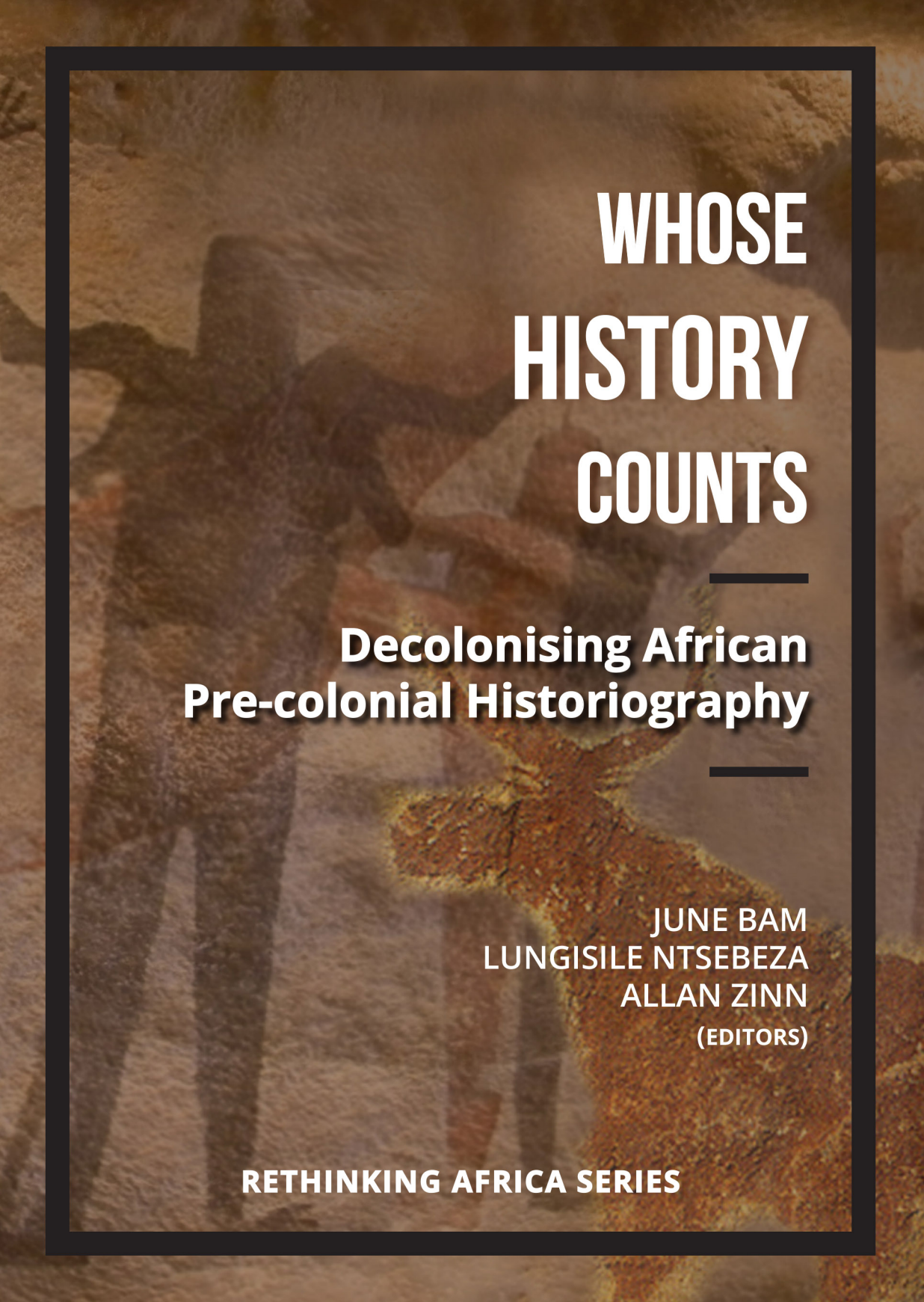

WHOSE HISTORY COUNTS

Decolonising African Pre-colonial Historiography

JUNE BAM
LUNGISILE NTSEBEZA
ALLAN ZINN
(EDITORS)

RETHINKING AFRICA SERIES

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CAS Centre for African Studies
NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
CANRAD Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism & Democracy
NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY
Conference rap

Whose History Counts? Decolonising African Pre-colonial Historiography

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ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

ADM	Amathole District Municipality
ANC	African National Congress
APC	Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative
CALUSA	Cala University Students Association
CANRAD	Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy
CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements
CAS	Centre for African Studies
CSIR	Council for Scientific Research
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DEIC	Dutch East India Company
FET	Further Education and Training
FHYA	Five Hundred Year Archive
FMF	#FeesMustFall
GET	General Education and Training
HoL	Home of Legends Project
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge System
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LTSM	Learning & Teaching Support Materials
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NEUM	Non-European Unity Movement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NHC	National Heritage Council

NIHSS	National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences
NMMU	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
NMU	Nelson Mandela University (previously NMMU)
NRF	National Research Foundation
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress
PAR	Participatory Action Research
RMF	#RhodesMustFall
SADET	South African Democracy Education Trust
SAHP	South African History Project
TK	Traditional Knowledge
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UCT	University of Cape Town
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNISA	University of South Africa
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand

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CHAPTER 1

Whose History Counts?

An Introduction

Lungisile Ntsebeza[1]

Background

This book is the third volume published under the "Rethinking Africa" series of the Centre for African Studies (CAS), University of Cape Town (UCT). Its focus is the catalytic project on the pre-colonial historiography of southern Africa, an initiative of the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS).[2] The NIHSS defines catalytic projects as "primarily research-based" programmes which aim "to catalyse and open up new avenues" for Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) scholarship, "and to assist in and promote the development of research in the HSS".[3] Established in 2012, the overarching aim of the pre-colonial historiography project was to create a platform that would support and nurture research over the long term, and promote the development of methodologies that would take forward the study of the pre-colonial eras in southern Africa.

The book is the outcome of a conference that was held at the then Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (now Nelson Mandela University) from 15 to 17 March 2017. The conference was organised by CAS in collaboration with the Centre for

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2 The NIHSS was itself the outcome of a Humanities Initiative by the then Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande. See www.nihss.ac.za

3 See www.nihss.ac.za

the Advancement of Non-Racialism & Democracy (CANRAD) at Nelson Mandela University. Volume 1 (Ntsebeza & Saunders 2014) of the project was published, following a conference held in the CAS Gallery on 28 and 29 March 2014. A second 352-page volume (De Prada-Samper 2016) on stories from the Karoo in the Northern Cape was published at the end of 2016. This was the result of research done by Professors Simon Hall of UCT and Jose Manuel de Prada, Honorary Research Associate in the UCT Humanities Faculty.

Evolution of the project

A key objective of the pre-colonial history project, when it was conceived in 2012, was to coordinate a network of researchers from institutions located in different provinces in order to construct a history of broader South Africa from the 11th to 16th centuries. At the time, the title of the project was "Pre-1652 historiography". However, this title was changed in favour of the generic title "pre-colonial historiography" in order to challenge the widely-accepted notion that the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 marks the point of departure in studying and understanding the history of southern Africa. Further, how far back the research would go was left open, rather than restricting the period to the 11th to 16th centuries. The geographic scope of the project was also modified to broaden the scope beyond the current borders of South Africa and to make this a southern African project. This modification was effected to make the point that the notion of a nation-state, such as South Africa, is a colonial construct and a project such as this one should be questioning these conceptions rather than taking them as a given.

Great strides have been made in the project. Firstly, at the level of coordinating a network of researchers from institutions located in different provinces in South Africa, participation has broadened from the initial group of academics from the universities of Cape Town, KwaZulu-Natal, Witwatersrand and Fort Hare who pledged their interest in the project and participated in the first conference in 2014. At the 2017 conference, participants were drawn from more South African universities, including Nelson Mandela University, the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Rhodes University. Furthermore, we took the first vital step of extending our activities beyond the boundaries of South Africa. To this end, we were joined by a colleague from the Institute of Arts & Culture in Mozambique, who is also curator of the Maputo Fortress National Historical Monument.

The focus of the book

The conference on which this book is based was initially informed by an observation that the Eastern Cape was conspicuous by its absence in the two earlier volumes of the project. We wondered why and how, in the context of pre-colonial historiography, the Eastern Cape would be in the margins. There is little doubt that the history of colonialism in South Africa would be incomplete if it omitted the Eastern Cape. For almost a century, between 1779 and 1878, the indigenous people in this part of South Africa witnessed a British onslaught in what is often referred to as the "frontier wars" (Peires 1981, 1989; Davenport 1986). These major wars were fought over land which British colonialists were using to divide Africans, by, for example, granting land under a quitrent title system to some blacks, in an attempt to create a class of black farmers (Bundy 1988). It is also in this province that missionaries established mission schools that were key to the colonial civilising mission and produced African nationalist leaders and academics of note such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe and AC Jordan, to cite a few.

With the above concerns in mind, we in CAS took a decision that the next conference would focus on the Eastern Cape. We embarked on a diligent search for academics and public intellectuals in the province who were doing work on the history of the Eastern Cape. In the Xhalanga area, which falls under the Chris Hani District municipal area in the Eastern Cape, CAS set up a research group whose objective was to conduct research on life in this area, before the arrival of colonialists. Most of the above took place during the course of 2014 and early 2015 and the conference was planned for 2017 at a university in the Eastern Cape, which ended up being, as already stated, Nelson Mandela University.

The 2017 conference turned out to be path-breaking. There was a major shift from the white and male-dominated 2014 conference in Cape Town, with the bulk of the presenters being black women. Furthermore, contrary to our expectation that the conference would be fact-based in the true tradition of history, foundational and searching questions were raised about the writing of history and whose history counts. Additionally, questions on the methodologies on researching and writing history were also raised and hotly debated.

In other words, what was originally planned as a conference on the pre-colonial history of the Eastern Cape, ended up focusing on epistemological and methodological issues, including challenging the very concept 'pre-colonial'. This book is thus not about a factual account of the Eastern Cape, or a pre-colonial history of *amaNguni*.

The extent to which reference is made to the Eastern Cape is in the context of using the province to draw examples that would elucidate conceptual and methodological matters. What accounts for this dramatic turn of events?

De-colonisation re-visited

A question that dominated presentations and discussions throughout the conference revolved around the reconstruction of the past, including a close questioning of the credentials of those who wrote/write history. Some presenters, as already indicated, even questioned the use of the term 'pre-colonial', associating it with a particular form of history-writing, with deep roots in colonialism. How history is researched and written, and who writes the history of the indigenous African people, were issues that were debated and discussed. This is something that was missing at the 2014 conference. So, why this change then in 2017?

The 2017 conference took place in a context that was, I would argue, fundamentally different from 2014. It was held at a critical moment that was characterised by a student-led rebellion against what students dubbed 'colonial' education and a clamour for, among others, a 'decolonised curriculum'. The student-led campaign manifested itself in the open when, on 9 March 2015, a UCT student activist, Chumani Maxwele, defamed the imposing statue of Cecil John Rhodes on UCT grounds. Soon thereafter, his student supporters, who organised themselves under the #RhodesMustFall movement, demanded the removal of the statue. They alleged that the statue signified deep-rooted links between the University of Cape Town and colonialism or, in the words of Emeritus Associate Professor Dave Cooper, "colonial capitalism" (Cooper 2015). The students occupied the administrative block of the university and announced that they would not leave until the statue was removed. Within a month, the statue was removed – a major victory for the student-led effort. By this time, a number of universities in South Africa and beyond had pledged support for the campaign. At the same time, students had added more demands, notably the decolonisation of the curriculum, as they called it, and the insourcing of former university workers.

The announcement by various universities in South Africa that fees would be increased in 2016 set the proverbial cat among the pigeons and led to an unprecedented student-led campaign against the increase, called #FeesMustFall. This campaign drew wide support, including parents and workers who bore the brunt of paying the fees. The student-worker-parent alliance was no doubt the

climax of the activities of the student-led campaign, forcing a complete shutdown of all South African universities, and spurring marches to Parliament in Cape Town, the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters in Johannesburg and the Union Buildings in Pretoria, the very seat of government administration. In the end, the ANC-led government was forced to make an announcement that there would be no fee increases in 2016. Furthermore, the campaign forced universities to reverse their policies of outsourcing workers. The "decolonisation of the curriculum" and the #FeesMustFall campaigns dominated debates and discussions in South African higher education institutions, especially towards the end of 2016, often leading to violent clashes with university and private security guards.[4]

A feature of the 2015/2016 student campaign is that it took place mainly in historically-white, advantaged universities such as UCT, Witwatersrand (Wits), Rhodes and Stellenbosch. Crucially, it is mainly towards these institutions that the demand for curriculum reform was directed. What is important to note is that historically, the quality of education that was offered at these universities was, in many ways, seen as a model of good education. For example, when he left Fort Hare and joined UCT in 1945 as its first black scholar, AC Jordan, the politically-engaged linguist, novelist and musician, defended himself against those who criticised him for leaving Fort Hare, a university for African students, for a white-dominated UCT, by saying that he wanted "to open that [UCT's] door, and keep it ajar" (Ntsebeza 2012:9). This was seen as a firm commitment on his part to make UCT accessible to black academics and students. Furthermore, when the so-called Extension of Universities Act was promulgated in 1959 (creating racially and ethnically exclusive institutions), the outcry was that this paved the way for the introduction of Bantu Education in higher education (Alexander 1990; Kallaway 1984, 1988, 2002; Hartshorne 1995). There seems to have been a sense that places like UCT and Wits offered a model of quality education and that the University Act of 1959 was meant to lower the quality of education offered to Africans.

The student rebellion of 2015/2016 brought to the fore that there were deep problems with the curriculum of the historically-white and privileged universities of South Africa. What the students have told us is that the kind of education delivered at these universities is not beyond criticism. Students have exposed it as colonial in its origin and in urgent need of transformation. This is an important message to take from the protests. In many ways, students have given academics and the wider

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[4] For an interesting analysis of the student led rebellion, see Nyamnjoh 2017, 2016.

society legitimate research questions which should be added to research agendas on higher education in South Africa and other former colonies.

A question that arises is: what would a transformed curriculum look like? What can we glean about this from the student protests? It seems possible to identify a couple of issues: the material that is prescribed, how it is taught, and who teaches it. Students complain that the books prescribed to them are authored by non-Africans and are written from a 'Eurocentric' point of view, which ignores the realities of the African continent and its people. Students are exerting pressure for the development of materials that are written by Africans and speak to African conditions and experiences. There is also pressure for an 'Afrocentric' approach to research and teaching which takes, as its point of departure, African conditions and the experiences of Africans.[5]

It is worth noting that the debate on decolonising higher education institutions in South Africa is not new. The issue was a subject of fierce and acrimonious debate at UCT in the late 1990s. The issue revolved around the establishment of a foundation course in teaching first-year students about Africa. CAS was entrusted with the task of setting up this course. A planning committee was set up to oversee the process of designing and implementing the teaching of the course. However, a dispute about the design of the course, its content and how it should be taught could not be resolved, leading to Mahmood Mamdani – the then Director of CAS and inaugural holder of the AC Jordan Chair in African Studies – making the unfortunate decision of leaving UCT (Mamdani 1996, 1998; Graaff 1998; Hall 1998.).[6] His departure left a huge gap in CAS and had a serious negative impact on debates on 'decolonising' the curriculum not only at UCT, but at higher education institutions across South Africa. Nearly 20 years later, it would take the students of UCT to put the issue of decolonising the curriculum back on the agenda.

Further on in this chapter, in the section on the outline of the book, I have described how the presenters at the conference (and subsequent authors of this book), while not directly addressing the issues raised by the student protest, showed great awareness of the current context surrounding higher education in South Africa, and the need to address the question: Whose history counts?

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5 See Mafeje 1981, 1994 for an elaboration of this approach. Also see Ntsebeza 1996 for an analysis of Mafeje's theory.

6 The debates on this matter were extensively covered by the Centre for African Studies journal, *Social Dynamics*.

Finally, the role of 'organic' intellectuals outside the academy has also been acknowledged and recognised in this book. The example of Isaac Bongani Tabata (Tabata 1950, 1952) of the Unity Movement and his contribution in the political history of South Africa has been highlighted. In addition, there is a strongly held view that, as part of decolonising higher education, if not education in general, the Pre-colonial Historiography project should aim at drawing the greater participation of broader society, especially poets, artists and organic intellectuals who are researching and writing their own history, focusing on their clans and/or family histories. Were these texts to be prescribed in schools, they would contribute to the transformation of education at primary and secondary levels. Several chapters written by organic intellectuals address the issue of developing materials for primary and secondary schools (see also Mafeje 1994; Mamdani 2016).

Outline of the book

This book is divided into two sections: Decolonising Historiography (chapters 2-6); and the Challenges of Praxis (chapters 7-10). This is followed by a brief concluding chapter, summarising the key aspects of the book and outlining an agenda for future research in preparation for the third conference.

Section I | Decolonising Historiography

This section, comprising only women authors, deals with the epistemological issues highlighted above. The women's approaches are truly foundational and highly questioning of prevailing and seemingly accepted concepts such as 'pre-colonial'. They also question the assumption that the contributions by Africans in scholarship be restricted to providing primary data that gets analysed by European scholars. The essential point made is that Africans should write history from their vantage point and that African writers of the 19th century, for example, should be seen as making a contribution to South African historiography as historians in their own right. The roles of language and *uMakhulu* (grandmother in isiXhosa) are highlighted as crucial in our quest to reconstruct life before colonial intrusion.

In chapter 2, Nomathamsanqa Tisani pursues research questions on how Africans defined and named themselves in the face of creeping colonialism and incipient Christian religion. The departure point in this chapter is a discussion of how Africans defined themselves as examples of self-framing, which should be one of the undergirding approaches in researching the African world in the past and

present. The author argues that at a broader level, Africans cannot frame and shape themselves in line with the charts of the coloniser.

Pamela Maseko, in chapter 3, seeks to reconstruct the experiences of a pre-colonial isiXhosa-speaking Nguni society to understand society's ways of knowing, in relation to social roles. She examines, through linguistic evidence, the manner in which social roles are constructed within amaXhosa society. She specifically considers whether 'gender' is a key factor in organising relationships and roles. Through the lens of the #FeesMustFall student protests, Maseko presents language as a possible source of essential evidence not only in the reconstruction of social roles in pre-colonial isiXhosa-speaking Nguni society, but also in the efforts of centring African experiences in knowledge production and dissemination in the academy. She concludes by arguing that if we have to develop knowledge about African society, it makes sense that we listen to what African languages are saying about their societies.

In chapter 4, Nomalanga Mkhize argues that South African historiography has been a white record of black actions. What is missing is the recognition of the many scattered writings by black South Africans. Mkhize goes on to explore some historical puzzles through the clan genealogies compiled by Walter Rubusana in his edited volume *Zemk'inkomo Magwalandini*. Her point is that African versions of history have yet to be acknowledged formally as South African historiography even though it is through African accounts that many pre-colonial narratives can be excavated; and that the idiomatic layers of African language are central to the reconstruction of the missing African historiography in South Africa's history scholarship.

Babalwa Magoqwana, in chapter 5, seeks to challenge some of the narrow conceptions that define *uMakhulu* purely in economic and seniority terms in African households. The chapter positions *uMakhulu* as an institution of knowledge that transfers not only 'history' through *iintsomi* (folktales), but also as a body of indigenous knowledge that stores, transfers and disseminates knowledge and values. In other words, her chapter goes beyond the narrative of *uMakhulu* as a 'safety net' and 'caregiver' under harsh socio-economic conditions in the rural households. In using *uMakhulu* as the institution of knowledge, she argues, society can move beyond the gendered and binary nature of institutions of learning (public versus private spaces of learning) and integrate the local language and values carried by our grandmothers in dealing with social, political and economic challenges in societies.

Carolyn Hamilton argues in chapter 6 that the long southern African past, before the advent of European colonialism, remains neglected despite powerful post-apartheid impulses of various kinds for its recovery and celebration. Her contention is that, in the last 20 years or so, outside of the specialist discipline of archaeology, there has been relatively little research undertaken to support those impulses. She goes on to offer her understanding of some of the things that have given distinctive shape to this field, attempting to account for its stalled aspect, identifying key challenges, and indicating some of the directions of new research currently being inaugurated.

Section II | Challenges of Praxis

This section builds on the previous one and grapples with methodological issues on how a decolonised history can be written. At the heart of this section is an attempt to critically look at the relationship between researchers in the academy and the host community against the backdrop of a perception that academic research is extractive and sees the host community merely as a source of primary data. The strong message here is that the gap between the academy and the host community must be bridged, with community members who participate in research seen as collaborators. Furthermore, this section considers ways of ensuring that the new materials are made widely accessible, especially in educational institutions.

Fani Ncapayi and Mlingani Mayongo's original contribution in chapter 7 provides a powerful illustrative case. Both operate in the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and collaborate in their research with CAS at UCT. In this groundbreaking chapter, the authors not only participated on an equal basis with academic researchers in CAS, but, working with the youth in their research sites, they actually drove the research and became the authors, with CAS researchers providing support. Their chapter investigates the lives and living conditions of people in early African societies, before colonial contact, in the former Xhalanga magisterial district. Through a combination of qualitative and participatory research techniques, the chapter details the lives and living conditions of families in three villages of the former Xhalanga magisterial district to get a sense of life in these villages before contact with colonialists. As much as the research provides knowledge about early African societies, its participatory approach empowered the participating local youth with research techniques, as well as report-writing skills.

In chapter 8, Denver Webb and Mcebisi Ndletyana write about their project – The Home of Legends – which originated as an Eastern Cape branding and marketing exercise, launched in 2012. While it elicited considerable public interest, commentators highlighted a number of problems. Subsequently, the Eastern Cape Office of the Premier and the National Heritage Council (NHC) entered into a partnership to commission research that would provide a firmer academic basis for a revitalised Home of Legends project. One of the key aspects was how heritage sites in the Eastern Cape could be used to tell the stories of the province, stretching from the geological and palaeontological eras to the recent past. The palaeontological and pre-colonial periods were initially included in the project, then dropped and have subsequently been re-instated.

Chapter 9, co-authored by June Bam, Bradley Van Sitters and Bongani Ndhlovu, outlines the authors' engagement with museums, heritage agencies and various communities over many years. They each bring a particular set of knowledge, perspectives, experiences and interactions to the pre-colonial project, which they have woven into five key emerging research themes. This chapter discusses these themes and attempts to identify possible ways for working on the pre-colonial project with higher education institutions in the future, and considers the possible impact on higher education transformation, should these recommendations be considered. Of special mention to this chapter's 'triangulation' research method (systematic triangulation of perspectives as a conversation analysis and validation strategy) (Flick 1992) in the three-way conversation and collaboration, is the working relationship between Bam (a university-based scholar) and Van Sitters as the 'keeper of pre-colonial knowledge' and as an 'organic intellectual' over the past three years.

The last chapter in this section, by Himal Ramji, addresses the aims of the prescribed Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in schools, with specific focus on the 'pre-colonial' sections of CAPS and the topic of Mapungubwe, as prescribed in grade 6 in South African schools. This chapter compares the interpretations provided in the CAPS curriculum and prescribed school textbooks, to the interpretations of the novel – in this case, Zakes Mda's *The Sculptors of Mapungubwe*. Essentially, this paper asks: what might the creative interpretation of the distant past offer to improve or expand our history education?

In conclusion, this third volume of the pre-colonial historiography project has taken a significant step in fulfilling the overarching aim of the pre-colonial historiography

project, which, as indicated at the outset, is to create a platform that would support and nurture research over the long term, and promote the development of methodologies that would take forward the study of the pre-colonial eras in southern Africa. Although initially planned as a volume that would focus on the pre-colonial history of the people of the Eastern Cape province, the student-led protests manifesting themselves in the open in 2015 compelled academics and intellectuals more broadly to confront foundational issues around epistemology and methodology that had been off the radar for more than a decade since the Mamdani debacle at UCT.

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