

»I did not forgive him. But after many years, I allowed myself to accept his apology.«

A Report on the Conference Circumstances from Post-Apartheid South Africa

Dr Sonja Hegasy, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, January 2019



University of Stellenbosch. Copyright: Lavonne Bosman

From 5 to 9 December 2018, the international conference »Recognition, Reparation, Reconciliation. The Light and Shadow of Historical Trauma« was held at Stellenbosch University (SU), hosted by Prof. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. Prof. Gobodo-Madikizela is herself a former member of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). She has an education in Clinical Psychology, and is the author of »A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness« about her encounter with Eugene de Kock, one of the notorious killers of the South African secret police, also called »Prime Evil«. She currently holds the Chair of Historical Trauma and Transformation at Stellenbosch University, which initiated this international meeting with nearly 400 participants, 128 presentations and numerous round tables. People from very diverse fields, among them researchers, practitioners working on conflict resolution, social workers, mediators, civic rights activists, community organizers, artists, first-hand witnesses of severe violence, children and parents of murdered South Africans, but also perpetrators, came together. In several sessions, perpetrators were themselves present and ready

to engage about their past informally in the breaks as well. Thus, the conference was a site with very difficult expectations to manoeuvre.

This report does not deal with the remarkable array of presentations given; rather it is about the circumstances of this meeting and how they unfolded: what struck me from the opening was the emphasis on praxis and positionality. When speaking of loss and embodied trauma at this gathering, it made sense to bring in one's own physicality for a change. The conference started off with three practical workshops to prepare for the up-coming lectures on genocide, disappearance, rape, racism, war crimes and political terror. One group worked with collages to shift perspectives on memories of injustice. A second used systemic constellations work to approach the topic. I joined a third group that offered contemplative mind-body exercises to make yourself aware of your positionality and the social conditioning everybody brought along. Each workshop addressed in different ways one's own awareness of a personal or social

injustice and how to connect to one another. Mindfulness was a recurrent theme throughout the conference, I found. In the course of my session, a group of people previously completely unknown to me became a bit familiar – actually more than that, because questions of guiding and following each other through the room, being in direct contact and supporting each other physically with complete strangers is an experience of its own. These people did not come together to experience a joint ›family constellation‹ or the like. They/ we were in an academic setting (more on the difficulty of the place below) to present research papers. Now, after the first workshop, I unexpectedly had people to greet throughout the next five days, to share coffee with and sometimes to extend getting to know each other beyond a usual conference setting, as we



Stefaans Coetzee, youngest bomber of the 1996 Worcester Bombing in conversation with Harris Sibeko, Khulumani Support Group, Worcester. Copyright: Lavonne Bosman

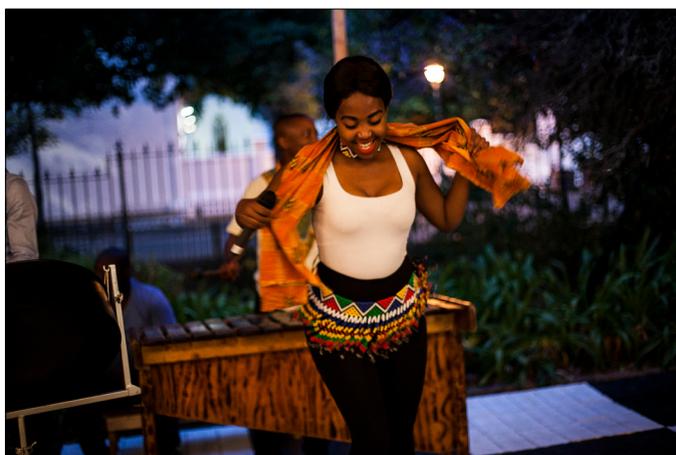
had shared a tiny bit about our background – a nano-bit in terms of everybody’s actual trajectory, but a huge facet in comparison to a typical academic scenery. This was already an unusual start. I felt that I had 24 hours of contemplative work before starting with Microsoft Office and PowerPoint.

It was in this first hour that I heard Ginn Fourie speak for the first time in her broken voice. Her daughter Lyndi was killed in an attack by an anti-apartheid organization in 1993. Later on, Ginn Fourie would also present her reconciliation work formally in one of the sessions, as she took part in a series of dialogues organized for the conference, in which we participants could listen to victims speaking out about their trajectories since the end of apartheid and how they met with a perpetrator of the crime against their relative (child, father, husband).



Prof. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Lindiwe Hani. Copyright: Lavonne Bosman

This was not all about ›forgiving‹, and many of the victims speaking out here had decided to meet the perpetrator outside the context of the TRC and many years later. As Lindiwe Hani, daughter of Chris Hani, then leader of South Africa’s Communist Party and second-best-known politician after Nelson Mandela, said after meeting with the killer of her father several times: »I did not forgive him. But after many years, I allowed myself to accept his apology.« After Ms Hani’s talk, she and Chris Hani created an enormous emotional response in the auditorium.



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Music also played a central role at the conference. Once more it became clear to the stiffest academic how important an element of opening up and healing it is. I wish everybody could hear a lecture by Homi Bhabha at 8:30 in the morning, preceded by the strong voice of Yanga Sobotwa, who had won South Africa’s Idol contest just days before.

Anniversaries and dates became increasingly important in the course of this meeting as well: Alex Boraine, former Deputy President of the TRC, passed away on 5 December 2018. It was also the anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s death five years earlier. And an initial thought of the conference organizers was to tie the event to the submission of the TRC’s final report 20 years

ago, in 1998. Thus, Desmond Tutu was invited to a final but internal celebration that the wider group of participants was unfortunately not able to witness. The University of Stellenbosch itself celebrated its 100th anniversary. Much has changed and much has not in Stellenbosch since then. Most international participants and first-time visitors to South Africa were unprepared for the post-apartheid realities in the country, the blatant inequalities and the obvious on-going segregation.

Though the university had made efforts to transition from a white *Kaderschmiede* to a national university, the student body was far from representing the country – which would be unthinkable at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), as we learned from one student. Of South Africa’s population, 80% identify themselves as Black Africans, which is certainly reflected at UJ, she stressed. This looks very different at SU: of its 31,765 students, currently only 20% are Black Africans, whereas 58% are White. Names of auditoriums and meeting rooms were still in Afrikaans here, while the country had seen a nation-wide movement that demanded the use of one of the indigenous languages and English simultaneously. From a group of student friends, we learned that not until 2014 did a movement calling itself *Open Stellenbosch* come into being to address the on-going whiteness on campus and its anachronistic language policy. The movement demanded:

- »No student should be forced to learn or communicate in Afrikaans and all classes must be available in English.
- The institutional culture at Stellenbosch University needs to change radically and rapidly to reflect diverse cultures and not only White Afrikaans culture.
- The University publically needs to acknowledge and actively remember the central role that Stellenbosch and its faculty played in the conceptualisation, implementation and maintenance of Apartheid.«



Radsaal Room, Stellenbosch University.
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Stellenbosch University reacted in 2016 by giving English equal status in teaching and acknowledging the users of Xhosa at the same time.

During the conference, while learning about grave human rights violations around the globe, portraits of old white Dutch males with white perukes looked down on us.

As the meeting was held at the Department of Theology, an alumnus stressed that it was exactly here, in the very same venue, where the religious underpinnings of apartheid were laid down: »We were taught false theology here!«, he exclaimed. The Dutch Reformed Church was an important backbone of the apartheid state, and is still far from having overcome its legacy.

Stellenbosch’s colonial character was all too widely felt during this week in town, and participants were not prepared for that. Many felt and unfortunately also experienced racial tensions all over town. It was at this point that the programme was interrupted to discuss exactly where we were and to speak out about aggressions. Thus, there was a demand that the conference should have given more advance background on the historical circumstances of the town and university. Though among the 128 presentations this certainly was discussed, it was scattered over the programme: three White future priests talked about a retreat they had

initiated to critically engage with their own Whiteness and privilege in preparation for their positions as clerics. Furthermore Juliana Claassens, Professor for the Old Testament at the Faculty, talked about the university’s response to *Open Stellenbosch* and student action to make its history of violence visible on campus, which involves memories of the broader communities around.

Beyond an amazing hospitality and warmth that radiated from the individuals of this university and the country, the conference was about post-apartheid year 24. In the beginning, it had asked: »What is the appropriate response to the echoes of historical wounding that extend far beyond the generation that experienced the trauma directly?« At its end it had lived through these »echoes of historical wounding« itself. It had blatantly become a showcase of multidirectional memory of apartheid as well as the Shoah. When we split up once in a Black caucus and a non-black caucus, one person was reminded of a *Selektion*. Many South Africans present saw the country at a crossroads and felt that, sooner rather than later, the nation will need to take a new path to address the blatant social inequalities and its divisions carried over from the apartheid era.

This conference report developed as a spontaneous idea in response to the intensity of the conference and in recognition of the amazing effort the organizers, and especially Prof. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, carried out. I thank Regina Sarreiter for her comments on an earlier version.

About the author

Dr Sonja Hegasy is Vice-Director of ZMO. From 2012 till 2014 she headed the research project *Transforming Memories: Cultural Production and Personal/Public Memory in Lebanon and Morocco*. In Stellenbosch she presented her work on »Our forbidden places«: Intergenerational Dynamics of Historical Trauma in Postcolonial Morocco«. In 2016 she was Fulbright-Fellow at the Graduate Center of City University of New York, CUNY. In 2019 she was appointed member of the Advisory Board for the Maghreb Studies Center at Arizona State University.

Recent Publications

Archive Partisans - Forbidden Histories and the Promise of the Future. In: Sonja Hegasy, Norman S. Nikro (guest eds.), *Memories of Violence, Social Life and Political Culture in the Maghreb and Mashreq*, *Memory Studies Journal*, Special Issue, 12.3, June 2019.

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