

The ‘born-free generation’: Narrating past, present and future in post-apartheid South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of present violence and trauma in relation to historical memory among school going youth at schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The project springboarded off questions around how ‘born-free’ South Africans navigate, narrate and relate to the apartheid past as they create their future. Thereby taking after work which explores identity, adversity and agency amongst children and adolescents in South Africa after Apartheid. The point of analysis shifted however to hinge on present conditions and identity and life constructed in relation to ongoing violence, racism and discrimination in the context. In this way the project design moves through a look at South Africa’s past and the transition to democracy to a lens centred around the present.

It is commonplace to treat the moment of transition to democracy in South Africa’s history as a fissure against which violence and racism would ‘never again’ be experienced (Jansen, 2009). By treating time as a ‘fissure’ point South Africans claimed those born after democracy to be ‘free’ from structural and racist violence and for whom the world was their oyster. By focusing in on this next generation of South Africans, this project explores the ways that the past is (re)constructed by young people as they navigate lives in the present and the future. The analysis focuses on the socio-economic legacies that are embedded in the systematic and structural challenges of everyday violence. This analysis includes a look at class, race, gender and place as they are aligned with psychosocial studies on memory, trauma and narrative and the questions that are raised about the (im)possibilities of claiming ‘born-free’ identities at all.

Interviews and visual methods including body maps, history lines and narrative lines are utilised in the design of the project to engage narrative identities among participants from three locations in KwaZulu-Natal - a rural, suburban and township school. Participants' stories illuminate the ways that memory of the socio-political and historical past has become embedded in personal narratives and in the imagination of events that did not occur in the lifetimes of the young people interviewed. In doing so this work goes about answering a line of inquiry that examines the 'born-free generation' as characterised by their time and place in the current South African context in relation to memory, identity, and traces of (everyday) trauma observed in their stories.

Narrative case studies in the analysis of interactional dynamics and content reveal the need to rearticulate (historical) trauma theory in light of ongoing, systemic violence in the present. The salience of place, race, class, gender and sexuality in young South Africans' narratives of ongoing, everyday experiences of violence speak to the embeddedness of young people in their time and place and to relationships between self and other that allow them to create pasts and futures out of their experiences in the present.

Through the research methodology that shifted the project away from direct talk about historical memory, the findings show that memory and trauma are salient in the lives that young people lead in the present and the ways these lived realities of everyday trauma become integrated and made sense of with respect to imagined pasts and futures, in both what has been remembered and forgotten as young people tell about their lives. This frames the project through a postcolonial lens that prioritises reflections on everyday trauma in young South Africans' current lives. Such a contribution offers insights for psychological praxis and interdisciplinary work in areas including memory studies, oral history and sociological understandings of the interplay between collectivity and individual meaning making.

Key words: Narrative, Psychology, Intergenerational Trauma, Memory, Identity, Born-Free