CONFERENCE REPORT

Legacies of Apartheid Wars Conference (LAWs), Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, 4 to 6 July 2013

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The Legacies of Apartheid Wars (LAWs) Project was established in 2011, under the auspices of the Rhodes University History Department. The LAWs Project is a research-based initiative, with the aim of interrogating and responding to the contrasting phenomena of both pervading silences and adversarial public debate about the current implications of apartheid era conflicts. Its aim is to provide a cross-disciplinary platform for a variety of (often marginalised) experiences and voices to be acknowledged, engaged with and documented. One of the legacies of the apartheid wars is the extent to which historical systems of oppression and marginalisation continue to inform social and political dynamics in Southern Africa. These need to be rigorously engaged with, constantly interrogated and deliberately shifted in the unspoken and qualitative dimensions of the project’s work, in the interests of both individual healing and social transformation. http://www.ru.ac.za/history/legaciesofapartheidwarsproject/

It was a cold 4th of July morning when I drove into the small city of Grahamstown. Welcomed by the descending drizzle, I started looking for the conference venue. Street corners and building walls were alive with posters and banners of the Arts festival that was also taking place during that week. This is one of the busiest times of the year for the city of Grahamstown as many people from around the country descend down to enjoy and immerse themselves in the various activities that take place during this time. It was within this week that the first conference on Legacies of Apartheid Wars took place.

After a few wrong turns I found the conference venue. I was immediately drawn to the Mekhonjo! (born in the struggle for Namibia) exhibition which formed part of the conference as well as the arts festival. The exhibition was by photographers John Liebenberg and Christo Doherty and its aim was to ‘give South Africans their first insight into the lives of the men and women who fought against the SADF
in the bush of Northern Namibia and Angola from 1966 – 1989’ (http://www.nationalartsfestival.co.za/show/mekhonjo-born-in-the-struggle-for-namibia/). The exhibition set the tone for what was to be a very engaging, thought provoking and emotionally charged conference.

The LAWs conference aimed at bringing together scholars from various disciplines, political activists, former conscripts and artists into the same space to have dialogues and conversations around the following themes: dialogues as archive, veterans who served in the South African Defense Force or liberation forces, gender and militarism, trauma and resilience, intergenerational legacies of war and conflict, to name but a few. The space was filled with voices from diverse backgrounds and contexts, interrogating and sharing experiences around legacies of apartheid. Some of the unique features of the conference which also coupled as highlights for me were ‘the acknowledgment of pain’ and allowing this to be expressed in the present. It was very refreshing to have some of the subjects (those directly involved, implicated and affected by the wars) in the room while discussing discourses around apartheid wars. The space allowed for theory and practice/experience to do a tango. The conference offered the opportunity for voices of the former conscripts to be heard, and for those who were involved in the liberation struggle to share their hurt and frustrations.

Papers that were presented focused on various aspects of the conference sub-themes. A keynote entitled, *Winning the war; losing the memory battle (and vice versa): The aftermath of the apartheid wars* by Prof. Gary Baines served as a platform that paved the way for various discussions that followed. My enjoyable snippet of the sessions includes: Visual and Literary Representations, War Resisters and the End Conscription Campaign, Memory, Trauma, and Healing, Revisiting Casinga, Archiving the Apartheid Wars, Liberation forces.
and veteranhood, Deconstructing Masculinities and Whiteness in the Legacies of Conscription, and Sharing learning from Ireland, Northern Ireland and beyond. Although the whole time I was at the conference the weather was not very kind, the discussions offered warmth (by not only affirming but by also allowing space for discomfort and disagreements). A conference of the heart!

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Puleng Segalo is a lecturer at Unisa where she teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate students in community and social psychology. Her research focuses broadly on issues of historical trauma and suffering, gender, power, sexuality and how these interplay. She is inspired by and draws heavily from critical feminist theories and narrative research approaches.