



PROGRAMME

Day 1, 24 February 2011

18:00 for 18:30

Forum and exhibition launch
Keynote speeches by Jacob Dlamini and Dini Sobukwe

Day 2, 25 February 2011

9:30 – 10:30 - Registration / Tea & Coffee

10:30-12:00 Session 1: The Secret
Verne Harris (facilitator)
Jabulani Sithole
Terry Bell
Nikiwe Bikitsha

12:00 – 13:00 - Lunch

13:00-14:30 Session 2: The Taboo
Piers Pigou (facilitator)
Carolyn Hamilton
Mondli Makhanya
Mmatshilo Motsei

14:30 – 15:00 – Tea / Coffee

15:00-16:30 Session 3: The Disavowal
Ferial Haffajee (facilitator)
Ali Hlongwane
Ndumiso Ngcobo
Kate Skinner

Background

Conflicting views about what is happening in the present and what is desirable in the future are matched by the absence of agreement about what happened in South Africa's past. Identities are claimed, political positions staked out, and futures imagined with reference to pasts that are diverse and often irreconcilable. Referencing or invoking of pasts occurs across a range of 'sites': from the school classroom to the museum display hall, from rural communities pressing land claims to urban communities demanding service delivery, from traditional leaders seeking extended powers to broadcasters marking anniversaries of historical events. The invoking of pasts is troubled, even shaped fundamentally, by resilient cultures of secrecy.

March 2011 marks the tenth anniversary of the coming into operation of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA). This piece of legislation underpins South Africa's freedom of information regime, which was conceptualised in the early 1990s in terms of 'open democracy': access to information, access to archives, protection of privacy, protection of whistleblowers, and access to meetings of government structures. The latter – 'government in the sunshine' – got lost along the way. But today we have P.A.I.A., a new archives act, and a Protected Disclosures Act.

A bill for the protection of personal information is in Parliament. As is a bill to replace the 1982 Protection of Information Act, our apartheid-era official secrets act. Implementation of this legislation has left much to be desired. The ten-year PAIA tale, for instance, is one of the odd victory (by those with tremendous resilience, good lawyers and access to resources) against a relentless stonewalling by state bureaucracies.

'Freedom of information' has not found a conducive environment in post-apartheid South Africa. Cultures of secrecy are widespread in society, flowing from a range of sources, including apartheid state milieus and the experiences of exile, underground and armed struggle. The country's protracted negotiated transition provided the space for more or less secret deals which have stimulated intense sensitivity to later disclosures. Public discourses generally and referencing of pasts in particular are circumscribed by secrets, taboos and disavowals.

We plan to mark the tenth anniversary of the coming into operation of PAIA by simultaneously hosting a dialogue forum exploring the above questions and launching an exhibition on the life and work of one of South Africa's great disavowed voices - Robert Sobukwe. The former will be in partnership with the South African History Archive (SAHA), and the latter in partnership with SAHA and the Robert Sobukwe Trust. We have secured the participation of Jacob Dlamini (author of *Native Nostalgia*) to provide us with a keynote address at the start of the forum. It is proposed to open the forum and launch the exhibition on the evening of 24 February 2011 at the Nelson Mandela Foundation. Day 2 of the forum (25 February 2011) will be dedicated to three panel discussions focusing on the following themes: the secret, the taboo, and the disavowal. Each panel will comprise three speakers. We are aiming to ensure that the panels secure a balance of scholarly, media and activist voices. Our objective is to create a safe enough space for contributors to say the unsayable. Together with our partners, we will be looking for ways of taking the dialogue from what is a limited and privileged spacing into broader and more accessible ones.