



Mobilising Histories: Reflections

By Mailies Fleming

Mailies Fleming, a student intern on the Changing the Story project and University of Leeds exchange student at University of Cape Town, reflects upon her experience of being involved in youth-focused participatory development in South Africa, using this to respond to what she learnt as a delegate at our Mobilising History workshop, organised by the South African strand of the Changing The Story project, and led by Prof. Stuart Taberner.

The *Mobilising Histories* conference, hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, brought together several UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) projects. The purpose was to discuss how arts-based interventions could be used in post-conflict societies to strengthen respect for human rights and make progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The primary focus points of the conference were confronting 'dark pasts', mobilising traumatic memory, addressing inequality and injustice and critically engaging with the SDGs. A number of talks, discussion panels and group conversations between participants from various backgrounds- from researchers and academics to curators and heritage workers- analysed these issues, attempting to reconcile them with the needs of post-conflict societies. The outcomes of this analysis will be outlined below and will be engaged with from the perspective of a student who has been involved with one of the GCRF projects, *Changing the Story*, since it was piloted in South Africa in 2016.

The SDGs represented a shift away from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs were the focus of UN driven development between 2000-2015 and have been criticised for their emphasis on donor achievements rather than development successes. The SDGs' adoption of a human-centred development approach embraced participatory methods, ostensibly foregrounding the perspectives of the beneficiaries of development with the aim of increasing their agency. In Professor Paul Cooke's (Principal Investigator of the *Changing the Story* programme) introduction to the *Mobilising Histories* conference, the rationale for the shift from the MDGs to the SDGs was to bring about a more complex conversation that 'genuinely engaged with some of the world's most marginalized communities'. Part of the rationale for this conference was to explore how far this conversation has really shifted.



With criticism levied at the MDGs for perpetuating unequal power dynamics between the global North and South, a recurring point made during the conference was the need to ensure that knowledge transfer is not one-directional merely because the funding acquired for GCRF projects comes primarily from the Global North. Furthermore, the negative impact of imposing a universal set of agendas and objectives by attempting to fulfil the SDGs was stressed, as these often manifest in coercive pressure on the Global South, whilst remaining largely aspirational for the North, thus undermining the principles of

voluntary participation and equal commitment to the SDGs. Taking seriously the way in which local contexts and histories shape engagement with the past was highlighted as an important counter to an over-simplistic universalism.

Dark pasts

The *Mobilizing Histories* conference also raised many pertinent points around how to leverage the arts to move from difficult issues or 'dark' pasts to creative, alternative solutions. Some participants drew from the work of Homi K. Bhabha to identify a 'third space' or the liminal realm, in which art can offer marginalized identities room to negotiate new cultural, and ultimately, political identities. There is great propensity for film-making to cultivate new narratives about individual and collective identities and, through the richness of film, allow an audience to imagine the possibilities for an alternative reality. This was particularly evident in many of the participatory films that were produced by one of the *Changing the Story* subprojects with which I was involved as a student intern. As part of a team of students from the University of Leeds, we were tasked with producing five short films in collaboration with a group of young people from Tsakane in Gauteng, South Africa. Here we wanted to use film to help participants explore their place in the world, the legacy of South Africa's past, and how they can advocate for change in their lives today. The project reached a mixture of positive and negative (or perhaps realistic) conclusions. However, the extent to which the young people we were working with cultivated a mindset capable of imagining alternative solutions to existing problems is questionable. Many of the participants in the project have grown up in impoverished areas of South Africa where violence- inside the home, on the streets and at a systemic level- is part of the norm. The participants would have likely had personal points of reference for the difficult topics they explored in their films (including bullying, drug abuse, child neglect and domestic violence). As such, working on the project may have not only been a triggering experience for them to address these issues directly. It may have also been hard for them to imagine alternatives to such harsh realities. The imagination cultivated by arts interventions should allow participants to expand their worldview beyond their immediate situation, but this can be a lengthy process involving (but not limited to) dialogue, introspection, a critical analysis of interpersonal relationships and larger social structures. As such, the limited time and resources, as well as the specific relationship that exist between participants and facilitators, can make moving on from 'dark pasts' challenging. An exploration of the main points raised during the *Mobilizing Histories* conference concerning arts interventions in development work, with specific reference to the *Changing the Story* project, can help to highlight why this filmmaking project had difficulty breaking the cycle of repeating negative narratives about South African youth.

My experiences as part of the *Changing the Story* team are examples of how the tensions between local and international actors can play out on the ground, as well as showing how a collaboration between these can be executed successfully. Delving into both physical and intellectual territory that was largely unfamiliar to us, our guiding principle on the project was to ensure that the voices of the participants would resonate in the films, instead of the films perpetuating negative stereotypes about South African youth. This was in acknowledgement of the tendency which many development projects have of side-lining the perspectives of the very people in whose name development is supposedly done. By insisting that the entire narrative of the films- from storyboard to final edit- was driven by the imagination of the young people involved, the films became a medium intended to give agency to people who, due to the various strands of oppression woven into their demographic composition, are all too often spoken for or not heard at all.

Filmmaking, as a narrative form, seems to lend itself to telling the story of an individual's development. Indeed, the conference delegates agreed that arts interventions are often an excellent way of bringing individual 'microhistories' to the fore and, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, letting the 'subaltern', or those who are written out of dominant historical narratives and discourses, speak. The specific context of South Africa is particularly pertinent for demonstrating the power individual narratives have to confront the norm. One example is the film *Phendulani* (see above), which portrays how the daily life of one of the participants in the *Changing the Story* programme does not fit the dominant (internationally recognised) narrative about post-apartheid South Africa being that of a 'successful' transition to democracy. The stark disparity between South Africa's shining constitution and the dire poverty in which many of its citizens find themselves is highlighted here. This is evidenced first hand through Phendulani's 'voice'. At just fourteen years old, he had suffered enough hardships growing up in a township to push him to run away from foster care and find refuge sleeping in a car. His matter of fact narration leaves you with the sense that this state of affairs was perfectly normal. It was (at this time in his life at least) difficult for him to make the link between the daily struggles of his own impoverished life, and the greater political structure in South Africa, which continues to enable the perpetuation of racial inequality almost a quarter of a century after the official end of apartheid. The value of art in this context is that it provides a body of evidence legitimating the experience of individuals who are silenced in the

dominant version of South African history, thus providing alternative points of reference to challenge the notion that South Africa has been salvaged from its 'dark past' by democracy. One of the hopes of the *Changing the Story* project is that it will enable a more nuanced engagement with those whom development is done for, requiring their human complexity and agency to be recognised both by their local communities and by the global community.

Making the political personal, and the personal political

The power of art to make the political personal, and vice versa, was perhaps best demonstrated through a xenophobia education workshop run by the University of Leeds team in collaboration with the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide centre, as a way of further enhancing and developing our filmmaking work. A group of youth leaders who had been involved in the *Changing the Story* project took part in a week-long project addressing the legacy of xenophobia in relation to the Jewish Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. The sessions focussed on establishing how stereotyping turns into prejudice, which can then be used for political gain and to justify xenophobia. Xenophobic violence swept across South Africa in May 2008, claiming at least 62 lives. Yet when conversations during the xenophobia workshop turned to South Africa, many participants themselves initially reflected anti-foreigner sentiments. Ironically, the structural forces that contribute to the inequality which xenophobia capitalises on are the same forces which prevent many young people from disadvantaged areas, including the participants, from accessing the necessary documentation allowing them to claim their rights in South Africa. Other participants implemented their learning from the sessions to point out that anti-foreigner sentiment was founded on stereotypes and that these stereotyped individuals also had families to support and lives they deserved to live.

The empathetic engagement demonstrated through the participants' ability to make an imaginative leap across lines of difference relates to another point made during the conference; namely the destabilization of the binary between victim and perpetrator. The magnitude of crimes against humanity such as the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda problematize the notion of justice and show that a nuanced understanding of victimhood is crucial for moving on from a 'dark past'. An important element of this nuance comes from recognizing that the categorization of victim and perpetrator is culturally and situationally specific and imposing these labels can often be too totalizing and counter-productive to peace-making processes.

Once again, the South African context provides a useful point of reference for understanding this. Despite being able to humanise the consequences of structural violence – as demonstrated in the aforementioned film *Phendulani* – the individualization of narratives of victimhood risks what Steph Craps defines as 'downplaying [...] pathologizing, and depoliticizing the lived experience of subjection' (Craps. 45). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is often heralded as the cornerstone of South Africa's peaceful democratic transition for the opportunity that it gave for victims to tell their individual stories; for creating space for dialogue between victims and perpetrators and for perpetrators to ask for forgiveness. Yet criticism has been levied at the process for individualizing apartheid at the expense of forgetting that apartheid was, what Mamhood Mamdani calls, a crime against *humanity*. As Steph Craps explains, by focussing on extraordinary human rights abuses which fell outside of the law, the TRC largely ignored the systemic violence and human rights violations which were sanctioned under apartheid law, thereby normalizing the everyday violations which 'can act as traumatic stressors' (45). Not only does this perpetuate a view of human rights abuses that caters to particular (physical) forms of violence, but suggests the TRC process was sufficient for victims to deal with their trauma, their 'dark past' and move towards forgiving those who violated their human rights.

The notion of the 'ideal victim' which such a process creates was touched upon at the *Mobilizing Histories* conference, as was the necessity of rejecting the notion of an ideal victim by recognizing the multiplicity of narratives that explain a 'dark past'. Yet rejecting the notion of an ideal victim is complicated by the legal and social frameworks of nation states that necessitate victims to be labelled as such. With the goals and funding for the SDGs tied closely to the UN and the national governments of member states, their implementation risks taking place in a top-down manner, rather than through locally-grown and negotiated solutions. This can alienate the beneficiaries of SDG interventions and raises difficult questions around the responsibility of foreign interventions. For example, the conference raised the question of how outside actors can intervene in situations of ethnic conflict and engage with victimhood without stoking the fire of ethnic tensions.

One of the potential answers that art interventions can offer to this question is in its ability to destabilize the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. The performance aspect of the participatory film making made it possible for participants to engage with both the roles of victims and perpetrators, exploring the potential this had to produce therapeutic, empathy-building and social transformational outcomes for the participants.

The importance of language

A glaring concern of development interventions by foreign facilitators is language and culture barriers. Entering Tsakane – a space in which almost all of South Africa's ethnic groups, as well as a swathe of foreign nationals, are represented – required negotiating not only the divide which existed due to English being our primary language as facilitators, but also the multiple and subtle boundaries between the diverse cultures in that space. The choice to use whichever language the participants were most comfortable in resulted in a mixture of subtitled English and Zulu films, reinforcing our participant-driven approach and making the end products more accessible to the community who would view the films. During the *Mobilizing Histories* conference, emphasis was put on development interventions working across and through language, as the importance of language choices goes beyond making the content more immediately accessible and speaks to the fundamental epistemology which invariably informs such interventions. English is too frequently used as a default language by practitioners for whom it may be a first, or at least comfortable, medium of communication, in spite of this potentially foreclosing the involvement of many local participants, for whom English may not be accessible. Imposing the use of English bears the hallmarks of a neo-colonial power relationship with the English-speaking practitioner assuming the role of an imparter of knowledge, rather than recognising that learning must be mutual. Mutual learning requires making the effort to meet halfway, so that the level of discomfort experienced from language boundaries is at least equal. This is a very important lesson that I have learnt from my engagement in this project.



Freddie Mutanguha, Africa Representative at Aegis Trust, Rwanda shares his thoughts with others at the Mobilising Histories workshop.

Moving an understanding of language and communication away from textuality is also something that we looked to explore, and is ideal for arts-based interventions. During the workshop, participants were confronted with the history of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the Jewish Holocaust, which included meeting a survivor from each event. This history was taught through showing films, discussing their content, viewing an exhibition,

listening to and interviewing the survivors, amongst other things. Whilst varying educational methodologies were used, the participants were visibly most engaged when theatre-based methodologies were implemented. Their engagement with dramatic techniques and active physical participation suggests that this method was best suited to the group in question. The importance of conscientiously fitting methodology to participants was particularly evident during debriefing sessions, when participants were asked to process their reactions to the content they had just been presented with by writing their thoughts in a personal journal. Whilst this offered a valuable moment for self-reflection, this mode of debriefing proved less effective than the theatre-based approach that had been used during the sessions themselves.

The films the group made evoked powerful emotional reactions at the public viewing. Our hope is that such projects will become a regular feature of the community and will contribute to a localized emphasis on youth engagement, allowing participant to raise issues that they feel are otherwise ignored. The topics of the films ranged from bullying, child neglect and domestic violence to drug abuse and parental pressure. The themes reflected the harshness of many of the participant's lived realities and addressing these issues through the medium of film may have offered an outlet for processing these same issues in a realm detached from the personal. However, upholding the principle of self-determination by giving the participants creative freedom clashed with the aim of breaking the cycle of tired

negative narratives about South African youths. During the *Mobilizing Histories* conference resource constraints, whether financial or temporal, were highlighted as limitations on the effectiveness of interventions, and in our case it was no different. Despite the work done prior to our filmmaking, which involved utilising a long-standing relationship between the participants and the community-based organisations that support them, and our efforts to explore themes through creating comics prior to the filmmaking to serve as storyboards for the film, my feeling was that there was not time to digest and critically engage with the themes addressed in the films, for the final product to go beyond a replication of the issues we had started out with. Clearly, our project needs to be embedded in the longer-term practice of the community-based organisations, if it is to have any real impact. These things take a long time.

Another important factor to consider is the legitimacy of rejecting reconciliation and the agency of those who do so. Rather than seeking out narratives that support reconciliation and provide neatly boxed solutions, arts interventions require an engagement with the fact that both their process and subject matter can evoke disturbing emotions and further open up wounds. Once again, the question is raised here as to whether such discomfort is a natural and even necessary piece of the artistic process, or whether creating feelings of discomfort for potentially vulnerable participants is a challenge to the ethical responsibility of arts interventions.

A human-centred development approach naturally lends itself to the qualitative approach generally adopted by the arts and humanities. The critical analysis and self-reflection enabled by qualitative methodology nurture the kind of 'self-awareness' that William Gumede emphasises is vital to psychological freedom. According to Gumede, this psychological freedom is the first step towards liberation for people in a post-colonial (or post-conflict) context because it highlights the neo-colonial power structures which perpetuate oppression and it discounts the notion that such oppression is innate or deserved.

However, for development to contribute to this psychological freedom, it must ensure that it does not perpetuate violence. Whilst violence may seem completely at odds with development, structural forms of violence come from development that elevates Western ideals and dominance, thus delegitimizing indigenous forms of knowledge. This forms a dependency relationship between the beneficiaries of development and those with the apparently legitimate knowledge of development (invariably seen as Western forces). Addressing these power imbalances is a vital part of decolonization and is particularly pressing in relationships between funders and beneficiaries, as the need of beneficiaries can become subordinate to the pressure to deliver specific. Decolonizing this partnership necessarily involves interrogating the extent to which knowledge-sharing perpetuates neo-colonial power balances. For example, what kinds of knowledges are being foregrounded and awarded credibility? Who are the gatekeepers of this knowledge and are they sharing this knowledge in a way which is mutually beneficial rather than through a process of one-sided knowledge extraction? Does re-legitimizing knowledge outside of the Western empirical canon necessitate a process of assimilation or one of complete institutional reform? How plausible is it to negotiate a hybrid form of knowledge and would such a hybrid do justice to all sides?

Conclusions

One major conclusion reached at the *Mobilising Histories* conference was the need for a code of ethics and engagement to define arts-based development interventions. The host-guest relationship between practitioners or funders and beneficiaries should ideally be predicated on a pre-existing relationship and guests should come on an invitation-only basis. This helps to ensure that a visit is not merely for curiosity or extractive purposes, but is equitable for all involved. The filmmaking process we developed was only able to grow as organically as it did because of the well-briefed partners on the ground who had an established relationship with the participants. This helped with practical issues such as translation, as well by building up trust with the participants and their community. As a consequence, the community stepped in to offer their homes for filming locations, the participants were cooperative and a large audience turned out to view the final products.

Returning to the question of whether the film-making process managed to break the cycle of reproducing 'dark pasts' and enable an alternative future to be imagined, the clearest restrictions were physical restrictions on time and resources. A certain level of briefing and learning was needed prior to beginning the filming process, to ensure awareness amongst participants that the purpose of the filmmaking was not simply to reproduce trauma but to tackle it creatively. Doing so can put a helpful distance between the participant and the material, it can (if handled sensitively and by suitable trained professionals – such as those employed by the organisations we were also working with) provide a therapeutic outlet, and can empower participants to depict a dehumanizing event in a way which reinstates humanity and agency. However, to do so, participants must arguably be sufficiently aware of the potential of arts interventions and must be informed about the ways in which interventions could also be potentially harmful.

The participants in the *Changing the Story* were able to exercise agency by taking complete creative control of the filmmaking process, including decisions over who was depicted in their films and how. The SDGs outline that development interventions do not merely tick boxes, but measure their success according to their local impact. This means that development should be locally and contextually specific to meet needs outlined by the beneficiaries themselves. The results of doing so are difficult to measure but have had tangible impact on the participants in our project, many of whom have gone on to implement change as 'youth leaders' in their community and to be involved in further projects. During my involvement with the *Changing the Story* project, I have seen the young people we have worked with grow in confidence, self-awareness and cultivate their propensity for critical enquiry, as well as developing their filmmaking skills! Whilst no causal link can be drawn between personal development and development projects such as *Changing the Story*, the importance of providing a space for growth and an opportunity for young people to exercise creative agency cannot be underestimated.



Participants at the Mobilising Histories workshop

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(a reproduced version of Spivak’s essay as featured in Williams, P. and Chrisman, L. 1994. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Colombia University Press is available [here](#)).