

FINDING A PLACE TO BE OUR-SELVES: NARRATIVES OF YOUNG BLACK WOMEN ACTIVISTS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores narrative identity constructions of black women student activists in contemporary South Africa. The apartheid past is evidently alive in the politics of the present and in the embodied experiences of these young women but mutates and is appropriated in new ways. In some senses, these women now occupy the centre rather than the periphery; many living in middle-class suburbs, studying at and occupying leadership positions in increasingly de-racialised spaces. However, their narratives reveal the precarity of these identities in relation to 1) male student activists; 2) fellow students, both black and white; and 3) the wider civil society of the working class and unemployed poor. These stories were collected prior to the decolonising political moment of #FeesMustFall but provide prescient insight into the intersectional positionality of young black women student activists in the Higher Education landscape of South Africa today.¹

Keywords: narratives, women students, political activism, intersectionality, intergenerational

INTRODUCTION

Living in the tumultuous present of the South African higher education landscape means that the typically concealed links between the social worlds of economics and politics, and personal trajectories of study and work, are writ large for all to read. The emergence of the Fallist student movement in 2015 and events of the past couple of years have taken some by surprise: transformation seems to be happening, with access increasing and most campuses and programmes of study progressively deracialising. Yet for others, the question is why did it take this long for things to reach boiling point? South African universities are characterised by perennial problems of funding and housing, the lack of adequate infrastructure and books, and pedagogical problems. This article presents narrative research conducted with a group of black women student leaders in the historically privileged institution of the University of the

Witwatersrand. Our interest in their stories lay in tracing the paths that had led them to this point; their childhood experiences, school learning histories and family worlds that had formed them as critically engaged, politically active students. The women in this study were “coming of age” at the same time as the democracy of the country, members of the post-Apartheid “hinge generation” (Hoffman 2004). While Apartheid and The Struggle were lived realities, constituting everyday ordinary life for their parents’ generation, this life-world is translated into discursive resources in the present, providing the broad brush-strokes that frame and situate experience but do not permeate every aspect of it. Importantly, this group of students are in a position to reap some of the benefits of democracy, particularly both financial and epistemological access (Morrow 1993) to higher education. And yet they do so within a perpetually unequal and racialized context in which the myth of meritocracy remains intact in the popular public imagination.

Universities are in some sense always liminal configurations of space and time where students prepare for adult citizenship and the world of work. The chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) of university life is thus both part of and yet distinct from its specific historical context, where the past (as inscribed in texts and in the expert knowledges of research active academics) and the future (in the form of students’ projected lives and knowledges) are as much vitally in play as the nitty-gritties of the present. More generally, youth is an in-between zone bridging childhood and adulthood, colloquially understood as the time to resolve the “identity crisis” (Erikson 1975). This process of “finding out” who to be in the world is partly accomplished in formal classrooms where traditions of knowledge in specialist fields form the curricula, preparing students for participation in society and the world of work. But this preparation also takes place outside of classrooms, in the hidden curricula (Illich 1971) of student life, of learning to be particular sorts of citizens in the arenas of public political and “private” family life. As Bauman (1996, 19) so beautifully puts it, identity “... behaves like a verb, albeit a strange one to be sure: it appears only in the future tense.” We are perpetually in the process of becoming who we are, through the activities of identification with and distancing from others. These fluid processes are marked by intermittent moments of “suture” (Hall 1996) that may be little more than temporary transitional attachments or may form the first stitches of connections that will thicken and become more tightly woven with time.

The domain of student politics may be understood as a “rehearsal space” in which wider social dynamics are reiterated and reproduced, in which young people can try out alternatives, take on and shed roles, draw and redraw lines of connection between themselves and others, and explore new configurations of self and the social world. But, of course, this zone is not disconnected from the wider social context and the degree of permeability between these zones

thickens and thins at different historical moments. In South Africa, this membrane between the political life of universities and the role of students, and the outside world, has tended to be extremely thin as education under Apartheid was an explicit political project and, therefore, also a key site of resistance. Contemporary events again make these permeable relations very evident. Students are both in and not-in the world; both in and not-in the flows of history; both adult and not-adult, growing in the ground of the historical past but “[a]s plants, heliotropic, arch their stems toward the sun, human beings twist from ankle to chin towards the future: not just toward a tomorrow like today and yesterday, but toward a future that never becomes past” (Crites 1986, 170).

A retrospective narrative analysis thus provides us with a window into the experiences of a group of young people uniquely positioned as simultaneously “powerful” and at the heart of institutional life (as student leaders) and yet, in many respects deeply alienated from the institution and marginalised (as black women). What might their narratives tell us about the processes of change, about (dis)continuities with the past and possibilities for the future? In what ways do the vestiges of the past remain heavily present? What historical sources of inspiration and energy enliven the present, making the imaginative invention of selves and futures possible?

Recent events in South African higher education, particularly the emergence of the student uprising in 2015, make it clear that, far from boldly stepping into new territory post-Apartheid, the past is alive in the present. Gramsci’s (1971, 276) notion of the *interregnum* encapsulates the moment: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this *interregnum* a great variety of morbid symptoms appear”. The politics of higher education may have shifted from being about race *only* to more complex considerations of the intersections between race, gender and class, and these shifts are even more evident now than they were when the study was conducted in 2012, but the narratives of these young women are both shadowed by apartheid history and foreshadow current events in the future of their present.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

Narrative interviews were conducted with young women who were active in student political organisations at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Narrative interviews enable participants to speak about their lives on their own terms, selecting experiences and shaping their accounts with minimal control on the part of the interviewer (Riessman 2008; Squire 2008). At the time of the study, the Student Representative Councils at Wits and at most other

universities around the country were predominantly black, led by men but with increasing numbers of women student representatives, and aligned with the governing party, the African National Congress.

The interviews were conducted mainly in English by one of the authors of this article, Thembelihle Mashigo who is a Zulu-speaking black woman and was, at the time, a postgraduate student. However, this insider status was complicated by age (which translates into a different positionality in relation to Apartheid history) and by the fact that she was not actively involved in student politics. This meant that initially she had to work hard to gain trust and assure participants that strict ethical guidelines would be observed to protect their identities. The interviews ranged in length from 48 minutes to 2 hours 57 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim, including nonverbal expressions such as accent, pauses and laughter.²

Profile of participants

The study specifically focused on women as, typical of all recorded histories, the narratives of women and their role in political struggles in South Africa life, have been marginalized. We were interested to explore whether these young women's roles had shifted from the predominantly supportive roles played by women in the older generation. Nine women students, ranging in age from 19 to 26 years old, at different levels and in multiple programmes of study, who were active members for a minimum of six months of SASCO (South African Students' Congress) and the ANCYL (African National Congress Youth League) or other ANC affiliates, were identified by means of snowball sampling. Three of the women were in leadership positions in the Wits SRC at the time of the interviews. The majority of the women came from politically active families and all of them had been to Model C (n=7) or private (n=2) schools. This is indicative of intergenerational shifts in class location, with these young people representing what is now commonly referred to as the so-called "missing middle" of the emergent black middle class.

Data analysis

The study adopts Squire's (2008, 41) "experience-centred and culturally oriented" approach, recognising that narratives are not unidimensional or reliant solely on the flow of temporal events. While specific events in the political sphere were highlighted as significant in participants' accounts, the focus of the analysis was on reflexive meaning-making about these experiences. The presented analysis focuses on extended extracts of data in order to retain the rich texture of participants' own voices. The participants' recollected narrative talk in the interviews is thus treated as a first layer of analysis, co-constructed (Riessman 2008; Josselson

2013) in conversation with the researcher. Key themes were identified along the dimensions of race, class and gender, and we organise these themes in developing layers of complex intersectionality (Crenshaw 1999): 1) Race, past and present: “we are not post-race” and “white ignorance”; 2) Race and Class: “struggle histories and new elites” and “languages of belonging and exclusion”; 3) Gender, race and class: “gendered comradeship” and “female bodies in the body politic”; and finally, 4) New coherences: “Beautiful black feminisms”; “Speaking consciousness: race and gender” and “projected selves”.

The initial analysis of the data conducted at the time of the study (Mashigo 2012) is now augmented by re-reading the data from the perspective of the present in the midst of the Student Uprising of 2015/2016. The stories of the then-present now past, and then-futures now present, can be read with the new perspective of hindsight (Freeman 2010) enriching the analysis and shifting the significance of particular narrative elements. New languages that were not commonly employed in the participants’ discourse at the time are now readily available, e.g. structural violence (Langa and Kiguwa 2016); “whiteness” (Steyn 2001) and “black pain” (Nhlapo 2016). The seeds of current events now seem patently obvious in these earlier stories of experience, although they could not of course at that time be read as predictive. The famous aphorism from Kierkegaard feels extremely apt: “Life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backwards” (cited in Crites 1986, 165).

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In some senses, the women in this study now occupy the centre rather than the periphery, many living in middle class suburbs, studying and occupying leadership positions in increasingly de-racialised university spaces. However, their narratives reveal the precarious and fluid quality of these identities as they negotiate the micropolitics of campus life to find their place in relation to 1) their male counterparts in organisational structures; 2) fellow students, both black and white; and 3) wider civil society of the working class and unemployed poor. Race, class and gender are all implicated in this process but not as distinct strands or dimensions of identity; rather, all operate together, complicating, contradicting and potentially enriching the whole.

RACE, PAST AND PRESENT

Although different life trajectories are now possible for these young women in the democratic South Africa, the Apartheid past is not an inert legacy. The participants’ narratives are shot through with race-talk and it is evident that race is viscerally alive with intergenerational power. There is little resonance with the idea that we are “post-race” (Gilroy 2000). Even where participants sometimes employ the language of non-racialism and are in close (even friendly)

relationship with white students on campus, the chasm between their conflicting lived experiences and histories is very far from being bridged.

We are not post-race

In the following extract, Minnie³ is clear that the “scars of Apartheid” must be confronted and rejects the anxieties of those who would hush all talk of race as too “sensitive”. She laughingly dismisses the implication that this could be interpreted as “racist” (possibly implying Mngxitama’s (2009) view that “Blacks can’t be racist”) and asserts that affirmative action is essential for restorative justice. She unapologetically asserts her “strong views” with confidence; a young black woman, performing new ways of being.

“Sometimes people may mistake my strong political views for me being racist and that’s not the case. I just feel, strongly about things like BEE [Black Economic Empowerment] and affirmative action and things that help restore our nation and I get offended when people make uhm comments about black people and [...] I analyse things and people say (whispers), ‘No, you obsessed with that’ and ‘Why does every debate have to come back to race because it’s a sensitive issue in our country’. We can’t just pretend it doesn’t exist uhm and the scars of apartheid are still there ... so we must face the issue and, and I do believe that everything in South Africa *comes back to race*, so uhm, I’m not a racist, of course, I’m not (laughs) I’m like, uhm, I just have strong views.” (Minnie)

Another participant, Bonang, begins by claiming she is different from those who angrily distance themselves from white people. However, as she speaks, she shifts positions, seemingly working through and finding a way to articulate her own feelings through talking:

“Aah, I, I’ve got friends that are comrades *that are very point blank* [...] They don’t like white people, they don’t associate themselves with white people, they don’t work with white people, they don’t party with white people, they just don’t do anything with white people ... they hate them. Whereas I am on the other side where listen, comrades I am with you, but I mean ... I have white descendants in my family ... and I have white friends, and to a certain extent there are times where you think but grrrrr [...] You see videos of Steve Biko, what they did with Steve Biko, explicit things [...] and you can’t help, even though I wasn’t there, there are times where you think I just hate these people. I don’t care if they were there or if they were not there, but I just hate these people. And you have, you have a very unwarranted hatred because you not there, you don’t know what it feels like. You were not part of the system, but you think, no, but your grandmother and grandfather, your mothers and fathers did this to us, that can’t be right.” (Bonang)

She first rejects the anti-white position of “others” by virtue of her close relationships with white people as friends and even family members. But as she talks, she thinks about the atrocities of the past such as the murder of Biko and then, despite qualifying her response as “unwarranted”, she acknowledges her own feelings of hatred and anger. There are fascinating and informative shifts between the past and the present in the way she speaks; presenting the view first that present anger or “black pain” (Nhlapo 2016) is unjustifiable or irrational as

“you were not here”. By implication, the defence of young white South Africans that they “were not part of the system” also seems on the face of it, legitimate. However, this development of the position that the past should be “put behind us” is then finally firmly rejected with reference to the intergenerational lineages of those who meet on the ostensibly equal ground of the present. Bonang holds these views in tension: the love she feels for specific individual white people and the hatred that she feels towards white people as a collective, or towards “whiteness” (Steyn 2001; Ahmed 2007) and the structural violence of racism (Langa and Kiguwa 2016). She recognises the invisible presence of ghosts that live on in our psyches and that we see in the faces of one another in the present.

White ignorance

Resistance to and anger directed at whiteness is not exclusively directed at the actors and actions of the past, but perhaps more vehemently at white contemporaries who live sheltered lives, (purposely) ignorant of the perpetual suffering of the majority of South Africans in the present. Anele talks about “white ignorance” (Steyn 2001) despite the close juxtaposition of the white world of affluence and ease with the black world of poverty and everyday struggles:

“I think the anger you know, growing up as a, a black child like, I’d see how my white friends lived and then I’d go back to the township and I’d see how other people lived like [...] we didn’t, weren’t, the richest family but you know, we always had a comfortable life my mother provided for us and I see that you know there’s always someone who has it worse off and I, I never felt that my white friends ever knew exactly like, how lucky they were and [...] those things as you grow up they, you know, you push them to the back somewhere, but you, you take note and you know what’s going on and eventually it builds up and you’re like but, ‘you know this is not right, I can’t continue like this’. You know, bebe sijwayela [they were taking advantage of us] back then and NOW! You know there’s still that sense of, you know, disrespect and it has to change [...] it has to, it must (laughs) actually it must [...] it pops up every now and again you know but with this anger.” (Anele)

She feels psychologically conflicted by being financially comfortable, with white friends, while continuing to be in close contact with other black people who are struggling financially. Unlike her white friends, she cannot escape either reality, she “knows” both these worlds and must be herself in both. Her outrage develops as she talks, most exasperated not about past oppression but about the perpetuation of poverty and racialised inequality in the present. Most of the time she conceals or suppresses this knowledge but recognises the inevitable volatility of her own self in which anger “builds up” and “pops up every now and again”, and the social world which “has to change ... it has to, it must ... actually it must!”

RACE AND CLASS

While it is clear that race matters in how the participants understand themselves and their place

in the world, their positionality is complicated by their proximity to whiteness (as both Bonang and Anele describe above) and the intergenerational shifts in political power and class mobility of their families.

Struggle histories the new elite: Class dynamics

The participants all unambiguously align themselves with and self-identify as members of the ANC or its affiliates – unsurprisingly, as there were no political alternatives at the time, which was prior to the launch of the EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters) and the DA (Democratic Alliance) was almost homogenously white. However, despite their loyalties and their own individual positions in student leadership and roles in political action, the seeds of critique of those currently in power are expressed. Minnie describes her experience of the widening gap between herself and another student with strong political connections, part of the new elite, and the ways in which this makes her feel inadequate and alienated even in the heart of the organisation to which she belongs:

“So we in this meeting, these girls are from like middle to upper class, they went to Paris, got connections you know and in fact one of them, the other two were just, ja I can handle them. The other one Nomvula, [...] her grandmother once dated Thabo Mbeki (T: mm) her uncle’s were also active in politics, (T: mm) she has businessmen, she’s connected like her cousins are someone’s, are married to so and so in the ANC, she’s like connected big time. So she comes to that first meeting. She’s like, ‘ja, I called my mom, my mom is the director at some company or whatever and she gave me a list of suggestions for this thing that we are discussing’. She comes with the *two page typed thing and she’s like, ‘ja, eh suggest one’* and I’m listening to her and I’m like, what! I only have like two suggestions and I have been wrecking my head the whole week for these two suggestions and she’s got like two pages and in that two pages, she covered my suggestions as well and I’m like, Ok, this is bad.” (Minnie)

Identities are raced but the participants also express nuances of black experience and the sense that they are always “more than just black” (Ndlovu 2012). In addition to navigating the racialised space of the university, they must also find their place within additional hierarchies of class privilege and political power. The recognition and sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011) that forms identities, is thus fluid and negotiable.

Languages of belonging and exclusion

Because all the participants went to Model C or private schools, they speak fluent English, typically with an accent that is colloquially simply referred to as “Model C”. This accent conveys middle class privilege and is often characterised as a “white” accent, marking its speakers as inauthentically black and distancing them from the working class and poor masses who speak distinctively accented Black South African English. While this accent is not their

“natural” accent, the participants sometimes adopt it in their talk and refer to it as “comrade language”. The participants seem to recognise that this is an ironic performance of “authenticity” (Hall 1991; Ndlovu 2012), a claim to an identity that is not really their own.

Thembi: “I noticed that you switched your, is it accent?” [...]

Noma: “I can’t speak for other comrades but, I think it’s, it’s a thing of the environment like we use it playfully, like when we are around each other we like you know, ‘*ja comrade leader*’ (smiling), you know, we use it playfully, hmm, if I am addressing comrades in an AGM, I speak like this, I am not one of those comrades who’s going to be like, ‘*yes, comrades, eh*’. I think that’s silly and quite frankly I think its patronising because there are comrades who have that genuine background and who speak like that so, what are you what are you trying to say? When you imitate, imitate that accent?” (Noma)

Although Noma is critical of this inauthentic adoption of the accent⁴, as patronising, she also acknowledges its use as an expression of identification with the working class or unemployed poor whose needs are the focus of the organization.

GENDER, RACE AND CLASS

The entanglements of race and class are further complicated by gender. The legitimate status of women’s belonging in the political sphere is contested and further eroded if she speaks in a particular way (marking her as “inauthentically” black) and performs her feminine identity in particular ways (that are interpreted as either white and / or sexualised).

Gendered comradeship

The political and the public sphere are conventionally seen as the spaces of men, and the private and domestic spheres as the spaces of women (Chodorow 1979; Geisler 2000; Hassim 2002). Women within politics have been predominantly viewed as “political outsiders” (Hassim 2006, 6). In the following extracts, Noma and Bonang observe that women are under greater pressure than men to prove their political credentials and this outsider status may be reinforced by the use of “white” language:

“Like one of the other things that I picked up [...] is that if I don’t know *ja*, men who come into the movement, if they have they have maybe let’s say a coconut⁵ accent if I can use that word, then they are excused or accepted for being that as compared to a woman, who will come in and have that *oh, you know* type of [...] Like I said women, we have a more onerous struggle, hmm, in that women are generally not taken seriously in the movement [...] so if you walk in with a model C accent unless you are articulate, you speak to issues and you have substance, you will not be taken seriously, they will take you as another Barbie, you know, hmm, ‘can you keep quiet so we can get to real issues’ type of thing.” (Noma)

“But you realise that, haai, I was a snob and the minute you speak like ‘that’ you don’t know

anything about the struggle you assuming then, hey, really, there's nothing I can do about it. I, I just, and you mostly find it amongst female, mostly among females. You rarely find being stigmatised when a guy comes with an accent, it's cool ok [...] I, it's, it's, a patriarchal society it's just the way it's done, but the minute a female comes in with a, with a, accent, it's just like, haai, like you just stand out like a sore thumb, like there's just something different about you. You know nothing about the struggle, but this one [a man] it's fine to speak English." (Bonang)

Gender and class create two lines of dis-identification or misrecognition, too many modes of difference in this space, to be taken "seriously" and not to be dismissed as inauthentic. At the time of the study, primary leadership roles in student governance were almost inevitably occupied by men with women in secondary supportive roles, in an apparent continuation from the political struggle history (Geisler 2000; Hassim 2002, 2006).

"Well, you see the thing about deputising is that ... you don't have as much say. You don't have the power to speak on programs [...] it sort of limits the, the voice of people." (Amina)

It is interesting and heartening to note that the situation has changed considerably since the collection of these narratives and several leaders in formal student governance are now women (e.g. Wits SRC acting president 2015, Shaheera Kahn and Wits SRC president 2016, Nompandolo Makatshwa). However, gendered struggles continue in the conceptualisation and implementation of the Student Movement with the authority of these women often challenged and even usurped by men in protest actions.

Female bodies in the Body Politic

Participants all commented on the sense of their bodies as women being very visible in the political sphere, and their sexuality being subject to greater surveillance. Amina talks about how women have to be extra vigilant about how they conduct themselves because their mistakes may damage their political prospects:

"So if a female does something stupid; a slip up, their reputation can be tarnished for a very long time, whereas for a man it's not." (Amina)

This surveillance of women is however not conducted solely by men. The quintessentially white Barbie doll emerged in several women's descriptive stereotyping of women who are both part and not-part of political circles.

"And the babes all make up and mascara who are like 'oh my gosh' and they are just there and like Barbie, little content, not really there to, but just maybe 'cause their boyfriend is there or whatever the case may be. But there seems to be like, they seem to try and force you to one of the boxes. It's either you're like, you're a Barbie [...] You're just doing it because you're, you like T-shirts, you like Biko you're like, 'oh my gosh, Biko you write what I like' (in coquettish voice).

(T: laughs softly) Or you're this male domineering kind of woman and it's like, it's like why can't I just be me?" (Oneka)

Barbie, the hourglass blonde doll epitomises an idealised beauty and sexuality located within whiteness. There seems to be an implied inverse relation between this particular sexualised stereotype and a woman's intelligence. The "Barbie" figure in politics is thus disqualified both in terms of race and her ultra-feminine body. Despite employing this stereotype to distinguish themselves from these women who insinuate themselves into the political space illegitimately, these young women are resistant to, and ambivalent about, the gendered alternatives available to them.

PROJECTED SELVES AND NEW COHERENCES

Participants resist gendered dichotomies and demonstrate agentic performances of femininity and creative articulations of masculinity both in the negotiation of shifting boundaries in the present and in their projected future selves.

Beautiful black feminisms

Ramphela (1991, 217) writes about how the slogan "Black is Beautiful" liberated black women from being defined in terms dictated by the "dominant white culture". Several of the women seemed to delight in the performance of femininity and feel this is a central defining feature of their identities. However, there are limits to their agency in the political sphere. Minnie refers to her "double life" in which she articulates her gendered identity differently in different spaces:

"It's nice getting dolled up. I have a girly side ... just that in politics, uhm I can't really show my girly side a lot coz, uhm, girly is seen as weak. You know so I have to kind of mimic the men most of the time you know. Even in my walk like if you see me when I'm going to a political event or meeting I have this, my friends call it the determination walk. (laughs) [...] And I'll wear a blazer and just so that I feel like a real leader. I won't go there in a dress. uhm I won't sit, I, I, I get there and I'm one of the boys. It, it, it gives me the confidence that I can challenge them. You know I don't have limitations you know when they jump, I jump as well [...] I was saying the other day that I feel like I'm living a double life. When I'm with my friends and my family, I'm Minnie, when, when in politics, I'm like this (laughs) emotionless person who will do anything to protect what she believes in and she will not let anyone, uhm, take that from her or silence her." (Minnie)

Minnie feels she has to conceal her femininity and perform a less emotive and less relational self in the public political sphere (Chodorow 1979). She talks about this role as embodied, demanding a particular way of walking and dressing. Conversely, Zimasa resists these demands to erase her femininity in the political sphere:

"There's always, been an impression that comrades must just wear all-stars, takkies, and like a cap

or whatever. That's how it was for the most part and one of the reasons I think was because women that enter into that space [...] with no objective to change it, but to be conformed by it historically. Now things have changed and now women are saying, 'I'm going to enter and I'm not going to be confined by the ideas that are existing now.' [...] I wear make-up, sometimes a lot, and I don't think I'm less of a comrade. Of course, other people will say 'that one thinks she's better', you know? 'She's too much of a girl', you know? What does that mean?" (Zimasa)

Speaking consciousness: Race and gender

Although these young women activists fully understand that the struggle against racism continues in the present, their agenda is also most certainly gendered. Humbulani talks about how the men within the organization become quite distressed or anxious about women working separately from men to focus on gender struggles and how they employ different tactics to undermine them. This is continuous with Hassim's (2006) observations that feminism was seen as a source of division in the anti-Apartheid struggle.

"I don't know why men, um, are so afraid of um, feminists. [...] I remember when we wanted to start the ANC women's league at Wits and the men were having a field day. 'Ja, this feminist group just wanna keep all these women to themselves.' [...] You know men! (laughs) So uh, they would always have an issue when women um, get together get together in a gathering or in discussions. They get nervous like you know, 'what are they doing? what are they thinking? what are they up to'?" (Humbulani)

Race discourse was (and still is) used to silence women; women entered the struggle movement as *black* people and their gendered positions were marginalized and silenced (Ramphela 1991). However, Janet turns this separation of race and gender on its head and suggests that resources for the struggle for gender equality may be found and appropriated from Black consciousness theories:

"Steve Biko says, 'no, take control of your own fight'. Take control of the struggle [...] The whole thing about of you mentally freeing yourself. You can only do things that you know, you are capable of doing them in your head [...] I can identify with mental, human, whatever it's called (T: mm) and taking initiative and believe in your own fight and not allowing those who don't understand what you are going through to fight [...] We can't have males telling us [how] we going to fight our patriarchal struggles." (Janet)

Janet appropriates the central tenet of Black consciousness: "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. If one is free at heart, no man made chains can bind one to the servitude" (Biko 1978, 102). She further (re)appropriates Biko's (1978) assertion that the struggle against racism and colonialism must be undertaken by black people for themselves, to argue that women alone can tackle the problems of patriarchy, producing a new story of liberatory consciousness in old words.

CONCLUSION

The time since these narratives were told and heard means that that even this recent past seems gone, erased and overwritten by new political formations and movements less tied to formal conventional political organisations, in which the role of the SRC and alignments with the liberation movements of history are being questioned in ways that were previously unthinkable. These developments together with the transient nature of student populations may lead us to dismiss these earlier experiences as irrelevant. But, of course, these young women, like all research participants, live on beyond the end of the project and these earlier selves continue to shape and inform who they and we are in the present. It is interesting to find in their narratives, nascent (and sometimes fully developed) articulations of these later schisms and complexities in the politics of student life. Narrative research enables us to read personal stories in and through history and challenges us to explore (dis)continuities between then and now.

In conclusion, the participants confidently assert their present identities and imagined future selves, crossing multiple lines in the performance of possibilities. However, these intersecting threads of identity are not always neatly woven together, sometimes unravelling, sometimes fraying, sometimes entangled. Their narratives reflect a tension between the assertion of new forms of life and ways of being that feel authentic (Hall 1991; Ndlovu 2012) but do not yet have clear outlines, and being subjected to multiple reproductive forces for “cloning” (Essed and Goldberg 2002). They articulate themselves as black, as women, as students, as political activists, but must do so using available tropes and discourses. Possibilities for new modes of being-in-the-world (Manganyi 1973) are suggested in the ways in which theory and concepts, the language of one struggle, may be mapped onto another. We found their narratives to be very evocative not only of past resonances, shadows and hauntings which are certainly there, but simultaneously of future horizons and possible modes of being that may slip these moorings in different ways. These young women are appropriating and performing possible ways of being, forging lines of belonging and disconnection, reconfiguring their positionalities in space-time, locating themselves, finding their place in the world.

Whether the current conflictual turmoil of events in South African higher education could have been anticipated (or avoided or precipitated) by reading the stories of students in advance of this moment is of course unknown, despite the sense that hindsight makes us feel that the unfolding of present events was foreshadowed in their stories. What is clear is that the “narrative unconscious” (Freeman 2010) is characterised by temporal fluidity in which the past and future coincide in whichever fleeting present we occupy. Student narratives then and now disrupt any ostensible stasis and stability, and provoke us to imagine the world differently. Even when they speak in languages foreign to adult ears, we would do well to listen attentively, to sharpen our

focus to read the signs of the present in order to imaginatively construct possible futures.

NOTES

1. A previous version of this article was presented at “Race, space, location, dislocation: Then and now”. 4th Apartheid Archive Conference, Pretoria, 21–23 May 2014.
2. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.
3. Conventions utilised in the transcription of the data are as follows: [...] indicates ellipsis; ... indicates a pause in talk; text in *italics* indicates spoken in the accent of “comrade language”; text inserted appears in square brackets []; text in parentheses is an English translation of words spoken in vernacular languages.
4. Julius Malema (leader of the EFF) recently criticised Musi Maimane (leader of the DA) for changing his accent to suit his audience, implying that he is “inauthentic” and not to be trusted.
5. The derogatory term “coconut” refers to a black person who acts white.

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