics saw a relatively rapid pace of change. The start of a new, democratic dispensation in 1994 required a huge amount of social engineering, as the old regime was replaced by something different. Derek Peterson is one of the few historians who compare South Africa's transition to the experiences of other African countries as they moved out of colonialism.²⁰ Due to the weight and force of colonial attempts to define African people primarily as 'tribes', whose characteristics were frozen in time, every new African government tackled the need to do some kind of nation-building

exercise to build unity and create a new sense of identity.²¹ Critiques of South Africa's nation-building agenda view it narrowly as about legitimisation of the ruling party, without taking the broader needs into consideration. International benchmarking from post-colonial states gives nation-building a more functional profile, related to the profound need for revamping the inherited colonial presence.

During its first few years of democracy, South Africa developed a strong reconciliation discourse to serve the immediate transitional needs. 'Rainbowism', now much maligned as unrealistic and naïve, could be better evaluated in terms of the ways that it contributed to implanting a human rights ethic to replace apartheid repression.²² The 1996 constitution of South Africa is considered a global model of articulating a human rights discourse, which remains cherished and defended in present times. Related to heritage, the new government speedily produced a new coat of arms, new public holidays and a new flag, among other new symbols of a break from the past.²³ Although no doubt much over-used, the official slogan of the Robben Island Museum, 'the triumph of the human spirit', provided a story-line of strength in the face of adversity, providing a positive spin on the cruel past. The 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission set the tone of a changed nation by acknowledging the atrocities committed in the past and signalling that they would never be acceptable in the future. Another key feature of the early transition period was a proliferation of a number of heritage 'Legacy' projects.²⁴ It proved to be much easier to start afresh with something new than to transform old institutions. The whole nation-building task of the new government has come under close scrutiny from historians. But most of these early strides from the era of the Mandela presidency are under-rated for their enduring value in rebuilding the nation.

When Thabo Mbeki replaced Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa in 1999, he advocated a strong, fresh commitment to what he called the 'African Renaissance'. This marked a significant departure from the earlier politics of reconciliation by placing much higher emphasis on honouring African achievements and culture. Attention shifted away from the politics of appeasing those, mostly whites, who had lost power under the new democracy to stressing positive characteristics of Africanness. It went much further than simply placing more black people and black experiences in essentially Euro-centric institutions. And it also began to move beyond valorising the anti-apartheid struggle as the sole highest achievement of the African people. In spirit, it accelerated the process of decolonising minds from the domination of Eurocentrism and resonates with a long tradition often

referred to as 'black consciousness' in South Africa. This shift put the restoration of African dignity centre-stage. But in so doing it left many white historians feeling marginalised.²⁵

Another important feature of the African Renaissance took the form of identifying and utilising a wide variety of forms of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, now referred to as AKS. This movement sought to unearth and document uniquely African forms of knowledge about the natural environment, as well as spiritual values, customs, symbols and languages. The emphasis started with widespread investment in research but extended to reviewing issues such as intellectual property rights and assisting with economic development grounded in indigenous knowledge. As the emphasis on retrieving the intangible from the African past grew, government also provided funding to build and consolidate oral history, managed through the National Archives. Pursuit of documenting the content of African knowledge and cultural practices remains very high on the priority list of leading government thinkers today.²⁶

In summary, by the late 1990s and early years of the new century, the African Renaissance ideals came to dominate new initiatives emerging in the heritage sector. Interest began shifting from the tangible to the intangible, including cultural expressions, African knowledge systems, oral history and oral traditions. In part, this followed trends in international circles. But it also suited the particular conditions in South African. The shift of emphasis to the intangible, especially touching on aspects of African culture and spirituality, placed much of the heritage drive out of the reach of academic historians, who are predominantly culturally non-African. The early transitional tasks of dismantling apartheid structures should be seen as having managed to deliver a new sense of a national identity, a commitment to basic human rights and foregrounding the need for African recovery of dignity.

Today the *National Heritage Act* of 1999 should be seen as the product of the early transition period of reconstruction. Efforts to address the backwardness of the heritage sector when it came to museums and sites of significance, inherited from the apartheid era, tended to be somewhat mechanical and superficial, leaning too heavily on international models of limited relevance. The spirit of wanting to effect radical change was not matched by mechanisms to bring this about. The first round of transformation took the revisionist form of simply making the inherited institutions more inclusive of black peoples' experiences. This was referred to by Witz, Minkley and Rassool as the 'add-on' complex.²⁷ The 2016 'White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage'

notes that 1996 efforts to legislate an integrated national policy on museums failed to be implemented.²⁸ 'In practice', it observed, 'the patchwork of institutions were retained and in some instances renamed, while new structures were also added. This resulted in the retention of the outdated, fragmented and uncoordinated system with all its gaps, overlaps and duplications.'²⁹ A thorough overhaul is still needed.

By the early 2000s, many academic historians rejected heritage as a form of bogus history. This was sharply discussed at a major conference in Copenhagen in 2002. Gary Baines claimed that: 'Heritage is a form of public history produced by those outside the professional historical fraternity.'³⁰ Carothers viewed heritage as 'quite subordinate to history – like antiquarian, home-made history done by amateurs' whereas 'historians have expertise which make them custodians of the past.'³¹ Heritage is often viewed as preserving the past, not studying it.³² Unlike a careful study of the nuances of history, 'Heritage is often a recreation of the past, an act of remembrance, through the giving of a name, the erection of a monument or the way objects are displayed in a museum.'³³ At its worst, in the eyes of academics, heritage appears to be about 'commodification in pursuit of tourist's spending.'³⁴

Much of the debate focused on how public memory since the rise of democracy was crafted by those in power. This resulted in attention being given to the creation of new monuments, the designation of new heritage sites, toleration for old ones and policies for museums. Historians agree that a strong dominant narrative of glorifying the role of activists in over-throwing the apartheid regime casts a long shadow over much of public remembrance work. This is viewed as self-serving affirmation of the legitimacy of the government itself. Important as such critiques are, they leave out or minimise other efforts to practice public history, which in fact reflect a far more diversified, nuanced and active sector. The editor of the Copenhagen conference collection, Hans Eric Stolten, noted that: 'The question of how to develop a practice that can enable a constructive combination of scholarly work and political engagement remains a central issue in South African historiography.'³⁵

The Honeymoon Ends

The year 2004 is often cited as the time when service-delivery protests started in South Africa. These were fairly numerous public protests, at times violent, demanding that government deliver promised new services, such as providing water, electricity, flush toilets, street lights and housing. They have become a permanent feature of South African society. But their start signalled that the honeymoon was over from the

initial reconciliatory transition period. The heritage sector also experienced a number of protests. In both Kliptown and Port Elizabeth, major new museum and commemorative projects had to be put on hold due to violent protests from local low-income residents who demanded that their immediate needs for better housing be prioritised.³⁶ In other cases, communities split over issues of ownership and consultation about new heritage sites.³⁷ It became clear that patience was running out as the hopes for significantly changed lives began to fade. As Meskell put it, the good intentions of the earlier days were now 'overshadowed by the understandably "greater needs" of fiscal recovery and development.'³⁸ Sheer poverty left little room for thinking about the meanings of the past. Meskell went on to say: 'The processing of history, the unmaking and making of heritage, cannot hope to offer the *muti* – the healing or therapy to ameliorate the past and re-enhance the future – without some attention to the specifics of a deeper history.'³⁹

When the National Heritage Council (NHC) came into existence in 2004, concerns over the potential for heritage work to fuel economic development and to create jobs ranked high on the agenda. Ten years into the new dispensation, it was clear that economic growth was not what had been projected, as old patterns of economic inequality remained firmly in place. The NHC viewed tourism as having the potential to both provide financial support for heritage initiatives, as well as create long-term sustainable jobs. South Africa's democracy still remains most threatened by the continuing disparities in income between rich and poor. Job creation is central to the 2016 'White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage' which conceptualises a whole creative economy to 'foster income generation, job creation and export earnings while promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development.'⁴⁰

Within the heritage sector, job-creation is most often linked with tourism, whose contribution to the South African economy is now even larger than the mining economy. Tourism is often seen as the vehicle by which aspects of heritage begin to generate sustainable income, rather than simply consume limited state resources in government-funded institutions. As such, much exaggerated faith has been placed in the sector, triggering sharp critiques. The limitations of tourism as a sector for developing historical-consciousness is a concern of Sifiso Ndlovu, who believes that tourism without being grounded in history can be dangerous and full of lies and distortions.⁴¹ Natasha Erlank notes from her teaching experience on both heritage and tourism that people prioritise making money from tourism projects which might clash with

the historian's wish to add non-material value: 'If it fails to provide, there will be a backlash.'⁴² The commodification of heritage is becoming commonplace throughout the African continent. As Peterson points out, 'the local and the authentic can now be sold, purchased, and consumed in a range of media: as medicine, as food, as literature, as art.'⁴³ In their seminal work, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, however, John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff suggest that producing cultural features for sale to the tourism market can also increase community pride and values in its own heritage and identity.⁴⁴ The urgency of generating income to offset poverty is likely to remain a complex factor in all forms of public history work and deserves to be treated more sympathetically than it has been to date.

For some historians, the mushrooming heritage sector itself became a new object for study under the label of Heritage Studies. As Witz, Minkley and Rassool put it, 'Heritage, turned into an object of critical scrutiny, has become a source of unending case studies, a veritable treasure trove of academic "constructive engagement".'⁴⁵ They describe the combination of what actually is done in the heritage sector and the critiques of it undertaken through Heritage Studies as the 'Heritage Complex'.⁴⁶ Heritage Studies, they claim, tend to perpetuate arms-length speaking for the voiceless without consulting them. They also feel that heritage only exists to create a new nation-state, saying: 'Heritage is not about any past but rather those pasts related to governmentality and the nation-state, to the national estate.'⁴⁷ Much of the Heritage Studies sector focused on providing critiques of both the newly-built public memorials, as well as the retention of old ones and museum practices. Issues of how identities get moulded and the role of memory ranked high on the publications agenda. But the main focus was on how government tried to manipulate or control what people should be thinking.

Only a few voices acknowledge the need to affirm Africanness as a form of recovery from racial stereotypes. As Erik Stolten points out: 'It is too easy for the historians just to blame the South African government for the situation. Some historians still seem relatively unconcerned with the legitimate feelings of black communities and their need for counter-histories of the freedom struggle.'⁴⁸ Noor Nieftagodien affirms governmental efforts to correct inherited imbalances: 'The heritage project was about redressing the problem of the white narrative on the Heritage landscape.'⁴⁹ Andre Odendaal similarly claimed that heritage practice tackles 'the hugeness of black exclusion' from the historical record.⁵⁰ In thinking about the role played by the new monuments that were built in South Africa, Sabine Marschall asked what they meant in terms of African affirmation, arguing that they publicly assert 'new

group values, restore dignity and self-esteem, express identity and recognise leadership achievements.’⁵¹

In the latter half of the 2000s, those historians who did engage directly with the public began to report an opening up of topics raised by people, marking a further stage in the evolution of the sector. Deep pains and particularly traumatic experiences began to be discussed, issues other than political struggles received attention and communities became more interested in developing their own histories. Phil Bonner, the former Director of the History Workshop, pointed out that only in a handful of public history projects were people finding the space to speak out about their personal pain and anguish under apartheid. Otherwise, apartheid is taught in history texts in schools as a series of laws countered by great struggle heroes: ‘The lived realities of apartheid were lost... The dance has yet to begin.’⁵² Bonner believes that some things are still too painful to even want to remember. Similarly, oral historian Sean Field observes that he ‘leaves many interviews feeling helpless’ in the face of deep personal trauma.⁵³ This has led him to caution oral historians against seeing their work as a replacement for more intensive kinds of therapy.

Nieftagodien witnessed a shift in the mid-2000s to people becoming more willing to talk about personal and community issues than about the grand narrative of overthrowing apartheid.⁵⁴ Now there is much more willingness to talk about lives beyond politics, such as church, sport and cultural activities.⁵⁵ This has seen ‘new life breathed into the local history practised by the History Workshop’.⁵⁶ By 2010, the History Workshop began receiving many requests from local communities to help them write their histories. Over time, History Workshop came to see that local struggles often have to do with competing claims for state resources, ‘premised on assertions of authenticity, belonging and citizenship’ with ‘new politics of inclusion and exclusion, insiders and outsiders’.⁵⁷ This reflects the centrality of economic inequality in understanding the late-transition period. After writing extensively about monuments and memorials in the new South Africa, Sabine Marschall, in 2013, began to question what they might actually mean to people. She concluded that they often lacked connections to ‘vernacular memory’ or African ways of relating to the past which are more often oral and performative.⁵⁸ Such thinking marks an important break from western analytical frameworks.

Historians cannot take the full blame for not using public history methodology enough. The growth of heritage came at the same time as rising corporatisation in Universities, a trend that was very anti-

collaborative and which instead stressed 'outreach'.⁵⁹ The Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, pioneered the use of oral history methodologies to address the traumas associated with the HIV/Aids pandemic.⁶⁰ A special Centre for Popular Memory found a home at the University of Cape Town where it assisted communities to develop their own histories. This included video, written and exhibition outputs, archived oral and visual history materials and provided training in public history practices at many different levels.⁶¹ By 2015, both had been closed down by their universities due to the logic of corporatisation, which did not see such work as adding financial value to the task of an institution of higher learning. The planners argued that such services and facilities belonged outside the university.

In the competition between heritage and history, there is little doubt that heritage dominates. According to Peterson, 'South Africa stands out in today's heritage economy. In no others part of contemporary Africa is national heritage being debated with such vigour, force and ingenuity.'⁶² While the heritage sector commands the broader terrain of public history in South Africa, the production of new histories of a more conventional nature has not kept up. When South Africa is compared to other African countries that attained independence, there is an apparent gap in how it managed history-writing. For Petersen: 'It could be argued that if South Africa really had been liberated from white supremacy and neo-colonial dominance, it would have only been natural if a school of Africanist history writing had matured and prevailed.' But after more than ten years into democracy there are, he says, 'only weak tendencies in this direction.'⁶³ This lack of deeper transformation underlies the unrest of the current younger generation.

Making Public History Work: Case Studies

During 2012, when faced with the task from my local municipality of trying to guide the town's two-hundredth anniversary observations, I began to question whether anyone really knew what it took to make heritage projects work.⁶⁴ Where were the success stories? So I embarked on a search for answers, both by visiting sites and by talking to historian colleagues, as well as heritage practitioners. Schooled in the thinking of the National Heritage Council, as tested in the local government sphere, combined with my own teaching a course on public history, I started out with my own list of important criteria for the best practices. This included (1) sustainability of initiatives, knowing that funding is always constrained; (2) the extent of participation and ownership by the people

whose story was being told, to avoid the possibility of projects being imposed top-down; (3) healing components – how did a project make a difference in peoples’ feelings about themselves; (4) transforming the lopsided historical record to include more African experience and; (5) effectively sharing new information with a wider audience.

From my inquiries, it became clear that the dynamics of the earlier transition period were over. New levels of questioning and articulating unfinished mandates emerged at every turn. Perhaps most vocal of all were the staff and management of Robben Island Museum. They articulated a frank, almost unbearable, sense that their work was only scratching the surface of what needed to be done, and could be done.⁶⁵ As staff of a state-funded world heritage site, they felt great constraint at having to tell sanitized stories which glossed over the facts, in part to not offend white South Africans too much. As one manager put it: ‘we are silent on many things... we learned to keep secrets and not talk about certain things during tours... the perpetrators of torture are still here.’⁶⁶ Another stated: ‘the oppressed must forgive and then get nothing... it seems the process stopped. I felt punctured. Peace and democracy should not wipe out what happened.’⁶⁷ Like many other colleagues who engage with the public regularly, the educators on Robben Island who work with school groups felt that the way to help people deal with their deepest pains lay in sessions that are significantly longer than the standard two-and-a-half hour tour. They offer activities such as work camps or a Spring School which keeps children on the Island for a week at a time. As one educator said, many children ‘were in tears’ as they expressed so much pain, but then found release in developing videos to tell the stories.⁶⁸ The educators observed that it is very hard for the ex-prisoners who give tours to keep polite with visitors, but ‘the anger is under control’.⁶⁹

Marlene Seilbert, working at the Cape Town Holocaust Museum, also felt that much more is accomplished by creating spaces for lengthy and substantive dialogs. She offered workshops in conflict resolution, drawing parallels between Nazism and apartheid. They were in great demand by government departments, including the South African Police Service and the Department of Correctional Services. She observed that the need for even further dialog was always the conclusion of every session.⁷⁰

Similarly, Sean Field, then the Director of the Centre for Popular Memory at UCT, believed the best work he had seen included intensive sessions with teachers and school children, resulting in the production of videos. From this, he identified a number of recurring important themes:

the extent and depth of fear; social distance of elites; the silences black people had to maintain to survive – always appearing to agree with white domination; finding common humanity behind all the stereotypes; finding unknown heroes who bring a sense of pride and affirmation; and seeing that people can move from ‘othering’ to ‘understanding’.⁷¹ These are all initiatives which focus on the goal of healing, showing that it can be done, but only with time and careful guidance.

The History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand has maintained much of its 1970s and 1980s role of active engagement but has evolved with the times. It is more engaged with communities now in joint production of local histories, following peoples’ leads, and also does much work with schools and teaching. While it receives city government funding for various local projects, the staff try to keep a sense of independence and critical thinking – the academic contribution. Noor Nieftagodien, the Director of the History Workshop, sees its Alexandra Social History Project which started in 2006 as marking an important shift.⁷² It ‘introduced innovative practices of public history that included the training of local researchers and the participation of a Community Reference Group, which acted as a community representative body to oversee various aspects of the project.’⁷³ In the preface to the book published about Alexandra, the authors describe the project as the ‘foundation of heritage and tourism... to address the ills of the past and to build a better future’. This reflects the prevailing view of government; that heritage can bring tangible improvements into the lives of ordinary people.⁷⁴

Like the Wits History Workshop, the History Department of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has maintained its public activist stance from the 1980s. Starting in 1990, the Mayibuye Centre at UWC served as an archive for documentation of activities relating to the struggle against apartheid. When the moves to develop Robben Island into a visitor attraction and museum started, this centre drove the process. By the late 1990s, UWC partnered with the University of Cape Town and Robben Island Museum to run a new post-graduate diploma course in Museum and Heritage Studies.⁷⁵ Staff members at UWC have also been intimately involved in the development of two successful peoples’ history museums, the District 6 Museum in Cape Town and the Lwandle Migrant Workers Museum in Worcester.⁷⁶ Extensive participation in these projects formed the foundation of numerous critiques of the heritage sector from a group of three historians who have dubbed themselves ‘the troika’.⁷⁷ They view this work as a model for public history practice. From the late 1990s, they questioned hierarchies of power in the production of knowledge. History writing, they assert,

should move beyond simply recovering the stories of the previously marginalised people in society, into the task of ‘making visible and visual the representations of productions in the public domain.’⁷⁸ This, in turn, alters the very definitions of how history gets produced.

In addition to consulting with the people involved in these initiatives, I visited three centers which embody the five criteria outlined above. The Clanwilliam Living Landscapes project lies far off the beaten path and has received little attention. Roughly 230 kilometres north of Cape Town, it started as an archaeological field station linked with the work of University of Cape Town archaeologist, John Parkington, who specialised in the San – indigenous hunter-gatherers – rock art of the area. Located on land bought from a church by the University, it is now a multi-faceted center, including a museum, tours of rock art, accommodation, a craft shop and conference facility. Since 2006, it has hosted the Clanwilliam Arts Project, driven by Mark Fleishman and Pippa Skotnes from the University of Cape Town departments of Drama and Fine Art, respectively. After a week of running workshops for the children of the local low-income community, highlighting story-telling, dance, music and visual art, the children produce illuminated lanterns for an annual night parade through the town.⁷⁹ The content of the workshops derives from the 130-year old records made by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek, from interviews with San people from the Clanwilliam area who had been imprisoned in Cape Town. Thus, through the combination of historical research and creative representation, today’s youth are taught about the legacy of their ancestors, which is otherwise nearly invisible in the written record or in their everyday lives.

The Clanwilliam work offers a potential model of how a university might partner with small, impoverished communities in mutually beneficial ways. The visitor complex makes most of its money from conferences, workshops and overnight stays by visiting international students channelled there from Cape Town. This steady source of revenue, in turn, supports the other heritage activities. At one point, the center offered training courses in a variety of skills to local people, not limited to tour guiding alone.⁸⁰ The University benefits from having a base for research work, which to date includes archaeology, drama and art. In addition it has an affordable conference center in a historic setting, rich in rock art. However, the historical content could be deepened by including more of what is now known about the genocide of the San people by white settlers or the outcomes for indigenous people of centuries of cultural assimilation. The tour guide was unfamiliar with

such issues. All the staff at the center confirmed that the local community does not yet feel a sense of deep ownership of their San legacy, primarily viewing the project as the means of creating a few jobs.⁸¹

An example of a community center which puts the needs of its local community first is the Steve Biko Centre in King Williamstown, a medium-sized town in the Eastern Cape Province. Biko, considered the father of the 1970s Black Consciousness movement and brutally murdered by apartheid police, is often viewed as representing a political tradition in opposition to that of government. The center came into existence, however, on a combination of both government and private funding, belying the frequent assertion that the current government fails to honour anyone other than its own heroes. The planners studied international best practices before adopting the theme 'Memory, Discovery, Action', aiming from the start to make it a living community centre not a traditional museum.⁸² The story of Steve Biko's life was to be presented in order to inspire engagement. The centre features public lectures, space for youth groups to meet, rehearsal spaces, a conference centre, restaurant, shop, library and business advice centre, in addition to a comprehensive exhibition about the life and thinking of Steve Biko. In its operations, it created seventy jobs for local people, made sustainable by tapping into government funding for job-creation. Its sustainability and construction to date has depended largely on grant funding, mostly raised by Nkosinathi Biko, Steve Biko's charismatic son. But business plans include ideas about reaching four different specialised tourism markets as a way of making the center fully sustainable in the future.⁸³ It stands as one of the most successful and vibrant public history projects in South Africa. But it has received no attention from professional historians.

The Solms-Delta wine farm in the Western Cape Province offers an example which embodies all of the criteria particularly well. Since I have written about it extensively elsewhere, a brief summary will suffice here.⁸⁴ Perhaps what is most unique about Solms-Delta is that knowledge of its deep history prompted the owner to enter into a one-third shared ownership arrangement with the farm-worker families who lived there. Profits from the wine business thus went into dramatically improving the living conditions of the workers. The intensive engagement with the history of the place and it surrounds resulted in an archaeological dig, the production of a social history museum which highlights the contributions of former slaves and workers, an indigenous music museum, an indigenous garden to provide food for a themed restaurant and an annual harvest festival. All of these features came about through

the inputs of academics with expertise in each area, but also included the teaching and training of local staff on how to use the information. Once the quality of life for the workers began to change, a flourishing of musical outputs developed. It has now become a model for a new government land reform scheme.

Conclusion

Public history practise in South Africa holds out much promise of things to come. It has the potential to close the gulf between history and heritage. The role of the public historian should not be conflated with the dynamics of the heritage sector. Trained academics can put their skills to work in a society that is passionately interested in understanding itself and how its pasts created the present. And public historians can work towards creating new spaces for the co-production of knowledge and the harnessing of traditional, indigenous knowledges.

The student movement sharply raised the issue of the ongoing crisis in universities. The tertiary sector in South Africa and elsewhere requires a whole new, relevant curriculum and needs to deeply rethink the ways that universities relate to their publics. The divide between academia and communities is huge and needs to be constantly tackled, providing access to the often inaccessible knowledge and skills of the professional world.⁸ Due to their privileged place in society, many historians have been unable or unwilling to engage with the recovery agenda – the massive need for the affirmation of African identity, capacity and culture. A handful of dedicated public historians have been exemplary in rolling up their sleeves and boldly engaging with the messy complications of dealing with non-academic communities to produce new forms of historical knowledge, based on inclusiveness.

The outlines of the recovery agenda for the post-transition period are clear. In South Africa, the public history sector is diversifying in a number of ways, moving beyond the initial drive to focus primarily on struggle history. The imperative to demonstrate the ‘triumph of the human spirit’ has not yet run its course, but is likely to take more diverse directions. It can be found in purely African precolonial studies, the targeting of intangible African cultural values and practices and the more inclusive agenda of broader social histories which incorporate sports, religion, education, environmental and family histories among many others. In South Africa it is now time to tackle the difficult tasks of engaging in tough dialogs about the nature of privileges and power; the current manifestations of racially-based thinking and practices; and finding the courage to talk about deep injuries that have until now been

considered buried or taboo. Perhaps more historians can see their way into creating the spaces for shared knowledge-production and its popularisation, without feeling they have been co-opted into a government propaganda machine. Partnerships of various sorts, bringing together those in public history, academia, the private sector, government and involved publics and communities with a passion for social justice will contribute to national recovery in South Africa.

ENDNOTES

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