



Echoes of the Past in Imaginings of the Future: the problems and possibilities of working with young people in contemporary South Africa

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ABSTRACT This article presents an exploration of how past and future are articulated in the construction of youth identities in the context of South Africa, with a particular focus on the possibilities for change in discourses of nationality and gender. The authors' selective focus on these two dimensions of identity is not only informed by theoretical interests, but is also driven by their implication in the critical social problems of xenophobia and gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa. The authors present two illustrative empirical examples that have emerged from (and reflexively inform) their domain of practice in working with young people, providing for some exploratory theoretical trajectories and pedagogical possibilities: (1) 'national' identity and dialogues of difference, and (2) gendered identities and constructions of sexual violence. Young people are quite evidently actively engaged in crafting their own fluid and hybrid identities, suggesting imaginative new ways to be in the world, energising us and provoking an orientation towards future possibilities. However, this articulation does not escape the past, which echoes in the reassertion of rigid categories of identity, such as gender and nationality. The authors not only consider the possibilities for creating 'better childhoods, better futures', but also explore the constraints on their conscientisation work.

Introduction: getting to here and now

In the context of South Africa where the past often seems quite literally 'another country', there is an exaggeration of the archetypal hope invested in the youth, who, we wish to believe, will make the world a better place. However, having reached the 'promised land' of democracy at a time when the rest of the world, and, in particular, the global intellectual community to which we belong, is already disillusioned with the limitations of democratic politics to deliver thoroughgoing equality, as educators and activists we find ourselves in a strange place. There is much to celebrate; the world of the young people with whom we work is, indeed, very different to our own racialised past. The narrative of the nation in which we both grew up culminated with the euphoria of 1994 and the birth of a 'new' South Africa. But the narrative of this 'new' nation cannot be told from scratch. It can only be created from the 'scraps, patches and rags of daily life' (Appiah, 2005, p. 297). Regardless of how boldly we call the future into being, the recurring echoes of the past are often alarmingly resonant. Even our current scholarly and collegial collaboration in some ways mirrors the social geometry of our historical transition, having come about, in part, as a result of the formal amalgamation of two historically racialised universities. The institutional merger was a re-visioning that invoked the re-imagined 'new' nation, while simultaneously reflecting its history of disparity in the nuanced differences of our personal professional trajectories and positioning as black and white

South African women. The ideological and theoretical resonances in our work and our commitment to social justice activism as feminists coexists with a critical awareness of how we are positioned and represented in relation to different temporalities within the nation project ('then' and 'now'). In this discursive terrain, our engagement with youth also suggests the possibility of writing ourselves into the future, extending our horizons in the lives of others, generating creative storylines in this relatively fluid moment. In this regard, as teachers and activists we work with youth as an act of imagination, oriented towards a future that we hope will be more just and more equal than our current shared worlds or our own histories.

Reflecting this optimistic orientation, a youth programme was designed and implemented by one of the authors of this article (Jill Bradbury), together with a team of colleagues (including the co-author of this article, Jude Clark) and postgraduate students.[1] The Fast Forward Programme was run on an annual basis from 2003 until 2009 as part of the schools outreach programme of the School of Psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The name of the programme alludes to the 'fast forward' button of a compact disc or DVD player, where one can jump forward in the story, leap across time to hear or see what is yet to come. The suggestion for the young participants in the programme was to imagine their future selves, to begin envisaging these 'possible worlds' (Bruner, 1986) and pursuing creative lines of action and thought towards actualising these futures. Although the programme offered a fresh opportunity to interrogate the intersections between theory and practice, it was not conceptualised as an 'application' of particular theoretical principles (see Bradbury & Miller, 2010). While it was designed to engage with issues of developmental identity and recognised the possibilities of the trope of story and the relevance of the 'turn to narrative', it has only been over time and through a consistent reflection on the ways in which participants engaged in the process that we have come to more explicitly ground our discussions within the framework of narrative theories of identity or subjectivity. Within the seven-year period of the programme, it inspired and challenged our engagement in critical pedagogies.

Our current reflexive interrogation explores the tension between the idea of youth as a resource for imaginative new ways of being in the world and the acknowledgement that young people's lives are shaped by narratives of disempowerment and constraints of the past that echo in the reassertion of rigid categories of identity. We are particularly interested to explore the possibilities for change in the constructions of identity as articulated in the discourses of nationality and gender. These dimensions of our own identities as South African women at the beginning of the twenty-first century embody the gains and dramatic changes of our political world but, paradoxically, continue to present deeply rooted and seemingly intractable social problems that take new forms in the present and infiltrate our imagined futures. Our selective focus on these two dimensions of identity is not only informed by personal identifications or theoretical interests, but is also driven by their implication in the critical social problems of xenophobia and gender-based violence in contemporary South Africa. We therefore consider theoretical and political commitments as intertwined and mutually constitutive.

This article begins by providing a brief contextual overview of the themes and methods of the Fast Forward Programme and the learners who participated in it. This is followed by a description of the theoretical and methodological resources that frame our analysis. Our reflexive analytic discussion is structured along the temporal thematic areas of past, present and future, each section unpacking a relevant core tension that arose within the youth programme.

Working with Youth: the Fast Forward Programme

The programme was coordinated and facilitated by the authors, together with a team of facilitators drawn mainly from the university community. As an outreach programme of the School of Psychology, it comprised a relatively small but significant aspect of our 'core business' as lecturers, and was coordinated under significant time and funding constraints, and alongside additional responsibilities of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and supervision, research, curriculum development, administration and management. The programme provided an innovative vehicle for teaching and learning, and was incorporated into our postgraduate teaching and training, creating new ways for students to conceptualise the practice of psychology in working with youth and offering valuable experiential learning of small-group facilitation and working outside of the

usual bounds of more individualised psychological practice, and without the pathologising discourses that typically frame such practice.

Every year, 100 black isiZulu-speaking learners (approximately 50 boys and 50 girls) in their penultimate year of schooling (Grade 11 in South Africa) would participate in the programme. They were drawn from two schools in KwaZulu-Natal: one located in a disadvantaged township community in the city of Durban and the other in a remote and resource-poor rural area along the Drakensberg mountain range. The programme would engage learners at certain points in the year, with the main contact period being a week-long series of workshops split between the urban and rural locations.[2] Focusing on the broad thematic domains of heritage, gender, sexuality, ecology and careers, the workshops were designed to engage particular discourses in current circulation in our context (racism, xenophobia, homophobia, sexism), deliberately creating alternative narratives and representations from which participants could draw in the making of their identities – for example, (1) ideas of cultural heritage that question the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion; (2) women's narratives of work in traditionally male roles; and (3) dialogues about sexuality that recognise the multiplicities of desire.[3] The intensive programme used multiple modes of the arts as the methodological vehicle to explore and deconstruct dominant, taken-for-granted notions of difference and commonality in identity along dimensions of 'race', class, gender, sexuality, language and nationality. Dance, music, bodywork, drama and film were used to introduce learners to different ways of thinking about themselves and their contexts. Theoretically and methodologically, the workshops were informed by the notion of performativity, 'an attempt to find a more embodied way of rethinking the relationships between social structures and personal agency' (Nash, 2000, p. 654). The link between narrative and embodied symbolic representation was also pertinent. In its association with 'the imaginative and the artful' (Freeman, 2003, p. 112), story (and the diverse possibilities of textual representation) has the potential to disturb traditional assumptions about knowledge. By working in this form, participants were able to comment on (and perform) the situatedness and multiplicity of knowledges through the various layers of representation and interpretation.

Two significant activities in the programme involved the use of a 'heritage box' and 'theatre of the oppressed'. The heritage box, compiled by one of the team members, Siyanda Ndlovu (see note 1), included images of people, places, practices and symbols that might represent our kaleidoscopic cultural world – both typical images of cultural tradition or 'heritage' and less conventional representations of fluid, living culture. This methodological resource is a creative way to think about the events of our past and their meanings for us today. As a collage of symbolic representations that participants sift through, it is useful in representing the performative aspects of memory and identity. The process of interpreting and discussing these images (often heatedly!) is an enactment of the ways in which a variety of cultural images and symbols (place names, commemorative monuments and ceremonies, and ritual enactments of past events) function as technologies of memory, mobilising particular understandings of history to specific contemporary ends. In this regard, the heritage box exercise generates possibilities for thinking about what should be retained and what should be jettisoned in the making of ourselves and our futures. Second, drawing on the theoretical offerings of Freire's (1972, 1973) pedagogy of the oppressed and Boal's (1979) methodology of theatre of the oppressed, we created opportunities for participants on the programme to use drama techniques to present what they identified as burning social problems and to generate possible solutions. We utilised theatre of the oppressed from the vantage point that performance has powerful socio-political uses and that symbolic human action can shift the dynamics of oppressive power relations within society and change the course of events (Brown & Gillespie, 1999). Methodologically, 'performance provides individuals with an experiential, communicative tool to express what might otherwise be inexpressible' (Howard, 2004, p. 219). It can also be argued that in both academic and lay domains where adults and adolescents or academic researchers and young participants interact, this engagement is usually heavily prescribed by norms and scripts, and that, therefore, young people often 'give us' the narratives we (as adults/teachers) expect and elicit (Clark, 2009). Working with bodies moves participants out of the 'talk-shop' mode of intellectual discourse to represent issues and experiences in multiple dimensions, and explore alternative creative methods of producing and expressing knowledge (Clark, 2009).

Theoretically and methodologically, we thus found it fruitful to use symbolic representations – be these narrative accounts, music, visual images or the body itself – as tools to engage young people in unpacking their understandings of themselves, in images of the past, in constructs of their current everyday life experiences and in their dreams of the future. The heritage box and theatre of the oppressed exercises provided participants with alternative languages to discuss, analyse and renegotiate current and alternative identity positions in a dynamic and creative way.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework: making and understanding storied lives

[T]he past and its retrieval in memory hold a curious place in our identities, one that simultaneously stabilizes those identities in continuity or threatens to disrupt them. (Antze & Lambek, 1996, p. xvi)

Reflexive accounts of our interaction with youth demonstrate the complex ways in which young South Africans engage with conflicting narratives – past, present and future – in the development of their identities. There *are* considerable cultural and political resources available to young people in our context in the process of identity development that recognise and legitimise multiple ways of being in the world. The motto on the South African national coat of arms, '!ke e:/xarra//ke', in the language of the /Xam people, means 'unity in diversity'.^[4] The Freedom Charter, the founding document of the anti-apartheid struggle, states that South Africa belongs to 'all who live in it', and this phrase is repeated in the preamble to the democratic constitution, extending this inclusivity in specific clauses that assert equality across 'race', gender, sexual orientation and ethnic or linguistic groups. The constitution also includes explicit provision for the rights of children – *inter alia*, the right to education, health and security. These remarkable constitutional protections remain, however, in tension with the lived experiences of women in a country in which gender-based violence is rife, and where the underbelly of the national project to erase racism and create unity among diverse South Africans is xenophobia, the creation of a new 'other'.

Narrations of continuity between 'past' and 'present' rely on a network of related conceptual and methodological assumptions and approaches, and invoke the notion of memory and culture in particular ways within and across the private and public domain, and individual and collective discourses. We have conceptualised our work with young people as, in part, to help them think of themselves as the 'hinge' (Hoffman, 2004) between an overtly oppressive past and the hopeful horizons of the future. In working with the young people on the programme, we explored the possibilities of drawing on the past to generate the future, on the assumption that the future cannot be imagined without using the stuff of the past. The mythical bird of Ghanaian legend, Sankofa, flies forward while looking backwards to gather the wisdom of the past.^[5] Kierkegaard's proverbial saying, 'We live forwards but understand backwards' (Crites, 1986), seems to apply not only to the personal linkages and coherences that each of us must construct, but also to the possibilities for national narratives.

Identifying elements of the past, of cultural history or heritage, which may be of use in understanding present positionalities and as resources for making future selves and worlds, is, of course, not a neutral agenda, and critics could argue that it simply substitutes one 'hidden curriculum' (Illich, 1971) for another, failing to respect and validate the understandings of others. In particular, many of these ideas can be, and often are, rejected as not culturally appropriate by articulate and resistant learners, who say things such as: 'Homosexuality is not part of our culture' or 'In our culture, women are expected to ...'. And how we deal with this resistance raises crucial questions of praxis for us as teachers and activists. The possibilities for agency or rewriting the self (Freeman, 2003) are always constrained by available repertoires or the cultural stock of stories that characterise the socio-historical world within which young people live. As McAdams (2001, p. 114) notes: 'It is painfully clear that life stories echo gender and class constructions in society and reflect, in one way or another, prevailing patterns of hegemony in the economic, political, and cultural contexts wherein human lives are situated'. Our work is premised on the possibility for alternatives, but also brings us into stark confrontation with the limits of such alternatives in our context. The young participants, as part of the 'born-free' generation, were still confronted with a past that, while appearing to be temporally and spatially distant, re-emerged as part of their own

young histories. This creates 'the experience of living simultaneously in different epochs, to the same degree present and past, open and hidden, and dominated by contrary agendas of remembering and forgetting' (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 459). Brockmeier expands on Freeman's notion of the collective 'narrative unconscious', the ways in which the past resurfaces in those culturally and historically rooted aspects of one's history 'that have not yet become part of one's story' (Freeman, 2002, p. 193). These underground stories that echo the historical cultural background are, according to Brockmeier (2002, p. 457), made up of 'the repertoire of life narratives circulating in a culture'. We posit that these anomalous past-present narrative reverberations could be conceptualised as a manifestation of young people's ambivalence, not only about their positioning as the 'hope for the future', but also about possible recourse to the dominant discourses of freedom and independence that produce them as subjects and (mis)represent the world they currently live in.

In terms of methodology, a paradox of exploring and drawing on alternative frameworks for 'producing different knowledge differently' is that the textual data often fall outside the conventional parameters of research and are rendered 'inauthentic' if they are not immediately observable, or not amenable to standard norms of measurement or articulation (Clark, 2009). A creative programme that is not initiated as a research project and that does not draw on standard methods of data collection often fares poorly in assessment of its reliability and validity due to ideas of what counts as 'data' and the perceived hierarchy of analytical accessibility thereof. At the centre of our approach to our 'practice as data' is the notion of critical reflexivity, an exploration that theorises experience rather than describing the data collected. Of central importance – particularly in the context of an activist education project in the Freirian tradition such as that reported on here – is the historical production of the subjectivities of all participants (researchers and researched) and their impact upon (and within) the research context. This involves conceptualising the historical, ideological and discursive trajectories of these subjectivities as integrally connected to the various ways in which they are practised in the research process and mutually constitute one another. Reconceptualising the process in this way enables us to reflect on ourselves as researchers and our relations with our participants, generating another form of data. These reflexive data are as critical to the process of deepening our understanding as the data produced by the participants themselves.

We are aware of the ways in which power is implicated in how we choose to represent the research process and interpret the experiences of the young participants. Reflections on experience cannot be referred to in an uncomplicated way and need to be problematised. There is much at stake when reflexive activity is represented as functioning predominantly as an uncritical legitimating of claims. For us, attending to the power relations within the context of research necessitated considering how our subjectivities and associated privileges and inequalities informed our positions in the research process.

As argued by Burman (2000, pp. 54-55): 'the project of "giving voice" threatens to reproduce the very paternalistic relations it claims to dismantle, this by virtue of presuming the power to afford that "giving" of voice'. The reflexive analysis of our practice in this space will be developed through vignettes – stories of our experiences with young people on the Fast Forward Programme that concretise the contours of theoretical explanation and provoke possibilities for practice.

Reflexive Analytic Discussion

Using the Past/Losing History

As mentioned earlier, the heritage box exercise is useful in uncovering how processes of remembering 'take on performative meaning within a charged field of contested moral and political claims', and are intimately involved in the process of identity construction (Antze & Lambek, 1996, p. vii). The elements included in these boxes for conversation were selected in line with the idea of heritage as those aspects of our past worth celebrating, reincorporating into our present conceptions of ourselves as individuals and as a nation. However, any such representations and excavations of the past – particularly in the context of a very recent violently conflictual past – entail a deeply political process of memory-making and forgetting. This is very evident in the way in which South Africa marks historical events in its contemporary calendar.

South Africa has 12 public holidays in a calendar year. Some are religious (Christian) days, but several are days that mark critical political moments in our recent history. In some instances, these same days were officially marked in the past but have undergone name changes, indicating a new conceptualisation of the day. For example, 16 December was officially called the Day of the Vow or, unofficially and more graphically, Blood River, a day commemorating Afrikaner military defeat of the Zulus, a day in which the river literally flowed red with blood. This violent historical conflict between people whose descendants share national citizenship is now, in a remarkable instance of rewriting the past, referred to as the Day of Reconciliation. In other cases, events of the political struggle such as the Sharpeville massacre on 21 March 1961 and the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976 are commemorated on these dates but have been newly labelled Human Rights Day and Youth Day, respectively. This practice seems to encapsulate the ambivalence South Africans feel towards their past, simultaneously remembering and forgetting our history, marking and erasing the events that led us to where we are today. A new holiday entirely was inaugurated on 24 September 1996: Heritage Day. In the words of then-president Nelson Mandela:

When our first democratically-elected government decided to make Heritage Day one of our national days, we did so because we knew that our rich and varied cultural heritage has a profound power to help build our new nation.

We did so knowing that the struggles against the injustice and inequities of the past are part of our national identity; they are part of our culture. We knew that, if indeed our nation has to rise like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes of division and conflict, we had to acknowledge those whose selfless efforts and talents were dedicated to this goal of non-racial democracy. (Mandela, 1996)

This construction of the day entails conflicting ideas about culture and, particularly, the role of the past in constructing the present and, beyond this, future possibilities. On the one hand, cultural diversity is viewed as a strength, and the multiple cultural threads of contemporary South Africa are asserted as all equally important in weaving a new national story. On the other hand, our cultural heritage is defined by the political struggles of those who fought against injustices, who acted in the past with a view to the non-racial future which is now present. Heritage Day thus presents us with the opportunity and challenge to invoke narratives of the past that celebrate cultural diversity in the act of recognising and valorising 'struggle heroes' in a narrative of overcoming and of salvation, which reaches its climax in the birth of the 'new' South Africa.



Figure 1. The old and new South African flags.

Using symbolic representations, facilitated conversation and debate with our young participants, enabling them to articulate the points of (dis)identification between the various national narratives and their own developing personal narratives, led to several surprises (or perhaps, more accurately, shocks) for us, challenging our assumptions about shared history and what is meaningful for young South Africans in the construction of their present and future lives. For example, aside from the most iconic day of the Soweto uprising, in most instances, the new sanitised names of public holidays seemed to have erased any link with the historical events of the past for the young participants. Very few of the young people even recognised the old South African flag, despite the contentious process of replacing it, which is a vivid, lived personal memory for us (see Figure 1).

Perhaps some may read this as a positive story. For those of us who lived through the fraught negotiations about the creation of our new multicoloured flag, with its surplus of meanings and active work to assert inclusivity, it is a joy that this symbol is taken for granted. But, in another sense, it means that the terse representation of our colonial history (represented by the amalgam of flags in the centre of the old flag) is not just replaced but erased, and, with it, the complexities of past oppression are oversimplified.

Present Worlds: cultural and geographical landscapes

Turning to another medium of cultural representation, the universal language of music, we discover that it is not entirely universal after all. Particular forms are recognisably 'African' and therefore claimed as our heritage, part of 'our culture'; others are rejected. The Senegalese music of Ishmael Lo was discounted as 'not African, that's Indian'. But these lines between 'us' and 'them' were not emphatically drawn, neither were the notions of 'heritage' or 'culture' interpreted simplistically or statically by these young people. From the 'past', it was not traditional cultural songs, songs of political struggle or even African jazz that struck a chord of recognition among the young listeners, but rather the pop music of their parents, with spontaneous singalongs accompanying Dolly Parton's 'Jolene'! Globalised popular culture creates connections across otherwise vastly different worlds. In a videoconference dialogue between Fast Forward participants and British youth in 2005, participants from both sides of the globe sang Akon's 'Lonely' as emblematic of their cultural worlds and adolescent experiences (Bradbury, 2006).

The sources and resources for the remaking of cultural and national identity are therefore not always ones that we would choose, and do not always accord with our pedagogical and political purposes. In particular, our attempts to encourage young people to think about connections with others in Africa produced very strange and somewhat disturbing responses, telling the story of our past isolation from the rest of Africa or mapping the continent as empty or invaded by dominant global reference points (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Empty map of Africa.



Figure 3. Other points of reference or worlds of significance.

This absence of even the scantest outlines of an Africa beyond our borders makes it difficult to (re)invent an African identity that stretches beyond parochial national boundaries, creating new, elastic ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991). The lack of a repertoire of battles fought and won in other places translates into a paucity of resources for creating a society in which we want to live and blunts our empathic sensibility. In our celebration of South African diversity and attempts to validate our multicultural histories, we assert our uniqueness. Against the monolingual and monolithic worlds of colonial Europe, we have 11 official languages recognised in the constitution. However, this is paltry compared with Kenya’s 69 languages or Nigeria’s 510 living languages, and because South Africans do not ‘know’ this (the young people on the programme responded with disbelief to these language statistics), we cannot learn from either the struggles or rich cultural life of others. And despite the ostensible equality of our languages, we do not have ways of talking to each other, and most South Africans continue to live in racialised linguistic enclaves. Conversations are both literally and figuratively impossible without shared language. As educators who are both mother-tongue speakers of English working with young people whose mother tongue is isiZulu, and living in quite different worlds of meaning, the problematics of translation and (mis)understandings are amplified.

Furthermore, the constitutive relationship between power and language can be seen as functioning as both a generative force and restrictive opportunity. As stated by Parker (2005, p. 25): ‘When language is structured into discourses it is structured such that spaces are permitted for certain things to be said by certain people, and that certain subject positions are allowed and others proscribed’. Giroux frames the challenge as

the need to fashion a language of ethics and politics that serves to discriminate between relations that do violence and those that promote diverse and democratic public cultures through which youth and others can understand their problems and concerns as part of a larger effort to interrogate and disrupt the dominant narratives of national identity, economic privilege, and individual empowerment. (Giroux, 1996, p. 74)

Enacting Social Problems and Imagining Solutions

In using Boal’s theatre of the oppressed methodology to represent real-life issues, the young people on the programme repeatedly identified the two critical issues which underpin our analysis in this article – xenophobia and gender inequalities – and creatively represented these dramatically.

However, it soon became apparent that the description of 'xenophobia' as a problem referred not to the hatred or fear of foreigners that has expressed itself in frequent violence against foreign Africans – most shockingly in the 2008 attacks, in which 62 people died and thousands were displaced and lost their livelihoods and possessions (Hassim et al, 2008) – but rather to the popular account of the 'reason' for the attacks: job competition. The dramas reinscribed the problem, defining 'xenophobia' as: 'These foreigners are taking our jobs'. If popular media focuses on an issue and creates explanations that are little more than labels for social phenomena, this may serve to crystallise the story in this way, to fossilise this version and foreclose alternative accounts. This is the danger of interventions [6] that focus on the provision of information: not only will they be ineffective in shifting understandings and practices, but they may also even serve to reinscribe common sense and bolster cultural norms and boundaries.

The young people's performances of contemporary scenarios of gendered social relations most typically represented forms of violence in heterosexual relationships. These scenarios were drawn directly from the young participants' own individual daily lived experiences and collectively choreographed into dramatic representations for an interactive audience of their peers. For example, participants enacted the scenario of a young girl travelling alone on a bus being sexually harassed by an older man. The interpretations of this scenario offered by participants were often framed in natural or culturally immutable terms as simply 'the way in which men demonstrate love'. Suggested strategies of passive resistance (ignoring the man's sexual advances) were countered with the argument that the fact that she was trying to ignore him did not mean that she was not interested, as this was often a way girls were expected to behave so as not to appear too 'eager' (read as 'promiscuous'). Girls immediately rejected strategies of assertiveness as impossible on their part, absolutely certain that reprisals would be violent.

Suggested strategies that did gain some traction were to appropriate or subvert the commonly accepted norms of feminine behaviour in resisting the unwanted advances of the older man, either going against the dominant script of femininity (portraying 'unladylike, disgusting behaviour for a girl' – for example, farting or scratching) or using the notion of feminine seduction as a decoy (coolly flirting and then escaping when 'his guard was down'). All possible strategies raised by the participants were strongly rooted in traditional gender roles that do not easily seem to lend themselves to redescription, despite all theories of gendered multiplicities. The enactment of these scenarios provides insight into the limited power that young women have in both private and public domains, and the contexts within which discourses of love, sex and violence gain meaning. The intricate interplay between the discursive and material conditions of being young in South Africa informs how abusive and violent relationships might be subjectively experienced and perpetuated.

The incontrovertible position of the girls was that if a man is intent on raping you, there is very little you can do to prevent or avoid it. It is very evident that despite the progressive nature of the legal and human rights afforded to women in South Africa, these often do not translate into action in women's everyday lives. As feminists, it has been a huge challenge to negotiate the tension between the progressive politics and rhetoric of gender equity at the national level that articulate the longed-for future of our personal pasts, and the deeply entrenched discourses of gender inequality drawn on by young men and women with such certainty, and very often naturalised and normalised in static versions of culture. Feminism is not seen as a resource on which young women can draw, being dismissed as, at best, out of touch with realities and, at worst, possibly increasing the danger of gender-based violence. These challenges from our young participants, in terms of what is and is not possible in their lived realities, undermine the sense that young people may represent hopeful, imagined futures, suggesting rather a spiralling politics of despair.

Implications for Theory and Practice

In the face of this despair, we are grappling with finding possibilities for hope, for 'better childhoods, better futures'. Despite its limitations, we remain convinced that narrative theory, with its implications of creativity and imaginative alternatives, offers a productive approach for engaging with the nexus of subjectivity and socio-political context (Bradbury & Clark, 2009). We

conceptualise our agenda in working with youth as twofold: (1) to listen attentively to the narratives of their lives and (2) to provide the resources for the construction of alternative counter-stories. As will be evident from the discussion above, the construction of these alternatives cannot proceed by a simple redescription of the world or the 'correction of a few flatly factual errors' (Appiah, 2005, p. 177).

Supplying alternatives seems to require creating new foci or new centres of attention, rather than directly confronting versions of the self and world that may be functionally 'true' (for example, gendered relations are dangerous and always potentially violent for South African women, and national citizenship is a very recent, hard-won identity and requires defending). The Fast Forward Programme engaged this problematic primarily by using the arts: (1) drama, enacting aspects of the world 'as they are' and then remaking them along alternative lines; (2) music, widening the circles of belonging and opening up connections with the cultural heritage of the continent of Africa; (3) dance, using our bodies to explore questions of trust and gendered power; and (4) stories of 'ordinary' people who have agentially created interesting and successful working lives in the face of the structural constraints of 'race', class and gender.

In the complex mix of past and present, sameness and difference, we struggle to find common languages, connections across divides. Our late colleague and dear friend Siyanda Ndlovu sought to invoke connections, creating 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) through a game using the very traditional African practice of praise names. An individual states her name and the name of her mother's family, and recites the family genealogy and praise names of her families. As each name is announced, members of the group with kin connections to these names rise and reach out a hand to join the growing formation of connected bodies (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Networks of connection.

This process very graphically consolidates relationships within ethnic groups; it does not so easily cross language or cultural boundaries, or, indeed, racial lines in our society, where the erection and preservation of these boundaries was the *raison d'être* of apartheid. However, we did find ways for these circles to operate inclusively, challenging the apparently rigid racial classifications of apartheid, and discovering shared surnames and histories. For example, one of the young white Afrikaans-speaking facilitators was drawn into the circle by a young black participant whose family history included the name KwaBothma, which literally means the 'place of Bothma', the surname of the young white woman's maternal grandmother. One of the authors of this article, Jude Clark, was drawn into the circle, exposing the ludicrous artificiality of apartheid's conflated classification of people with mixed ancestry as a distinct 'racial' group – 'coloured' – with Jude's heritage linking her to both English-speaking white and Zulu-speaking black young people in the room. The other

author, Jill Bradbury, and a young black participant discovered that both were related by marriage to McKenzies. And McKenzie was the name of the tartan of the kilt worn by facilitator Siyanda Ndlovu in playing the game (see Figure 5), deliberately breaking down boundaries and appropriating cultural threads from all over the place to make new connections possible. His aim was to simultaneously subvert his blackness, gender, national identity and colonial history; to embody and overtly articulate his multiple identities (Ndlovu, 2012).



Figure 5. Siyanda Ndlovu in action in his kilt and Converse tackies.

The game then takes a new twist to offer alternative lines for connection that depart from ‘natural’-kin lines of relationship into worlds of shared interests, sports and music, art and studies, of likes and dislikes, with participants moving around the room identifying themselves with and distancing themselves from multiple others in a morphing, moving set of formations. These new and mutable threads demonstrate the fluidity of identifications and suggest alternative ‘webs of locution’ (Taylor, 1989). This process suggests that imagining ‘better futures’ is not a question of simply developing individual agency. In order to enable young people to live ‘better childhoods’, they need to find imaginative (re)connections across present divisive lines inscribed by our past histories. It is apparent that it is not inevitable that young people will spontaneously envisage these possibilities simply because youth is on their side. There may be aspects of experience, the knowledge of historical ‘hindsight’ (Freeman, 2010) that educators with a critical agenda have to offer. Our task is not to simply passively observe young people in a mistaken application of the political importance of valuing their positions or listening to their voices. We most certainly need to be critical of our blind spots and ignorance of the worlds that youth inhabit (Steyn, 2012). However, the imperative to actively confront disabling and disempowering narratives remains: alternative interpretations or ways of viewing the world have to be actively created.

Conclusion

In conclusion, on good days, our work with young people continues to offer us new hopeful horizons, eroding the cynicism and jadedness often felt by those of us who are ‘over the hill’ or past the intense, defining activity of youth that features so strongly in life stories – what McAdams (2001) calls the ‘narrative bump’. In one sense, the future anticipated by our own youthful longings,

hopes and activism has been delivered, in that we live in a post-apartheid society. However, in many respects, 'the future ain't what it used to be!' This article outlines the ways in which our hopes have been tested and sometimes eroded by the recognition that, as South African youth struggle to make their way in the world, the resources most easily available to them may be conservative and reactionary. Talking to and playing with young people in creative spaces suggests that developing agency entails *work* to transform the contours of our identities and the social world. The recurring nightmares of our apartheid past – racism and sexism – return in the 'narrative unconscious' (Freeman, 2010) of young people who are growing up in a supposedly 'free' society. However, simply rejecting the unpalatable stories of youth because they do not conform to our political lines or fulfil our personal hopes will do little to undercut the evident mutating power of these narratives.

Appiah (2005, p. 189) poses this dilemma: 'How can we reconcile a respect for people as they are with a concern for people as they might be?' He suggests that this is a conundrum that cannot be avoided: 'to ignore the first term is tyranny; to give up on the second is defeatism, or complacency' (Appiah, 2005, p. 212). This is the conundrum in which we find ourselves.

Freire's (1972, 1973) emancipatory pedagogy claims that we can teach people to read their worlds in the process of learning to read. We find ourselves flipping between the worlds of practice and theory, and somewhat overwhelmed and despairing about the impossibilities of praxis. One option might be to step out of the vortex of theory, finding a space where other sources of energy and possibility for action exist; the other is to flee the world of practice in the hope that perhaps teaching students to read and work theoretically may release them to do things differently in the future.[7] Our ambivalent oscillation between these worlds may mirror young people's own uncertainties about how to step into the future and how to find the resources to act and think in the world, which often seems a flurry of experience. The enticing title of Boal's (1995) text *Rainbow of Desire* resonates strongly with the 'rainbow nation' metaphor that Archbishop Desmond Tutu invoked as the slogan for the non-racial democracy of the 'new' South Africa.[8] The challenge is to find new ways to 'teach to transgress' (hooks, 1994) so that metaphorical rainbows may serve as hopeful inspiration for new horizons of action, rather than illusory mirages that seduce and paralyse.

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Notes

- [1] Our late young colleague and very dear friend Siyanda Ndlovu developed and ran the heritage box task and other important components of the programme, working with the participants with his characteristic openness and passionate energy. Siyanda died in a tragic drowning accident in 2010. This article is dedicated to his memory and to all the young people committed to making a future that he would have loved to live in.
- [2] Even in using different regional locations the programme challenged participants to envision and experience new realities, and to begin to question the politics of spatialised identity. For instance, many of the rural learners and some of the township youth had never been to the ocean before and, similarly, most of the city teenagers would have their first experience of the vastness of nature out in the mountains.
- [3] Additional aspects of the programme included a workshop on sexuality and sexual identity, and a workshop on thinking about the worlds of work. Trained facilitators provided information about safe-sex practices in the context of the risks posed by HIV/AIDS and encouraged open dialogue with the learners on issues often considered taboo. Young black role models conversed with the learners about their working lives, how they made their choices, and the lucky and not-so-lucky incidents along the way that had led them to the kinds of work which they now did. This framework enabled young people to begin thinking about work as a part of life, as a process, and as integral to the development of identities and relationships with others in the world.

- [4] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coat_of_arms_of_South_Africa
- [5] See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankofa>
- [6] The South African education system has historically been characterised by authoritarian didactics with an emphasis on the transmission of 'facts'. This approach is also typical of educational media campaigns, such as that dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic with the mantra of ABC (Abstain, Be Faithful, Condomise).
- [7] The authors' current positions reflect their individual trajectories in relation to the dichotomous alternatives of practice and theory: Jude Clark is now an independent practitioner and activist, whereas Jill Bradbury is focused on theoretical work and postgraduate teaching. However, we recognise the severe epistemological and political constraints of both domains, and are committed to asserting the importance of practical implications for theoretical work and inserting theory into practice. Our personal collaboration provides one vehicle for challenging us out of our respective retreats.
- [8] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rainbow_Nation

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