Commemoration | Centenary: Memorials and the Making and Unmaking of Settler History

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Abstract

This discussion originally took place as part of the *Sounding the Land* exhibition curated by Simon Gush, Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, Craig Paterson and Gary Minkley at the virtual National Arts Festival that ran from 25 June - 5 July 2020. *Sounding the Land* (https://soundingtheland.co.za/) intended to use the bicentennial of the so called 1820 settlers' arrival as a critical platform from which to discuss the legacies of the settler colonial project, the ways in which it is commemorated, and to reassess the historical understandings of the 1820 settler moment in South African history. In the following discussion, which took place via Zoom Video Communication and was originally recorded on 2 June 2020, between Leslie Witz in Cape Town (6 pm South African time) and Helena Pohlandt-McCormick in San Francisco (9 am Pacific time) they talk about the cyclical and accumulative power of anniversary and commemoration, the ways they set in place temporal certainties that align past, present and future, and how configurations of memorial space through visual technologies are authoritative mechanisms in establishing the time and times of history. They discuss strategies of resisting such memorial power and whether the simple inversion of historical figures and events may inadvertently serve to reinforce anniversary histories of founding. By linking the contemporary moments of the interview – the COVID-19 pandemic, the postponement of settler commemorations, the virtual National Festival, and the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis – they consider dystopian futures as inaugurating the possibilities of disruptive memorial time that constantly exposes the fractures of racial violence and colonial dispossession rather than masking it through either the commemoration or the inversion of the anniversary.

Keywords

pageant, toposcope, cyclical history, memorial, inversion, betterment, boycott, pandemic, alignment.

HPM: A group of scholars from Rhodes University and the University of Fort Hare were planning to host an international workshop and exhibition series entitled *Sounding the Land* during June and July 2020, intended to overlap with the National Arts Festival in Makhanda. This project and this conversation are now part of the virtual National Arts Festival. I am Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, a professor of African History at Rhodes University. I'm speaking today with Professor Leslie Witz, a professor of History from the University of the Western Cape.

Leslie, welcome.

LW: Thank you, Helena.

HPM: You have written and researched variously about commemorations, their rituals, symbolisms, and how they configure in spaces and time. You have written on, for example, the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival, which you said was pivotal in establishing settler nationalism.[1] You've written on apartheid's last festival, the Dias Festival, which took place in Mossel Bay in 1988, which you said was based on an eventless history.[2] And then in the post-apartheid era, you've written on the South African War centenary commemorations in 1999 which you and your colleagues Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool claimed merely added extra racial categories to an already existing script of the Anglo Boer War, in effect leaving the same categories in place.[3] In the case of the last one, the South African War Centenary, you provocatively suggested it perhaps should be boycotted, rather than being celebrated as a legacy project of the Department of Arts and Culture. And we will get back to the question of appropriate responses later. But first, I wonder if you could reflect on these commemorations together and say something about what is key to your analysis overall. I have often heard you make the outrageous claim, for instance, that Jan Van Riebeeck landed in 1952. How on earth can that be so? And what does that exactly mean?

LW: Yes, one of the first things I say to undergraduate students when I teach them History 1 is that Van Riebeeck landed in 1952. They look at me askance and say, 'What is this? What is this history professor actually saying to me?' Well, really what I am trying to say revolves around issues of memory, ritual and commemoration. The figure of Jan Van Riebeeck was not a well-known or a prominent figure in South African history largely up until the mid-20th century. What I've written in my book and in an earlier article with Ciraj Rassool is how, in the moment of the Tercentenary Festival of 1952, Jan van Riebeeck was established as a historical figure. In effect his

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1 L. Witz, *Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South African National Pasts* (Bloomington / Cape Town: Indiana University Press / David Phillip, 2003); C. Rassool and L. Witz, 'The 1952 Jan van Riebeeck tercentenary festival: Constructing and contesting public national history in South Africa', *Journal of African History,* 34, 1993, 447-468; L. Witz and G. Minkley, 'Sir Harry Smith and His *Imbongi*: Local and National Identities in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, 1952' in J. R. Forte, P. Israel and L. Witz (eds.), *Out of History: Re-Imagining South African Pasts* (Cape Town: HSRC, 2016), 31-52.

2 L. Witz, 'Eventless history at the end of apartheid: The making of the 1988 Dias festival', *Kronos*, 32, 2006, 164-193.

3 L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, 'No End of a [History] Lesson: Preparations for the Anglo-Boer War Centenary Commemoration' in L. Witz, G. Minkley, and C. Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 160-176.

landing took place through this festival of commemoration in which he was made into a figure of settler nationalism. Previously, yes, he was there, and of course he did land and disembarked from his ship at the Cape in 1652. But really that wasn't a significant moment, or rather was not claimed as a significant moment, in South African history until largely the mid-20th century, when the idea was to use him as a figure that could bring whites together in South Africa, to establish a common history around this actually quite insignificant figure in Dutch history. So, the idea is that while we think of time as progressing one event after another, in fact, what we are looking at is the ways that certain times are recalled into memory for certain political reasons. And that's why I would say that the landing of Van Riebeeck and the creation of images around that took place in 1952. The image of him landing with his wife and child. That is a ridiculous image created in the pageantry of 1952. We have got a much older image of the arrival in a painting that was done by Charles Davidson Bell 1852 of a meeting with the local inhabitants. These are all just figments of the imagination. What we can gather from the Dutch East India Company's administrative journal is that when he landed in 1652 he actually didn't land. He spent most of his time onboard ship sitting in Table Bay because he had nowhere to stay. He used to go backwards and forwards and he spent three or four weeks sitting on board a ship in Table Bay. So, the idea of him landing and bringing and planting a flag is a ridiculous idea. These flights of the imagination are really there for political reasons.

HPM: Can you be explicit about what was going on in 1952 that made this happen?

LW: I think that there are two things that are happening here. Obviously the one thing is this is the time of the implementation of apartheid. The National Party had come to power in 1948. Even amongst the whites which constituted the limited electorate, it did not even have a majority. At the same time, what is also happening is that there is rapid black urbanisation happening on a large scale within South Africa. And this festival in 1952 was part of an attempt to create and secure a white identity, an identity that sets up, and this is very important, the idea that history is based on the idea of whites arriving at the Cape, or whites arriving in a country called South Africa. Obviously, there was no country called South Africa in 1652. But the idea is created that they do arrive at this imaginary country, and that all history emerges out of that place and time. And interestingly, in that moment, any idea that there were people who were racially black in that history, almost disappears. So even in previous racist histories, and this is very important, there were encounters, there were wars, there were frontier wars. Now in this new type of history that emerges, post 1952, it is all about settlers, how great they supposedly were, and how they became pioneers. And people who are racially classified as black, are totally written out of this history, which is always based upon settlers.[4]

4 See Witz and Minkley, 'Sir Harry Smith'.

HPM: If that is true for Cape Town, let us take this to the Eastern Cape. Could you think aloud a little bit about the question of the arrival of the 1820 settlers?

LW: So, let me go back a bit. The idea in 1952 was to create a national settler history. And that was a problem because settlers do not have a united history amongst themselves. There had just been a war 50 years previously when settlers had fought against each other.[5] Here, in the Tercentenary Festival of 1952 to create a settler history one had to contend with many divergent strands and histories. The idea was that all towns and cities would create their own separate settler histories and bring these together through a journey to the festival stage in Cape Town. A ritual and procession were created involving the construction of 19th century mail coaches that travelled from different parts of the country, that went from town to town, in which each town had its own little settler history and pageant en route. And these mail coaches brought the written histories to Cape Town. But there was a problem in the Eastern Cape. The Eastern Cape's history did not fit neatly with the idea of settler founding. Up until that stage the way local Eastern Cape history was constructed was mainly about the frontier and it was about race. And it was about conflict, and it was about a colonial history of the Eastern Cape. These were the histories in which people had fought in frontier wars. It was not about founding. It was not about settlement. And so, what then happens is that there is a directive to the Eastern Cape to stop doing these histories to focus instead on creating a settler history.

HPM: A directive from whom?

LW: From the festival committee. There is a negotiation which goes on and there's the idea that that the Eastern Cape won't fit into this settler history. In effect, as Gary Minkley and I have argued, this may have been the moment in which the idea of Eastern Cape as the home of settler history started to emerge much more strongly. Yes, of course settler history and commemoration were there before. There had been previous commemorations of the so-called 1820 settlers. But clearly from the 1950s onwards, Eastern Cape settler history starts to take off and even more so in the 1960s and 1970s. This is the beginning of the idea that the Eastern Cape is the home of the settlers, rather than the place of the frontier.

HPM: So, if I can put a pointed question to this. If Jan Van Riebeeck arrived in 1952, when did the 1820 settlers arrive in Makhanda?

LW: The 1960s. I am not too sure of the exact date but certainly they arrived in the 1960s. If one looks at the museum in the town for instance. There was an older 19th century natural history museum in Makhanda, but then the Historical Museum only

5 The Second Boer War (11 October 1899 - 31 May 1902), also known as the Boer War, the Anglo-Boer War, or the South African War, was fought between the British Empire and two independent Boer states, the South African Republic (Republic of Transvaal) and the Orange Free State.

opens in the 1960s. It's called the Settler Museum. And then obviously there are the plans to build the whole settler memorial on top of Gunfire Hill. While the colonial fortification of the frontier wars, Fort Selwyn, remains in place on the hill, it is overshadowed by the construction of the National Settler Monument.

HPM: When does that get opened?

LW: Early 70s. But the plans are already there in the 60s. If you look, and we can talk a bit more about it later, at the toposcope in Bathurst. I looked up the year it was constructed. It's 1968. It's another 1960s settler memorial. So, the interesting thing is that that mail coach in 1952 that traverses the Eastern Cape is named *Settlers*, which is a very strange name and out of synch with all the other mail coaches of the Van Riebeeck Festival. In fact, all the other mail coaches that arrived are always named after a town. There was one called *Germiston*, there was another named *Johannesburg*, for instance, but they were all named after separate towns. But in the Eastern Cape, they couldn't decide upon a united history emanating from one town. So they decided to name the Eastern Cape mail coach *Settlers.* That coach today sits in the town of George. I found it quite coincidentally. It sits in the Outeniqua Transport Museum which is largely devoted to railway history. The *Settlers* mail coach is alongside a 1938 Great Trek centenary *ossewa* (ox-wagon), a 1938 Great Trek centenary festival artefact.[6] Here is another analogy, the Great Trek.[7] The Great Trek also is an event that largely gets created in the 20th Century, very much around the centenary celebrations in 1938 although there are several earlier components of this mythologising around forms of dress, narrative progression and lifestyle.[8] So, these are important events, around which the time of history gets created, and the power of it seems so natural, but it's not. That is the actual power: the repetition of a singular event in a cyclical history. So, it's like 100 years, 200 years, 300 years, it seems like it's a natural progression. But once you start seeing this, it is unnatural, it is made, it is produced, it is created.

HPM: In other words, you are not saying that the events did not happen in the past, but that history creates a narrative about the past, in which it uses things like commemorations and anniversaries and festivals to establish the importance of those events from the past in a certain present. So, the question I want to ask you here is then what these commemorations really are? Are they, and the anniversaries by association, hard-hearted events, the thugs of history and historiography?

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6 L. Witz, 'A Nineteenth Century Mail Coach, a Fifteenth Century Sailing Ship and a Bus Crash: Re-Thinking Collection and Display in Transport Museums', *South African Historical Journal*, 63, 3, 2011, 431-455.

7 The 1938 Great Trek centenary festival is to the making of Afrikaner nationalism what the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival is to the making of the settler historiography.

8 I. Hofmeyr, 'Popularizing history: the case of Gustav Preller', *Journal of African History*, 29, 3, 1988, 521-535. See also R. Uys, 'The lives and deaths of memorials: The changing symbolism of 1938 Voortrekker Centenary monuments' (MA mini-thesis, UWC, 2019).

LW: When you were talking now you said, 'History makes these events'. Of course, there are people that are behind making these events. The anthropologist Greg Dening says that this is people dressing up in funny clothes and staging a performance of history.[9] It is in some ways what is happening here. I think what you are also trying to say is that by invoking the metaphor of thugs, that it's almost like this power is a sort of imposition. One would have to think about how powerful these commemorative events are. People do attend, some people accept what goes on and buy into the whole concept, and some people reject it and oppose it. But these must be seen as parts of larger processes. I do think that the idea of pageantry, of commemoration through specifying time and date as origin is an immensely powerful articulation and making of an event as history. So, it is quite thuggish as you say. It has an enormously powerful presence. But these things are combined with work that goes on that gives it, let's say, academic significance. The whole thing about the 1952 Festival is that there is this historiography which has already emerged, but which then gives it academic authority as well. It comes from departments and academics at the universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town. They contribute to giving the festival the capacity and legitimacy to claim history. So, it is not just the commemoration on its own, but the commemoration is a very powerful medium.

HPM: Let me follow up on that here. You have said that commemorations are public institutions that produce, circulate and contain meanings about the past. What then – and I want to distinguish commemorations from anniversaries, like a bicentennial, or tricentennial and so on – are anniversaries about? Do they have a particular form of power or weight? And what constitutes that?

LW: I think that power is the power of time in history. I think more than anything else that is what anniversary does. Anniversary is about saying that this happened so many years ago, and now it is happening or being remembered as if there is a natural cycle. Anniversary is linked to commemoration. It is one type of commemoration that is happening here. What it does, it almost sets in place certain steps around those times that everything gets centred around, a moment, a moment that becomes fixed in history. I suppose I am reiterating the point about the power of creating time. Just thinking about it now, it is also around creating a time for a space that is called South Africa. So of course, Van Riebeeck did not land in South Africa in 1652, there was no South Africa. What 1952 does, is that it creates the idea that he landed in South Africa It brings into being not just a historical narrative but also the possibility of commemoration around the notion of an anniversary that needs to or can be celebrated.

HPM: The emphasis is on South Africa as an entity.

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9 G. Dening, 'Deep Time, Deep Spaces: Civilising the Sea' in B. Klein and G. Mackenthun (eds.), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 13-36.

LW: As an entity, so the commemorative time of anniversary creates the space. And here, the idea of the settlers, and those mail coaches comes back in again, is significant because they were returning to the place of founding in Cape Town. They came from various parts of the country. This reverses time into a place called South Africa, that is found in 1652 through 1952 and which always already existed.[10]

HPM: When there are calls to celebrate the arrival, the 200th year anniversary of the arrival of the settlers in Makhanda in the Eastern Cape, is what you're saying that time accumulates, and then adds weight to the commemoration and to the space that we're talking about?

LW: Yes, and the accumulation is constructed through commemorative cycles of history. And it is interesting to think about how you think about that space and in the spaces of what is the Eastern Cape, and what is settler country, what is frontier country, and how those spaces are configured around the time of commemoration.

HPM: Right.

LW: That is what I think you are trying to say. I think that is what one needs to think about, because the spaces of the Eastern Cape become configured as settler country.

HPM: I wonder if we can switch gears a little bit now, because I'm thinking this might be a good point to turn to opposition to these festivals of commemorations because these festivals were in most instances heavily resisted, and different types of historical interpretations were offered. And we can see that unfolding in the Eastern Cape even as we speak, and around things like the renaming of Grahamstown to Makhanda, and the role of the Settler Monument and those kinds of questions. Maybe you can talk about the forms of opposition, and their effectiveness in establishing different types of history. I know, for instance, that you have written about processes of inversion.

LW: It's quite interesting to think about forms of resistance to commemorations. If you read in another historiography, 1952 is another time of origins, it is a key moment in South African resistance history as the year of the Defiance Campaign under the auspices of the Congress movement against the laws of apartheid. It begins at the same time as the Van Riebeeck Festival and is almost launched at the same time on the Grand Parade in Cape Town. And so they are linked together. But it is also about thinking what strategies and different types of history to put in place to counter what you call a thuggish history. It is exceedingly difficult. Part of that process in 1952 was to try and create a different type of history around the settler figure of Jan Van Riebeeck. Let me just first say that much of the resistance to the Van Riebeeck Festival in 1952 came from organisations that were affiliated with the Unity Movement at the

10 This is a key point of Witz and Minkley, 'Sir Harry Smith'.

time. They produced their own texts, in newspapers, in books around alternative histories of South Africa. There was *The Role of Missionaries in Conquest* by Dora Taylor and Hosea Jaffe's book *Three Hundred Years*.[11] There are other books and articles as well. The idea was to say that the 300 years were 300 years of dispossession, and that Van Riebeeck had started this process. His arrival wasn't the moment of founding; this isn't the founding of progress but of oppression and exploitation. So, what happens is there are protests and mass meetings that are held calling for a boycott of the 1952 Van Riebeeck Festival. In these meetings, the figure of Jan Van Riebeeck is literally turned on his head. The organisers take the image of the statue of Van Riebeeck that sits in Adderley Street in Cape Town, and they produce posters that turn it on its head and deface it by placing a cross through that image of the figure of Jan Van Riebeeck.

There is a question that needs to be asked about this process of inversion. It is what Ciraj Rassool and I wrote about when we first thought about the festival and the contests around it. What does it mean if you invert the central figure, and keep him as a major figure in South African history? In effect Jan Van Riebeeck became the founder of apartheid, both for those who were in favour of apartheid, and those who resisted apartheid.[12] Should one, therefore, start thinking about histories that do not have that central figure. Should one perhaps write a history that writes out Van Riebeeck entirely? Is that possible one might ask? I am posing these as questions, but these are questions from people who were saying that we don't need this figure of Jan Van Riebeeck there at all. Let us rather show processes of capital accumulation. Some wrote about industrialisation, for instance. These were very much different types of histories that were being put in place.[13] Yet, the process of inversion still remains a major way to do resistance history and one needs to think politically what the power is of that strategy? One obviously thinks about, in more recent times, the 'Rhodes must Fall' movement. Many people that contested the figure of Rhodes said that Rhodes was a coloniser who brought about destruction and exploitation. There is no doubt about that. We know that. But a question to be posed about the 'Rhodes must Fall' movement is whether it was giving more prominence to Rhodes than he should have been given and inadvertently reinforced his centrality in South African history.

HPM: And similarly, we could ask, should we preserve the figure of the 1820 settler in the Eastern Cape? And that is the question that is asked when people talk about the role of the Settler Monument and the role of the celebration of the anniversary or the Bicentennial, of the arrival of the settlers. So, take us once again, back to the Eastern Cape. The anniversary or bicentenary with which *Sounding the Land* and the virtual

11 N. Majeke (Dora Taylor), *The Rôle of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Johannesburg: Society of Young Africa, 1952); Mnguni (Hosea Jaffe), *Three Hundred Years* (Cape Town: New Era Fellowship, 1952).

12 Rassool and Witz, 'The 1952 Jan van Riebeeck tercentenary festival', 466.

13 See, for example, K. Jordaan, 'Jan van Riebeeck: His Place in South African History' in M. Hommel (ed.), *Contributions of Non-European Peoples to World Civilization* (Johannesburg, 1988), originally published in *Discussion* (1952); E. Roux, '1652 and All That', *The Guardian*, 14 February to 17 April 1952.

National Arts Festival has to engage this year, is the 200-year anniversary of the arrival of the 1820 settlers. Can we talk specifically about that settler history, its memorials and anti-memorials in the Eastern Cape, and can you give us some examples? I know a lot of people are aware of the presence of the monuments, but we also know that there are multiple versions of that and that they are monuments that oppose that history. So perhaps you could talk about those a little bit.

LW: The monuments that I know particularly well are the ones in Makhanda: the memorial up on the hill, the little-known Settler Memorial in the industrial part of Makhanda, the Thompson-Uys Memorial. And I know a little bit about the toposcope, the one that is in Bathurst, and I think that in most Eastern Cape towns you will find some form of settler memorials. It might just be a plaque.[14] It might be a statue. The thing about the 1820 settlers idea is that it's not just the 1820 settlers that are there. There is also the idea of the German settlers, and you've got the German Settlers Memorial in East London (1961) and in King William's Town (1966). Those memorials arrived in the 1960s, and settler displays also get put into museum exhibitions in King William's Town and East London. All those settler displays date to that time. So, you find all these different settlers, or settler groups, being imagined and memorialised.

I have looked at the idea of the toposcope,[15] particularly the one in Bathurst because that is interesting as well. It was declared a national monument in 1968. What it tries to do in quite a – I am going to use your word again – in quite a thuggish way, in quite a powerful way is that it tries to show possession of the land by the settlers. It has the name of the settlers and where the settlers settled. You look out from the vista of the toposcope, you have the names and the names of the farms and where the settlers went to. The idea is to imagine, almost to envelop the land, and to hold on to the land as settlement. So, by looking, by seeing ... looking from the toposcope, you do not literally see the land, but you do see the land through viewing what is said. You are seeing, through the landscape, this image of settlers and settlement. If you look this way that was where this farm was or that settlement, where those settlers went. You do not see them actually, but you do see them. When I write in some of the work that I do about tourism there is an analogous term that was used by the company Thomas Cook, 'eyes and no eyes'. So, you see it and you do not see it. And it is a powerful thing. It's almost the idea of saying, through your vision, which you don't see, you embrace and hold onto the land.

I see recently what has happened is that they have added the names of Xhosa kings and other leaders on to the toposcope in Bathurst. I would actually like to see it now. It would be interesting to see what has happened. I know at some stage, there was some defacement going on and this was a response to that, making it anew, fixing it up and including new elements. That strategy, which myself and colleagues Gary

14 See Simon Gush's film trilogy, *Welcome to Frontier Country* (2019): https://simongush.net/, in particular 'A Button without a Hole' which formed part of *Sounding the Land* (https://soundingtheland.co.za/).

15 A monument erected in a high place, such as a hilltop, indicating the direction and distance of notable landscape features which can be seen with the naked eye from that point: https://www.wordsense.eu/toposcope/.

Minkley and Ciraj Rassool have called an 'add-on strategy', it doesn't change the way that the toposcope is configured.[16] Because what it does actually, is that it writes out the violence of the frontier, the violence of settlement. It is almost as if the settlement was a moment that just happened without any associated violence. You talked about anniversary; anniversary is about naturalising a moment. Now you have Xhosa kings and leaders included there. But part of settlement was the frontier of race and destroying those Xhosa kingdoms and polities. From what I see, and I am not sure because I haven't seen it, that gets written out. It is almost saying, we have now updated it and put a black history in place. But you have not shown what settlement and what race on the frontier was all about actually.

HPM: Are you saying that a toposcope, even if it was built in the 1950s, or 60s, is, in fact, an instrument or a technology of colonialism? Or to put it more sharply, are toposcopes a kind of a holdover of the instruments of colonialism into history as a discipline or public history as an expression? Put slightly differently, where colonialism/conquest had ships and guns, History has technologies of representation/presentation that do violence as well.

LW: That I cannot say, and I'll tell you why. This would be a very interesting research project actually. What is the toposcope and what is the history of that visual technology? […] Which one would have to find out. Where does it come from? What does it do? Is it related to other sorts of instruments of vision? It is a very interesting form of vision, like I said. It is a vision, you see, and you don't see. And it's not like a photograph. In a photograph you are supplied with an image. Here at the toposcope you could say, 'Look out there. And imagine the land belonging to the settlers. This is where they lived. That is the place of settlement.' I am interested in how the seeing and not seeing fits together. What the power of an image is that one cannot literally see.

HPM: But you have an imagination. It is a historical imagination, and in that historical imagination inheres a colonial imagination, or a nationalist imagination.

LW: I would agree with that. I think that is what this is about. It relies upon an imagination, that you almost know beforehand what you are seeing.

HPM: It is scripting an imagination to a certain degree.

LW: Hesitantly, yes.

16 L. Witz, C. Rassool and G. Minkley, 'The Castle, the Gallery, the Sanatorium and the Petrol Station: Curating a South African Nation in the Museum', in Leslie Witz, Gary Minkley and Ciraj Rassool, *Unsettled History: Making South African Public Pasts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 99-123.

HPM: So, we talked about responses to this, and you talked about boycotts and inversions, and revisions. There are several other toposcopes in the Eastern Cape. I know of at least three offhand. And the one that you and other people have thought about and written about, Gary Minkley, Ashley Westaway, Ciraj Rassool and you, the one that is perhaps most different to the Bathurst one is, of course, the one at Cata.[17] Can you talk about that one a little bit?

LW: I think that was an interesting idea. I remember when the idea of a Cata museum was first proposed. I thought, 'Really? Why do they need a museum in Cata?' The museum is in fact in a little community hall, and it is okay. It has a lot of information around the process of betterment and how betterment involved land dispossession in apartheid's ethnic homelands.[18] This argument made through the NGO the Border Rural Committee, which was initially known as the Grahamstown Rural Committee, was to show that dispossession was not just an urban phenomenon, in that through processes of betterment, particularly in the ethnic homelands that were created, people were dispossessed of their land through schemes of villagisation which reduced land and cattle holdings. Those were schemes of dispossession and the museum has a lot of information about the intense and extended struggles in post-apartheid South Africa to claim compensation for the loss of land. Gary Minkley has called this a museum built around a 'single restitution narrative'.[19] But what was added onto the museum was the idea of a heritage trail in which you traverse the landscape that ends at this toposcope. The idea is that it also uses the technology of the toposcope, not to show how people acquired the land, but in fact, exactly the opposite. It is a signifier of dispossession. It tries to recreate a historical imagination of what the land and the landscape was like before apartheid and the betterment schemes took place. What sort of organisation would have existed on the landscape that you are now looking at and that you're being directed to? What the toposcope does is a few things. It tries to show forms of organisation. It tries to show how villagers would have been clustered together. How they would have worked together. So, it's not only just around where they were, which is like the Bathurst toposcope, but it's also trying to show that these were forms of organisation that were based on ideas of household heads, clans working together, that in fact, what you're looking at on the landscape is a political economy. What you are seeing is a claim to community around social and economic organisation. And what you are also seeing is that this was taken away. As with the Bathurst toposcope, you can't actually see it, but what it's doing, or attempting

17 A. Westaway, 'Bare life in the Bantustans (of the Eastern Cape): re-membering the centennial South African nation-state' (PhD diss., University of Fort Hare, 2009); L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, 'Sources and Genealogies of the New Museum: The Living Fossil, the Photograph, and the Speaking Subject' in L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, *Unsettled History*, 177-203.

18 Also known as 'betterment dispossession', this refers to a process 'implemented in the former homelands and other so-called black areas from the 1930s onwards, in an attempt to regulate these areas and control land usage. Under betterment, designated areas were divided into distinct land use zones – for example, for residential, arable and grazing usage – and all their residents were forced to move into the demarcated residential areas. Furthermore, people were also dispossessed of arable and grazing land through the process of betterment'. See G. Minkley & A. Westaway, 'The Application of Rural Restitution to Betterment Cases in the Eastern Cape', *Social Dynamics*, 31, 1, 2005, 104-128.

19 Witz, Minkley and Rassool, 'Sources and Genealogies', 191.

to do, is trying to show processes of what was taken away, not what was claimed through settlement.

HPM: That is a response to what we would call settler histories created in the 60s and 70s. Do you see any dangers that inhere in the appropriation of those technologies to make a counter narrative, a counter imagination?

LW: Yes, there can be and as I was talking, I was thinking about it. Certainly, you can. Because what it sets up is claims to the land and community and politically this was important to do as part of the argument. Definitely. Yet it might exclude people from those claims. I am not saying it will. You set up a vision of the land as it was before. Let me just be clear here because it is quite important. I am not saying that the court case and the accompanying claim was incorrect. But I am saying that there might have been people who felt excluded through this process. I do not know. I really do not know. And I do not want to say that for certain. But I want to say that it sets up a certainty through the vision of the land. That is the danger here.

HPM: Which returns us to the hard heartedness, and the potential, and 'thuggery' is perhaps too strong a word here right now, but the power that inheres in these kinds of structures, technologies, even if they are structures and technologies of other historical reconstructions and historical revision, a re-envisioning of different pasts that were possible, and that might be possible in relationship to a different future.

LW: Yes, this is always the question around memorials. It is around museums, it's around this whole heritage matter. Commemoration is around setting up certainties. Are there though possibilities of something at the edge rather? Are there possibilities of something different? On the one hand, the toposcope in Cata is so powerful, because it is different, because it has used the technology in such a startlingly different way. And I think that in that respect it is beautiful, and that it opens possibilities around questions that we are dealing with now. But it also contains within it the limits of that as well. And I am not so sure. I don't know how one does it in all cases.

We tried something when the 350th anniversary of Van Riebeeck's landing took place. It was in some ways a ridiculous situation. It was 2002 and the City of Cape Town and the Western Cape government were commemorating Van Riebeeck. So, we tried something that in some ways was a replication of the Cata toposcope idea. We (the Project on Public Pasts based in the Department of History at UWC) took the inverted Van Riebeeck image from 1952 and we used it, created an upside statue, and used it as a central figure to think about figures and icons of colonialism in post-apartheid South Africa in various spaces.[20] There was the Castle of Good Hope where the exhibition *Y350? Debating Old Memorials in New Times* was first displayed. Then we took it to the farm museum Kleinplasie in Worcester and asked, 'What would

20 L. Witz, 'Apartheid's icons in the new millennium: The making and remaking of settler histories' in D. de Lame and C. Rassool (eds.), *Popular Snapshots and Tracks to the Past* (Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2010), 203-221.

your local history which commemorates Van Riebeeck as the founder of agriculture look like if you inverted him?' We finally took the exhibition to UWC, and it created a little bit of tension, because it highlighted that the UWC crest adopted in 1961 has also got a bit of a racist history.[21] We pointed this out as part of the exhibition. The idea was to think about the local in terms of these commemorations, to open the idea of locality and what the local means. Can you write a local history outside of the bounds of these national, these thuggish pasts? I am coming to like your idea of a thuggish past. Let me say, I think that the toposcope creates the possibility of uncertainty, and that is why it's so powerful. I think it creates the possibility of using the technology and saying, 'Well, this is a history of dispossession'. And we can tell a history of Cata in a vastly different way. The story of Cata is not the big story. Yes, it is the story of apartheid, but it is very much a local story of those struggles. That is the thing about Cata. It is a struggle about apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa. It wants to be recognised as a community that was part of land dispossession, even though it falls outside of the narrative of apartheid in post-apartheid South Africa. So, it must engage in intense struggles to win its narrative, basically. That is what the toposcope does for Cata's story.

HMP: I think is an important point that the toposcope at Cata to a certain degree, restores to history with its truth claims and its certainties, a certain amount of ambiguity and uncertainty that counters the power of history and historiography. I like the idea that you introduced, that it makes visible the dispossession. One of the things we have talked about is that instead of celebrating the 1820 settlers, maybe we need to celebrate one thousand eight hundred and twenty dispossessions, as perhaps a recognition of a much larger dispossession. But that leads me to the question about what in your mind would be appropriate responses to the bicentenary that is now. Well, it is actually not taking place because of COVID, but that we are commemorating, or that people are trying to commemorate.

LW: When I heard it was happening, my off the top of my head response was to ignore it. Like the City of Cape Town commemorating 350 years of Van Riebeeck's landing, I thought this was a ridiculous idea. When I looked at some of the ideas floating about, I thought there was nothing that could be done and to engage with. Obviously, there is the idea that one can do local histories, but this can become like add-on histories, additional local histories. But I do not think that's appropriate. With the South African War anniversary events in 1999 we said it would be more appropriate to boycott it if it's just conceived as an add-on commemoration: you found black

21 This racist history is evident from the Minutes of the Senate meeting, UWC, held on 28 November 1961. In the minutes it is explained that the doric pillars on the crest were intended as an academic symbol; the motto at the bottom of the crest translated as 'look back; look ahead'; and a set of 3 proteas set above the icon of the Greek temple were used to invoke 'religion, culture and science', South African indigeneity and the Western Province as 'the centre of gravity of the Coloured Community'. Although not part of the exhibition, UWC's first rector maintained that the inclusion of the proteas on the crest was because it was 'a flower which … Coloured people cherished'. See J. Martin, 'An Open Space' in P. Lalu and N. Murray (eds.), *Becoming UWC: Reflections, Pathways and Unmaking Apartheid's Legacy* (Bellville: Centre for Humanities Research, UWC, 2012), 25.

concentration camps, black participants in the war and just added them on to what fundamentally still remained, despite everything that was said, a white man's war. It was still the Anglo Boer War, even though the organisers of the centenary commemoration claimed it as the South African War.[22]

The struggle around anniversary commemorations is how to use them to open history and to create historical uncertainty. It is a project of destabilisation and using the toposcope to do this would be a great idea. Part of the commemoration of the 1820 settlers could be at the toposcope at Cata, to have an exhibition about the technology of toposcopes and to invoke Bathurst. So, to link places together that for the most part exist apart because of colonialism and apartheid, really. How do you start thinking about places as part of histories that are linked and almost start to question these narratives of separateness? I think a lot is about places, and reconfiguring places, and making links that have never been made before. So at the toposcope at Bathurst also it would be incredible to have an exhibition about the toposcope at Cata.

HPM: Yes.

LW: To think about and how one would do that.

HPM: Yes.

LW: To link these spaces together.

HPM: And part of the question is how one does that without repeating the gestures of monumentalisation and institutionalisation and museumisation, etc.

LW: And without also the gesture of the add-on.

HPM: And without the gesture of the add-on. Exactly. I have a few more questions that perhaps relate to this, and it comes from thinking about how this project that we've been working on, *Sounding the Land*, and we've been working on it for a while now, has to be rethought in this current context in which we find ourselves in relationship to the pandemic, in relationship to the new technology that we are trying to harness, to create a virtual National Arts Festival, and perhaps even in relationship to the protests that have expanded across the US and across the rest of the world against the violence on black bodies in response to the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. At the risk of drawing these three events together, they are provocative to think with, and we can't address all of them here, but I wonder if you could think a little bit about this new context, this convergence of the three things I'm talking about, this particular conjuncture and its implications for the making of history, the

22 Witz, Minkley and Rassool, 'No End of a [History] Lesson'.

1820 settlers, the notion of a national history, the notion of space and history, and the notion of the anniversary or the commemoration.

LW: Okay, so let me just say one thing that is peripherally related to this. It is that obviously the commemorations of the 1820 settlers are not happening because of the pandemic. The actual getting togethers that were going to happen on farms throughout the Eastern Cape of families, the gathering of descendants of the1820 settlers, it is not going to happen. It is happening online, through Facebook pages and Zoom lectures, and all that sort of thing, but those actual commemorations are not going to happen this year (2020). And so, there is one interesting thing that's going to happen is that it may happen in 2021. So, you can have the 200th anniversary, which is not the 200th anniversary. For me that is an interesting to think about. When the time does not converge, how do you create the convergence when it is not there?[23]

HPM: Doesn't that get at precisely the kind of uncertainties that the creation of a commemoration tends to hide, and that this commemoration, delayed, deferred or belatedly held next year because of the pandemic, forces us to rethink the understanding of a commemoration and of an anniversary, and the kinds of certainties that it tries to establish?

LW: A lot of this is around issues of memory and commemoration. It is about people. It is about dates, it's about all those sorts of things in history. I am trying to think about George Floyd, because obviously, these are memories that are being created. These are moments of memorial and people are using it in this way. And you have written yourself around memory and issues around June 16th as well. These become particularly important moments. Even though June 16th as you have written is not just one moment, but it becomes one moment.[24]

HPM: So, it condenses in other words.

LW: It condenses to one time. I wonder whether the instability that is caused now, I mean, the thing about the pandemic, is that it has somehow thrown out accepted ideas of time. It absolutely disrupted it. One would have to think about how it has done that, through ways that we communicate with each other, through calendars and diaries of appointments and meetings that have been destroyed, literally, and ideas of the futures that were not in any way envisaged. Yet many talk about futures all of a sudden, and they are saying we don't know what the future will be, but we need to plan new futures. This is what commemorations does. We need to acknowledge

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23 The ongoing COVID pandemic again limited opportunities for in-person gatherings in 2021. It is not merely that there was lack of convergence but that the political conditions for such a memorial project or even opposing it were not there. 1820 was hardly a site of intense commemoration and contestation, even leading up to 2020. Delays made an alignment even less possible. It could not be made to appear as a natural progression.

24 H. Pohlandt-McCormick, '"I Saw a Nightmare...": Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)', *History and Theory*, 39, 4, 2000, 23-44; H. Pohlandt-McCormick, *'I Saw a Nightmare…': Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

the work of Tony Bennett. It aligns past, present, and future. It puts them in a straight line.[25] Here you have that line disrupted. It is in some ways because the idea of the commemoration is saying, that the 1820 settlers arrived at this time, or Van Riebeeck arrived then, and this is the trajectory of our future. This is the settlement and it is based on that past. But you are envisaging a future in that moment, actually, in claiming the moment you're claiming a future. The idea of that future as a trajectory then becomes even more tenuous.

I am thinking about your ideas of technologies and what they do. I would have to think about that much more. It's about time getting shortened. It is also about not having futures. But you are also still instituting futures. Several people are saying that there is almost a utopian claim that's being made. There is a time of the world in which we can set up a better future. That is part of the pandemic. So, when people talk about South Africa, they talk about what is happening now, with the social grants, with everything being put in place with water, with sanitation, this needs to be seen as part of a post-apartheid reconstruction that had not happened in spite of the promise of democracy and the formal ending of apartheid in 1994.

HPM: That has not been achieved.

LW: That was not achieved. So, the pandemic is creating a time of the future as almost a utopian future through the possibility of beginning anew.

HPM: So, if I can just interrupt for a second in a sense, much like the toposcope of Bathurst, which may now include the Xhosa kings and leaders but excludes the violence that destroyed them. In a sense, when you add George Floyd into this convergence of events, this conjuncture turns the pandemic, this moment of the pandemic and all of its consequences into a dystopia, or at least it forces us to acknowledge the violence that is at the heart of what made this pandemic possible. It is dangerous to have a cause-and-effect relationship here. I think conjuncture is the better word, but it brings out the dangers in the utopian vision, at the same time as there is a necessity or perceived necessity for a utopian, another future, a different future. It adds back in the violence of the dispossession.

LW: Yes, that it certainly does. That I agree with. Where I would want to think more is around what does the commemorative work do. I hear and I understand what you are saying around this. Can one hold that with the commemorative work? That is the question, because the commemorative work works towards the certainty of nation and an unfolding narrative of history, a time of the past and leading to the future. So, I suppose that is what we are asking, actually, in big terms, how can the commemorative and the dystopian be held together, if at all, that is anti the add-on. That is thinking about memory work that can be disruptive.

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25 T. Bennett, *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 130-153.

HPM: Memory work that is disruptive and acknowledges the dispossession, and that somehow lives the dispossession and the destruction and the murder that is behind this. In the way that centenary often used in conjunction with celebration gets at what you are saying about the certainties that centenaries tried to celebrate and tried to establish in historical memory. Perhaps what you are saying is that this convergence of the pandemic and the protests in the face of the murder of a black man at the hands of a police officer are a powerful way of responding to commemorations and anniversaries or provide us with the opening to rethink the violence that inhabits commemoration.

LW: I think so and as you were saying that I am thinking of what happened to South Africa's public holidays calendar after 1994. Obviously, Van Riebeeck Day was thrown out of South African public holidays. But just think about it, what happened to June the 16th, Soweto Day. It became Youth Day. What happened to Sharpeville Day? It became Human Rights Day. So, the violence, yes, it's remembered, it's commemorated, yet in a way that binds it into something that is related to it, but that is actually quite different from the complex and fractured memories around events and the associated violence. So, it almost takes out the uncertainties, the problematic. It erases them.

HPM: So, by a historical sleight of hand or by a sleight of hand of history, we are masking the dystopia that's behind the violence that inheres in these commemorations and their physical imposition on the landscape through monuments and toposcopes.

LW: Yes, yes, exactly. I will agree with that. How one can undo it is the question.

HPM: Perhaps that is part of the next conversation. And I think maybe this is a good place to end. I am just wondering if you have any last thoughts that you would want to bring into this conversation right now.

LW: Look, formally as somebody who is called a historian, one always is thinking about making uncertain, to constantly evoke questions, to disrupt existing narratives. That was the idea behind the *Y350?* Exhibition. It was to constantly think about what you call these dystopian moments, these uncertain moments that get hidden, that get masked. I think one of the powerful things about our conversation today is to think about what the power of unmasking actually is. We tried to do that in *Y350?* And that is another important thing to do. To go back to the beginning of our conversation to say that Jan Van Riebeeck landed in 1952 is to say something that is very powerful and destabilises, and it unmasks the certainty of the 1820 settlers.

HPM: And that is a project of unmasking, in the face of grave racial violence, either historically or in the present that has accumulated over time, that is a project that can never end.

LW: Yes, absolutely. I agree.

HPM: Well, I think on that note, Leslie, thank you for a rich and important conversation that I hope we can continue in the future and in person (post-pandemic).

LW: And in person.

This is an edited and annotated transcript of an interview originally recorded on 2 June 2020, between Leslie Witz and Helena Pohlandt-McCormick: COMMEMORATION | CENTENARY https://soundingtheland.co.za/project/commemoration-centenary/