APORTAL Vol 2 (1) 2018

Women Doing History Differently

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ABSTRACT
I was recently invited to give a lecture to post-graduate History students on *Women and History* at Howard College at University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I began by encouraging students to ask broad questions about the way History as a subject in the Humanities is constructed and institutionalised. Coming from an English Literature background, I deliberately deployed examples that showed the intersection and slippage between History and Literature, to encourage the exploration of a more malleable and contentious view of what might constitute History. This article is presented as a working exemplar of how one might work tangentially, with the deployment of diverse case studies, in order to promote scrutiny of traditional, formulaic views in the teaching and learning of a particular discipline. This is not to flatten distinctions, but to encourage critical thinking about the borders and fences we erect around and within disciplines. This contribution has two main purposes specifically for teaching and learning. Stylistically, by retaining the direct presentation mode that I used originally, I question the indirect, reported, journal writing mode that we normally adhere to when speaking about teaching and learning. Secondly, through the use of a particular example, I am prompting a re-consideration of the disciplines we teach, in terms of its received construction, content, and methodology. Even where critical innovation has occurred, there is always room for pushing the [new] boundaries.

Keywords: *Women; history; historiography, teaching history; higher education; presentation mode.*

THE PRESENTATION - WOMEN DOING HISTORY DIFFERENTLY

In this presentation I shall begin by posing questions related to the field of History[1] broadly, as it is constituted as a discipline, and how History [as traditionally defined] does "History". Certainly, as you progress in the study of a discipline – any discipline – you need to look at its construction, its history, its ideology, and not just at its purported content or curriculum. Indeed, that very content is the result of these factors. Often disciplines get normalised, and we forget the dimensions that shaped it. In this instance, this approach takes us to pondering over the "idea of History", and to a consideration of historiography, and issues related to representation and writing of History, among others.

We need to look at the discipline we call History from different angles. When and where did this entity we call History begin? How did it begin to become constructed and formulated as a discipline that is taught and transmitted? How does a certain type of content come to cluster around it, and be identified with it? It is important to bring this kind of interrogation to bear on all our disciplines, to be vigilant towards a certain "manufacturing of consent" that creeps in. This happens in all facets of life, all practices, and discourses; that they cease to be transparent. We have to ask how and when disciplines become institutionalised. In this particular instance, how did the professionalisation and 'scientification' of Historical Studies develop? What were the different stages in the development of History as a discipline?

My field is English Literature, and for a long time I accepted the content of this subject/discipline called "English Literature" as a logical amalgam of what should be included, and what its parameters were. This is how ideology works on individuals: I accepted the content unquestioningly. I studied English and English Literature from my high school days, and through university, and only much later did I begin to question it as a construct, and even see it as such.

I was surprised to learn, years after I began studying English Literature, of its development and formation as a formal subject or discipline. One of the books which changed my perspective on English Literature is Gauri

[1] I use the capital H" to denote the subject on the curriculum in our educational institutions.

Visvanathan's *Masks Of Conquest: Literary Study And British Rule In India* [1989][2]. This book is about the institutionalisation of English, and the way the institution, practice and ideology evolved. It is interesting to note that the discipline was first developed in India – a colony of the British Empire, and then, imported to the metropolis, where it was taught at Oxford and Cambridge and elsewhere, and then, exported back to the different parts of the British Empire.

Viswanathan uses Antonio Gramsci's insights on the relationship between culture and power, on how cultural domination of subjugated peoples seemed to work by consent, rather than coercion, and how this precedes conquest by force [see Kumar, 2017]. She points out that the function of Education, in general, and of English literary education, in particular, had a religious and moral edge in the colonies, that the "discipline" of English had its beginnings in strategies of socio-political control.

It is worth looking at the history of any discipline - as an exemplar for investigation. This is a worthy project in different disciplinary spaces in teaching and learning.

One of the theorists of History was Hayden White, who considered the philosophy of History, and its construction as a discipline. In his book, *Metahistory – The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* [1973/2014], White argues that History is marked by narrative, and is akin to literature, in its reliance on narrative for meaning. While History strives to be objective and scientific, its narrativity tries to make history "coherent", using the available evidence. Literary writing, on the other hand, may develop an imagined narrative.

White's discourse on the notion of "metahistory" is an important one, where one looks beyond the visible content of the discipline, to its history, assumptions, and worldview. Crucially, White, who worked in Comparative Literature, stressed the role of the HISTORICAL IMAGINATION in doing History, and the role of the

[2] Visvanathan, who initially studied in New Delhi, went on to read for her PhD at Columbia University, under the well-known postcolonial scholar, Edward Said.

IMAGINATION as fundamental in critical reflection on any subject and is, crucially, dependent on the evidence found. The important effect of his work was a shift in emphasis from History to historiography, in the quest to render History-making more transparent. This "revisionist" turn in History has been welcomed. The other consideration, that a historian might be aware of, is that due to various reasons, some evidence may be suppressed, missing, deleted, or side-lined.

Similarly, Angeliki Spiropoulou, a professor of Modern Literature and Theory in Greece, in her book *Virginia Woolf, Modernity and History – Constellations with Walter Benjamin* [2010], makes important observations from Literature on the politics of History. She considers the representation of history and the workings of the historical memory/imagination in literary spaces, such as Virginia Woolf's writings, to be worth reflecting on, as they question conventional ways of "doing" History. Her drawing on Walter Benjamin, one of the classical theorists on the philosophy of history, provocatively links different nodes of inquiry in an interesting dialogue[3]: 'History' as a term combines the ontological with the epistemological in as much as it refers both to the past and our representations of the past. Since we only have access to the past through its representation, historiographical methodology necessarily evokes questions addressed by the philosophy of history. Such questions concern the nature of historical temporality, crucially coupled with some notion of the possible direction of history and of the appropriate subject of history writing. These in turn determine how a historian conceives the relation between the present and past, the possible meaning of human history, the possibility of objectivity and the role of interpretation in historiography. [Spiropoulou, 2010, pp. 37]

David Boje's [2008] interesting notion of the *antenarrative* offers a counter to the conventional notion of a coherent, linear narrative, usually found in History. Postmodernist story-telling has attempted to subvert certainty and

[3] This kind of dialogue/conversation or new "constellation" [see Rabaté 2012], is that which I am generally prompting in this presentation, where we consider one entity [or discipline] from the vantage point of another.

predictability. How will this "work" in history-telling?

Foucault, who works interdisciplinary, has also argued for a new kind of history - a history that is about discontinuities. Described as an "anti-historical historian" [Poster, 1982, p. 116], Foucault also approaches history subversively, and speaks of a "history of the present", where we consider the genealogy of the present and how it came to manifest itself in the way it does [see Garland, 2014].

Of concern, is how art may also be used in representation of History, a topic to which I will return at the end. [We might also consider the idea of History as art.]

Women Questioning History

How do women in particular, question the terrain of History and how do they "do" history? Hence, the title of my lecture: *WOMEN DOING HISTORY DIFFERENTLY.* I have deliberately included some unusual, "eccentric" [off centre] examples [some figures you are not likely to encounter in the usual History lecture room], to disrupt, question and re-vision the "centre". I think that when you look beyond what the selected women are saying, to the sub-text of what they are doing, you appreciate many things about History that might otherwise elude you. While much of this is not new, and now included in the revisionist History curriculum, some of the examples I have included show that there is scope for other emphases.

In looking at *WOMEN DOING HISTORY DIFFERENTLY*, you also need to look at those who are feminist intellectuals and scholars in general and in other disciplines – Science, Literature, Psychology, Literature, to name a few. What are they saying specifically, but also generally, on matters related to epistemology, ontology, identity, politics and general History? You need to consider coloniality, apartheid, post-coloniality, decoloniality, generally, and how feminist scholars have influenced the direction of discourses in these areas in South Africa. Although this is beyond the scope of this presentation, it is crucial for rethinking History, and any other discipline, for that matter.

Similarly, we should always explore new ways of doing research in relation to women/gender and History and, in the process, make new contributions to teaching and learning

History. Issues of epistemology, ontology, and methodology in research are closely intertwined to teaching and learning in any discipline, the one shaping and determining the course of the other. We often do not realise that every discipline we teach, including subjects like Science, and Architecture, to name a few at random, should be scrutinised from a variety of perspectives. Appropriating the lexicon of critical interrogation of History as a discipline is a fundamental exercise in your development as a historian.

Your approach should include both a broad critical orientation as well as specific, critical approaches to the study of particular historical areas.

Inquiries may take different directions: What have been the broad trends and developments in History over the past century at global, continental, and regional levels? How has the study of History in South Africa been influenced by developments in the discipline elsewhere, or by other disciplines? How has the study of History in South Africa been influenced by developments in History in South Africa? What have been the trends in History in other countries? In India, for example, we saw the development of Subaltern Studies. How has this changed the topography of History as a discipline? What have been the trends among South African women historians, and from elsewhere? There are several ways in which women have changed, modified or questioned History, and I draw on four examples from this broad and exciting field of work. A vast and deep literature exists on women in/and history, and one needs to engage in greater depth on the historiography of women's history.

Making Women Visible

Sheila Rowbotham, a UK-based historian, in her study, *Hidden from History – 300 Years Of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* [1973], shows that the terrain has been broadened to include "women's issues", and social history. Some women scholars proceed to a re-configuration of History, where there is questioning of "mainstream" History to a re-defining of History. Nombonisa Gasa's edited collection *Women in South African History* [2007] is a good example of feminist scholars revisiting South African History, from precolonial to present times, and is a worthy

contribution to South African historiography and feminist literature.

Similarly, the recent work of Enuga S. Reddy and Kalpana Hiralal, *Pioneers of Satyagraha in South Africa* [Reddy and Hiralal, 2017], and my own literary study on Indian Women's Writings in South Africa, *Sister Outsiders* [see Govinden, 2008], which includes a great deal of historical information, are excavatory in intent, in the attempt to respond to the invisibility of women in History and Literary Criticism in South Africa.

In the field of religion and women, our book, *Her-stories*: *Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, edited by Isabel Phiri, Sarojini Nadar and myself [2002], is a deliberate attempt to foreground women and women's stories, against the background of a mainly patriarchal rendering of the Christian faith in Africa.

Women historians may also engage in important excavatory work, to unearth hidden histories, and to provide corrective histories. For example, Gerda Lerner, another UK-based academic, in her book, *Why History Matters –Life and Thought* [1997], gives a new angle to the history of the idea of Non-violence or Civil Disobedience. She shows that the initial conception of Civil Disobedience was made by women in the Quaker movement [leaders like Mary Dyer], who influenced Thoreau. The role of Quaker women is often eclipsed in the long chain from Thoreau to Tolstoy to Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. Part of corrective history may also be undertaken to "rehabilitate" and restore women, who might be the victims of biased portrayals. A good example here is the biography of Emily *Hobhouse – Beloved Traitor* by Elsabe Brits, published in 2016 [see Birch ,2016].

Addressing the invisibility of records of rural Black women in our History, Lauretta Ngcobo chronicles their struggles against apartheid oppression. Her And *They Didn't Die – A Novel* [1990/1999], set against the effects of the 1913 Land Act, and subsequent Land Acts, shows the resilience of the women "who were left behind", during the migration of Black men to the mines on the Witwatersrand in the early to mid-20th Century.

An instructive collaborative project might be to explore the ways in which various women - through different genres of historical work - have

influenced the changing face of History. The women cited here are just a few examples from a larger pantheon, and they would make interesting case studies because of their particularities.

Women Doing History Differently

Against this broad background I should like to consider four case studies, or vignettes, of "women doing history differently" and how the life and death of Winnie Mandela was (man) handled.

SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH - "A NEW KIND OF HISTORY"

Swetlana Alexievich is described in a *New York Times Book Review* of her work as inaugurating a "new kind of history" [2017]. She received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015.[4] She is from Belarus, and has a background in journalism. Alexievich's work comprises oral histories of hundreds of Russian women – ordinary women - who fought in various spaces in World War II, but who have been forgotten or erased. When we read her work, we appreciate that it involved meticulous and unobtrusive listening, with an ear for what lay beneath the surface, to the "seamless flow of voices" in an intimate exchange with her.

What is interesting about her outlandish understanding of History is that it is not a mapping of events, but of the character and emotions of those involved in them [she deliberately eschews telling the macro narrative of the War, or of Chernobyl, for example]. The Nobel citation credited Alexievich with "'inventing a … history of emotions' – a carefully composed collage of human voices recorded during interviews. Her oral histories [for that is what they are] are presented as monologues; they are concerned less with the witnesses' recording of historical events than with their feelings about how their interior lives have been shaped by those events." [Figes, 2016, p.18]

Indeed, this is Oral History at its finest, and it shows, as well, the power of memory – and in particular, a women's memory. Her view is that Art and History have both failed to understand many things about people, and of the history of human feelings. Alexievich is on "a search for eternal man":

[4] What is ironic is that some questioned whether the genre in which she worked was Literature. This is similar to the questions raised last year when Bob Dylan was given the Nobel in Literature for his songs!

I am searching life for observations, nuances, details. Because my interest in life is not the event as such, not war as such, not Chernobyl as such, not suicide as such. What I am interested in is what happens to the human being, what happens to it in our time. How does man behave and react? How much of the biological man is in him, how much of the man of his time, how much man of the men. [Alexievich, 1985]

Alexievich implicitly asks the question: *What constitutes history?* And, she answers it in her own eccentric, inimitable way.

What is exciting for me is the way Alexievich works intuitively in capturing this "history from below" in different senses of the term. While "history from below" has generally been envisaged by revisionist historians and social historians, I want to argue that Alexievich probes even further, to hidden, submerged layers in the palimpsest of women's experiences.

While Urvashi Butalia's The *Other Side of Silence – Voices from the Partition of India* [1998], dealt with the untold private stories of women and other marginalized groups, and foregrounds the "persistence of memory", Alexievich goes even further, to tell of suppressed, very personal feelings and emotions that women experienced during major historical happenings.

ANTOINETTE BURTON – DWELLING IN THE ARCHIVE

The second case study I should like to present is that of Antoinette Burton, a well-known, professional historian, based in the United States, and working in histories of Empire, with particular reference to women. She has written an interesting autobiographical chapter on her journey of becoming a historian of Empire [see Burton 2016].

One of her principal works, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* [2003], shows the "intersection" of British feminism, Indian women and Imperial culture.

Burton's approach is to question History as the site of masculine thinking and grand narratives. Implicitly, through her practice, as with Alexievich, Burton draws attention to questions such as *Who constitutes History?* W*hat constitutes history?* This is an old question,

admittedly, asked by different groups, but Burton seeks new answers.

In his review of Burton's book, Vinay Lal, Professor of History at UCLA, writes of *Dwelling* as "an attempt …to stretch the parameters of what professional historians would ordinarily construe as 'history'," and in particular, the "historical archive". He points out that, "…Burton is working with a more expansive conception of who counts as a "historian" and what counts for "history", just as she seeks to give politics a reach that was always anticipated in feminist theory." [Lal, 2004, p. 673].

Lal draws attention to the influence on History of various theoretical approaches that have influenced History as a discipline – Post-structuralism and Post-colonialism [this is similar to work in Literature and literary criticism], where the "centre" is reconfigured. Indeed, Burton's work includes women, sexual and ethnic minorities, orphans, social 'deviants', those on the margins of history – what Lal refers to as "*additive histories*".

Further, Burton questions what constitutes a historical text, and moves away from dominant understandings; she works with private diaries of working class women, folktales, comics, and public statuary is commendable; and although this is not necessarily new, it emphasises the view that "history" may be found in diverse places. The archive is usually seen as the repository of public and political histories, with no place for private memories. However, "… Burton's intent is to fragment the opposition of public and private, of history and memory…" [Lal, 2004, p. 673], and uses the home as a historical archive.

In *Dwelling in the Archive*, Burton tells the stories of three Indian women, using an ethnographic approach: The first is of Janaki Majumdar, and uses her personal diary, called a "*Family History*." Majumdar's father [W.C. Bonnerjee] was the first president of the Indian National Congress, and Burton points "to the politics of knowledge which inheres in domestic as much as public arrangements", given that the private, "domestic genealogies of Indian nationalism" have been obscured. The other study is of Cornelia Sorabji, the Oxford-educated barrister, who was an expert on the *zenana*, which was the interior quarters of homes, and seen as

the domain of women, and as a sacred space. Sorabji turned the zenana into a museum, an archive, and Burton expounds on this. Burton's third study is on Attia Hossain, and her novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column,* which deals with the History of Partition [between India and Pakistan], with particular focus on what happened to the women.

GAUITRA BAHADUR – COOLIE WOMAN

The third case study I have chosen is *Coolie Woman – The Odyssey of Indenture* by Gauitra Bahadur [2014]. Bahadur is originally from British Guiana, and is now based in Canada and the United States, and works as a journalist. There are many interesting aspects raised in the book around History, and I summarise the essential points.

Coolie Woman is an individual story, presented as a paradigm case for all Indian indentured women across the Indian Diaspora. It is a personal, family history, with particular details related to the author's great-grandmother, but it is also an expansive and collective biography of an indentured "Everywoman", gleaned and constructed from various sources. The author used diverse and indirect investigative methods, mining indirect records - letters, diaries, statements of colonials – and effectively giving voice to the voiceless, in the face of official history that was guilty of the "stealing of the voices of indentured women".

While the work is excavatory, it is not a case of straightforward, simplistic reclamation and reconstruction, but demonstrates the use of the critical, creative Historical Imagination. What is interesting here is Bahadur's critical use of archives, as she navigates biases, elisions, and absences in official colonial archives. Her recasting indentured women as subjects, by piecing together statements, testimonies [confessions] of colonial men is an impressive accomplishment. While the place of "evidence" is crucial in History, as pointed out earlier, the questioning of "historical evidence" and of representation in History is implicit in her work, as we appreciate that *Coolie Woman* is a reconstructive narrative, in the best tradition of creative non-fiction.

GRADA KILOMBA – SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

The fourth case study revolves around the interesting work of Grada

Kilomba. The *Mail and Guardian* article by Kwanele Sosibo, "Colouring the white cube", on her last week [Sosibo, *Mail and Guardian,* 7th April 2018] prompted me to consider her here in this presentation. Again, here is another quite eccentric example, deeply challenging of so many assumptions we hold, assumptions about History that we do not question. I know of Kilomba's work and of the way she has inspired other South African artists[5], and was happy to see it featured in our local news, and that her work, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, was featured in the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town early this April.

Kilomba is an artist, educator and writer based in Berlin, with roots in Lusophone Africa [the Angolan, Sao Tome and Principe diasporas]. Her work, combining art, poetry, histories, is very concerned with questioning "History", and how it is done, of addressing the "silencing", "rupture", and exclusionary practices that are pervasive when dealing with histories from the South. What is also instructive of Kilomba's work and approach to History, is her emphasis on how histories inform and are inextricably part of "global collective history", with its "triangulation of 500 years of slavery and colonialism…" [In Sosibo, 2018, p. 3]. As a black feminist artist/historian, Kilomba's work is invaluable and her contribution path-breaking, "…we are redefining policies, politics, language and also artistic language. Which formats, which genres should I work in? We are redefining everything…" [Sosibo, 2018, p. 3].

[5] See the PhD work of Sharlene Khan, one of my old students from the former University of Durban-Westville [before it became the University of KwaZulu-Natal], who is now based at Rhodes University, in Grahamstown.

WINNIE MANDELA – "WRITING A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT"

The recent death of Winnie Mandela, and the numerous and diverse articles on her since her death, is also pertinent to concerns I am highlighting here. There are many challenges that the life of Winnie Mandela poses to us as historians, whether working in the formal academy or on the ground.

In the article "Winnie and the politics of memory" [*Mail and Guardian,* April 13-19, 2018, p. 13], Gugulethu Mhlungu draws attention to the way in which South Africa was "totally unprepared to memorialize her". She suggests that there was a patent failure of the historical project, as

insufficient attention, compared to Nelson Mandela, was given to the archiving, documenting and critical reflection on Winnie Mandela's life. By failing to write Madikizela-Mandela's history, we failed to protect her from the ever-present shadow of white supremacy and patriarchy – both of which would want to see her fire and immense criticism of these systems erased from history. The overwhelming absence of her radical feminist ideas – which still ring true in present-day patriarchal South Africa – is evidence of this…. What does it reveal about a nation that was built on her back, that it failed to do the work, the rituals, the rewriting her name in history that was and still is so necessary for a person of her stature? [Mhlungu, 2018, p. 13]

While the work of "assessing" anyone's life is an on-going process, certainly, in the case of Winnie Mandela, the concern is that not enough attention was given to the diverse and competing elements of her life over the decades, from the apartheid era, through the political transition, to the present time. Professor Njabulo Ndebele has rendered a compelling portrait of women who wait, blurring the boundaries of myth and reality, fact and fiction, biography and History, in his book, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela - A Novel* [2003]. Angelo Fick makes the important point that attempts to "simplify" the woman that she was would be "doing ourselves and this political moment a disservice" [Fick, 2018, p. 19]. The challenge to history remains - how to deal especially with the pervasive "misogynistic gaze of an unsettled patriarchy" [Fick, 2018, p. 19] – and how to render Winnie Mandela in her "infinite variety". While this is true for any figure in history, how circumspect are we in the way we portray women?

CONCLUSION

Against this broad, wide-ranging, introductory overview, one may consider a few challenges. To be fair, many of these innovative approaches to teaching and learning [which include the scholarship around it], and with research in this direction, are actually practised in some of our more creative History Departments. But, would a work such as *Coolie Woman – The Odyssey of Indian Indenture* be accepted as a PhD "dissertation"? We have to question why our formal academic structures do not always conceive of such creative work

as appropriate and "rigorous", and how understandings of knowledge production and representations of knowledge may be broadened. In any event, the challenge is to create spaces, both in the academic world and beyond, where we produce new historical knowledge, creatively and critically.

Against the background of all that I have said, I conclude with two quick creative, tangential [eccentric?] examples [from two eminent men – great human beings, to boot] for your critical consideration and earnest reflection. Consider the spectacular example of one of Africa's greatest intellectuals, Achille Mbembe, and his *On the Post Colony* [2015], which defies narrow categorisation and classification. I wonder where it will be placed on our library shelves! Here is the most creative and critical amalgam of history, cultural politics, music, art, literature, theory, and philosophy - all in a searching and insightful analysis of the constitution of power in its different manifestations in the postcolonial state in Africa. As Mbembe himself reflects [invoking the Muse of History]: "To think is to embark on a voyage of the mind. This is why, in *On the Postcolony*, I wanted to experiment with the sensation that comes from a liberated mind, one that is ready to let things go off in unforeseen directions" [Mbembe, 2015, p. vi].

And then there is Marina Carter and Khal Torabully's *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* [2002]. I met Torabully in person [in Mauritius and France], and he told me that he did extensive historical research to compile his poetic work in *Coolitude*. Torabully is another great historian, from Africa, whose writings Aime Cesaire, the great poet of Negritude himself, described as "containing all my humanity".

What I wish to highlight in Torabully's work is the representation of History in *Coolitude:* the creative and critical weaving of vast swathes of centuries of history, his intertwining of intellectual and theoretical analysis, History/history, documentation, memory, and so much else – all in the most evocative poetry imaginable. Indeed, one finds it hard to know where the History ends and where the poetry begins… I offer you a sliver:

["And If I Choose a Vessel"]

And if I chose a vessel with strange accents of the sea, it's because I want to be at home anywhere else, even in words most removed from my borrowed soul. The doors of the world have been knocked down for me by a current-of-blood, drift-of-flesh navigation.

Coolie, because my lost memory chooses its roots in my truths…

Thank you for this invitation to share my thoughts with you. I wish you well in all your endeavours in "re-writing" History. I LOVE YOU!

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