

# RACE, POWER AND ME: MY POSITION AS A HISTORY EDUCATOR IN RELATION TO THE POSITION OF LEARNERS

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## ***Abstract***

*History, as outlined in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements for GET and FET (CAPS) is both a journey of enquiry and an evidence-based construction of the past. It enables learners and teachers alike to understand better our human condition. The role of the history teacher is to create an environment in which such an historical gaze can be fostered in the classroom. A precondition of this is, however, a relationship between teacher and learners that allows its development. In this article I explore my position as a History teacher in relation to the position of my learners, taking cognisance of the power relationship between educators and the learners they teach. I consider how this relationship may be complicated by structural inequalities in the South African context and may stand in the way of the learners accepting that they can develop an historical gaze of their own. To do this, I construct a narrative of the significant turning points in my personal journey of understanding human rights as a teacher. Themes that emerge are 'voice' and silence, and the moral dilemma of responsibility (and sharing of resources) versus voluntary abdication of power in the way of redress for injustices of the past. Through the form of a personal, first-person narrative, I endeavour to make explicit the ethical dilemmas of my own conscience and to promote the language of the personal and of feeling. I begin with an assumption that teaching and learning of the CAPS curriculum is a given, and, accepting its values and aims, I reflect on how to embody them. This includes reflections on positionality and subjectivity, trying to answer, "who is the gazer, and from where is she gazing?" This is an exercise in multi-perspectivity that accounts for my own perspective, recognising that I, too, am embedded in history. Ultimately, I suggest that it is only as a reflexive history teacher that I can assist learners towards understanding history with their own gaze.*

**Keywords:** History; Education; Race; Gender; Power; Ethics; Ontology; Transformation; Redress; Whiteness; Voice; Silence; South Africa; Dialogue.

I have recently completed my PGCE qualification. My postgraduate studies, lecturing and tutoring experience prior to this have given me opportunities to think hard about what being a well-educated white woman might mean for the students who find themselves sitting under my instruction – that is, positioned in a relationship to me where I am the authority. As South Africa's history of inequality is encoded into our institutions as well as our identities, teaching History in school has ethical challenges which need to be acknowledged and negotiated.

I shall share personal experiences that have shaped my awareness and helped me to engage with human rights inside and outside of the classroom. Rather than considering inequality in the abstract, I want to make the interactions between teacher and learners personal and to articulate what group rights or the lack thereof have looked like in my own life. Through the mode rather than the content of this article, I aim to show that we as educators and knowledge producers should also make space for personal openness and reflection if we are to assist our learners to develop their own understanding and appreciation of History.

While race is an obvious human rights issue in South Africa, it is also a screen or proxy for other human rights issues: such as huge income disparities, unequal access to opportunities and resources, and sometimes cultural and religious conflicts. Race complicates the already existing power relationship between my students and me. My narrative is of significant turning points in my life that have forced me to think differently about human rights.

When I started school in 1993 I made friends with a small girl who I believed to be called Assembly, but who was in fact, Kessendri. I was a bit unsure about being friends with what was designated then as an "Indian" girl. Gradually an idea formed in my young head that "other than different food and religion, they are basically the same as us". Somewhere between the things I heard my parents say, and my own experience, an allowance was made in my own mind for the group designated as Indian, that although Indians were different to "us" in some minor respects, I felt that I was allowed to relate to them as equals. I remember going to the homes of one or two Indian friends for their birthday parties, which reinforced my feeling that my parents implicitly supported these friendships. As an adult, it is interesting for me to reflect on what was implied by, but unarticulated in my mental arithmetic: that "black" people are "not" equal, and friendship with black people is neither desirable nor permitted.

By the time I arrived at university in 2004, I had made only one black friend – at the private girls’ school which I attended, she had been the only black South African girl in my grade. But university opened up new possibilities. I joined a church which assigned me to a bible study group comprised of young women from my residence, most of whom identified as black or brown. Through my friendships with these women, I became privy, for the first time, to discontent with white power in the church. Rather unwillingly, I was made aware of the white-centredness of a church where more than half of the members were black – the style of music for example, was rock rather than R&B or African traditional/s. My new friends pointed out that although the leadership, to their credit, addressed race relations from the pulpit, the broader leadership of the church was almost all white. Importantly, I was also privy to the anger of these women, and sometimes the recipient thereof. Without realising it, at this time I learnt to be silent about race rather than making a mistake and causing offence.

The church was ideologically very conservative, such that I found myself to be silenced in another way, one that was “not” by choice. Like many women, I had grown up with tacit acceptance of male centrality in the household, but these rules about gender roles only became explicit in the context of this conservative, hierarchical church structure. I found that I was repeatedly judged “as a woman”, rather than by my personal qualities or what I could offer. I felt my voice to be unheard, and my options to be significantly diminished on the basis of my biological sex. I completely supported these ideas until my final year when I became very close to a lesbian couple, who also were actively involved in HIV/AIDS activism on campus. Gradually, my own doubts and confusion began to surface, creating a tension between two sets of beliefs which I was not able to reconcile at that time. It only became clear to me during the following 18 months I spent working in the United Kingdom, how much I had been a victim of discrimination and sexism, which had been disguised as indisputable religious doctrine.

The psychological wounding and the sheer frustration that I experienced had important consequences for me. For the first time, I was able to identify strongly with people who had experienced other kinds of discrimination. I could empathise with their position in a way I had not been previously. What followed was a greater willingness to recognise and engage with racial prejudice. I came to identify strongly with academic feminism, finding ideological support from that corner, and decided to further my studies with

a focus on “gender and writing”.

There, I formally encountered postcolonial and African feminisms, engaging with writers such as Audre Lorde,<sup>1</sup> Chandra Mohanty<sup>2</sup> and Desiree Lewis.<sup>3</sup> I came to understand the importance of not assuming that all women suffer discrimination equally. Mohanty writes about how Western feminists, in their well-meaning attempts to support their “sisters,” have constructed the idea of an homogenous “third world woman” who in no way represents the real experiences of all the many, different women who live in the global South. Mohanty shows that it is better for black women to speak for themselves.

Like Mohanty, Desiree Lewis has also voiced strong opposition to white or Western feminists who try to speak for black women, under a guise of solidarity. Lewis argues in no uncertain terms that knowledge is power, that the written word has a history of white power, and that by speaking for black women, white feminists overwrite the actual experience of black or brown women. It started becoming very clear to me that white women trying to “help” often have the counterproductive effect of further silencing and disempowering black women.

It was with these ideas in mind that I felt myself faced with something of an ethical dilemma when I was offered a temporary lecturing contract at a tertiary institution a few months later. An educator stands in a position of power in relation to students. At this institution, the educator-student power relationship was complicated by other power dynamics, by virtue of differences in income, background, language, race and even dress. By taking the job, I risked perpetuating an historically entrenched power-relationship between black and white South Africans, particularly pertinent in the history of education. All but one of my 150 students were black, many came from single-parent households or were raised by their grandmothers, and I gathered that they had not had access to a good quality of high/secondary school education. Article 15 in the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights states that every individual has the right to work under equitable and satisfactory conditions.<sup>4</sup> I wondered how it would look and feel to the students

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1 A Lorde, “Age, race, class, and sex: Women redefining difference”, *Zami, Sister Outsider, Undersong* (New York, Quality, 1995), pp. 114-123.

2 CT Mohanty, “Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses”, A McClintock, A Mufti & E Shohate, *Dangerous liaisons: Gender, nation and postcolonial perspectives* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 255-276.

3 D Lewis, “The politics of feminism in South Africa”, *Staffrider*, 10(3), 1992, pp. 15-21.

4 Organization of African Unity (OAU), African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, 1982, p. 5 (available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3630.html>, as accessed on 8 October 2014).

if the only white person in the room was the one in a position of power. Is it possible that it could be viewed as equitable?

But the other side of the dilemma was this: since I had come to be privileged, and chiefly through the formal education I have received, what was the ethical thing to do with that privilege, and in particular, with the knowledge-power I possessed? Article 29 in the African Charter requires that each person has a duty to serve his or her national community by placing her physical and intellectual abilities at its service.<sup>5</sup> And in the spirit of human rights, white South Africans have a duty towards racial reconciliation, and redress for the injustices of the past. As I consider this dilemma now, from the perspective of school-level teaching, it becomes even more acute, when “encouraging the values of the South African Constitution ... [and]... promoting human rights and peace by challenging prejudices”<sup>6</sup> is not only a matter of civic responsibility but also a requirement of the curriculum. How then, did I justify a teacher-learner relationship that reinforced many aspects of the apartheid past? At the time I fixed upon a “lesser of two evils” philosophy and did what was practical and possible given my circumstances. I hoped, still, that I could make a positive difference, even though I do believe that I participated in a structure of racial inequality.

I moved from the institution and continued to pursue a postgraduate interest in gender studies, specifically in the field of masculinities in an even more pronounced way than before. As I tried to understand gender, I was forced to engage with “race”, and the history of race relations in South Africa. Kopano Ratele, for instance showed me how not only history, but narratives *about* history, shaped Steve Biko’s articulation of “the black man” – an ideal masculinity believed to be lost together with political autonomy at the hands of white rule.<sup>7</sup> Steyn exposes white superiority and racism as a pathology, and shows how blackness came to be seen negatively by Western empires, largely due to economic expediency.<sup>8</sup> Steyn borrows from a number of sources including psychoanalytic thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, to the effect of exposing white superiority and racism as a pathology. At this time I recalled a source I had seen years before while studying Cape settler history: it was

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5 Organization of African Unity (OAU), “African Charter...”, 1982, p. 8 (available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3630.html>, as accessed on 8 October 2014).

6 Department of Basic Education (DoBE), *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement: Grades 7-9 Social Sciences*, 2011, p. 11.

7 K Ratele, “The end of the black man”, *Agenda*, 14(37), 1988, pp. 60-64.

8 M Steyn, *Whiteness just isn't what it used to be: White identity in a changing South Africa*, pp. 3-22 (Albany, SUNY Press, 2001).

a document produced by a woman's philanthropic organisation about how to "help" indigenous people. Only when I read Steyn's powerful piece on whiteness did I come to the conclusion that philanthropy, do-gooding and "outreach" are part of what have enabled white people, particularly colonists, to be convinced of their own moral superiority. I understand missionaries as having mostly occupied this ambiguous position of doing a lot of good while in the long run, their very presence contributed to the decimation of African culture, dignity and family structures. I think something similar happens today, where wealthy, predominantly white churches continue to expend enormous resources on charitable activity, having the unfortunate side-effect of standing in the place of real engagement with issues of race and segregation. As I have already suggested, this 'helping' relationship may even be *disempowering* for those at the receiving end.

During the soccer world cup in 2010, I was involved in a holiday club for children that exemplifies this kind of ambiguous "helping" relationship. The church I belonged to at that time had an informal partnership with a school that served a low-income community in the city centre. The school lent us their premises for our four-week children's holiday club. The programme was comprised of educational, recreational, and religious elements, and was also devised as a way of protecting children during the world cup. The intention was, in principle, to make the world a kinder, fairer place, and this is often attempted through education-type projects. Steyn's "Master narrative of whiteness"<sup>9</sup> has subsequently forced me to think more critically about this kind of activity. Article 28 of the African Charter declares that "the state shall ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women, and also ensure the protection of the rights of the woman and the child".<sup>10</sup> This is essentially a principle of redress; of actively remedying unequal power relationships; of setting them right.

The question I am left with though, is how best this can be carried out; and for the purposes of this conversation, what does redress look like in the context of relationships between educators and students? For readers in other contexts, perhaps the question might be a different one; you might want to ask: how can we, as privileged citizens of our countries, address inequality without inadvertently participating in it? Some intellectuals in the global South may identify with the victims rather than the perpetrators of historical injustice,

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9 M Steyn, *Whiteness just isn't what it used to be...*, pp. 3-22 (Albany, SUNY Press, 2001).

10 Organization of African Unity (OAU), "African Charter...", 1982, p. 5 (available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3630.html> , as accessed on 8 October 2014).

especially in educational systems where indigenous languages have been sidelined or decimated. For educators in this position, perhaps the question is not one of redress, but of repair; how best can the damage of global imperialism be repaired in your classrooms as the acquisition of a historical gaze provides the opportunity for social justice?

Samantha Vice, a philosopher, thinks about the question of redress in the South African context in a way that responds to the kind of challenge to white power issued by Desiree Lewis. Vice has written a contentious article about how white people might try to live ethically in post-apartheid South Africa,<sup>11</sup> and she suggests that white people should be very cautious about speaking or writing in the public domain. She advocates voluntary silence as an act of restitution, since she views silence as a way of stepping down from that power which white people have illegitimately gained.

There is a kind of silence that can be very destructive. Judith Butler borrows Freud's idea of "melancholia":<sup>12</sup> Freud famously argues that what is not acknowledged (and repressed to the unconscious) repeatedly manifests in other ways. Freud originally used the concept to describe denial of loss, which forecloses the grief process and results in depression, but Butler uses this idea to a political end. She thinks about which people, and which bodies are not allowed to be acknowledged; in her earlier work she shows how public discourse does not allow for the mourning of gays, and in *Precarious life* she gives the example of a newspaper's refusal to publish the obituaries of two Palestinian families, submitted by a citizen.<sup>13</sup> Drawing parallels between her examples and my own environment, I started asking myself these important questions: who, and what, is not being acknowledged in my context? And what am I personally not acknowledging (denying) because it's too uncomfortable or too difficult?

I was able to start finding the answers in a mixed race reading and discussion group of which I became a member in 2012. Under the auspices of discussing a book about how evangelical theology perpetuates racial segregation in America<sup>14</sup> our group functioned as something of a private truth and reconciliation commission. The group worked because of an agreement to be forgiving, and accepting, which made honesty possible, and because of

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11 S Vice, "How do I live in this strange place?", *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41(3), 2010, pp. 323-342.

12 V Bell, "On speech, race and melancholia: An interview with Judith Butler", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 16(2), 1999, pp. 163-174.

13 J Butler, *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence* (New York, Verso, 2006), p. 35.

14 MO Emerson & C Smith, *Divided by faith: Evangelical religion and the problem of race in America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000).

a common desire to see the local church racially integrated. The group was important for me in many ways, but two in particular I will mention; firstly I came to see the importance of white South Africans getting behind black leadership and playing supportive roles, especially in the context of charity or development programmes. Secondly, I was challenged by members of the group that while selective silence might be wise, it is important to use my voice as a white person, to speak to white power, and to challenge, where I can, assumptions of white privilege and superiority.

What better occasion to do this than to teach second year students at an historically white university where I had registered for a postgraduate degree? I had the opportunity of teaching my own research to a group of 11 students of English who signed up for my seminar course. Eight of these students were white, and from varying degrees of privileged backgrounds, two self-identified as “coloured”, and one as black. We studied two novels, spending one term on white masculinity and a novel called *The children’s day*,<sup>15</sup> and one term on black masculinity and the novel *After tears*.<sup>16</sup> Although the class situation was awkward and tense at times, it was easily the most positive teaching experience of my relatively short career. While we worked through *After tears* and accompanying readings from sociology, psychology and literary studies, I had the privilege of watching the lights turn on in the heads of the young white students as they moved from a position of judgement and frustration, to empathy for, and even indignation on behalf of the fictional character, Bafana, a disaffected young black man who treads a path of dissolution and despair. Most importantly, my single black student expressed having felt invisible at the largely white university until taking the course, which gave her a space to feel seen, heard and recognised.

I now face a career in high school teaching, in what is a very economically, and often racially divided education system. The ethical questions which I have discussed return to me in a slightly different form. The history curriculum allows me to address race directly, and to incorporate the problems of race and inequality into the content of the lessons themselves, particularly when teaching The Transatlantic Slave Trade, Colonisation of the Cape, the Mineral Revolution, the Scramble for Africa, The Rise of NAZI Germany and the Holocaust, Turning Points in South African History, Transformation in SA and Colonial Expansion, the South African War, Ideas of Race, Nationalism, Apartheid, Independent Africa, The Civil Rights Movement, and Democracy

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15 M Heyns, *The children’s day* (Johannesberg & Cape Town, Jonathan Ball, 2002).

16 N Mhlongo, *After tears* (Cape Town, Kwela Books, 2007).



in South Africa. But there is a limit in a school context, especially as a new entrant into the school system, to how much I am able (or willing) to expose the plumbing of inequality within the very walls of the school itself. During one of my periods of teaching practice, I was placed in a school which (although it has much to recommend it) I experienced as bureaucratic, punitive, and unnecessarily hierarchical. While teaching the Grade 9s about the rise of Nazi Germany, I found myself describing the relationship between dehumanisation and state institutions – bureaucracy – in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa: that where the system rather than individuals is held responsible, terrible atrocities become possible. It occurred to me that the most relevant, poignant and truthful example I could use to explain this aspect of history – that is, how institutions wield power beyond that of individuals – was the school itself, and the petty rules to which the learners were daily subjected. Yet, I censored myself. At the time, this choice was largely to do with my position as a student teacher, and a guest in the school, but if I were a permanent staff member, should I have done otherwise? Similarly, in a lesson explicitly devoted to eugenics, the history of white supremacy, and the idea of a “master race”, I found that I could not bring myself to draw on the most salient and obvious example of how white superiority can become entrenched as normal, invisible even: whilst the learners themselves were mostly black, the teaching and managerial staff of the school were almost exclusively white – including me.

In the South African History classroom, the complexities of history and inequality are almost always immediately present in the structure of the class itself, of the school, and often in the relationship between the learner and the educator. In my case, the traces of history are most obvious where I am white and middle class, and where my learners are black and often less privileged. This historical residue might also be felt in working class and in rural schools, where by virtue of their level of education, the educator may be marked as privileged relative to their learners. To what extent is it necessary to expose to learners the foundations of injustice upon which almost all of our educational institutions are built? While it might illuminate their circumstances and invigorate their historical understanding, the risk is that learners may cease to have faith in the idea of the school, in the structures of power that, however flawed, are necessary for the functioning of the school, and perhaps even faith in the teacher herself.

Much may be said for caution, restraint and maintaining the status quo within the school environment. But something pulls me in the opposite direction.

It is a sense of responsibility and integrity to the discipline of History itself. As the CAPS document neatly articulates, “History is a process of enquiry and involves asking questions about the past: What happened? When did it happen? ‘Why’ did it happen then? It is about how to think analytically about the stories people tell us about the past ‘and how we internalise’ that information”.<sup>17</sup> Both in explaining why events happened, and in considering how I internalise narratives that in turn constitute my identity, I am seeking to “explain human behaviour”.<sup>18</sup> For me, part of the explanations for history’s greatest large-scale atrocities is the blind conformity of ordinary people – just like me – who make injustice possible merely by not noticing, not knowing, or being silent. If I know that it’s possible for “good” people to be complicit in larger systems which amount to evil, I must ask myself how I, personally, might be complicit in systemic injustice. Conversely, I must ask myself how history – the place, time, events and narratives over my life – has come to form my personality and identity, layer by layer, over time, so that the “I/eye”<sup>19</sup> that I recognise as my self is constituted, in part, by the very history which I teach. In teaching learners a “multi-perspective approach”,<sup>20</sup> when considering “the many ways of looking at the same thing in the past” and “the different points of view of people in the past according to their position in society”, I do believe that History educators should include themselves and their learners as textual objects for analysis.

I have shown how the position of (especially white) educators is inscribed with real and symbolic power, yet the two examples I have given from within the classroom point towards a lived experience in which educators may feel quite *powerless*. It is important to recognise this, and to differentiate between an “experience” of powerlessness, and symbolic, cultural and economic power, which are often invisible to the individual who bears these privileges. An educator’s feelings of powerlessness may be on account of authoritarian school management, nationally issued curriculum and assessment demands. This is to say nothing of the powerlessness (especially new) educators feel at the hands of the learners themselves, whose behaviour in the classroom may be difficult or impossible to manage. To answer this question of individual experience, I turned to Maxine Greene, who understands that educators

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17 DoBE, CAPS... (2011), p. 9. Italics my own.

18 DoBE, CAPS... (2011), p. 11.

19 This construction deliberately refers to L Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema”, *Screen* 16(3), 1975, pp. 6-18.

20 DoBE, CAPS... (2011), p. 11.

face a number of situations where they “simply see no alternatives”.<sup>21</sup> Greene considers power, not in economic or political terms as I have, but within the realm of the moral and ethical. She shows that every educator may, in good conscience, exercise the power of agency, and exhorts teachers to be “wide awake” – alert to, interested in, and concerned about the world around them. She paints a picture of teachers as ethical decision-makers who invest energy into imagining alternatives to difficult situations, and to transmit to students through their actions the principles of ethical being.

Rob Phillips (2002) concludes his book<sup>22</sup> on the reflective teaching of history, which is based on the relationship between research and history teaching, with a chapter he entitled “Towards becoming a reflexive history teacher”. “Reflexive,” he defines as the capacity for critical and self-critical reflection.<sup>23</sup> For Phillips that means, “that in order to be effective, history teachers have to think reflectively about what they are doing and why they are doing it”.<sup>24</sup> It concerns citizenship and identity, values, concepts, structural considerations, culture, “race”, combating racism and prejudice, and gender issues, all of which the reflexive history teacher needs to grapple with. He continues that a constant question that he asks himself is “What kinds of people do we want to help produce via the history curriculum?”<sup>25</sup>

History as expressed in the CAPS is a journey of enquiry to be embarked upon, an evidence-based construction of the past, which leads to debates that enable learners and their teachers alike to understand better our human condition<sup>26</sup>. If we want our learners to develop an historical gaze, we need to create relationships and an environment in which such an historical gaze can be fostered in the classroom. I hope, in the future, to continue to learn to understand how my own and my learners’ views are shaped by our positions, views held at a critical distance. In addition to balancing the demands of professionalism and of the institutions where I shall be working, I look forward to finding ways of allowing the learners’ own experiences to broaden and deepen the dialogue about race, power and fairness, and for their everyday experiences of race and to strengthen our collective historical understanding.

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21 M Greene, “Wide-awakeness and the moral life”, *Landscapes of learning*, Chapter 3 (New York, Teachers College Press, 1978).

22 R Phillips, *Reflective Teaching of History 11-18* (London, Continuum, 2002).

23 R Phillips, *Reflective Teaching of History 11-18* (London, Continuum, 2002), p. 157, quoting R Griffith, National Curriculum: National Disaster? Education and Citizenship (London, Routledge/Falmer), p. 19.

24 R Phillips, *Reflective Teaching of History 11-18* (London, Continuum, 2002), p. 155.

25 R Phillips, *Reflective Teaching of History 11-18* (London, Continuum, 2002), p. 157.

26 Refer to J Dean, “Doing history: Theory, practice and pedagogy”, S Jeppie, (ed.) *Toward New Histories for South Africa*, (Cape Town, Juta Gariep, 2004), p. 101.

South Africa needs its educators to acknowledge the ways in which they are implicated in South Africa's story of inequality and injustice, whether as beneficiaries, victims, or both. Like many others who pursue reconciliation, my own journey of healing began in dialogue. As far as I know, the History classroom is the only designated space for continuing dialogue about race and power on a national scale. I do not know yet how honest reflection about race and power between educators and learners should be facilitated, but I hope that going forward, part of the job description of History educators in South Africa will be to acknowledge the elephant in the classroom.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> An early version of this article was presented at the University of Namibia at a Finnish North-South-South programme intensive seminar, Windhoek, June 2014.