Education & Representation in South African Paleoanthropology
Musings on Brief Experiences in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and the Kalahari Desert

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Intro & Preliminary Research

Before our departure from the classroom at Dartmouth College, we the students were told that this trip to South Africa was an experiment in experiential learning. We were prepared with individual project proposals, packing lists, and trepidation for what our experiences would actually entail. I only had scholarly journal articles and a shallow understanding of South African history to accompany me as I got on a plane to Johannesburg.

I first became interested in the topic of education and representation during the very first meeting of this class at Dartmouth. Dr. Bernhard Zipfel was visiting from the University of Witswatersrand, and graciously sat in on our first class meeting. He explained his role at the University of Witswatersrand and the unconventional route he took to being a fossil curator. He commented on the seeming lack of South African interest in the fossils being found in its own soil. These musings struck a curiosity in me about the reasons behind these social constructions.

After some preliminary research, I pinpointed some areas that scholars have identified as important factors of inequality in South African public education. One of the most important political and ideological factors is the legacy of apartheid. Christian National Education (CNE) was established after the National Party gained control of the South African government in 1948. The idea of divine justification for minority rule permeated the subject of history and science in public schools (King 2012). Furthermore, South African public education is still recovering from the economic effects of segregations. Geographical differences in black and white schools have also translated into inequalities in access to quality public education. The end of apartheid was a mere two decades ago, and the current political state of affairs suggests a dawning time of change in South African politics.

These findings definitely colored the way in which I approached conversations in South Africa. I started this ethnography with vague questions about education. However, I realized the interactions I would have in South Africa would not answer the questions I was asking. So I allowed my conversations and subsequent fieldnotes to take a direction of their own.

As I conducted fieldwork, I wished I had had a deeper understanding of apartheid and the current social climate of race and representation in South Africa. I found myself unable to ask questions for fear of offending people, but then in hindsight wondering if my concerns were even legitimate. I was treading lightly on eggshells I was not even sure existed. Nevertheless, I found myself in conversation with many different types of people—from Charles*, our van driver, to graduate students at the University of Cape Town—about education, paleoanthropology, and representation in South Africa. I became friends with members of team at the excavation site we visited and staff at the University of Witswatersrand. I talked over dinner with a South African tour guide. I bartered in money and conversation with stall sellers in Cape Town’s Greenmarket Square. I met graduate students and their mentor and professor in Cape Town. I stood in the caves of Pinnacle Point, quietly shedding a few tears after a conversation with Dr. Pettersen, a South African archaeologist. Over time, the questions I asked were shaped by the people I encountered.

This ethnography has become an exploration of how South Africans with experience or exposure to paleoanthropology grapple with issues of the Christian narrative of creation and the
lack of Black African representation in South African paleoanthropology. It is a collection of reflections. Our stay in South Africa was fulfilling and exciting but also brief, and at times I wished I could have deeper connections and relationships in order to further understand the answers the questions I was asking.

I have grouped my findings into three general strands. The first vein I will talk about is the Christian tradition and its effects on how people view, understand, and become involved in paleoanthropology. The second deals with how the general public understands—or does not understand—the field of paleoanthropology and its ties to public education. And the last vein is my own observations of the forerunners of paleoanthropology, research, and the field in the context of South African politics and social climate.

*all names of individuals have been changed for privacy reasons.

The Christian Tradition

The first site we visited was the Cradle of Humankind in the Gauteng province of South Africa. My first impression of the paleoanthropological site was the huge, white guide sign standing starkly in contrast with the fertile landscape. We stopped by the sign to take pictures, then drove straight to our campsite for the next few days.

At Malapa, a fossil site in the Cradle of Humankind, I met Mompati. His formal title is “Exploration Field Technician” and he was partnered with me and another student for the day. The first thing I noticed about him was his wide smile and boyish cheerfulness. He is a young black South African man, around 30 years old. The other field technicians (a few men and one woman) working at the site were also black South Africans, with the exception of the field manager and two cave explorers.

“You chose to be on my team, so you’re gonna have a good day,” Mompati said with a toothy grin. We put on our gear and kneeled on the rocky floor, and Mompati meticulously taught us how to brush off the top layer of our assigned grid square. He was talkative and joked constantly with the other field technicians on site.

Our conversation turned to how he got the job at Malapa. He told a hilarious and animated story of how he worked as a tour guide for the Sterkfontein caves because of his father’s relations to the tourist company there. One day, he caught wind that Professor Brown, a well-known name in South African paleoanthropology, was touring the Sterkfontein caves. Determined to impress, Mompati claims that he insisted on being Professor Brown’s guide. He impressed Professor Brown with his rich knowledge of the site and the history of Professor Brown’s contributions to paleoanthropology—so much so that Mompati was offered a job to work for Professor Brown at the Malapa site.

We were in tears with laughter at Mompati’s animated storytelling, and equally as affected by his seemingly incredible tale. I took it in stride, though. I asked him questions along the way, like how he became a tour guide in the first place and if he had ever gone to school for paleoanthropology (archaeology and paleoanthropology were interchangeable terms for most
people. The University of Witswatersrand had a department of archaeology that included in paleoanthropology within its scope, so most people use archaeology as a broad term for all studies of early human history). In turn, he asked me about what I study at school and how I ended up all the way at Malapa, too.

In no time, I felt like we had become good friends. I asked him about his schooling.

“Did you ever study at University?” I asked.

“No. No, after I graduated high school I started working. I moved away from my family.”

He said.

Mompati had learned everything he knew about fossils, South African cave sites, and Professor Brown at his job at Sterkfontein. And he had learned much more when he accepted a job at Malapa. Professor Brown is quite famous, we told him, at least in the paleoanthropology community. Mompati joked around asking if we had ever seen him on TV because of his association with Professor Brown’s work.

“So you guys get to be on TV for this kind of stuff?” my partner, Jane, asked excitedly (she was doing a project on anthropology in the media).

Maropeng shook his head, smiling. It was just a joke. “This kind of stuff you don’t really see on TV.”

“So do your friends and family know what you do...or do they care about this kind of stuff?” I asked.

Again, Mompati shook his head, smiling but less brightly than before. “No, no. I mean—they know what I am doing, but...they don’t understand.” And before I could interject another question, he continued.

“You know, I grew up in a Christian household. And a Christian school. So what the Bible says about Adam and Eve as the first people on Earth, that’s what they believe. And so, that’s what I learned, and what my friends learned all growing up. And it’s hard for them—the older generation—to change their beliefs. For me, I am a Christian and I believe. But, who is to say that Adam and Eve were not walking around Malapa two million years ago, you know? Who says that they were not Sediba? But, for most people, they cannot combine these two ways of thinking. So they’re not interested in this.”

I sat and listened. I understood—I remember growing up and hearing about the creation vs. evolution debates in middle school. I remember moving to California from Louisiana and learning about evolution in middle school science class. Jane was listening, too. She told Mompati about the Bible belt in the U.S., too, and how people have the same debates in America.

Later, we found out that the other field technicians told a strikingly similar story to Mompati’s about how they came to work at Malapa for Professor Brown: that they had started as a tour guide, met Professor Brown on a tour, and were so knowledgeable that Professor Brown offered them a job a few days later. Other people on the trip guessed that maybe the field technicians were all told to tell the same story to visitors. I didn’t want to think that Mompati had been telling us a scripted lie. I wondered what motivation he had to do that, other than the ones binding him to his job of course. Maybe that story was true for one person, and it had been so good and inspiring that they decided to all co-opt it, to make the story of Malapa (an already amazing and seemingly impossible one in itself) that much more magical and exciting.
But even if Mompati’s Malapa job story wasn’t entirely true, I had a feeling that his thoughts on his Christian faith were raw and true. This early interaction had me thinking in entirely new ways about what I knew about South African Christian National Education. I had known it was a real consequence of apartheid on public education, but Mompati’s experience spoke to the legacies of Christian imperialism in South Africa. In 2001, about 80% of South Africans identified themselves as Christians. Though the Khoesan people are the “minority of the minority” in South Africa, their existence, culture, and belief system are examples of the fact that Christianity was brought to South Africa very, very recently on the timeline of human inhabitants in South Africa. And yet, about 80% of the country identify with the Christian faith. Many people I met—from Charles, our driver, to a street stall vendor in Cape Town—revealed to me very quickly their religious identity. It was a reeling moment for me to understand the hegemonic reality of Western Christian imperialism. Compared to a much longer history of European colonialism and settlement, fifty years of apartheid seems like a short amount of time on paper. But the real legacies on education and historical consciousness are still strikingly existent. It made sense that only few people like Mompati, who by various economic and social circumstances, end up in the field of paleoanthropology. Indeed, everyone at the Malapa site, when I asked, said that they never even dreamed of having a job working in paleoanthropology. Literally, not even a dream, because they never learned what paleoanthropology was in school. Most of the staff were around 30 years old, so they had lived about half of their lives in and out of apartheid. For a nation so quickly and deeply entrenched in the Christian gospel and story of creation, in the words of Mompati: it’s hard for people to change their beliefs.

The People and Public Education

After we left Malapa, we spent the most part of a few days in our van. On the day we left from Pilanesberg national park to head toward the Kalahari Desert, I sat in the front seat with our driver, Charles. Charles stayed with us the entire trip, from the moment we landed in the Johannesburg airport to the time we got on an airplane to depart. He was generally quiet, taking phone calls occasionally, and sometimes observing our weird American behavior with what I think was an amused smile on his face. He told me he was from around Kruger, South Africa. He is a black South African and looks like he could be in his 30s, but the few white hairs in his hair and beard give him away a little bit.

I could barely hear his deep, slow voice over the roar of the van, but we talked for hours on the drive from Pilanesberg. At first it was just me asking questions—what’s the name of this town? What do the people do that their houses look so wealthy and nice? What kinds of mines are throwing up that smoke in the distance? He answered calmly and knowledgeably each time.
After a few hours, he asked about what college was like for me, especially how I was paying for it.

“What does it cost to go to University?” He asked. I answered in US dollars, and then did the calculation into Rand in my head. It’s a lot of money.

“And do you pay that? Yourself?” He asked, a little incredulously.

“Oh God, no no. My parents are paying for it.” I answered. I was embarrassed, to be honest. “I mean, that’s why most people, including me, feel so much pressure to get a good job right after we graduate. Like me, I want to get a good-paying job so I can support myself. And pay back my parents, in a way.” I added on, as if this justification would make up for the fact that I had just unashamedly stated how privileged I am.

Charles nodded. “Your parents? Wow.”

Charles has worked for a few different American university programs that bring students to South Africa. When asked where he would want to go to visit in the U.S., he says New York City and North Carolina. New York City because it’s the most famous city in the world. North Carolina because that’s where Duke is. He’s worked with many students from Duke and their global health program. He says they’re nice students—very kind and very smart kids. I joked and said he would soon have to add New Hampshire to his list of places.

At one point, Charles told me about his family in Kruger. He has five brothers and one younger sister, and he’s the youngest of his brothers. When we were in Pilanesberg, he visited one of his brothers when we were hanging out at the park. He said his brother already had three children and had just opened up a barber shop of his own. I asked about his children. He has a baby daughter, Evelyn.

“Just the one?” I asked, still fawning over the picture of Evelyn he has as his phone background. “Do you think you’re going to have more kids?”

Suddenly, he’s very serious. “No,” he says without hesitation. “I just want one daughter now.” After a few moments of silence, he bursts out loudly, like he’s been holding it all in.

“I just have one daughter because I don’t want her to grow up like I did. I want to give her the opportunity that I didn’t have. I don’t want her to have to fight to get what she needs—you know, I had to stop university because I was paying by myself. My parents couldn’t pay for me. So I had a job and I paid for school, but then I couldn’t afford it. And you know, the private schools for children are very expensive. For my daughter to go, I want to be able to provide for her that education. The difference in public and private schools is—you can see, if you compare a child from a public school to a child from a private school, there is no comparison! The private school child has much more opportunity and the level is just different!”

He’s talking more animatedly than I have ever seen him, waving his hands around the steering wheel and talking loud enough that I can hear him clearly over the road and the radio. I’m touched by his passion and his fatherly love. He hasn’t talked about anything more passionately than he talks about his daughter and her future.

I ask him about the public schools near his home. “Are there good schools around where you and your family live?” I ask.

There are a few, he says. One private school, but it seems like tuition is a good chunk of his salary. And his wife is staying home to take care of Evelyn right now. We sit in silence for a few minutes in the blisteringly hot AC-less van, only halfway through our 8-hour trek for the day. The hot air whips me in the face, thankfully drying out the tears pretty quickly.
Charles didn’t want his daughter to go to public school in South Africa. He said the government just did not provide the funds for good education. The teachers, the facilities, the opportunities were just so vastly different from the private schools. Even in big cities, he said, the public school system just wasn’t good. He had grown up in a huge family, and it seemed that all of his siblings had married and had a good number of children each. Him, though, he was determined to just have one.

Most people I met seemed to have gone through the public school system in South Africa. Randall and Mark, the two white South African cavers at Malapa had both grown up not 30 kilometers away from the site in Johannesberg. Mompati had gone to public high school in Johannesberg, too, after his parents had moved there for jobs. The children at the !Xaus lodge in the Kalahari desert told me that they were on school break for the holidays. When I asked them where they went to school, they said “outside,” pointing their fingers past the walls of the fortified lodge.

Dr. Byron Engel, a curator at the University of Witswatersrand, greeted us on the first day at Johannesberg. He was a middle-aged white man from South Africa, who had also been with us on our first day in this class at Dartmouth. He was knowledgeable and approachable, and more than willing to answer all of our questions.

When I asked Dr. Engel about the number of students that study paleoanthropology at the University of Witswatersrand, he furrowed his brow and thought for a second.

“Two to six students a year do the Honors Paleontology undergrad program from a pool of about 20 applicants. But there is no paleoanthropology or anthropology major—those fall under the geology, environmental sciences, and archaeology departments.” He said. “Those who do the Honors program usually then do a Master’s or a Ph.D. at Wits, too.”

So out of the almost 26,000 undergraduates at the University of Witswatersrand, two to six devote their last year of university to paleontology. Dr. Petterson, from the Pinnacle Point Caves in Mossel Bay, South Africa, said he took an archaeology class on a whim—“because a friend said it was an easy class”—when he was at the University of Cape Town, which ultimately changed the direction of his career.

In talking more to Dr. Engel about the public’s interest in South African paleoanthropology, though, he had much to say. First of all, most people who visit the vaults of fossils kept at the University of Witswatersrand are foreigners interested in paleoanthropology. Very few South Africans take advantage of the resources available there. Some South African student groups pass through, he said. But in the field of paleoanthropology itself, “we have been intellectually colonized.” Dr. Engel said.

The field of paleoanthropology, according to Dr. Engel, is dominated by American and French scientists in South Africa. And recently, the government of South Africa have joined in efforts with Chinese researchers to promote collaborations with South African scientists and the IVPP (Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology) in China.

“I feel like a minority as a South African in this [University of Witswatersrand paleoanthropology] program,” he mused with a laugh.

But more seriously, as we delved into harder topics like misrepresentation and discrimination against women and black South Africans in the field, Dr. Engel was passionate. The legacies of South African apartheid have real implications, he insisted. As a white man, he
said, he feels “personally responsibility for the misrepresentation and discrimination” in this field. He brought up to me that Phillip Tobias, a very prominent South African paleoanthropologist in the era of apartheid, was used by the South African government to prove the biological justification of white minority rule, but Tobias argued that race was a human construction without real biological bases.

“It is interesting,” Dr. Engel concluded somewhat somberly, “that compared to countries where the minority groups are underrepresented and discriminated against, in South Africa it is the reverse situation. 9% of South Africans are white, and yet in South African the majority group has less power.”

Professor Brooke Eggers of the University of Cape Town spoke to us about somewhat similar sentiments when we met her for dinner in Cape Town. I chatted with a few of her Master’s and Ph.D. students at dinner. They, too, hadn’t really heard of paleoanthropology until they happened upon it in University. The students, who were all female, were all South African as well.

One black South African student, Nora, sat next to me for the majority of the dinner. She told me about her work as a Master’s student, and how she, unlike most of her peers, had learned about evolution and paleoanthropology in public school because she had lived in the U.S. for a few years. Her mother was a diplomat. Her American accent was the first thing I noticed about her. We didn’t talk much about her work, though, because we soon were talking passionately about Black Lives Matter. Another one of Professor Eggers’ students, Marianne, was sitting across from us. She identifies as colored (a term meaning a person of mixed race in South Africa). She told us that one of her white professors had broken down into tears in front of her, saying that he didn’t understand the black students’ struggles, asking her to try to explain them to him.

“I don’t have time for that,” Nora snapped, rolling her eyes and waving her hand like she was batting away a fly. “You don’t know what poverty looks like? You don’t know what our struggle is? Do you even look out your window when you’re driving down the street? People say poverty doesn’t exist in Cape Town, but I can tell you it does. It’s outside on the street and all you need to do to see it is to open your eyes.”

There are many factors at play in all of these situations. Race, and however an individual is labelled, is simultaneously openly talked about and a sensitive topic of conversation. Even by the end of the trip, I had never fully gauged how or even if it was an acceptable question to bring up, especially as a foreigner. It was clear to me, though, that paleoanthropology was racially misrepresentative of South Africa (though that is slowly beginning to change) and even more misrepresented in public education. Very few South Africans are involved in the field itself. Dr. Eggers is an American-born scientist. Professor Brown also grew up in the U.S. Both are naturalized citizens now but they, and many other white faces of paleoanthropology, are shining examples of the intellectual colonialism of South Africa, in Dr. Engel’s eloquent words. It seemed to me that the few South African students and professors of South African paleoanthropology were shiny, hopeful examples of a better, more diverse future. However, the sentiment on the quality of public education seems bleak. Socioeconomic divides are linked to race, and those divides were as clear as the difference between the open, deserted, Eden-like landscape of the Kalahari Desert and the modern, Western, urban utopia of Cape Town.
In the short time we spent in South Africa, we were afforded the opportunity to meet a number of influential people in the field of paleoanthropology. On our first morning in Johannesburg, I was fortunate enough to sit down right next to Professor Brown at breakfast. He sat and chatted with the professors from Dartmouth, while I nervously played with the food on my plate, wondering how I could possibly start a conversation. The opportunity came when everyone left to refill their plates except for Professor Brown and myself.

He was very warm and talkative, not hesitating to answer my questions and the questions of my peers. We talked about the economic inertia of South Africa after quite a few economic and political reforms. He thought that since 1994, many economically disenfranchised men have pursued financially viable careers out of university, whereas women tended to be less risk-averse, therefore going into jobs like teaching and paleoanthropology. The students from Dartmouth make up a class of 14 female students and one male student.

“There is no middle class in South Africa,” he said. He had just graduated the first three black South African women from his Ph.D. program in South Africa.

Professor Brown was charismatic and approachable, but also a famous contributor to paleoanthropology, which he wasted no time in telling us through his collection of hominid fossils at the University of Witwatersrand.

Later, in Cape Town, we met Professor Brooke Eggers who introduced us to a different perspective in paleoanthropology. Her ideas on variation and the move away from tree models of evolution pointed to her greater ideas of diversity in academia and science. Her students were obviously inspired by her points of view in their own work in paleoanthropology.

And yet, outside of these amazing interactions, we met many people along the way who had no clue what it was we were in South Africa for. At a brief stop at the Bushman Council Office in the Kalahari Desert, we briefly explained the nature of our studies in paleoanthropology to the representative that came out to greet us.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He said with a laugh.

Another time in Cape Town, I found myself in conversation with a stall vendor in Greenmarket Square. He asked where I was from (“Japan?” He first asked. “No, America.” I replied) and what I was doing there.

“Anthropology.” I said. “We came with our university, and we’re taking a class on evolution and the fossil record in South Africa.”

He looked at me blankly, smiling politely, and changed the subject.

So by the end of the 3-week trip, I was reeling with interactions, a little overwhelmed by the different perspectives and narratives and opinions I had compiled within such a short time. Many things were what I expected to observe—that paleoanthropology was foreign-dominated discipline, that mostly white researchers represented the field, and that Christian values and a struggling public education system meant that most people had no clue or interest in the groundbreaking discoveries that were happening right in their land.

And some observations were jarring, though maybe not completely unexpected. Nora, from the University of Cape Town, said quite bluntly: “Yeah, the majority of South Africans are
black, then coloreds, then white.” She glanced at me, paused, and then said, “and Asians and Indians are, like, yeah the most minority. There’s like none of you guys here.”

The manager at the IXaus Lodge in the Kalahari desert tried to joke around with us, except I think the Dartmouth students on the trip didn’t quite appreciate his sense of humor. “So, fourteen women studying Anthropology, huh? Good. Leave the important stuff up to the men.” He said, laughing. No one laughed with him.

Jack, a tour guide, shared his opinions with me during the braai we both attended. “Black Lives Matter? Now there are so many people here that are also spouting and spreading that bull. It’s making people think they can do whatever they want.” He spat.

And later, on apartheid, he said. “It was twenty years ago. Get over it.”

I couldn’t help myself but raise my eyebrows and retaliate, maybe a little rudely. I asked if he didn’t think there were any lasting effects of apartheid on the way South Africa is now.

“No.” He said right away. “Twenty years is a generation. It’s over now.”

I had to step away from the conversation to grab another beer.

By the time we reached Pinnacle Point, I think I had cemented in my brain an impression of South African Afrikaners and white male researchers in general. I was, I think, driven so much by the emotional experiences I had with people I had met, and was ready to leave South Africa with these impressions, perhaps wrongly so.

At Pinnacle Point we were led on a guided cave tour by Dr. Paul Pettersen, a South African archaeologist. He is an older man with striking blue eyes and a serious demeanor on first impression. He gave a lecture on the findings at Pinnacle Point, and I was struck by his message of art and spirituality. It was this appreciation of beauty that makes us human, he said, and Pinnacle Point is one of the places in South Africa that holds evidence of some of the earliest times in which humans created symbols.

In the last cave, he urged us to be mindful of the history and meaningfulness of the place before we entered the cave. Inside, he stopped to let us ask questions and take a look around. I stopped to ask him about his experience as an archaeologist.

Dr. Pettersen laughed a little as he said he had never intended to become an archaeologist. It was all a whim—he took a course at the University of Cape Town because he needed to take courses to be able to stay there for a few years after his military service. His friend had said that it was an easy class.

“And then, I fell in love. I loved archaeology and the discipline and what it taught me.” He said, his eyes sparkling. “I grew up in apartheid, and to me, history didn’t mean anything. I was taught that other than what was going on in here, nothing else mattered. So archaeology was like a whole new world.

“Because, to me, it wasn’t about who was right or who was wrong, or this group of people or that group of people...it was about who we are as human beings. I found myself, in a way, through it.”

I walked away from this moment with tears streaming down my face, standing in a cave full of shells, and stone blades, and ochre. I hadn’t expected to walk out of that day full of optimism for the future. I wasn’t ready for someone that looked like Dr, Pettersen to shatter my impressions so easily. I hadn’t expected a reason that was so simply beautiful to resonate so deeply with me, too.
Works Cited


