Matthew Harris

Issues of Fear and Identity
in Engaging with Your Community

Worked with Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, clinical psychologist and former member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), on two studies. The first explored Apartheid Era conscientious objectors from the South African Defense Force, and the second was a psychology study stemming from her work in trauma.

Project Goals
- Determine a cognitive model regarding the decision to conscientiously object
- Assess current and past material relevant to trauma and recovery, and connect this research with our study

Personal Goals
- Gain a better understanding of the psychology of recovery
- Learn about the social, economic, and political disparities that continue in South Africa even a decade after the official end of apartheid

Activities
- Researched cognitive modeling with respect to conscientious objection
- Interviewed several conscientious objectors
- Collaborated with Gobodo-Madikizela on an article summarizing our findings, to be published in a journal of psychology in South Africa

Key Dilemma
- How can I, as a foreign, transient observer, begin to understand my role in a country with such deeply intrinsic problems?

Important Learning
- We connected our conscientious objection study to the notion of cognitive dissonance, postulating the idea that people generally have a set of ethics or morals, which may be in contradiction with the ethical code of the military state. Those who cannot reconcile the two codes find themselves experiencing this cognitive dilemma, and will often engage in conscientious objection.
Children play in the park, Grahamstown, SA.

I joined the crowds exploring the Grahamstown Arts Festival in Grahamstown, SA.

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (above) is a former member of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, center affiliate, and my boss.

A view of Cape Town from Robben Island
An imaginary letter written on the Soweto Massacre, now known as National Youth Day

Dear Sir;

I stood here this morning, not actually today, but twenty-seven years ago. I stood on the ground of Soweto, a township no different from any other in South Africa. I stood here with my friends, my peers, and even those who I didn’t really like. We stood here, 170,000 of us.

We stood here because we are forced to learn in Afrikaans, a language we do not know. It is forced on us only to perpetuate the cycle of white oppression on the black and colored communities. We just wanted to be taught in English, a language we understood.

On a winter morning, 170,000 kids between the ages of 10 and 20 marched through Soweto’s streets peacefully, but demanding our right to be taught in English. We carried no guns or knives, only our hope that you will listen.

There you stood on the grounds of Soweto, with your batons ready and tear gas. Marching in groups of 15,000, we must have been some sight from where you stood. You approached us with batons swinging and tear gas launching into the crowd of children. We were scared but we didn’t go. You didn’t warn us, you just took a swing, pulled a trigger. Yet, for some reason, we still did not leave. Not as we laid crying and bleeding from the beatings. We chose to stand. We fought back with small stones, against your mighty arms and brutal batons.

I guess it was difficult to see the fear in our eyes. I suppose you could not fathom the extent to which you were hurting young children. I imagine, that from where you stood, that you were blind to the things you were doing. I guess from behind the gun, your vision was poor.

I don’t know if you remember me, us. I don’t know if you’ve chosen not to. But come visit. It’s not hard to find, our homes neatly beside each other, beneath stones that bear symbols of our faiths. You may have killed me or rather us. But you brought to life the spirit of our cause, though the costs of this revival was great. I hope that you do remember us, me. I hope that you never forget, while you and your children celebrate this national holiday in the mini-malls and movie-theatres that were built when our townships were destroyed by bulldozers. I hope you remember that day, when you stood there, across from us. Across from me.

Sincerely,
Faceless