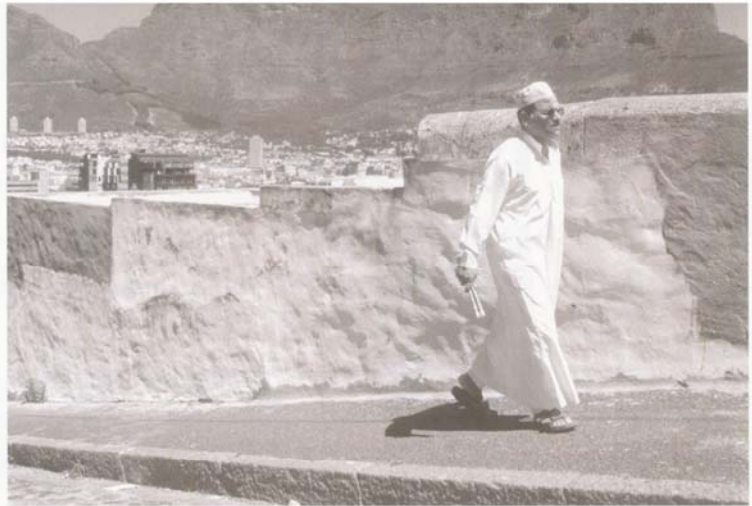


**Nick Shepherd** teaches a class on 'race and racism' at the University of Cape Town.



Here he shares the journey he undertakes with his students to find a "civil space" to discuss sensitive and complex issues...



## Crossing the Street Navigating through racism's heavy traffic

*So wide, historically, is the gulf between black and white that, in reality, we have different perceptions of South Africa, depending where you are, this side of the street or the other.*

— President Thabo Mbeki, speaking to Hugo Young of *The Guardian* ("Across the great divide," *Mail and Guardian*, 1-7 June 2001)

IN PRESIDENT MBEKI's striking image, black and white South Africans face one another on different sides of the street. The intervening traffic ("history") results in the production of different 'perceptions', even different realities. The question arises: What happens when one tries to cross the street? Will you be mown down by a passing truck? Ticketed for jay-walking? Or is there a traffic island on which we can huddle, in however provisional a way, as we try to sort out perceptions and perspectives?

This past semester I convened and taught a course called "Debates in African Studies: Race and Racism" in the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town. My colleagues on the course were Brenda Cooper and Harry Garuba. This is not the first time we have taught the course – we taught a similar course last year – but by now I have had time to sort out my own perceptions.

The course material covered a range of topics: race and colonialism; race and apartheid; the origins and deconstruction of the idea of race; slave narratives; black and white fictions of Africa; traveller texts; Dark Continent myths; race and anti-colonialism; race and post-colonialism; race and

*i.e. the past, and their faith in themselves and hopes for the future. We are aware of the terrible role played by our education and religion in creating amongst us a false understanding of ourselves. We must therefore work out schemes not only to correct this, but further to be our own authorities rather than wait to be interpreted by others. Whites can only see us from the outside ...*

Or again, as a young Hegelian:

*Since the thesis is a white racism there can only be one valid antithesis i.e. a solid black unity to counter-balance the scale. If South Africa is to be a land where black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation, it is only when these two opposites have interplayed and produced a viable synthesis of ideas and a modus vivendi. (Biko, *The Definition of Black Consciousness*).*

What such a synthesis might be, of course, remains an open question. Non-racism? Anti-racism? Or the gradual disappearance of racial consciousness, like a grease spot attacked by a dose of Omo?

Frantz Fanon has always been revered by a sector of anti- and postcolonial writers, most famously by Homi Bhabha who provides the foreword to the Pluto Press edition of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Born in Martinique, educated in France in the shadow of Sartre and the Existentialists, later becoming the Algerian revolution's most passionately articulate spokesperson – Fanon's life story itself leads us through many of the preoccupations of current postcolonial theory: hybridity, diaspora, translation, the experience of

youth cross the country bearing burning torches. A fuhrer is not at hand, but one is sure to emerge. It all seems otherworldly, a continent rather than a lifetime away. The clip from the 1994 elections is closer to home and also, somehow, sadder. A figure dances towards us: "Today I am a king of the world!" The camera pans the long, patient queues.

Of course, the most interesting thing about the course was the manner in which it echoed, in microcosm, a broader public debate in South African society. Issues of race and racism, it seems, have never been so current in public culture, have never devoured so many newspaper inches or exercised so many talking heads. Is this a sign of public health, of a long-delayed loosening of tongues, or is it the sign of an obsession which threatens to throw us off balance?

The class is divided. Is Mbeki re-racialising South African society? asks one section of the class. Was it ever de-racialised? asks another. One thing seems clear, in the name of 'race' we are currently debating a range of issues: wealth and redistribution, access to resources, class formation, issues of authority and representation.

The immediate context of the course is the United Nations World Conference against Racism, to be held in Durban in late August and early September. A group of students from the course tries to get observer status, but is rebuffed. Are they an official student organisation? Accreditation must be obtained from Geneva. Geneva will not reply to emails.

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gender; 'blackness'; 'whiteness'; race and HIV/AIDS; race and identity; race and diaspora. We read widely: JM Coetzee's perceptive essay on "The Mind of Apartheid"; Henry Louis Gates' African safari (described in *Wonders of the African World*); the still resonant poetry of Leopold Senghor; the rage and erudition of Frantz Fanon; the compelling, activist prose of Steve Biko; Stuart Hall's careful untangling of key terms: race, culture, identity, diaspora.

What have been my impressions of the course? These are necessarily scattered, a jumble of words, images, fragments of dialogue, moments of indifference or high emotion. Beginning with the words, one of my impressions has been the return to relevance of the work of Steve Biko, and the continuing relevance of Frantz Fanon. They were probably the most widely quoted and referenced writers in student projects and assignments. For decades the words of Biko have led an underground existence, not only because of their censoring under apartheid, but also in the Congress-aligned liberation movement, and in the mid-90s, in the years of rainbow-nationism. Now, suddenly, they tumble from the mouth of the President, and Biko's short, polemical journalistic pieces assume a kind of eerie prescience. He writes:

*There is always an interplay between the history of a people*

racism as embodied practice, the uneasy marriage of the personal and the political. In the final, glowing sentence of "The Fact of Blackness" he writes:

*I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit. I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disembowelling silence fell back upon me, its wings paralysed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.*

A note of hope, or of despair? The class is divided and cannot decide.

The images which I have in mind come from two short video clips which I showed the class. The first is a black-and-white documentary made up of archival footage of the 1938 Great Trek re-enactments (the "Eufeeces"), a high-point in the formation of Afrikaner nationalism. The second is news footage of the 1994 elections. In the first, stick figures cross the screen in jerky formation, or gather around the wagons, the women in kappies, the men in beards. There is haranguing of the folk, and a kind of mass jubilation. Pyres are lit and foundation-stones laid. Clean-limbed voortrekker

What conclusions have we reached as a class? The danger would seem to lie in being content to remain on opposite sides of the street, hurling bottles and insults, or in imagining the street (the 'historical gulf') to be uncrossable.

We are formed by our different histories, as both Biko and Mbeki point out in their different contexts, but at the same time – in however provisional a way – there is a sense in which we are self-creating, can bend these histories to our own purposes, work with them to create something splendid and unexpected.

The immediate challenge is to create a civil space in which we can discuss issues of race without fear of reprisals ("Look Mama, a racist!"). The more accommodating non-racism of the post-1994 years has been overtaken – run down! – by two sets of material realities: those associated with the continuing, obscene, racially-based disparities in wealth, and those associated with HIV/AIDS. Ideally, discussions of 'race' need to take place in these two contexts.

NICK SHEPHERD is a lecturer in African Studies and Postgraduate Programme Co-ordinator in the Centre for African Studies (University of Cape Town). He has a PhD in archaeology.