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Mohammed Adhikari , Howard Phillips , Liese van der Watt , Ian-Malcolm Rijsdijk , Lance van Sittert , Harriet Deacon , Natasha Erlank , Lindsay Clowes , Nigel Worden & Vivian Bickford-Smith

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## Reports on Colloquium Sessions

*Session 1:*  
**Writing and Teaching Race and Ethnicity in  
African History in the Twenty-First Century**

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The predominant theme of this, the opening session of the colloquium, was the marked avoidance of race and ethnicity as explanatory concepts in South African historical writing during the era of white supremacy. There was, however, general recognition of a greater willingness to engage with issues of race and ethnicity in the more recent past.

The main speaker, Professor Saul Dubow of Sussex University, started off by observing that, while studies of race and ethnicity have of late become quite fashionable in the South African academy, these concepts had previously been shunned as explanatory tools. This was partly a consequence of the political context, as the liberatory movement, particularly those sections allied to the African National Congress, sought to counter apartheid by fostering non-racial values and had a general 'disdain for any hint of tribalism'. Also, the intellectual climate was one strongly influenced by Marxist theory, which emphasised class as central to understanding historical change. Dubow, in addition, identified the Non-European Unity Movement's rejection of Coloured identity as a meaningful category and the liberal tradition with its universalist premises as significant to the regional context in which UCT operated. He, moreover, noted that this avoidance of race and ethnicity occurred before the influence of post-modernist theory on the discipline, when 'it was taken as an article of faith that the authorial self ought to be concealed in the interests of objectivity and detachment'.

Next, Dubow identified a number of influences that encouraged South African historians to engage more seriously with questions of race and ethnicity from and after the early 1980s. Firstly, a growing body of scholarship on Africa from the 1960s onwards demonstrated that ethnic affiliations were 'not some simple hangover from the pre-colonial past, but were intimately associated with the creation of modernity'. Secondly, a seminal conference held at the University of Virginia in 1983 and the resultant volume, *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, edited by Leroy Vail, presented a wide range of case studies of the malleability of ethnic identities in southern and central Africa. Drawing on the

key theoretical insights of studies such as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, this influential book encouraged further studies in a similar mould. Dubow, thirdly, identified the work of Hermann Giliomee and Andre du Toit on the origins of Afrikaner nationalism, as well as that of Heribert Adam on the mobilisation of Afrikaner ethnicity, as crucial to opening up debates about ethnic identity among South African historians and dissolving the artificial theoretical boundaries between the liberal and neo-Marxist positions. Fourthly, ethnic conflict in South Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s created a sense of urgency around the need to understand ethnicity. Despite these developments, by the mid 1990s there nevertheless remained a 'deep reluctance' among many to admit to the salience of racial and ethnic identities in South Africa.

Turning to UCT's contribution to this growing body of scholarship, Dubow reiterated the importance of Du Toit and Giliomee's contributions, in addition citing Emile Boonzaaier and John Sharp's interventions as examples of influential work produced outside of the History Department. He was of the opinion, however, that for the most part 'anthropology's embrace of historical materialism meant that new opportunities for original research were spurned rather than embraced'. Within the History Department Dubow identified the writings of Vivian Bickford-Smith on Victorian Cape Town, Mohamed Adhikari on Coloured identity, Anne Mager on the Eastern Cape, Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain on the Jewish community and Patrick Harries on Tsonga identity as significant. Prior to the appearance of their studies, it would be difficult to identify a tradition of interest in race and ethnicity amongst UCT historians. Some of the work of Leonard Thompson and Eric Walker, though, could be seen to have made a contribution in this regard, particularly the latter's work on the nature of South African Englishness. Rodney Davenport's book on the Afrikaner Bond stands out as the most important study of ethnicity emanating from UCT during this earlier phase.

Finally, Dubow reflected on his experience of teaching race and ethnicity, one largely confined to Britain. He reported that many of his students were shocked to learn about the history of scientific racism and its relationship with imperialism, since these ideas were completely foreign to them. They were, however, not greatly surprised to learn of the negative connotations attached to ideas of ethnicity and tribalism in places like South Africa. Being generally well-travelled and having grown up in a multi-cultural society, they tended to be 'instinctive, albeit naïve, cultural relativists who were not troubled by the notion that other people are not like themselves'. While this multi-cultural, post-modern outlook may be an advance, it paradoxically also involves a loss, as students seem to be less curious about other people and more inclined to think about themselves and their own subjectivities.

In conclusion, Dubow drew attention to Hobsbawm's autobiography, in which this 'arch modernist', in response to the post-modern trend of introspection

and advocacy of in-group interests, insists that historians should stand 'at an angle to the universe' and resist emotional identification with chosen groups as this leads to unsatisfactory and biased history.

The next speaker, Professor Hermann Giliomee, who had been at both Stellenbosch and UCT, broadly concurred with the foregoing analysis, especially the comments regarding the avoidance of race in South African historical writing. He felt that it might be worthwhile adding Leonard Thompson's work on the frontier to the list of those having made a contribution to an understanding of race, even though this was produced after he had left South Africa. Giliomee also identified Richard van der Ross's work on Coloured identity and Mohamed Adhikari's *Straatpraatjes* as significant in this regard. He added that he was struck by how little contact there had been between academics researching race and identity at the three universities of the Western Cape and how little their work had influenced one another. Rather than shying away from it as they had hitherto been doing, Giliomee felt that it would be productive for historians to take constructions of whiteness seriously. He cited the opinion of Fernando Ribeiro, a Brazilian anthropologist who had done a comparative study of race, class and ethnicity in Cape Town and Rio de Janeiro, that South Africans of different racial and ethnic groups had not yet found an intelligible way of talking to each other about apartheid. In closing, Giliomee expressed the view that coming to grips with apartheid was the greatest challenge currently facing South African historians.

Professor Milton Shain from UCT's Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, started out by presenting evidence that in popular perceptions the number of Jews and their role in South African society are generally exaggerated, sometimes wildly so. Yet, he observed, the Jewish community is virtually absent from general histories of South Africa – as are virtually all other white ethnic minority groups. Shain cited the *Oxford History of South Africa*, Rodney Davenport's *South Africa: A Modern History*, *The Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa*, Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa*, William Beinart's *Twentieth Century South Africa*, in addition to several others, as examples of general histories from which Jews were excluded, except perhaps for a few incidental references. He stressed that he was not insinuating any sinister motive on the part of authors, but rather pointing out that the absence of minority ethnic groups from national survey histories – it would seem that Indians were the one exception – does raise questions about the state of ethnic history in South Africa and the conceptualisation of our national histories. Shain emphasised that he was not advocating a conceptualisation of South African history in terms of an 'ethnic peopling' or the inclusion of 'internal' ethnic histories in these syntheses. He did, however, feel that the appearance of an ethnic group such as the Jews in these histories needed to go beyond a sentence or two and that readers be given a sense of the making of South Africa's cultural tapestry. Shain pointed to Charles van Onselen's 'Randlords and rotgut' as an excellent example of how the history of the

Jewish community can be shown to intersect with the history of South African society broadly.

Dr Mohamed Adhikari's presentation centred around his changing experience between the 1980s, when he started researching Coloured identity, and the more recent past. Whereas there is currently open and sometimes intense interest in the nature and history of Coloured identity, and questions about the legitimacy of studying the topic would now be absurd, that is precisely what had happened in the 1980s. The politically correct line of the democratic movement of the 1980s was not only to reject Coloured identity but also to treat it as if the identity did not really exist, except as a fiction created by white supremacists to divide and rule the black majority. Thus, any recognition of Coloured identity as social reality, especially if done publicly, was likely to be condemned as a concession to apartheid thinking, if not rejected outright as racist. Adhikari noted that he had come in for a fair degree of criticism during the 1980s for demonstrating the social significance of Coloured identity. The more dogmatic forms of Coloured rejectionism were largely swept away by F.W. de Klerk's reforms of 1990 and the subsequent competition between political parties for support within the Coloured community. Nelson Mandela's urging of ANC supporters in the early 1990s to recognise 'Coloured ethnicity as a political reality' was identified by Adhikari as a defining moment in the breaking down of the politically correct fiction that Coloured identity was some form of false consciousness. Any doubts about the salience of Coloured identity were dissolved by the majority of Coloured voters flocking to the banner of the National Party in the 1994 elections. Coloured identity and politics has in the meantime become an issue of intense interest and deep controversy, and is destined to remain so for the foreseeable future, if for no other reason than the pivotal role it plays in the way the South African racial hierarchy operates.

The final presenter, Dr David Scher of the University of the Western Cape, started off by identifying himself as a 'recipient' of the 'Adam to Adolf' first-year survey course at UCT during the 1970s and felt that he had benefited greatly from its broad sweep of European history. He lamented that the current tendency in undergraduate history curricula, of teaching courses focused more on the contemporary period and on narrow geographical regions, resulted in a degree of intellectual impoverishment and stunted general knowledge of history among students. He felt that providing a broader historical education could be achieved without being Eurocentric. Dr Scher suggested that there was a continuing reluctance to address issues of race and ethnicity at South African universities as they were still in the throes of transformation. The current state of affairs echoed the situation in the early decades of the twentieth century when, in the context of the English-Afrikaner divide, there was debate about whether South African universities should follow the 'fusionist' or conciliatory route, on the one hand, or the 'volks' or ethnically exclusive model, on the other. Despite following the conciliatory model and attracting significant numbers of Afrikaner students, UCT

nevertheless experienced a good deal of ethnic tension in the 1920s and 1930s, as the majority of Afrikaans-speakers felt alienated by the dominant English ethos of the institution. Scher suggested that this experience informs UCT's current reluctance to broach matters that may be regarded as racially or ethnically divisive.

Professor Vivian Bickford-Smith, who chaired the session, initiated the discussion by suggesting that historians should not only be writing about racial and ethnic identities, but that they should be mindful of the interplay between them, as well as the broad spectrum of identities available to people which may be derived from such aspects of social life as class, gender, religion and even occupation.

Professor Toyin Falola, from the University of Texas, Austin, wanted to broaden the discussion beyond South Africa. He noted that globally the dynamic of the post-September 11th context was one in which ethnicity had gained greater force as governments used it as part of a range of classificatory mechanisms to implement security measures and to gain greater control over populations, the full consequences of which cannot yet be imagined. Falola felt that in Africa the initiative in researching and writing about race and ethnicity needed to be shifted to African scholars. One fruitful way of doing this, he suggested, was for the establishment of institutes of Western studies at African universities, because the opposite, institutes of African studies at Western universities, were the norm. He added that he was not persuaded by suggestions that ethnic identities had, as a matter of course, been eroded in post-modern, multi-cultural societies because of his own experience of the tenacity of such identities in the industrialised North. Identities such as Yoruba, Igbo and Kikuyu within the African immigrant population of the United States, even among people who had been born in North America and who have never visited Africa, remained vibrant.

Professor Shula Marks of the University of London stressed the need to historicise ethnic and racial identities. She cautioned that race and ethnicity cannot be abstracted from issues of gender and class because males and females and people from different class backgrounds experience racial and ethnic identities differently.

In response to some of the issues raised in the discussion, Dubow pointed out that ethnicities change meaning over time, citing South African Jewishness's embracing of Englishness as an example. It also needed to be taken into account that the same forces and devices that went into the making of racial and ethnic identities at any point were often also involved in the construction of gender, class and other identities.

Towards the end of the discussion, Professor Nelly Hanna, of the American University of Cairo, warned that it should not be taken for granted that ethnic identities are necessarily paramount in the lives of people. Religious identity may, for example, be more important.

The overall sentiment of the session was perhaps best captured by Dubow's concluding remarks to his presentation, that heeding Hobsbawm's useful

corrective to the post-modernist tendency toward self-absorption, should help us 'to write without apology but with sensitivity and self-awareness about others without othering them and to write about ourselves with similar detachment and distance'.

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*Session 2:*  
**Writing and Teaching National History in Africa in  
an Era of Global History**

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This session of the colloquium began where the preceding one had left off, with the lead-in speaker, Professor Toyin Falola of the University of Texas, arguing that if 'race' and 'ethnicity' were meaningful concepts for historical understanding, so too was 'nation'.

For him, national history was both meaningful and vital in the current era of globalisation, when global history was being touted as the only paradigm within which seriously to understand modern processes and events. Indeed, he believed that national history was an essential defence – even means of survival – against the dominant brand of global history in the contemporary world, which in his view amounted to 'a narrative of western power and its expansion, ... [which sought to turn] the national history of one great power [the USA] into the metanarrative of global history ... by eras[ing] the experiences of so-called local identities, sweeping the dust of the ethnic under the carpet of the national, and the national itself under the table of the universal'.

He defended the idea of national history against those who regarded a national framework as either weak or untenable in the face of 'transnational formation', for the nation-state was still the most common political mechanism to organise people within distinct boundaries and under distinct governments, while national history was itself a major element in the nation-building process. As a powerful instrument against globalist attempts to provincialise the history of those outside the mainstream of Western history, it provided a means for non-Westerners to be heard amidst the most prominent version of global history which he perceived as an accompaniment to globalisation. Without national history, where, he asked, would the African voice, for instance, be heard in histories? National

history could not and should not ignore global history, but it should not be superseded by it either.

However, for all these positive features of national history, he was well aware that the concept and its application were not unproblematic. It was itself a construct too, which too often slurred over disparate local identities, trying to homogenise them with its excessive focus on the national state, its rulers and their interests and activities. Historians should always ask ‘whose nation, whose history?’ when attempting to write or read national history. A much broader conception of national history was necessary than was common in African historiography to date, one which was inclusive of all layers of society, not just the national elite, and one which also recognised how Western concepts of the nation and nationalism had been indigenised, enriched, energised and enhanced when transferred abroad. This was what had taken place at the University of Ibadan in the 1950s and 1960s, and this was the key to the success of authors like Soyinka and Achebe. For this reason he felt that ‘traditions, localism, communities, ruralism, indigenous knowledge should inform what we do against the background of external ideas and “universalistic” methodologies and approaches’. Such a broadly conceived national history should, in his opinion, inform university history syllabuses. ‘National history – rather than global history – can be the centre of the curriculum, with the goal of understanding a country’s experience within a regional and continental framework and with other courses to compare and contrast experiences in a global world.’ Such a wide-angled approach would also act as an antidote to one of the dangers of an overemphasis on national history, xenophobia.

Predictably, the discussion which followed concentrated on the strengths and weaknesses of national history as exemplified in African historiography. Dr Shamil Jeppie (UCT) wondered about the suitability of a national history framework when it came to writing about states which spanned what later became national boundaries (e.g. Sokoto or the Almoravid Empire). Historians (and their students in particular) needed to be alive to the flaws in purported national histories which were in fact little more than the histories of one dominant group in the state, masquerading as national history (for example, Holt’s history of the Sudan which inordinately privileged the Muslim North, or histories of Ethiopia which were really histories of the Amhara). To these, Dr Maanda Mulaudzi (UCT) added a local example of historians presenting part as the whole: the depiction of Soweto as the norm of black South African experience from the 1970s, which ignored the very different processes then at work in rural South Africa.

On this point Professor Patrick Harries (University of Basle) referred to the way in which some French historians in the 1970s had re-conceived the national history of France from the bottom up as it were, with their point of departure being how local communities had thought of France. Perhaps this patchwork quilt of different takes on the nation was a model for historians of African countries to follow.



As necessary to deconstruct as these top-down, synecdochial national histories, observed Jeppie, were uncritical nationalist histories which portrayed the triumphant making of a nation as the predestined outcome of complex and often contradictory processes, to the exclusion of all other possibilities. As Professor Nelly Hanna of the American University of Cairo remarked: 'We need to distinguish between national history and nationalistic history.'

Several speakers interrogated the need for national history to recognise the existence of disparate local identities, and not to try to homogenise them by depicting national history as the history of a single, monolithic nation. Histories of these distinct communities should rather become the building blocks for all-embracing national histories. As an example of these, Dr David Gordon (University of Maryland) pointed to the existence in Zambia of popular vernacular histories of particular ethnic groups, written in local languages by 'organic intellectuals'. Not surprisingly, however, these had generally been ignored by historians in the academy.

Unlike in most other sessions, the South African experience was not much to the fore in this session. Professor Albert Grundlingh (University of Stellenbosch) did suggest that the glaring lack of a scholarly, Africanist national history of South Africa might be the result of the challenges to the very concept of national history posed by postmodernism, the rise of social and gendered history, and a wish to close the door on a past in which national history had been closely tied to an apartheid agenda. South Africa was perhaps as yet too fragile to conceive of a national past.

Yet, many agreed that in any national history, the national state and its conduct would necessarily loom very large, if only because it generated reams of records, the very bread and butter of historians. As a result, Professor Shula Marks (University of London) noted, history as a modern discipline had had a long history of a close association with the nation-state.

The other chief component of Falola's lead-in address, the relationship between national and global history, enjoyed much less attention in the discussion, apart from Marks's suggestion that global history might be imaginatively re-conceived in a way different from that which currently predominated in the world, as comparative national history, which would open up space for national history, but conceived of in an outward-looking fashion. To this, a smiling Toyin Falola added, more subversively, why not think of global history from the bottom up? That would alter what was seen in the kaleidoscope of history decisively!

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*Session 3:*  
**The Role of the University in Writing and Teaching History  
in Africa in the Twenty-First Century**

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On three scores this session differed from most other sessions of the colloquium. First, in Professor Robert Addo-Fening from the University of Ghana it had a non-South Africanist as lead-in speaker; second, half of its panel of discussants consisted of educationalists whose primary focus was history in schools rather than history at universities; and third, the session was chaired by a 'historian *manqué*' (as he termed himself), the sociologist Professor Robin Cohen, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at UCT. These features gave to discussions an unusually wide range, which helped broaden the perspectives of the South African historians who made up the bulk of those present at the colloquium.

Addo-Fening began by sketching the dismal plight of history at universities in Ghana at present: heavily diminished student numbers compared to a decade ago, and depleted, disheartened and ill-paid staff in history departments, who provide unimaginative teaching and promote rote-learning, thereby producing a profession less and less able to reproduce itself. Over the last decade eight posts had remained vacant at the University of Ghana for want of suitable applicants.

This dire situation he attributed to the disappearance of history as an autonomous subject in schools and therefore of the need for specifically trained history teachers, inappropriate and out-dated university syllabuses, a widespread belief that a training in history led nowhere in the job-market and a general perception that history was irrelevant to problems of the present and the future. The result of this marginalisation of history throughout the educational system was a generation of Ghanaians with little national historical awareness; to Addo-Fening they seemed to be 'ignorant Westerners rather than real Africans'.

To reverse this grave situation he suggested that history syllabuses and teaching at universities be comprehensively overhauled: syllabuses should include dimensions of the past especially pertinent to development (e.g. history of agriculture, science and technology, the environment, medicine, architecture); teaching should be reformed to promote critical thinking and engagement by staff and students; and government should be made aware of the relevance of history to furthering exciting new continent-wide initiatives like the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD).

Recognising in this cheerless portrayal of the grim state of history in Ghana too many similarities (or potential similarities) with the situation in South Africa since 1994, most of the discussants focussed their comments on how to counter

such a deterioration which, going by remarks from the floor, was to be found elsewhere in West Africa as well as in Egypt.

Taking up one of Addo-Fening's recommendations, Associate Professor Rob Sieborger (School of Education, UCT) spelled out three critical competencies which university history departments should inculcate into students who wished to teach history in schools if history was to flourish at this level: historical imagination, historical literacy and the know-how to find information independently, and the capacity to turn this information into an exciting, challenging history lesson. To illustrate these he gave a concrete example of how a Grade 4 teacher had used prisoners' accounts as a basis for getting learners to think imaginatively about the attitudes of warders on Robben Island during the 1970s.

Dr Ciraj Rassool (UWC) introduced a fresh perspective to the session's by-now dispirited navel-gazing by reminding those present that university history departments were, of course, not the sole sites for the production of history which was then popularised for the public. Especially since 1994 in South Africa, popularly accessible history was equally produced at other locations like museums, heritage sites and community organisations. What university history departments had to do was to prepare their students to practise historical skills in such locations too, and not just in the school classroom. Such locations constituted a new job-market for historical skills, but in so doing they challenged departments to re-think their syllabuses and teaching methods to meet this new demand appropriately. As a functioning example of such innovation, he referred to the Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies which was jointly taught by UCT, UWC and the Robben Island Museum.

With Rassool's outline of new opportunities and new challenges to history departments Professor Nigel Worden (UCT) agreed entirely, citing his own experience of how a topic (slavery at the Cape) had been transformed in terms of who studied it and how over the last 25 years. In the 1980s it had been the preserve of a handful of university-based scholars, but since then their research has been popularised for a larger public, and nowadays non-academics who claimed descent from slaves were keen to carry out research themselves, insisting that they wanted to be able to explore their own history themselves. Appropriately in this regard, he drew attention to the community outcry in Cape Town within the last weeks over the fate of the (slave?) remains found in the burial ground at Prestwich Place near the Waterfront.

In terms of South African university history departments re-thinking who and what they taught and to what end, he outlined UCT's experience since 1999. With a fall-off in students wanting to teach history in schools becoming evident, the then History Department had introduced novel first-year courses with a wide popular appeal, especially those which put contemporary problems into historical perspective. The result had been a massive increase in enrolments, but with this difference, viz. the majority of students taking courses in the department were now

not planning to major in history. They were students pursuing other careers, but who saw in contemporary history an effective way of understanding the present.

However, Worden warned against offering only crowd-pleasing courses which were narrow in ambit, either temporally or geographically. An exclusive focus on African history, for example, ran the risk of fuelling a sense of African exceptionalism, unaware of illuminating comparisons to be made with Asia or Latin America.

The final discussant, Dr June Bam of the national Department of Education assured Worden that the new national curriculum for schools sought to avoid such narrow conceptions of the past by stressing South Africa's position in wider regional, continental and global contexts. It promoted the idea of common, shared experience across humanity, from the 'cradle of mankind' to South Africa as part of the developing world. Within these, a distinct but wide-ranging South African identity could be grounded. In developing these notions and turning them into school history, she invited university historians to participate, as some at UCT were already doing in her department's 'Turning Points in South African History' project.

In the discussion from the floor which followed, concerns were expressed that, in their eagerness for a place in the sun, hard-pressed history departments which responded positively to Bam's invitation might compromise their academic integrity. What, it was asked, would an appropriate relationship between universities and the state be: collaborative, complementary or oppositional? In the latter mode, the Department of Education's unilateral decision to republish for distribution to all schools the UNESCO *History of Africa* was questioned. Was this not too outdated and complex a work to impose on schools?<sup>1</sup> Would it not be far more effective to resort to a kind of *History Today* magazine to make current academic work accessible?

A different concern raised was that the concentration on popularising history would compromise the output of scholarly history aimed primarily at scholars, with the attendant loss of standing in the profession and thus in the eyes of the public. Rassool disagreed, believing that the two kinds of history production were not mutually exclusive,

In bringing the wide-ranging session to an end, Cohen suggested that, from his perspective as dean of the faculty in which the Department of Historical Studies was situated, he could point out to intending students and their parents the many new job opportunities for which history (as taught at UCT) was an ideal preparation: for example, in the heritage and tourist industry, in documentary

1. A reply to this question was made in Session 8 ('Unfree Labour') by another Department of Education official, Dr Thabo Raphoto, who said that the great virtue of the UNESCO *History* was that it located South Africa's experience within an African context. For him, this far outweighed any shortcomings it might have.

film-making, in the media and in land-claim projects. With this positive endorsement the session ended, in a vein very different from that with which it had begun.

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***Session 4:***  
**Writing and Teaching Visual History in Africa in the  
Twenty-First Century**

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What started out as a session aimed at discussing the teaching and writing of visual history in the twenty-first century, in line with the broad themes of the centenary colloquium, soon became a discussion of the history of visuality, a rather different question. This was somewhat inevitable given the fact that this particular panel of the colloquium was made up of art and film historians who form part of the broader UCT Historical Studies Department, but spend their time confronted with the power of the visual and thinking about the politics of visuality. And so, whereas other sessions were more tightly framed around a specific theme within the field of history – such as medical or environmental history – this panel raised a wide variety of questions and signalled issues which are perhaps more pressing in visual disciplines.

The lead-in speaker, Professor Sandra Klopper of the Department of Fine Art at Stellenbosch University, presented a fascinating paper in which she pointed to the importance of visual literacy in an increasingly visual world. In line with a host of visual culture theorists such as Nick Mirzoeff and Irit Rogoff, Klopper demonstrated that vision and the visual are crucial to the production of meaning and are never simply reflections or illustrations of experience. This means that visual images cannot be taken as transparent ‘windows’ on the world or innocent documents of history, but should be queried for the power relations embedded in all modes of visual communication. Meaning is never located in an image but always in the social spaces that surround an image: text and context inevitably anchor and influence our reading of images. This view was immediately challenged by Anna Tietze of UCT in an argument for what might be called ‘the innocent eye’. In this view, not all images need to be anchored by texts or contexts; certain images are more captivating than others simply because of their sheer beauty, sensitivity or skilful execution. So, for instance, the image by local graffiti artist, Falko, of a middle-aged Superman with an Afro hairstyle, that Klopper used to demonstrate the necessity of asking appropriate questions in

decoding images, was said to compare badly with Degas' painting of two men at the Paris stock exchange, which Klopper ironically invoked to demonstrate her point further. The Degas, Tietze argued, is simply, obviously, perhaps one could say objectively, a 'better' painting and a more successful artwork. While the comment about the Degas had much to do with the skill that went into the work, these kinds of arguments point to a much deeper division within the field of History of Art over what is included in and excluded from the canon. These are the kinds of arguments that have helped certain art historians to police the canon with notions of authenticity and quality, and have forced others into articulating more post-disciplinary spaces, such as the emergent Visual Culture meant to address the plethora of visual forms that populate our world today. It is in the face of this multitude of visual forms and 'the relentless abstraction of the visual' – as art historian Jonathan Crary has described the disembodiment of vision because of digital technology – that we need to study the mutation of vision, which means the history of visuality rather than visual history.

Much of the debate revolved around visual art in the form of paintings, photographs, and graffiti, and the extent to which these have to be contextualised. Dr Leslie Witz of UWC pointed out tellingly that the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam was now rearranging its display of Rembrandt's paintings no longer as timeless 'great' art but thematically as historical texts showing changes in social life in the past. The need for historians to use visual art critically was stressed, with Kallaway's *Johannesburg: Images and Continuities* being cited as a good example of this and Luli Callinicos's *Gold and Workers* as too bland in this regard. On this theme, Ian Rijdsdijk, one of the UCT Historical Studies Department's film historians, emphasised how important it is to place films in historical context too, with regard to when they were produced and the period they were meant to represent. Films constitute a constant dialogue between meaning now and meaning then. He argued for a critical, contextualised use of film – both feature and documentary – in the teaching of history, particularly in the light of its increasing use as a popular medium to tell 'historical' stories. While historical events and people have been depicted cinematically since the early days of film, it is only in the last twenty years or so that serious debate among historians has emerged regarding the representation of history on film. The debate has moved from notions of 'accuracy' and 'fidelity' to more complex questions of representation and the special capabilities of film to tell stories in ways different from written history. Echoing the 'innocent eye' debate earlier in the session, Associate Professor Richard Mendelsohn of UCT referred to a major issue in film historiography: should historians see films as works of art or as texts? The importance of film, for good or bad, in representing historical narratives was also discussed, notably film's ability to illuminate, obscure, strengthen or challenge conventional views of well-known figures or events. In this regard, Professor Shula Marks of London University observed that the attempt by a recent TV series to put across a different image of Rhodes and the Ndebele had largely been thwarted by the

preconceptions of many British viewers prompted by seeing Zulu-type dress and customs. Questions from the floor concerned the danger of history films, given their persuasive power, not so much in the propaganda sense of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, but more through their capacity to entertain while contracting and abbreviating events.

A second debate dealt with representation, for example depictions of Africa on film, particularly negative images of Africa in Hollywood film. A recent Bruce Willis vehicle, *Tears of the Sun*, was cited as a typical view of Africa that reinforced stereotypes, not only of African people and countries, but also of their relation to the world community. How is one to guard against or even challenge such simplistic representations? How should one 'educate' viewers and help them to understand the apparatuses used by filmmakers to construct meanings in film? It was suggested by Rijdsdijk that the process of teaching film involved, initially, challenging or even dismantling the complacency regarding film as a 'pleasurable' medium intended only for entertainment. As students develop an understanding of how film communicates, how it structures narrative and uses editing, cinematography and sound to achieve ideological ends, they then embrace with greater zeal the more complex issues of representing race and gender. The varied discussion during the session indicated both the complexity of the relationship between history, visual art, and film, as well as the importance of visual art and film in approaching an understanding of history.

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***Session 5:***  
**Writing and Teaching the History of Land and the  
Environment in Africa in the Twenty-First Century**

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Since the late 1980s the environmental trope in South African history has been gradually elevated to a field of enquiry in its own right. The impetus to this transformation has been varied, the blossoming of environmental history in the North American academy and green politics and agrarian social history in South Africa being among the more influential. With such diverse origins, South African environmental history has evolved into a broad church whose catechism has thus

far defied the best efforts at scholarly synthesis or explication.<sup>2</sup> One scholar whose timely reviews of the field have both mile-stoned and moulded its development is Professor William Beinart (University of Oxford), and it was thus particularly appropriate that he should provide the keynote address on the subject at the centenary colloquium.<sup>3</sup>

Beinart took as his main theme the need to situate South African environmental history in broader comparative perspective. He pointed out that when seen in the African context, South Africa (along with the other 'Mediterranean' colony, Algeria) was unique for its high level of European settlement, but when viewed in a wider global context alongside the Americas and Australasia, it was a failure inasmuch as European settlers did not achieve demographic majority as they did in the temperate zone colonies. A number of universal theories have been advanced to explain the success of the European diaspora and these, Beinart suggested, might also usefully be deployed to develop explanations for the blocked demographic transformation in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> In other words, historians need to try to define what factors allowed Europeans to establish a beachhead in southern Africa, but prevented them from breaking out from there to become the dominant population in the region. Beinart speculated that the answer lay in a medley of environmental, demographic and disease parameters, which, although not absolute, explained both the successes and failures of settler colonialism.

Second, Beinart emphasised the need for appropriate comparative examples. South Africa's rich agrarian historiography, he pointed out, was dominated by European (transition from feudalism to capitalism) and American (plantation slavery) comparative models and hence focussed disproportionately on the 40 per cent of the country that was better-watered and sustained crop production, the

2. For these efforts, see J. Carruthers, 'Towards an Environmental History of Southern Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 23 (1990), 184-95; S. Brooks, 'The Environment in History: New Themes for South African Geography', in C. Rogerson and J. McCarthy, eds, *Geography in a Changing South Africa: Progress and Prospects* (Cape Town, 1992), 158-72; W. Beinart and P. Coates, *Environment and History: The Taming of Nature in the USA and South Africa* (London, 1995), 1-16; P. Steyn, 'A Greener Past? An Assessment of South African Environmental Historiography', *New Contree*, 46 (1999), 7-27; and J. Carruthers, 'Environmental History in Southern Africa: An Overview' in S. Dovers *et al.*, eds, *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and Comparisons* (Pietermaritzburg, 2002), 3-15.
3. See W. Beinart, 'Introduction: The Politics of Colonial Conservation', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15 (1989), 143-62; W. Beinart, 'Empire, Hunting and Ecological Change in Southern and Central Africa', *Past and Present*, 128 (1990), 162-87; W. Beinart, 'African History and Environmental History', *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 269-302; W. Beinart, 'South African Environmental History in the African Context', in Dovers *et al.*, *South Africa's Environmental History*, 215-26; and W. Beinart and J. Macgregor, 'Introduction', in W. Beinart and J. Macgregor, eds, *Social History and African Environments* (Oxford, 2003), 1-24.
4. W.H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York, 1976); A.W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 1986); C. Wills, *Yellow Fever, Black Goddess: The Co-Evolution of People and Plagues* (New York, 1997); J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13000 Years* (London, 1998).



maize revolution, landlord-tenant relations or slavery (in the case of the social and environmental 'island' of the south-western Cape). Such comparisons were ironic given the relatively low levels of arable land in South Africa, and consigned the dominant pastoral economy to the intellectual and social margins, treated only as either a frontier phenomenon practised by migrant trekboers or a subsistence pursuit in the African reserves. Beinart's new book provided a much-needed corrective to the prevailing agrarian history orthodoxy by focussing on the commercial pastoral economy of the Cape and treating it comparatively with Australia.<sup>5</sup>

Third, Beinart flagged knowledge about the environment as an area thus far relatively neglected within South African environmental history. He pointed out that, until as late as the 1960s, the majority of the country's population, both black and white, were rural, and hence environment was central to their knowledge and skills over a very long period. Taking the example of commercial pastoralism, he suggested that the necessarily intimate human interrelationships with livestock that this economy mandated spawned a hybrid 'Cape vernacular' knowledge, derived from indigenous, European, folk and scientific sources, about how to manage animals and pastures, which had very old and deep local roots. The recovery of this and other indigenous knowledge systems should be a priority for environmental historians.

Finally, Beinart raised the issue of the state. The environment was a major arena of action and environmental management a key focus of policy for the various colonial states and their successor national state in the region, and environmental history was thus a potential way of broadening the understanding of state praxis and power. Indeed, citing the central place of betterment in twentieth-century South African history, he speculated that a disproportionately high level of environmental intervention might even be a distinctive characteristic of the South African state when seen in comparative perspective with that, for example, of Australia.

Dr Lance van Sittert (UCT) thought it equally important to recover the historical role of environment in South African historiography as to develop comparative histories. Environment was a very old trope and interdisciplinary borrowing a very old practice in the historiography, despite the claims to novelty on both fronts made by environmental historians today. Liberals, Afrikaner nationalists and radicals had made generous use of environment to buttress their arguments, particularly about the nature of the white nation state and its citizens. Environment was the central explanatory mechanism in the so-called 'frontier thesis' of the liberals, as well as in the definition of 'volk' by the Afrikaner nationalists, both traditions having been influenced by acclimatisation debates in

5. W. Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment, 1770-1950* (Oxford, 2003).

geography. Similarly, the liberal-Africanists and radicals, borrowing freely from archaeology, had, in the final third of the twentieth century, made environment the motor of the region's pre-colonial history. There was thus, to borrow Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool's term, a 'non-innocence' about environment in South African history, which needs to be understood as an integral part of the process of writing the new environmental history.<sup>6</sup>

Dr Maanda Mulaudzi (UCT) endorsed Beinart's call for a shift in focus within agrarian history, away from arable farming to the arid margins. In his own work on land dispossession in the Limpopo Valley, environment was both a recurring alibi for the failure of white authority and settlement, due to malaria and drought, and a key focus of state intervention in the form of water-boring to secure and expand the white presence in the region. Environment was thus an important aspect in plotting the historical trajectory of land dispossession in the far north.

Dr David Gordon (University of Maryland) contended that African environmental history as espoused and practised by Beinart was overly preoccupied with conservation and agrarian history, at the expense of the more pressing environmental issues facing modern Africa. The continent's past may well have been rural, Gordon averred, but its present and future were undeniably urban; yet African environmental historians had paid no attention whatsoever to the environmental history of urbanisation and industrial expansion, as well as issues such as pollution, disease and the decimation of rural hinterlands to feed the resource hunger of cities. On a related theme, Gordon decried the emergence of a dominant counter-paradigm within African environmental history, following Leach and Mearns, critical of the old degradationist orthodoxy about African environments.<sup>7</sup> The latter was now dismissed as a myth of racist colonial administrators and scientists. The danger of this, said Gordon, was that it risked obscuring the very real ecological changes that had occurred in African environments and especially the massive decline in biodiversity. Lastly, Gordon expressed dissatisfaction with the model of the state as autonomous agent proposed by Beinart. This bore little resemblance to either colonial or African states, which were characterised by their fragility and genuflection to political circumstance. The control and management of African environments was not merely a state function, said Gordon, but a social one in which relationships between people and human networks were salient in determining outcomes, regardless of the prevailing official legal forms of ownership. Gordon therefore contended that the limits of white settlement might more plausibly be ascribed to the nature of the African

6. 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, 1998), 89-99.
7. M. Leach and R. Mearns, eds, *The Lie of the Land: Challenging Received Wisdom on the African Environment* (Oxford, 1996).

state or relations between forms of wealth and political power than some distinctive African environmental quality as suggested by Beinart.

Dr Dawn Nell (Oxford University) warned against the dangers of environmental history either ghettoising itself through what she called 'environmentalism' or, conversely, collapsing into agrarian history. She further endorsed Beinart's claims about the utility of seeing South Africa's environmental history in comparative perspective and more particularly that of the British empire-cum-commonwealth.

The discussion was then opened to the floor. Dr Wayne Dooling (University of London) was perturbed by the panel's agreement on the limits of white settler control over the region. Seen through the purely juridical prism of land ownership, the most striking feature was the extent of colonial conquest and domination, not its weakness, and the political nature of struggles over ownership thereafter. Dooling therefore wondered what environmental history really had to offer by way of enhancing our understanding of these processes.

Gordon maintained that claims to ownership were made on a number of different levels, not merely the juridical, and in post-colonial Africa the trend was towards the emergence of alternative ownership claims actively challenging formal legal rights. Ownership was thus a messier business and one always open to political contestation. As for what light environmental history might shed on the subject, Gordon was sceptical and hence avoided casting his own work in that mould.

Beinart agreed with Gordon about the dangers of a simplistic, anti-degradationist narrative and the standard practice in African history of inverting an old colonial orthodoxy to create a new Africanist mythology. Rather, environmental historians needed to develop the intellectual weaponry to think about environmental change and be constantly aware that all such debates were 'moralised'. To do this also required that they take the history of science seriously, as the very concepts available for thinking about environment were derived from this source and often naively employed by novices in the humanities. In response to Dooling, Beinart conceded that it was perhaps difficult to see the limits of settler colonialism from the vantage point of the western Cape, but stressed the importance of recognising the unevenness of the colonial impact in both space and time, and of looking at the process regionally in order to grasp the 'fragility' of settler control.

Professor Toyin Falola (University of Texas) then raised the issue of the current Zimbabwean land crisis. Beinart suggested that this was a good illustration of the extraordinary fragility of the settler hold on the land (to which he had been referring) in an area seen as second only to South Africa for effective settler dominance. Whites controlled at most 45-50 per cent of the land and then only for the half-century after 1920, and ownership subsequently very rapidly returned to African hands. Zimbabwe underscored the urgency of land reform in South Africa, although the nature of the demand among South Africa's more urbanised population was fundamentally different, being more about secure rights to a place

of 'residence' rather than 'agrarian production'. Available land was sufficient to sustain only 5-10 per cent of the landless in viable agrarian production and South Africa had thus instituted a system of private land tenure (unlike the communal tenure favoured in Zimbabwe), which, unique in Africa, had achieved a significant increase in productivity. The critical issue for the state was whether it regulated the process to prevent the kind of self-organised repossession that had happened in Zimbabwe, with the dire consequences of dissipating capital investment in a diversified agrarian economy.

Professor Shula Marks (University of London) suggested population density was also a crucial factor determining control over land. Dense populations of cultivators could re-occupy lost lands, while thin populations of hunter-gatherers tended to be permanently displaced. Struggles over land between white settlers and African cultivators, beginning in the 1890s, had continued for over a century along the Transkei, Lesotho and Natal Midland settlement frontiers.

Beinart reiterated the point that environmental constraints were not absolute and cited the Limpopo Valley as one such environment historically hostile to white settlement, that had been transformed by stock dipping, moving disease frontiers and irrigation into a centre of citrus fruit cultivation. Conversely, forced villagisation of African cultivators under betterment, by removing people from proximity to agricultural lands, encouraged them to invest less labour in crop production and so led to the decline in a viable agrarian environment.

Other speakers from the floor served up a smorgasbord of areas requiring work, ranging from the marine environment to ethnic and gendered environments. Professor Patrick Harries (University of Basle) was also unhappy with the base-superstructure model underpinning Beinart's agrarian-cum-environmental history and wondered what new alternatives there might be to such an approach.

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***Session 6:***  
**Writing and Teaching the History of Health, Disease and  
Medicine in Africa in the Twenty-First Century**

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Professor Shula Marks (University of London) began the session with an account of the emergence of her interest in writing a revisionist medical history in South Africa in the 1970s. This came about as a result of a request for an article on the impact of apartheid on health in the country from the World Health Organisation.

This (anonymous) piece laid the foundation for influential subsequent work by Marks and Neil Andersson on the political economy of health, disease and medical provision in the country. The concern with charting the politics of medical racism and the racialised demographics of health and disease in the country dominated much of the early revisionist work, and continues to be a central problem in the field today, though it has been complemented by a more self-reflexive approach which takes account of the social framing of disease and does not evade issues of culture and consciousness. In the words of Jean Comaroff, cited by Marks: 'Medical practice is a particularly appropriate context for examining how the universal human paradox is invested with specific socio-cultural value, and how interest-serving ideologies become part of tacit everyday assumptions.' In this vein, Marks emphasised the importance of engaging with other theoretical approaches to medical history, including social constructionism, but also the necessity to investigate race, class and gender as central concepts in historical analysis. The panellists all identified the need to embrace methodological eclecticism while engaging critically with historical theory.

The other panellists were Dr Elizabeth van Heyningen (research associate in the UCT Historical Studies Department), Associate Professor Howard Phillips (UCT Historical Studies Department), Professor Jonny Myers (UCT Department of Public Health) and Dr Harriet Deacon (freelance historian). The three historians among them represented a body of research in medical history emerging out of the UCT Historical Studies Department, which has the largest concentration of medical historians in the country, but there are still relatively few specialists in this area of historical inquiry in South Africa in particular and in Africa in general.

Phillips underlined the marked neglect of health, disease and medicine in mainstream African historiography to date by referring to the profound impact on human life of both epidemics like the 1918 Spanish Influenza (which killed six per cent of South Africa's population in six weeks) and the pervasive presence of diseases like tuberculosis and malaria which decisively shaped the structure and culture of communities. It was amazing, he observed, that general histories paid so little attention to the very building blocks of human societies, birth and death. Today, in a country like South Africa, marked by great inequalities and continued social divisions, HIV/AIDS and associated illnesses are key structuring forces on society, and historians needed to recognise this fact now and in the past. He emphasised the lessons to be learned from historical inquiry in dealing with these new disease challenges and that, with historical perspective, it was possible to see epidemics like HIV/AIDS as having parallels in local history.

From an epidemiologist's point of view, Myers confirmed the benefits of longitudinal analyses of health and disease that historians had undertaken and called for a multidisciplinary approach in this field.

Expanding on what could be gained from examining health, disease and medicine in history, Van Heyningen pointed out the extent to which such a lens could provide insight into much more than merely the history of health, disease

and medicine: for example, social control, moral attitudes and gender relations. Professor Robert Addo-Fening (University of Ghana) added to these the key role of healing in Pentecostal and independent churches in Africa. These examples well illustrated Alan Brandt's observation (quoted by Marks in her lead-in address) that 'the way society responds to problems of disease reveals its deepest cultural, social and moral values'.

Deacon suggested that South African medical history had been profoundly influenced by the tradition of the social history of medicine that had been so strong in the United Kingdom, and by the focus on the development of racial segregation under colonialism and apartheid. It was only after 1994 that medical historians had really begun to look at slave, settler and indigenous crossovers in medical knowledge and practice, but in all areas a gendered analysis was lacking, a particularly significant silence given that the first segregatory impulse in medicine had always been to separate male and female. Comparative material on institutions, professionalisation, medical education and perhaps, to a lesser extent, demography and epidemiology, had provided theoretical frameworks and comparative data for work in Africa. Much South African medical history had concentrated on institutions and the biomedical professions, a focus that had to be broadened out to other areas. Even in this work, more attention had to be paid to geographical issues, visual and oral sources. As Anne Digby's excellent work had shown, economic issues had also been relatively neglected in discussing the history of medical practice.

Another illuminating approach, but as yet less influential in southern Africa, was the medical anthropological tradition, represented by writers such as Steven Feierman and Megan Vaughan. Their work underlined the necessity for historians to engage more closely with the history of indigenous medical systems in Africa, which continued to be the systems of first-choice of the majority of the population in Africa – in South Africa, for example, there were 250-300 000 indigenous healers today compared with 30 000 biomedical doctors. To do this, Marks observed, intensive oral research in indigenous African languages was required. Romanticised views of indigenous healing, based on a few interviews, had to be challenged. Two other major silences in emerging African medical historiography which could be addressed by gathering oral testimony were the experience of patients – the 'gaze up' to complement the doctors' 'gaze down' – and the experience of self-medication which lay deep in the heart of private history, a domain extremely difficult for all historians to access.

The session concluded with the suggestion that detailed micro-studies of health, disease and medicine in selected communities in the past – especially those well served by a run of statistical records and personal accounts, such as mission stations, mines, military bases and Pholela-style health centres – would be a fruitful next step.

*Session 7:*  
**Writing and Teaching Gendered History in  
Africa in the Twenty-First Century**

NATASHA ERLANK and LINDSAY CLOWES  
*Rand Afrikaans University and University of the Western Cape*

One of the very well-attended sessions at the UCT History Department Centenary Colloquium was that of the panel on the teaching and writing of gendered history. While this may have been partly the result of its comfortable slot in the proceedings, the amount of discussion which took place reflects the engagement of every member of the profession – even if peripherally – with the issues raised.

The session was introduced by Dr Debby Gaitskell (University of London) as lead-in speaker, and had follow-up input from Associate Professor Anne Mager (UCT), Dr Lindsay Clowes (UWC), Dr Natasha Erlank (RAU), and Dr Yvette Abrahams (UWC). Rather than simply reflect on the contributions of each presenter, this report will consider some of the key themes and points of contention emerging from discussions between and among the panellists and the significant number of participants who elected to attend this session. Given that the majority, if not all, of those who engaged in the debates – both from the panel and the floor – are South Africanists, most of the discussion centred on Southern Africa.

One of the currents to emerge from the panel was a consideration of the nature of gendered history. Gendered history starts with a certain reflexivity, derivative in part from the field's location and emerging out of cross-fertilisation with disciplines such as psychology, cultural studies, sociology and literary criticism. Doing gendered history is a practice sitting on the cusp of two disciplines – gender studies and history – but gendered history comes with a critical awareness that extends beyond interdisciplinarity. First, it derives from a history of feminist activism in and beyond academia, which continues to challenge socially constructed inequalities around race, gender, class and sexuality. Second, it draws on a wide range of feminist theorising which has problematised our understanding of biology and gender, and challenges us to reconsider the ways in which masculinities, femininities and even our bodies themselves are constituted. Such work understands historical trends and events as the outcomes of the contests between a multiplicity of socially constructed and competing identities on the level of the individual as well as the group. Understanding gender both as a practice and as a construct hopefully results in a gendered history that reflexively acknowledges the individual standpoint as a strength and uses that standpoint to ask questions that do not get asked by those historians who are less interested in identity as a social construct.

Dr Gaitskell, in her opening address, provided a 20-year retrospective on the emergence of feminist theorising around women and gender in South Africa. Roughly speaking, the former began with an initial investigation into women's roles in history,<sup>8</sup> while studies of gender can be traced to Belinda Bozzoli's seminal theoretical article published in the same year.<sup>9</sup> While the primary focus in those early days was on rediscovering or reclaiming women as subjects of history, the trajectory soon expanded – in response to Bozzoli's call – into an investigation of the creation and maintenance of gender power relations in historical situations, alongside an increasing awareness that contemporary historians did not themselves live outside these power relations. While some have argued that a focus on 'women's history' is no longer appropriate, that it is time for 'gendered' history, Gaitskell made an extremely strong case for the maintenance of both the concept and cause of 'women's history'. If we do not know what women were doing or thinking, she argued, if we do not know anything about how they experienced their lives, then how can we even begin to write gendered history? At the same time all panellists were emphatic about the simultaneous requirement for women's history, combined with the need to take women's history one step further by turning it into gendered history. It was recognised that this was not a simple task, and compelled historians to be constantly aware of the micro-politics of their own time as well as those of the past, for power is hidden in the interstices and minutiae of human relationships, and it is often difficult to identify the seemingly innocuous ways in which power is exercised to disadvantage particular groups along the lines of gender, race or sexuality. As one panellist noted: 'Truly gendered history can only really come out of a context in which gender is recognised as a key category of analysis more broadly.'

While there was broad agreement on the importance of both women's history and gendered history from both the panellists and the floor, achieving a gendered history falls short in practice. Several of the panellists spoke of how many contemporary historians still trivialise the concept of gendered history. For instance, it remains possible, even today, to be confronted by an interview panel that feels comfortable dismissing gendered history as irrelevant. Such views are not isolated, and undermine attempts to re-engender curricula and classrooms, although, to be fair, as both Shula Marks and Debby Gaitskell were to comment, the situation in universities has improved greatly since the early 1980s. But the absence of a gender perspective informing historical research can be seen, not necessarily simply in regard to content, but also in relation to theory. Doing gendered history requires familiarity with a broad range of theoretical work emerging out of psychology, literary studies, cultural studies, anthropology and

8. See the special edition of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* entitled 'Women in Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 10, 1 (Oct. 1983).
9. B. Bozzoli, 'Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9, 2 (Apr. 1983).



sociology, to name but a few relevant disciplines. It requires an understanding of the intersections between different identities constituted along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, gender and religion, and how these are manifested in, are contested by and even co-construct inequality and privilege. Where a substantial number of historians cling to essentialist ideas of gender (and thus the inequality/privilege it bestows) as ‘natural’, there can be little real progress in attempting to unpick the complex and multi-faceted ways in which power relations – and thus historical change – are the product of human interactions, rather than ordained by ‘nature’. Perhaps if the focus were shifted to account for the privileges of the advantaged it might be easier to understand.

A gender perspective is also often absent from much of the teaching in our courses (here some of our experiences are from teaching in non-history departments). In many universities, gender is too often tacked on to courses as one lecture or treated as a theoretical add-on (though this is not peculiar to either African history or history in Africa). Participants and panellists pointed to the problems inherent in either adding a lecture, or a week of lectures to a course, but changing nothing else, and the almost overwhelming challenge of developing whole new courses that took gender into account in a context where so much research needs still to be done. Partially as a result of these issues, those of us who are interested in doing gendered history often find ourselves alone or relatively isolated in its pursuit. This can be seen in the way gender still tends to be taught in gender courses only, or in women’s or gender studies programmes mainly to women students. However, there are a wide number of historians as well as other social scientists scattered across the country who are engaged in research and teaching that incorporates gender and gender analysis, as well as women’s history. We need to find new ways of bringing such scholars together, as well as the work undertaken in different disciplines and separate locations. At the same time we need to teach students that gender does matter. Typically – and unsurprisingly – the students who choose to study gender are generally those who have been most disadvantaged by it: women. When we find ourselves attracting male students, lecturers can find themselves demonstrating that gender analysis is highly relevant to men – thus inadvertently privileging men in a course or programme that fundamentally aims to challenge male privilege.

The difficulties of teaching gender are compounded by further institutional constraints. Gender teaching normally occurs within the context of overwhelming demands for ‘gender knowledge’, for obligatory gender modules in other courses, in funding applications and proposals as well as in policy reviews. ‘Gender’ is ‘sexy’, and practitioners are much in demand. But, within the academy, we find ourselves spread thinly – the majority of us teach not only history, but also gender courses to several departments/ programmes, while also serving on university sexual harassment committees and other institutional forums. While many of our colleagues who do not ‘do gender’ are similarly burdened in their fields of expertise, the context of structural gender inequalities which – despite the fine

words of the constitution – continues to characterise most South African academic institutions as well as the wider society demonstrates that there is an ongoing need for gender to be in the forefront of everyone's minds.

Another issue which came up in the discussions concerned the profile of those students attracted to history, and speaks eloquently to the historical legacies of disadvantage in South Africa. A gender issue within the profession itself relates to the demographic makeup of its practitioners. According to Abrahams, there are only three locally graduated black female historians in the country, and attempts to recruit a black female history student to the Sarah Bartmann Biography Project elicited not one suitable female candidate. A similar lack of black female graduate students is common to history departments around the country (though thankfully it does not appear to be a feature of history departments elsewhere in the subcontinent). While the discipline generally experiences a dearth of black graduates wishing to continue in the profession, the situation is more critical for women historians. The situation is something which the profession needs to address – and starting points could include attention to departmental structures and practices which the most marginalised find oppressive. Institutional and departmental transformation go hand in hand with attempts to understand and undo positions of privilege that are not earned.

If race – or whiteness – is still a fundamental marker of expertise in the historical profession, another marker relates to history of and in local languages. Mager drew attention to the inability of many South African historians (and historians of South Africa) to conduct research in anything other than English and Afrikaans. A South African historical canon presented overwhelmingly in English has several effects. It serves to prioritise exclusionary research agendas, while at the same time provides students with the impression that research undertaken in isiXhosa, Zulu, or Sotho is somehow unacceptable. This is obviously a problem not only for gendered history, and needs to be taken up by academic institutions much more broadly. However, given that much gendered history relies on knowledge of (and acknowledging) the everyday interactions taking place within private and personal spaces, the problem of producing meaningful gendered history, for instance via translation, becomes an issue of representation and power that gender-sensitive historians cannot fail to consider.

What this panel did do, perhaps more so than the other colloquium panels, was to focus on our obligations and responsibilities towards students. Whether they are doing courses on women's history or gender studies, female students tend to find role models they can identify with, problems and conflicts they are familiar with and strategies for resistance that they can either adopt or adapt. It is not uncommon for students exploring the gendered struggles of other women over time and across space to recognise similar struggles in their own lives, and to find new ways of challenging their subordination. Many seminars on gender history end up being directly about the way to connect the personal to the political, turning comments about people's own cultures and traditions ('In my culture we ...') into

awareness of the contextually specific and contingent nature of gendered distinctions and gender power imbalances.

While much of the discussion in the session revolved around the need to research gender and the importance of theorising, teaching and doing gendered history more broadly, there was also discussion of some of the resources available to do this. Gaitskell's lead-in address referred to some of the recently published anthologies on women and gender in African history.<sup>10</sup> While these represent excellent work on gender in Africa, there are two problems associated with them. The first relates to the way in which gender-only anthologies can contribute to the tendency to marginalise (ghettoise) women's and gender history. The second involves the perhaps more tricky issue of where this work is being produced, published and, literally, at what cost.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand it would be both exclusionary in its own right and silly to berate and dismiss work published in the United States or Britain (a shortcoming of this panel related to its lack of consideration of gendered work on Africa in other colonial languages like French – something which other panels did pick up upon). On the other hand though, because it is easier to use this work (at least for those with reasonable library budgets) or to access foreign journal articles via the internet, it can tend to deprioritise the encouragement and promotion of local writing in any of the African languages – vernacular is the wrong term, it is dismissive. Gender historians, especially women, writing from Africa, find it difficult both to do research as a result of funding and other constraints, as well as to have their work published. As a result, alternative accounts of gender in African history are in relatively short supply.

Finally, the panel had little time to discuss how attention to gender in the context of South African history has so far provided little space for the myriad play of, and constraints upon, non-hetero-normative gender identities, an aspect which was raised from the floor. For instance, the matter of what to do with the intersections between gender and sexuality is not something many historians have resolved, although there has been a great deal of work in other disciplines on which historians need to draw. Studies in the history of homosexuality and same-sex relationships in South Africa (let alone the rest of the continent) are still in their infancy, although again there is a wealth of material to be found emerging out of other disciplines. Thus, overall, while some major advances have been made in gendered history and women's history in South Africa, it remains fair to say that the panel agreed that much still needs to be done. We ought to encourage our students to work with us, as well as draw on the work of colleagues in other

10. This included J. Allman, S. Geiger and N. Musisi, eds, *Women in Africa: Colonial Histories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2002).

11. For example, the volume edited by Allman, Geiger and Musisi cost \$24.95 in paperback via Amazon.com in September 2003.

departments and faculties to challenge the hetero-normative, gendered and racialised narratives that continue to prevail in the praxis of history.

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**Session 8:**  
**Writing and Teaching the History of Unfree Labour in  
 Africa and the Indian Ocean in the Twenty-First Century**

NIGEL WORDEN  
*University of Cape Town*

The topic for this session has been a strong focus of the UCT Historical Studies Department over the past two decades, and one which is currently taking important new directions. Not least among these is the locating of the history of unfree labour in the Western Cape within the orbit of the Indian Ocean. This was marked by the presence of Dr Vijaya Teelock, a leading historian of slavery and indentured labour in Mauritius, who gave the opening address.

Teelock's account of the neglect of the study of slavery in Mauritius before a key conference in 1984,<sup>12</sup> and its growth in the subsequent two decades, was one which made strong resonance with the panel of South African historians. She explained this by referring to the impact of work on Atlantic slave systems in the 1970s and early 1980s, especially that of Barry Higman on the Caribbean, the slave-based sugar economy of which bore strong parallels to those of Mauritius, and the growing awareness of the neglect of slave history in the south-west Indian Ocean region. By 1998, understanding of the history of slavery in Mauritius had not only been significantly furthered in academic research, but was also a topic of considerable public interest, with a new government accepting the possibility of claims for reparation.<sup>13</sup> Mauritian researchers were overwhelmed by public demand to trace their ancestry in order to file such claims, and a genealogical 'Origins Project' was established by historians to facilitate this process. Meanwhile, ethnic conflicts on the island highlighted the continuing discrimination felt by slave descendants in Mauritian society.

Such conflicts pitted those who identified with an African past (associated with slavery) against those of Indian and Asian origin (associated with indentured

12. The proceedings were published as U. Bissoondoyal, ed., *Slavery in South West Indian Ocean* (Moka, 1989).
13. As reflected in the proceedings of a colloquium held in Port Louis: J.-C. Cangy *et al.*, eds, *L'Esclavage et ses Sequelles: Memoire et Vecu d'hier et aujourd'hui* (Reduit, 2002).

labourers and traders). In response, Mauritian historians were concerned to show how these categories were in fact much more blurred – many slaves came from India – while indentured workers often lived and worked under conditions which differed little from chattel slavery, and had much interaction, including marriage, with ex-slave families.<sup>14</sup> Many hopeful reparation claimants were shocked to discover that they were descended from Indian indentured labourers who had taken Christian (rather than Hindu) names, while others found they were in fact descended from slave owners. Teelock pointed out: ‘Slavery and indenture created culturally mixed rather than racially segregated societies but we have continued to live with the stereotypes and that is what causes the tension today.’

A desire to dispel these stereotypes and myths had stimulated interest in the history of slavery and indenture among students and researchers, and had led to their active participation in the ‘Origins Project’ and in family reconstruction studies. Public concern around slavery had also been shown in hotly contested heritage issues in Mauritius, notably opposition to the building of tourist amenities and a cable car on Le Morne, a mountain known to have been the site of a slave *droster* (runaway) community. The outcome of this was a growing interest in oral traditions about the slave past, and an interest in historical archaeology, a new discipline in Mauritius.

Teelock’s address raised a number of key issues related to the study of the history of unfree labour in South Africa, not all of which could be given full justice in the allocated time. Much discussion by the panel and audience centred on the appropriateness of various comparative approaches to slavery. Dr Kerry Ward (Rice University) stressed the Indian Ocean context of Cape slavery, and the need for South African historians to be aware of the ways in which slaves were used in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia, where labour practices of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) co-existed with complex indigenous systems of slavery and unfreedom. Such a background was essential to understanding the ways in which Asian slaves at the Cape understood their situation and the ways in which they resisted it. Dr Wayne Dooling (University of London) questioned the argument that Cape slave studies have depended too much on the Atlantic world, to the neglect of Africa,<sup>15</sup> by suggesting that African comparisons were less useful to the study of a colonial society such as the Cape, that the specific problems with Atlantic comparisons had yet to be demonstrated and that useful insights could be gleaned from work on peon labour economies such as that of colonial Mexico. Some of the audience were less taken by the idea of an Asian or Indian Ocean maritime context than with issues around the connections between Cape slavery and labour practices in its territorial African hinterland, a viewpoint which some panel members found too parochial.

14. V. Teelock and E. Alpers, eds, *History, Memory and Identity* (Mauritius, 2001).

15. In, for example, G. Cuthbertson, ‘Slave Historiography and the Question of Intellectual Dependence’, *South African Historical Journal*, 27 (1992), 26-49.

A more unanimously positive response came to the suggestion that we no longer confine ourselves to the study of 'slavery', with all the problems of definition (legal or social practice?) and boundaries, but rather extend the focus to varieties of forms of unfree labour. Ward's work on penal labour and exiles in the VOC Cape had shown the complexity of forms of unfreedom. They were a very visible part of the population, complicating notions of status (some of them owned slaves) and highlighting a sub-regional diaspora which linked the Cape penal settlement (and Robben Island) with not only Asia, but also Rio de la Goa, Madagascar and Mauritius.<sup>16</sup> Professor Nigel Worden (UCT) pointed out the need to examine the position of VOC soldiers, sailors and artisans (mainly European migrants but also those born at the Cape and from Asia) who worked under highly restrictive conditions and who had much social interaction and common identity with slaves, convicts and indentured workers.

The research of both Associate Professors Nigel Penn (UCT) and Susan Newton-King (UWC) has now convincingly questioned the division in historiography between slavery and the indenture of the Khoi and San. But Penn pointed out the inadequacies of characterising Khoisan labour as 'slave-like' and the need to be aware of new types of labour that emerged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Cape hinterland, such as the Oorlams, with their distinctive forms of resistance, sexuality and labour relations. Professors Robert Addo-Fening (University of Ghana) and Nelly Hanna (American University of Cairo) particularly welcomed the need to study unfree labour on its own terms rather than in rigidly fixed categories which blunt local forms and practices, and supported the broadening of scope from pre-conceived concepts of slavery.

Dooling emphasised the need to study not only the unfree, but also their owners or employers. In one of the few interventions at the colloquium overtly to raise the issue of class (a sign of the seismic shift in historiography over the past two decades), he called for an integration of the rich tradition of slave and labour history 'from below' with analysis of the economics of production and the accumulation of capital by landowners. The history of the unfree was inseparable from that of those who imposed unfreedom on them.

A major issue raised by Teelock was the responsibility of the historian towards the general public. The Mauritian examples of contemporary controversies was paralleled at the colloquium by a visit to the recently discovered Prestwich Place site of mass burials, which the media speculated to have been a slave cemetery. A week before the colloquium opened, exhumation of the remains was halted by the South African Heritage Resources Agency, after a public meeting in which identity with a slave or underclass past was claimed by many and demands were made that the graves be left undisturbed. The future of Prestwich

16. K. Ward, "'The Bounds of Bondage': Forced Migration from Batavia to the Cape of Good Hope during the Dutch East India Company Era, c.1652-1795" (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2002).

Place and of other sites of burial in Cape Town and elsewhere in South Africa currently hangs in the balance.

How can the research claims of historians and archaeologists be reconciled with such public perceptions and sensitivities? Newton-King argued that academic researchers should enable their work to be popularised and should facilitate public access to archival or other research materials, and she cited the joint project of the Universities of the Western Cape and Cape Town on 'Slavery and Heritage', which enabled seven rural community workers to use materials on slavery in the Cape Archives.<sup>17</sup> However, she pointed out that the academic should not be 'cowed or intimidated' by political voices outside the universities, believing that the separation between the academic and the public historian is an important one to maintain. The academic historian is usually concerned with the difference of the past, not its malleability to present-day concerns of the kinds often reflected in heritage controversies.

This issue warranted a session to itself, as there was little time for discussion of such an important topic. Certainly there was some disquiet with unquestioning assumptions that the historian should be responsive to public needs, and the history of South African academics' scepticism over projects of the state or of nation-building may explain why many local historians were less open to such involvement than their colleagues from elsewhere in Africa. Professor Shula Marks (University of London) referred in her closing comments of the colloquium to the dangers of historians opening up public issues of sensitivity which they lacked the ability to resolve.

Less was said at the session about teaching than about research. Ward described the ways in which she had included work on unfree labour and forced migration in courses on global history at Rice University in Houston, and Teelock referred to the incorporation of research on slave families into undergraduate teaching at the University of Mauritius. At UCT, a long-standing course on Comparative Slavery which had been taught through the 1980s, and which had provided the stimulus for much postgraduate research on Cape slavery, had been replaced by courses on Western Cape history that accommodated a broader view of labour history in the region. Joint projects of archaeologists and historians in the Clanwilliam area have recently involved student teaching and research, with a strong focus on local educational needs. A new research project run jointly by UWC and UCT on the social history of the VOC incorporates teaching seminars for final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students, this year focussing on Asian material and taught by Dr Ward.

Penn was the only panellist (not only in this session but in the colloquium as a whole) to raise the issue of how historians write. He made a call for an

17. The project produced a guide to archival materials: C. Cornell, *Slaves at the Cape: A Guidebook for Beginner Researchers* (Bellville, 2000).

awareness of issues of narration and emplotment in our work, issues which many students who also take literary, film and media studies respond to with interest. We have perhaps become concerned with the subject matter of our teaching and writing, to the detriment of awareness about the methods we employ to convey the past to our audiences.

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***Session 9:***  
**Writing and Teaching Urban History in Africa in the  
Twenty-First Century**

VIVIAN BICKFORD-SMITH  
*University of Cape Town*

In 1968 H.J. Dyos edited a seminal collection of essays entitled *The Study of Urban History*.<sup>18</sup> This collection stemmed from the first-ever conference of British urban historians which was held at Leicester University (where Dyos was Professor of Urban History) in 1966. Included among the essays were seven dubbed simply, 'Discussion'. These were the written-up versions of questions and comments that followed the presentation of either single papers or groups of papers on topics such as methodological trends, sources for urban history, stages of urban development, the social structure of towns or defining or setting an agenda for the emerging sub-discipline. There is therefore a notable precedent within the field for this written summary of the presentations, questions and comments that accompanied the session on urban history at the centenary colloquium.

Each 'Discussion' was put together by a different participant and, consciously or unconsciously, reflected (to greater and lesser extents) a little of their own view about what was particularly worth recording. In other words, these 'Discussion' essays were not intended to be a verbatim précis of proceedings. Neither is this summary of the session on urban history.

It is worth admitting from the outset that there were shortcomings in the nature and range of the four presentations on offer in Cape Town in 2003. Most obviously, they did not offer coverage of the state of urban history across the whole of Africa, beyond its north-eastern and southern tips. Nor did they speak to one another directly. The three discussants had only seen a brief abstract of the main paper by Professor Nelly Hanna of the American University of Cairo, on

18. H.J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968).



urban history in North Africa and the wider Arab world. Perhaps as a result they chose in their own offerings to focus on South African urban history rather than engaging with Hanna's comments. And only Dr Elizabeth van Heyningen (UCT research associate) went beyond historiography and touched (albeit very briefly) on the teaching of urban history. Yet each presentation, together with the subsequent discussion, raised issues, posed questions or offered insights that should prove useful to existing or would-be practitioners of the sub-discipline, as one trusts that the following summary will demonstrate.

Professor Christopher Saunders (UCT) opened the session by noting that, having until then been almost ignored by UCT historians, urban history had from the 1970s to the 1990s been a 'boom area' at the university. Yet now many of its former practitioners, including him, had moved on. He, for one, had been drawn into Cape Town history in the 1970s because of the contemporary threat of forced removal facing African communities in Langa and Nyanga.<sup>19</sup> By offering this autobiographical insight, Saunders raised what became a recurrent theme in the session: what has motivated, or more controversially, should motivate, the study of urban history in Africa.

Hanna, whose own work has been largely on the urban history of Egypt, began by stating that a major difference between North and sub-Saharan Africa is that cities in the Arab world of the North are far more ancient. The sources for the study of the latter's history are voluminous, but a major problem was the lack of historians to study them, given the decline of history as a subject in Egypt. She suggested that there were some similarities between the dual nature of Arab cities – with 'indigenous' and 'European' towns side-by-side – and South African cities, with their distinction between the 'European' town and the 'black' townships. Although there was a pre-colonial urban historiography, Hanna noted that the academic study of North African (and Middle-Eastern) cities commenced with colonialism. By the beginning of the twentieth century European academics were drawing distinctions between what they saw as the ordered and 'logical' European part of town and the 'disordered', indigenous 'non-cities' which 'didn't make sense'. They used religion to explain the difference: the haphazard buildings and alleys in the indigenous town were reflections 'of the disorder of the Muslim mind'. The historiography of North African/Arab cities changed somewhat in the 1970s, influenced by the rise of urban studies and social history in Europe and the United States. Historians began using new sources which led both to new themes in urban historiography and (one can infer from Hanna's comments) new explanations of the built environment of the indigenous city. She had time to say something about two such sources. 'Waqf' deeds (of either religious or family endowments) often contained rich information about both the endower and the

19. And hence Saunders's first two essays on earlier forced removals and resistance: 'The Creation of Ndabeni: Urban Segregation and African Resistance in Cape Town' and 'From Ndabeni to Langa', both in C.C. Saunders, ed., *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 1 (1979).

buildings endowed. Ottoman court records (from about the 1530s) recorded the day-to-day dealings of a wide range of social categories, whether these were property transactions, marriages, loans, or conflict with neighbours. Such records had helped to make possible some uncovering of the (previously hidden) history of labouring people and ethnic minorities in Arab cities.

Professor Vivian Bickford-Smith (UCT) began by noting, like Saunders, that there was not much South African urban history (beyond the antiquarian or 'municipal record' kind) before the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> The explosion of work on urban history in that decade (and beyond) was a response both to contemporary processes, events and crises – like the 1976 Soweto uprising – as well as to the changing Western historiographical trends that Hanna has already mentioned. South African urban historiography, whether 'history-in-the-city' or 'history-of-the-city' (to borrow Paul Maylam's terms), contains some weaknesses.<sup>21</sup> These include the fact that there have been few histories of South African cities from their origins to the present; that there is a dearth of comparative studies (a lacuna in British urban studies bemoaned in that 1966 conference); that many South African histories are confined to a focus on the urban experience of only one racial group rather than the interaction between groups; that there are few histories of small towns; that there is a lack of statistical methodology to trace the history of the likes of cost of living or property ownership; and that there are few histories of whole South African towns – rather than just their township components – that might reveal the history of urban planning through time. Yet South African urban historiography since the 1970s has been hugely productive and often of high quality. Perhaps this was because it was inspired in the apartheid years not only

20. Saunders had mentioned the pioneering work on Grahamstown's history by W.M. Macmillan and the non-historian Jack Simons's interest in Cape Town history. Bickford-Smith referred to Maynard Swanson's 1960s work on the possibilities of urban history in South Africa and his later piece on urban segregation: M. Swanson, 'Reflections on the Urban History of South Africa: Some Problems and Possibilities, with Special Reference to Durban', in H.L. Watts, ed., *Focus on Cities: Proceedings of a Conference Organised by the Institute for Social Research, at the University of Natal, Durban...1968* (Durban, 1970), 143-9, and M. Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909', *Journal of African History*, 18, 3 (1977), 387-410; to Rodney Davenport's research on the 1923 Natives Urban Areas Act: T.R.H. Davenport, *The Beginnings of Urban Segregation in South Africa: The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and its Background* (Grahamstown, 1971); and to David Welsh's 'The Growth of Towns', in M. Wilson and L. Thompson, eds, *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1971), 172-243. Bickford-Smith noted that other works of urban studies had been contributed by non-historians like Monica Wilson and Archie Mafeje, Philip Mayer and Ellen Hellmann.
21. P. Maylam, 'Explaining the Apartheid City: 20 Years of South African Urban Historiography', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21, 1 (Mar. 1995), 20. Indeed, this issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* was a special issue on urban studies and urban change in southern Africa, and the introduction by Hilary Sapire and Jo Beall, as well as Susan Parnell's and Alan Mabin's article on 'Rethinking Urban South Africa', are useful overviews of past and contemporary trends in the sub-discipline in the mid 1990s.

by a political agenda but also by academic leadership (at UCT, Witwatersrand University and SOAS) which encouraged an international and collective research engagement that proved to be enormously exciting and supportive. At UCT, work on Cape Town history drew more on Dyos-informed, eclectic urban studies rather than the more rigidly neo-marxist revisionism that informed most Rand history, which might explain why Cape Town historiography was arguably more inclusive in terms of topics covered. This inclusivity informed, and enabled, the production of a two-volume illustrated history of Cape Town in the late 1990s.<sup>22</sup> But now the collective study of Cape Town history in this department has all but collapsed, outside of work done by the Centre for Popular Memory, and writing about Cape Town has largely again become the responsibility of non-historians. Perhaps what Harrison Wright unsympathetically referred to as ‘the burden of the present’ had had a positive effect on urban historiography in South Africa, and we should be inspired once more to study the origins and histories of the multiple crises (still) facing our cities today.<sup>23</sup>

Van Heyningen began by stressing that the two-volume histories of Cape Town had evolved from collaboration between staff and students at UCT, as well as people from outside the university, that had begun in the 1970s. She said that to begin with there was little expertise in urban history at UCT. What helped to rectify this situation was an Honours course she ran with Howard Phillips, which had enabled them to learn about the sub-discipline while generating student research. The Cape Town History Workshops, which commenced in 1978, had facilitated an engagement with outsiders and given rise to a series of small books called *Studies in the History of Cape Town*.<sup>24</sup> Writing the two-volume history of Cape Town was a collaborative effort between the three authors. They had wanted a relatively seamless work, rather than discrete chapters by different authors. To this end, they had hammered out a series of themes that they wanted to come through in each chapter. The authors drew on a multitude of available illustrations of Cape Town not just because they knew that the general public would be attracted by these, but also because such representations of the city could be critically discussed in the books. She suggested that the two volumes had brought a degree of closure to the History Department’s urban history project. But rather than this spelling the end of the sub-discipline in Cape Town, she felt that changing times – and particularly the opening up of international tourism after 1994 – had meant that urban history had mutated into ‘heritage studies’ in the city.

22. N. Worden, V. Bickford-Smith and E. van Heyningen, *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (Cape Town, 1998); V. Bickford-Smith, E. van Heyningen and N. Worden, *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century* (Cape Town, 1999).
23. H. Wright, *The Burden of the Present: The Liberal-Radical Controversy over Southern African History* (Cape Town, 1977).
24. There were seven volumes in all. See C. Saunders *et al.*, eds, *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, 6 vols (Cape Town, 1979-1988), and E. van Heyningen, ed., *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 7 (Cape Town, 1994).

She ended by also identifying the need for comparative urban studies, and for stressing the need to identify the different identities of South African cities, as well as pointing out gaps in Cape Town historiography, including the paucity of economic history.

Dr Noor Nieftagodien (University of the Witwatersrand) felt that he was less burdened by nostalgia for past ways of studying urban history than others on the panel, since he had only recently entered the academy. He felt that one of the present problems in South African historiography was that there was far less history-of-the-city or of 'the urban', than there were histories of what had happened in urban areas. To redress the imbalance there needed to be more works both of synthesis and theory. Currently at Wits there was a considerable amount of work on the history of townships, with a huge demand for such history coming from local communities, and there needed to be even more if an overview history of Johannesburg were to be possible. Yet there were potential pitfalls. Many of these histories remained local, and were not looking beyond individual townships. In addition, much of this local history had been influenced by the requirements of tourism and heritage studies. This had often resulted in a narrow focus to the work, so that it could be linked to a nationalist agenda, and became subject to commercial imperatives. He felt that in recent years urban historiography had suffered from parochialism and from individual historians protecting their own intellectual fiefdoms. He suggested that we needed to produce more 'resistance history', while developing an awareness of how 'the urban' had shaped the character of such struggles and the need to keep a critical eye on the nationalist agenda. He concluded by warning that urban historians were being 'muscled out' by others within urban studies who were deemed to be of more use to urban policy makers because they were more obviously located on the development studies terrain. Urban historians should be involved in the struggles over resources, space and development. If they were, this would stimulate student interest and also ensure that class (as a theoretical tool) and class struggle were not neglected.

A selection of questions, comments and responses follows.

- \* Dr Sean Field (Centre for Popular Memory, UCT) supported the idea of the fruitfulness of collaborative research and writing. He mentioned that this approach lay behind the production of a special edition of *African Studies* on oral history in the Western Cape.<sup>25</sup> Such collaborative projects encouraged methodological pluralism, and embracing such pluralism and explicitly discussing the different theoretical biases that inform our work would enrich urban historiography.
- \* Dr Harriet Deacon argued that historians needed to get more involved in planning and development work, as well as the heritage industry. For

25. *African Studies*, 60, 1 (July 2001), edited by Vivian Bickford-Smith, Sean Field and Clive Glaser.

- instance, they could be more involved in heritage impact assessments, which should not be left solely to the architectural historians.
- \* Professor Rodney Davenport (formerly Rhodes University and before that UCT) made a plea for more work on local government. He said that as someone who had studied the administration of the 1923 Urban Areas Act, he was aware of the enduring damage that had been done by the policy of putting the poor on the outer margins of South African cities – not least because they suffered from far greater transport costs than would otherwise have been the case. We should also study the question of local government finances, and the relationship between local and central government over the matter of financing housing. We should also consider global comparisons between South African cities and others in terms of the structure of local government and the allocation of local taxes.
  - \* Professor Patrick Harries (Basle University) believed that urban history in South Africa had been driven by the agenda of the struggle, and was almost an exposé history of poverty, rightlessness and disease in our cities. He wondered whether urban historians in South Africa were now starting to look not just at victims in the past, but also at perpetrators. For instance, in terms of forced removals, was anyone looking at estate agents who had benefited, which could be discovered from Deeds Office searches, or were the imperatives of reconciliation too important?
  - \* Professor Neil Parsons (University of Botswana) suggested that the experience of ANC exiles had prejudiced the new South African government against site and service schemes as too ugly and demeaning. Instead, the state had to deliver ‘good’ housing. The failure to do adequately so since 1994 had produced a flight of the new black elite from the townships.
  - \* Dr Ruth Watson (University of London) wondered whether it was useful to distinguish between an ‘African’ and a ‘colonial’ city.
  - \* Associate Professor Howard Phillips (UCT) asked what the new topics were on the agenda of urban historians in the English-speaking world today.

Professor Saunders invited the panellists to close the session with some responses or concluding comments.

Nieftagodien, responding to the point about the flight of the new elite from townships, commented that the ANC government had made no real attempt to challenge the configuration of the apartheid city, and that this flight was the sole obvious change in this respect since 1994. He also claimed that Johannesburg was the only ‘African’ city in South Africa, yet local authorities there still attempted to hide or eradicate the ‘African presence’. He agreed with Davenport that we should study the history of local government, and suggested that we should look at the interaction between local authorities and civil movements.

Van Heyningen suggested that we should explore what might be meant by the term ‘African city’. Surely Cairo was an African city, even if the vast majority

of the population was Arab? She responded to Harries' question on 'perpetrators' in the past by saying that there had been different beneficiaries through time and agreed with Deacon that historians should be involved in heritage impact assessments because of the broader understanding they could offer.

Bickford-Smith, also replying to Harries, said that we knew little about estate agents' benefiting from forced removals beyond the preliminary research conducted many years ago now by John Western.<sup>26</sup> In response to Watson, he was not sure that distinguishing between an 'African' and a 'colonial' city was necessarily helpful. In terms of current international trends in urban history (Phillips' question), he thought that there was considerable continuity of traditional topics, but that there also seemed of late to be a particular interest in the question of space, place and identity (both of, and within, cities), as well as an interest in how the city, or particular parts of cities, had been imagined or represented. He had not meant to suggest that urban historiography in South Africa had collapsed, merely that it had seriously diminished as a trans-national and international project, and that it was the poorer for this.

After the formal proceedings had ended, a number of the panellists agreed that South African urban historiography could greatly benefit from a conference aimed at generating comparative urban studies (both within South Africa as well as with other African cities). It remains to be seen whether this desirable end will be achieved. Perhaps urban history might be the focus of a South African Historical Society conference?

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***Session 10:***  
**Reflections on Writing and Teaching History in Africa in the  
Twenty-First Century**

HOWARD PHILLIPS  
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Given the predominantly South Africanist composition of those participating in the colloquium, it was not unexpected that the discussion throughout was heavily canted towards the historiography of South Africa, and especially to producing it rather than teaching and communicating it. This proved to be no less the case in the final session, which sought to provide space to stand back and reflect on what

26. See J. Western, *Outcast Cape Town* (Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg, 1981).

had been discussed during the preceding days. The observations which follow emerged jointly from the audience and a panel of four historians, Professors Toyin Falola (University of Texas), Shula Marks (London University), Nelly Hanna (American University of Cairo) and William Beinart (Oxford University).

The general insularity of South African historiography, especially from the rest of Africa, was remarked upon by many. Where comparisons and links were drawn, these tended to reflect familiarity with what one speaker called 'the cosy old colonial relationship with Britain'. The opening up of South Africa to the rest of Africa since 1994 should rather be seen as an opportunity to forge links deliberately and make historical comparisons across the African continent, allowing South African history to be put into a fresh, comparative, continental perspective. Prompted by this comparative train of thought, the suggestion was made that comparisons between South Africa and Brazil ought to be pursued as a high priority too, as these were the two countries in the world today with the greatest gap between rich and poor. Explaining how this had come about would be most telling of similarities and differences between the two societies and perhaps point to broader underlying forces at work in each.

That contemporary issues like this had so often triggered historical inquiry in South Africa in recent years did not surprise participants, given that the country was in the midst of its greatest transition ever, but several felt unease at what they called the inordinate 'burden of the present' on South African historiography, for it raised the danger of excessive presentism in what was researched, written and taught in universities. This had to be guarded against, lest it produced a foreshortened view of the past, lacking the long perspectives which ought to characterise a historical approach.

In terms of manufacturing and communicating history, concern was voiced about the predominance of English in all spheres of these activities in South Africa – the colloquium itself was a good example of this – for this unduly privileged those fluent in English, excluding or, at best, marginalising research, debates and even sources in other local languages. Moreover, such tunnel vision potentially diminished the end-product of research into the past by denying it the perspectives of sources not in English.

This raised the question of 'Who has the right to write history in South Africa?', an issue not openly discussed in the academy. Could only Afrikaners write the history of Afrikaners, and Zulus the history of Zulus? On this delicate topic it was suggested that such sectional history should rather be avoided by scholars who should focus instead on the history of interaction. One speaker, however, felt that the history of Afrikaners written by a Zulu historian would be most illuminating.

The format of the colloquium – sessions devoted to one historical sub-field after another – also gave rise to the opinion that such fragmentation in historical writing, research and teaching was very artificial, hinting as it did that the past could only be effectively studied through specialist lenses. The quest for 'total

history' seemed to have been abandoned without a fight, with a very real loss to historical understanding. Taking a leaf out of an earlier call for the need for comparative African perspectives in South African historiography, one participant reminded those present that African historiography of course boasted a notable exponent of total history, Ibn Khaldun. Perhaps reading his *Kitab al-'Ibar* and *Muqaddimah* would be a useful corrective to excessive fragmentation.

The only significant attention to the relationship and responsibility of historians of South Africa to the wider public arose around the issue of the appropriate role of public intellectuals. Should historians, it was asked, maintain as much critical distance from public history as possible, lest their integrity be compromised by non-academic demands, or should they enter into public history with gusto as advisers and collaborators? Given this choice of two extremes, some of those present opted for a third path, delightfully described by one as 'throwing a curve ball into the arena of public history every now and then'.

One aspect of historians' responsibilities to the wider community, of which participants in the colloquium were reminded, was their obligations to their subjects and informers. Not many asked 'What are the likely repercussions of my research for both my sources and my intended audience?' This was a question which had to be posed and answered, especially in post-apartheid South Africa with its legacy of open historical wounds.

Inevitably, the silences in the colloquium – what one speaker called the 'missing pages of history' – attracted mention in the closing session too, especially where they were deemed to have the potential to excite new audiences about history and to reveal the past in novel ways. In this regard family history was highlighted as an important vein left relatively unexplored by academic historians in South Africa to date, while the potential of the history of religion to illuminate private space in the past was not one that should be left solely to university departments of religious studies to explore. Away from silences about content, participants also had it drawn to their attention that the colloquium had been markedly unreflective about periodisation, terminology and methodology in South African historical writing. How, asked one champion of methodological self-reflexivity, would historians be able to reach wider audiences unless they critically debated how to produce narratively more interesting accounts?

With such pregnant questions hanging in the air undiscussed, the UCT History Department Centenary Colloquium adjourned until the department's bicentenary in 2103.