




IDENTITY AND THE ARCHIVE

Public Lecture Series

2006

The lecture series involved a mixture of South African and high-profile international commentators. It explored the relationship between archive and identity in contemporary public deliberation. The question is especially pressing in South Africa in the wake of a violent, racially-divided past. The lecture series presented powerful challenges to ideas about essentialised identities determined by immutable, and, strictly controlled, archives. The lectures were delivered to packed auditoria in Johannesburg and, in many cases, other venues around the country. They were placed on a website with supporting resources, and were discussed a range of media.



By archive we mean both the many items in many different forms from the past, or about the past, that survive in the present to serve as sources about the past, as well as the circumscribed body of knowledge of the past that is available to us to draw on when thinking about the past.

THE SPEAKERS

THE TRANSMISSION LINES OF THE NEW AFRICAN MOVEMENT

Ntongela Masilela

Ntongela Masilela is Professor of English and World Literature and Director of the H.I.E. Dlomo Center for African Intellectual History at Pitzer College. He is also a film scholar and the creator of the New African Movement Website.

IDENTITY, POLITICS AND THE ARCHIVE

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Kwame Anthony Appiah is Rockefeller University Professor at Princeton and one of the world's foremost thinkers on the articulating of identity and its place in ethics and politics.

BLACK WOMEN INTELLECTUALS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

Phyllis Ntantala

Phyllis Ntantala is a veteran political activist, writer and speaker on the issues of apartheid and the situation of South African women.

THE GOODNESS OF NATIONS

Benedict Anderson

Benedict Anderson is Professor Emeritus of International Studies at Cornell University and author of the acclaimed study *Imagined Communities*; on the emergence of nationalism.

I, TOO, AM AN AFRICAN - IF NOT, WHY NOT?

Frederik van Zyl Slabbert

Frederik van Zyl Slabbert is an eminent South Africa public intellectual and erstwhile politician, recognised for his role in facilitating dialogue between white South Africans and the ANC in the years preceding the political transition to democracy.

BLACK ATHENA AND THE ARCHIVE

Martin Bernal

Martin Bernal is Professor Emeritus at Cornell University renowned for his robust research into the African contribution to classical civilisation.

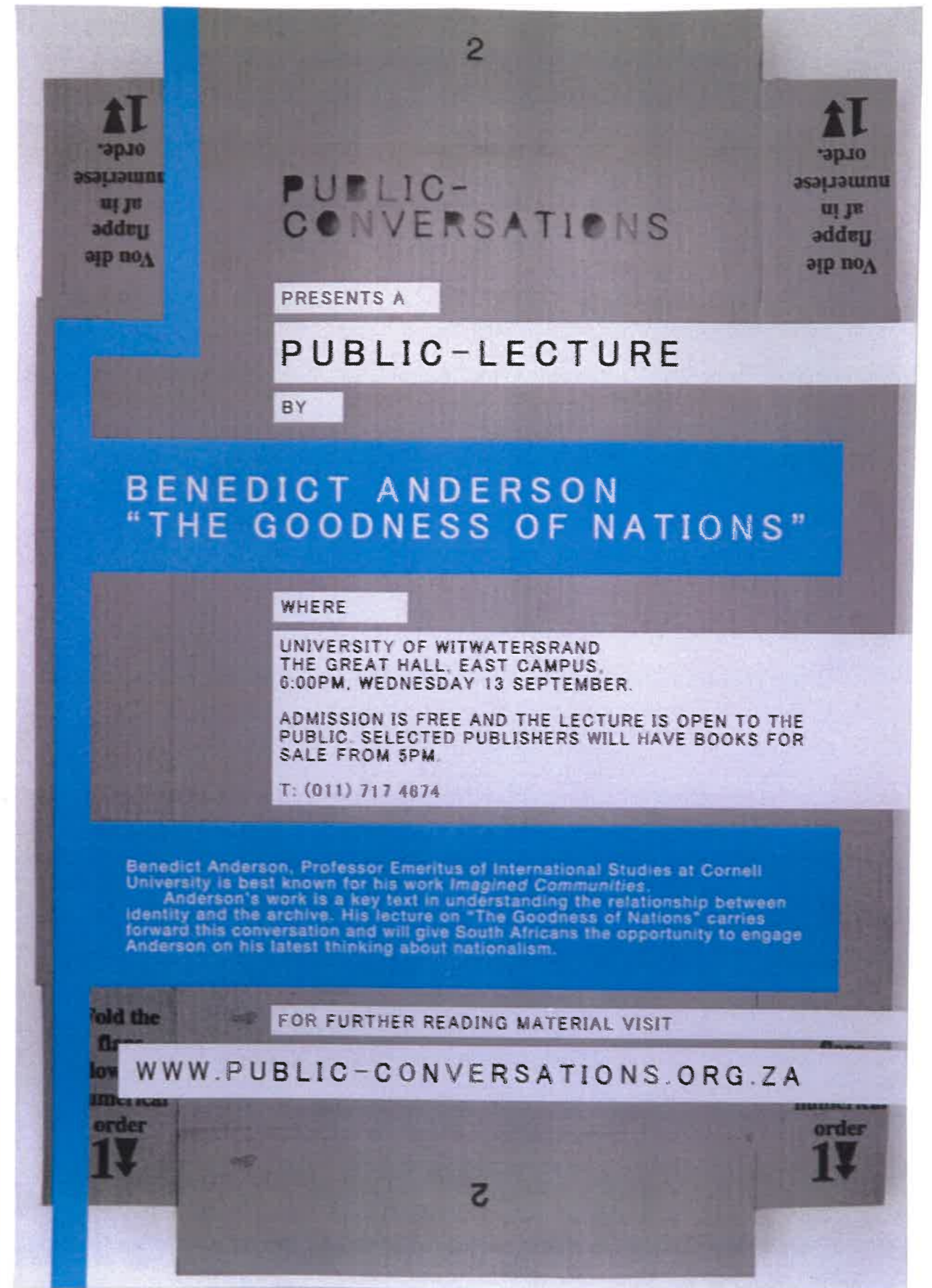
Identity and the Archive



How do we imagine ourselves as South Africans in a globalizing world? How do we shape identity in the wake of a violent, racially divided past? What role does identity play in democratic South Africa?

These are just some of the questions that feed into a pressing public conversation of our time – identity and the archive in South Africa. It is a conversation that is going on all around us: in the presidency, in the Native Club, in art and literature, and more importantly, in daily life. This series of lectures, hosted by Dr Xolela Mangcu, was undertaken to enrich this growing public debate.





I have asked a number of distinguished intellectuals to come to the University of Witwatersrand and participate in discussions on how to re-imagine our South African and broader African identities by first examining this intellectual-historical archive. And guess what, they have all accepted: **Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Martin Bernal, Benedict Anderson, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Phyllis Ntantala, Thandika Mkandawire and Ntongela Masilela.** Masilela's lecture, *Transmission Lines*, will examine the debates on African identity that have taken place among Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho intellectuals on what it means to be African in the modern world. Masilela's lecture will be at the Wits Senate Room at lunch time on April 5.

Ways of being African, on the continent and around the globe

I met **Bernal** recently at Cornell University and invited him to come to the Public Intellectual Life Project at Wits to speak about the third volume of *Black Athena*. This volume, which comes out in October, contains formidable evidence of the presence of African languages in the Greek language. Bernal argues that even though Greek is an Indo-European language, it contains anomalies in its morphology and its syntax that can only be explained in terms of Egyptian and Semitic borrowings. Bernal is important to SA for reasons that go beyond the substance of his work. He demonstrates that a white person can actually transcend the limitations of Europe's racist cultural heritage.

Black Athena's white professor a lesson in mastering the evidence

Last week I announced that the distinguished philosopher **Kwame Anthony Appiah** would deliver a public lecture at the Origins Centre at Wits next Wednesday evening. Appiah has since sent me a copy of his lecture.

What I find fascinating are the suggestions he makes about how to think about what makes us South Africans, how we should treat each other, and the norms of identification we rely on to get to those treatments and feelings. A big part of that process of identification depends on the archival resources we draw on, from official archives to everyday memories that people have about their history. My hope is that my book on Mandela will constitute a small part of that archive. We need more, much more.

World Cup is a social experiment in competition and co-operation

I have asked **Appiah** to give a talk at Wits about the alternative, imaginative ways in which the state should handle racial identities in a pluralistic and democratic society.

There's a sense in which the Soccer World Cup in Germany is a metaphor for how we can think about our identities.

But I would not hang my identity on such a limited frame of racial identification when the parameters of a nonracial ethos also impel me to say: "May the best team win."

It is that synthesis of identification and transcendence that constitutes Appiah's dynamic concept of rooted cosmopolitanism.

To embrace one's own identity without rejecting that of another

Frederick van Zyl Slabbert has described our political system as "achieving the very opposite of what you claim to pursue: being democratic in an undemocratic way. You pretend you vote for us and we pretend to represent you." But I also detect a vicious cycle: It is precisely because we pretend to represent you that you dare not tell us to change the system so it can work better for you. Thus, while the communists may be accurate about the "presidentialising" of the African National Congress, what they offer may do little to radically alter the political system.

SA's political health too crucial for party bosses alone to tackle

What Arendt fears most is not so much that lies will be turned into truth, and truth into lies, but that "the sense by which we take our bearings in the world is being destroyed".

We do not know who to trust any more, and that's just downright scary.

I HAVE over the course of the year focused some of my writings on the spectre of racial nativism in our country. In the process I have become a convert to nonracialism.

In that spirit I have asked **Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert** to deliver a public lecture at Wits on the topic: *I Too Am An African. If Not, Why Not?*

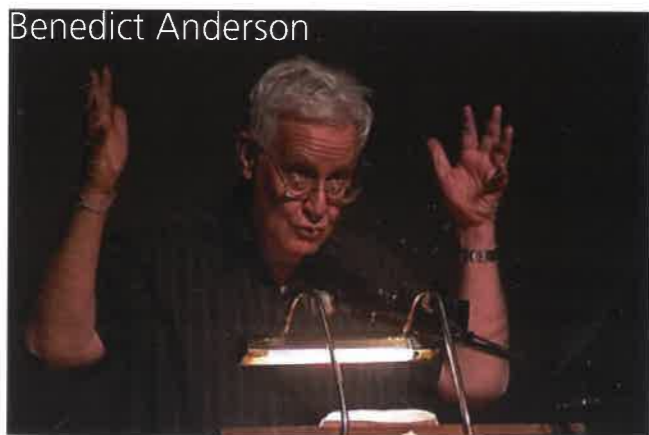
ANC leadership tailspin has SA struggling to get a hold on truth



Kwame Anthony Appiah

As a departing thought, Appiah makes the point that any identity, including South African as an identity, is a work in progress, reminding us that much of our current cultural input will shape the archive of ourselves that has yet to be written.

But where is this “rich heritage of memories?” Talk of national memory is a metaphor. **Nations do not remember; individuals do.** The metaphor of a national memory has to be cashed out in the stories that citizens tell one another about the nation, the stories they teach their children.



Benedict Anderson

In Slabbert’s view, the moment one moves away from using the term African in a context other than referring to an uncomplicated geography one enters a world of ideological agendas and value judgments.

[Weber] says that the future asks us to be **worthy ancestors.** He himself was deeply ashamed of his German contemporaries. This shame is basic to the Goodness of the Nation. If we are incapable of being ashamed for our country, we do not love it.

Anderson points to the way in which the nation rummages through the archive in order to extract worthy ancestors that will come to represent the nation’s heroes.



Frederik van Zyl Slabbert

The issue is on the one hand, **the invented historiography;** the invention of history and the harm it does to a society. And then on the other hand, using race as an instrument of policy implementation.

The archive is always a contested space, but is it itself a neutral repository? What historical forces are at play that direct our attention to the archives of the classical world that dominate Bernal’s debate?



Phyllis Ntantala

Ntantala’s lecture traces a history of black women intellectual’s engagement with politics to a period that supersedes the Women’s march. Her account is a reading against the grain of what is conventionally understood to be women’s political involvement and shows how single events often eclipse the complexity of history.

There is a saying: **“It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive”.** For, although a spectacular feat of organization, logistics and discipline, the march did not achieve its objective, namely: stopping the extension of the Dom Pas to African women.



Martin Bernal

I have argued that far from being essentially European Ancient Greece was **not pure but thoroughly hybrid** and that its undoubted creativity came precisely from that hybridity. Furthermore, the main outside influences on Greece, and those that introduced urban civilization to the Aegean came from Egypt and Syro-Palestine.

And the public flocked to the lectures...

