

DISCUSSING *LALELA*: AN INTERVIEW WITH JUNE BAM-HUTCHISON

Por: **Camila Araújo Gomes**¹

Intending to overcome the Eurocentric perspective into our institutional production, the 28th edition of *Inventário* Journal invited Doctor June Bam-Hutchison, our first interviewee from Africa, specifically from South Africa. Her research interests are in Khoi and San identities and social justice, critical issues in heritage, school history education, and decolonial discourse and practice. She supervises doctoral students in interdisciplinary fields, lectures on the African Studies Master's degree programs and the African Studies undergraduate Major at the University of Cape Town (UCT). She is also the Interim Director of the Khoi and San Unit at the same university². June has held research fellowships at York and Kingston Universities in the UK for a number of years and also as visiting professor and director of 'Sites of Memory' with Stanford University's overseas programme for 6 years. The interview with June Bam-Hutchison recovers some points discussed in her paper *Lalela: occupying knowledge practices and processes in higher education in South Africa (UCT as case study) / Lalela: práticas e processos de ocupação do conhecimento no ensino superior na África do Sul (um estudo de caso da Universidade da Cidade do Cabo)*. Translated by Hilário Zeferino, the Portuguese version of the mentioned text integrates the 28th edition of *Inventário* Journal. It is relevant to declare that this interview was possible because of the support given by Ana Lígia Leite e Aguiar, the associated Professor of Brazilian Literature at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA). She is one of June Bam's postdoctoral students at UCT (2020-2021). This institutional collaboration promotes reflections on the past and present of South Africa, marked by transformative practices of resistance against the violent impacts of European colonialism across the post-apartheid country, especially concerning to Khoi and San indigenous people. This context has a lot in common with the process of colonization and its effects on Brazilian contemporaneity. Furthermore, this interview can work as a resource to understand the South African landscape through a non-hegemonic view. It also can be productive for humanities and social sciences scholars.



¹ **Camila Gomes** is a master student in the Graduate Program in Literature and Culture at the Federal University of Bahia. Her research focuses on the dialogue between contemporary literature and Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1985). E-mail: mila_araujo25@hotmail.com.

² The information is available at: <http://www.africanstudies.uct.ac.za/june-bam-hutchison>. Access on: July 03, 2021.



1. According to your paper, the #Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) protests in March 2015 corresponds to the foremost college student movement in South Africa since 1994. It also presents similarities to the United Democratic Front (UDF) moment in the 1980s against the apartheid state. Is it possible for you to describe the socio-political scenario of South Africa since then? What has been the public agenda, especially in academia, intend to destroy or remove the “statues” inherited from this oppressive system?

The opposition to colonialism and apartheid has a long history in South Africa; the former starting in the late 1600s with resistance to Dutch colonialism through several wars of resistance waged into the 1700s and black resistance wars beyond that into the late 1800s. Resistance to colonial education and imperialism was led particularly by teachers and students especially from the 1940s, leading to the defiance campaigns and broad-based ideological united fronts against apartheid in the 1950s (founding of the Trotskyite Unity Movement's Ten Point Programme of 1943 and African National Congress' Freedom Charter of 1955). There was then already a call for race equality and for the doors of learning to be open to all in response to a brutal racial segregationist policy aligned with local national capitalism after the indigenous people's loss of the land. After the repressive 1960s (imprisonment of freedom fighters on Robben Island and other prisons), the workers' struggle gained momentum in the 1970s along with the students in 1976. The struggle took on an increasing united front against both capitalism and oppression. It is during this time, in September 1977, that Steve Biko, as unifying black consciousness leader, was murdered by the Apartheid Regime. The 1980s saw the intensification of militarisation of the Apartheid state in the context of liberation movements in southern Africa. South Africans were reading Paulo Freire on liberation education and pedagogy – both in workers' reading groups, in schools and universities. There was a pronounced interest in the struggles in Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, Brazil, Bolivia – because there was so much resonance. The United Democratic Front, launched in 1983 in the Western Cape drew inspiration from ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! – from struggles led by Che Guevara, Allende, Fidel Castro etc. reflected also in the songs of Victor Jara. In the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle, South Africans drew significantly from the Latin American freedom struggles. The People's Education, with its inspiration and in solidarity with anti-Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique emerged in the 1980s during the State of Emergency. Teachers were at the forefront of these struggles against the Apartheid regime – many imprisoned, tortured and some also executed. The questioning of Apartheid curricula (especially history, hegemonic heritage and culture and their associated myths of narratives and heroes in the

official textbooks) formed an important part of subversive education. Statues (though questioned in oppositional historiography) were not the focus then as the liberation struggle was much wider at the time.

2. After the end of apartheid in South Africa, significant advances are evident, such as a new Constitution, a Human Rights Commission, a Constitutional Court, and new curricula. However, you highlight the existence of a deepening democratic crisis related to ex-President Jacob Zuma's renouncement involving corruption in his governance. On June 29, 2021, South Africa's highest court sentenced him and ordered his imprisonment. This warrant arrest occurred because Zuma did not appear on the date of the judgment, alleging that he is a victim of a conspiratorial movement. Do you still consider that this crisis continues in other terms, including during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The crisis is bigger than the Zuma-led failed state and its legacies. It is about poverty and unemployment in which the political elite has exploited these vulnerabilities to tribalise the working class and the huge mass of unemployed youth as a form of 'divide and rule'. The 'Zuma' factor is only one aspect of a much deeper political economy in crisis; it does not explain the cause of everything that has gone wrong since 1994.

3. You underline violence and exclusionary practices as two intergenerational points in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite the democratic context, the maintenance of the status quo remains across the country, in which student protests had intended to tackle unresolved economic and land claim issues. In this light, there is an ethnic fact involving the South African landscape and, consequently, the University of Cape Town (UCT), where you work as a professor and the Interim Director of the Khoi and San Unit. As well as all the national territory, this university occupies the land once lived the indigenous ancient Khoi and San, whose genocide and earliest freedom struggle against European colonialism suffered a process of invisibilization through the post-apartheid "grand" narrative of South Africa's history. Can you explain the importance of the Khoi and San Unit and relate it to the production of local/national memory?

The precolonial, the first contact period of around 100 years, the period of slavery of almost 200 years in this region and recognition of the Apartheid-designated ‘Coloured’ people of the current Western Cape as ‘African’ have always presented a major shortcoming in education. This includes in effect the San (circa 20 000 years) and Khoi history (circa 2000 years) of southern Africa that has been left out of the grand narrative for as long as an astonishing quarter century since 1994. This period was always studied within a Eurocentric focus by white scholars with a few indigenous scholars on the periphery. A fuller history and historiography from the perspective of indigenous people themselves is long overdue. The Unit’s work focuses on research and knowledge production in addressing this significant gap in curricula and scholarship. It also engages in debate on ethno-nationalism (the latter is something our country can ill afford after Verwoerdian policies that engrained tribalism and in light of the July protests that took on a worrying ethnic dimension). One of its Values is anti-racism – because studying these deep pasts bring us closer to an understanding of entangled global pasts rather than essentialist paradigms. At least that is the objective of the scholarship of the unit’s work.

4. What is the socio-political relevance of the integrated performance between the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the Archive & Public Culture (APC)³ in contemporary South Africa?

On debates on the archive and theoretical / praxis explorations. For example, we have a shared interest on the ‘anarchive’ as a concept that emerged from the doctoral studies of Carinne Zaayman (2019) at the APC under supervision of Prof Carolyn Hamilton. Zaayman is a direct descendant of Krotoa (South Africa’s ‘Pocahontas’) and a member of the A/Xarra Restorative Justice Forum (a research and knowledge partnership with San and Khoi traditional structures).

5. For you, the legacy left by Khoi and San people equates to their activism as a collective to organize for historical and social justice rather than the idea of a fixed ethnic identity. In these terms, UCT, in its historical condition of a haunting or traumatized place, has become the target for catalytic revolutionary national events in contemporary South Africa. In your vision, is it possible to promote “healing” processes of the effects caused by European colonialism as well black nationalist chauvinism, integrating the spiritual, psychological, and historical dimensions in the UCT activities? Does the *Lalela* framework have this holistic

³ Available at: <http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/apc/gazette/archive?page=3>. Access on: July 03, 2021.

purpose there? Has it been applying successfully in higher education teaching and self-reflective practice at this university?

I draw on my collaborations on *Lalela* practice in my work with Zulu-speaking Eugene Skeef (former driver of the late Steve Biko). Tribalism has encouraged a certain deafening through the creation of artificial cultural and linguistic frontiers. UCT is built on a former slave site and this is in the process of now being acknowledged and addressed by the present Vice Chancellor Professor Mamogethi Phakeng. It does mean listening to the students, workers, academic staff, local communities in their troubling of the ‘deep architecture’ through various forms of articulation that may unsettle us – and necessarily so – from time to time. It is important that this listening is acted upon – otherwise it is shallow listening. The university has for example a Vision 2030 to unleash human potential; deep listening (*Lalela*) would be key to implementing that vision.

6. Based on the deep listening, the *Lalela* scholarship problematizes notions of inferiority/superiority of knowledge. In this framework, indigenous perspectives are genuinely valued and are present, according to your paper. Keeping it in mind, have the Khoi and San-descents been “heard” by the South Africans only in academic spaces? Is this a problem?

There is the perception that this ‘hearing’ is not inclusive and the government only speaks to one ‘representative’ group (the The National Khoisan Council), which excludes a large number of traditional formations and also women. The other critique is the regards the The Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act passed in early 2020 which is male-focused. Globally, indigenous women are recognised as knowledge keepers of plants, food security, biodiversity – yet they are excluded significantly from this Act and from ‘listening’ processes. Traditional structures tend to be patriarchal (preoccupation with hierarchies and leadership positions and titles). If one studies the pre-1952 precolonial era, these contemporary cultural claims are not true to a very different past in which women managed resources such as cattle, education, medicine, land and milk. Women were highly respected and the key consultation leaders and decision makers in the absence of hierarchical systems as we understand them today. We cover this on our recent book Muthien, B. & Bam, J. 2021 *Indigenous Women Re-interpret southern Africa’s Pasts*⁴, Jacana.

⁴ The original title of the book is *Rethinking Africa: indigenous women re-interpret Southern Africa’s pasts*, written by Bernedette Muthien and June Bam-Hutchison.

7. On April 20, 2021, the Table Mountain fire destroyed some of the UCT's historical buildings, including the Jagger Library, the historic Mostert's Mill, and several residential houses. What are the historical meanings/ memories incited by this catastrophic event? Did it affect you personally? How?

This was a major tragedy as we are used to fires on the mountain. It has happened for hundreds of years. It is uncanny that the fire jumped from the restaurant at Rhodes Memorial to the one academic building of great importance for African studies scholars internationally and for local people. We were just on the brink of giving the A/Xarra community members access to the collections and library – so this is sad. We don't know what we have lost as we do not know the scope of the collections held there and relevant to our research. The well known archives of the /Xam people were thankfully saved, but the indigenous literary archive is larger than that in its entanglement with diverse and dispersed archives and artefacts in 'African Studies'. I've studied in that library since my teenage years, and could even access banned books there (when I was a high school teacher) by filling in a red slip and reading under the watchful eye of a vigilant librarian – during Apartheid. Just to feel pamphlets and books of over 100 years old and more was quite reaffirming, giving one a sense of African belonging to the land. Some of these materials are now permanently lost.

8. In short words, can you make a personal report pointing out your own experience related to the Khoi and San ancestry, also considering your fruitful and powerful work at UCT nowadays?

My mother only spent one day in school as a little girl (ostracised by a teacher because of her 'dry hair' and threatened to be hanged from a tree and set alight). Out of fear, she never returned to school and taught herself to read and write, even in cursive. She was fully literate by the time she was an adult. She could speak the erased Khoi language of the Western Cape, Khoekhoegowab and perhaps even others. They called it 'die taal'; 'the language' – many clicks that she said was 'not Xhosa'. It was her secret as a mother under Apartheid, like in the case of many of her generation. She revealed this secret in circa late 1990s at the age of 70 years when her family was involved in curating the return and later funeral of Sarah Baartman and we questioned her about her indigenous roots as a person of veritable Khoi-San heritage. As a knowledge keeper of Khoi and San traditions, she had to teach and mentor the late Ernest Keet (her cousin). Keet was the choir master tasked with curating Sarah

Baartman's funeral. She had a strong cultural connection with indigenous history through her grandfather (the national secretary of the National Griqua conference). My mother's family was very active in parliamentary campaigns for the return of the land decades before Apartheid. She was also taught the language and rituals by her aunt and mother. Her task was to lead on the cattle slaughter ritual (to secure livelihoods) for which she was revered and respected by male figures in the family who also had to ask her for permission to use milk. With our grandmother, she taught us some of these aspects, especially through herbal education, massage practices, interpretation of dreams and visions. This happened on Sundays. Her last words to me before she passed on were on the importance of 'deep listening'.