

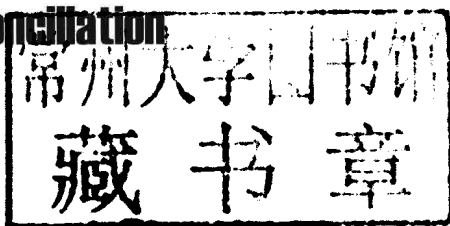
Memorializing the Past

Everyday Life in
South Africa after the
Truth and Reconciliation
Commission

Heidi Grunebaum

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In memory of Irene Mxinwa and Mzoxolo Ndita

Dedicated to the unnamed slaves who built the city at the foot of the
great Hoerikwaggo

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Introduction: The Limits and Possibilities of Integrating Atrocity

The year 2010 marks the passage of twenty years since the formal capitulation of the apartheid regime. Regardless of what the limits to structural change that the negotiated political transition process and the current form of democracy may be, the defeat of apartheid was and remains a moral victory. Legal apartheid was ended because of many decades of struggle, rebellion, direct action, and vocal dissent, solidarity on the continent, the Diaspora and elsewhere, and international pressure. Apartheid was ended through the continuing and tireless efforts of generations of ordinary people for which the human cost is yet to be accounted.

The time of “transition” to constitutional democracy in South Africa has been one of great hopefulness, of possibility and expectation, of sadness and celebration, of contradiction and vexing complexity. The work of rendering intelligible the extent of colonial and apartheid state violence—their continued and invisible embeddedness in structure—slowly begins. Unraveling the lived inscriptions of layer upon layer of sentient injustice that have marked everyday life over the past three hundred and fifty years in the southernmost parts of the African continent is still only beginning. Twenty years on and we have hardly scratched the surface of three and a half centuries of colonial and apartheid wars and many wars of resistance. We have barely begun to ask what these mean for a more human and humane life to be possible here in southern Africa. Yet, in the global political and moral imaginary the “new” South Africa, has come to figure in two fairly stark and rather reductive ways: either as the “miracle” of reconciliation in which the moral victory of good (the struggle against apartheid) has prevailed against evil (white supremacist rule), or, increasingly, as yet another instance of the failure of neoliberal macro-economics where huge class disparities, social inequity, entrenched racialized poverty increasingly foretell a society in crisis. Whilst both views hold implicit assumptions

about time, about historicity, and, of course, about oppression, they are seldom interrogated in the light of what remains vexing, inassimilable to or in excess of the illusionary promises of the “new” times; in light, also, of what is creative, resilient, hopeful, human and, therefore, irreducible in both pictures. This warrants reflection. Particularly since in South Africa in the time after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the discursive economies of reconciliation have been shaped as much through social structures of denial as through the interconnected workings of institutions of power that archive, occlude, silence and revise the domesticating accommodations of nation-building ideology and neoliberal forms of political democratization which characterize South Africa’s postapartheid political landscape. Questions of land and home restitution as well as of accounting for the accrued economic and psychosocial costs of dispossession for the people who bore the brunt of colonial expansion and settlement, of apartheid’s crimes against humanity, were set aside by this project of national reconciliation. Which means that these questions, so centrally tied to the politics of memory and social justice, will return. They must be accounted for.

This work is a meditation on the shaping of time and historicity as these have contoured what it means to live with and understand atrocity in South Africa in the wake of the TRC. It is concerned with the institutionalization of memory and how perceptions of time and “transition,” of events and happenings, of sense and sentiment, of violence and recovery, of the “past” and the “new” have been managed. Through the process of the TRC a public language of “memory” emerged which has informed collective modes of meaning-making about and after apartheid. It is a language that seems bereft of the hopes, dreams and possibilities for the promise of a just and redemptive future it once nurtured. It is a language for and about “the past.” In a review of poet Rustum Kozain’s collection, *This Carting Life*, Jeremy Cronin captures these sentiments when he writes that in the collection, “The prevailing sense of loss is not a pining for a dreadful apartheid past but, rather, a conviction that our present reality is less than we had struggled for, less, perhaps, than we deserved.”¹ As time has been made and marked the synchronous moments of human agency, resilience and creativity have been rendered into “events” and into commemorations of times passed. A tight weave of compelling and dominant regimes of meaning, sewn together by and through the publicly interpolated process of the TRC of South Africa, has rendered lived time into an object. Time, as an object, has been made into a commodity called the “past.” Through the experiential optic

of memory the “past” may be accessed. Of course, the certainties and foreclosures of the “past,” in contradistinction to the “new” and to the now, are not uncontested. The signs of a more fractious unstitching of the meanings of the “past,” and therefore of lived time, have begun to show of which this work is but one instance. It is a tight web of normative assumptions, meanings and perceptions that is the TRC’s legacy, which the work of unstitching must tackle. For, insinuated in different ways in the global and national imaginary, the TRC has been one of the most powerful institutional processes to shape historical and national “consciousness” since South Africa’s political change to constitutional democracy.

Truth commissions have increasingly become *de rigueur* state-instituted tools of transitional justice for countries that emerge from long periods of administrative oppression and atrocity—particularly in the global South. Increasingly, truth commissions are becoming deeply and ambivalently threaded into the social politics of memorialization and into the forms of institutional occlusions that shape social processes of remembrance and forgetting. As the South African TRC has been held up as a model to be reproduced (with changes according to local contexts) across the so-called “developing” world, which has also experienced prolonged periods of war and of state and structural violence—from Burundi, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Peru, Colombia and Sri Lanka to East Timor, to name a few—it becomes increasingly necessary to examine how truth commissions, the epistemologies that inform them, and the forms of knowledge they produce about the social contexts in which they are located, are embedded in the global political economy in very particular ways. Although it is imperative to locate South Africa’s transition, as well as the TRC (as but one institutional tool of transition) in its historical moment of emergence, and in relation to globally propagated neoliberal forms of democratization in which Africa is being geopolitically and economically reconfigured, it is equally crucial to examine how the TRC, as a specifically “national” institution, was intended to socially manage political change by “dealing with the past.”²

Truth commissions are implicated in the social politics of memorialization. As a conceptual, historical and experiential discourse about “the past,” memory relates to the ways in which atrocity is integrated into cognitive and epistemic frameworks and into constructions of social meaning in, of and about the postcolony. The politics of historical truth, of memory and of justice, play out not only in relation to the ongoing struggles for survivors of state terror (regarding the kinds of

subjectivities and speaking positions this informs or prohibits as well as for claims for justice that may or may not be mobilized), but also in relation to the ways that the harsh grittiness of the everyday, the shapings of silences, the emptiness of reconciliation and the fracturing of hope remain embedded in the etiologies of such politics. For the time of the “new”—a temporality in which foundational concepts such as nation, modernity and globalization intersect and interact—rests on “the past” being constructed as distinct and separate from the now and from the “new.” It is a temporality that is *perceived* to be discontinuous with everyday life, which arguably, is increasingly the time and place of the political in the contemporary world.³

Historical Debts and Methodological Concerns

Much of the existing scholarship on the TRC has tended to reproduce the epistemic underpinnings of the institutions. Either by dismissing the legitimacy of the institution itself, critiquing the reach of its mandate or by evaluating the weaknesses, successes and shortcomings of its legal mandate, its proceedings and its findings against the terms set out in the mandate and its interpretative field.⁴ Whilst much engaged, critical and rigorous scholarship on the TRC has been produced in the form of published monographs or doctoral dissertations,⁵ many studies of the TRC tend to approach the institution as an archive. This work is *not* about the TRC and its workings as a state institution. Rather than examining the operations of the commission itself or reading the commission as an archive, this book is guided by the questions: How, why and for whom do truth commissions produce particular “pasts”? How are conceptual categories of memory, trauma, testimony and violence structurally embedded, discursively configured and politically deployed in the production of such “pasts”? What kinds of social meanings do they generate and legitimize and what do they occlude and delegitimize?

This book is about the way that ideas concerning time, historicity and social change have been generated and reproduced through the TRC process at the global historical conjuncture in which South Africa’s political “transition” features in distinctive ways. It has been structured around a set of thematic concerns that I have grappled with over the past ten years.

The concerns in here have themselves changed and shifted through this time from the initial Justice in Transition debates in South Africa that shaped the form the TRC would take, through the public hearings of the TRC’s Human Rights Violations and Amnesty Committees, to

ongoing attempts to make sense of the insidious and perpetual forms of “race”/color, class, social, economic, spiritual and *human* violence in Cape Town, the city in which I live. In the early stages of research these ideas were initially examined through theories of memory, narrative and discourse and applied to analyses of Human Rights Violations testimonies from transcripts and recordings that formed part of a large personal multi-media archive of the TRC hearings. In other words, I initially engaged the TRC as an archive. My own archive comprised of newspaper clippings on public debates related to the TRC, on reportage covering its hearings (from 1996-2000), audio recordings of radio programs on the TRC (from 1997-1999), video recordings of television coverage of the hearings and of documentaries (from 1996-2000) and written material produced by the TRC during the hearings. It also included seminar, workshop and conference papers, field-notes and ephemera, personal journaling and email correspondences made during and after the Human Rights Violations Committee, Amnesty Committee and Special Events hearings of the TRC which I attended in Cape Town, Athlone and Guguletu between 1996 and 1999. Whilst that archive generated much text for “close-readings” which culminated in a number of publications, I became progressively disturbed by an increasingly widespread pillage, commoditization and re-circulation of testimonies that had been borne publicly to the TRC. This was during the late nineteen nineties, a time when a growing national and international memory and truth commission “industry” had begun to simultaneously flourish.⁶ With the advent of South Africa’s liberal constitutional form of democracy and the deep affective pull that the TRC’s public hearings held for so many people, researchers, journalists, artists, writers and film-makers from across the world and throughout the country came to hear, collect and interpret testimonies and personal “stories” from survivors, witnesses and actors in the struggle against apartheid and from perpetrators and actors connected to the apartheid state.

The TRC itself was being figured in problematic and often contradictory ways in relation to the privileging of individual “stories”: As a narrative mode associated with the recovery of “buried” or excluded histories, as a therapeutic mode for psychosocial “healing,” as a confessional mode inflected with a distinctly Christian ethic of moral redemption and, finally, as a poetic mode for a rights-based approach to civil and social pedagogy. As personal “stories” have been foregrounded and subjected to a general tendency of treating testimony as “text” or “data” with which to interpret or aestheticize or illustrate history, criti-

cal attention has shifted away from the more systemic, organizational, inter-institutional and epistemological processes that comprise the making of a highly accessible and multi-sited “public” archive of TRC testimonies. Instead of theorizing the relationship between institutional practices of selection, categorization and judgment which constitute both the production of testimony as well as of the public archive, I stopped working on testimony.

In 1999, I was invited to work at the WECAT Project, a then-recently initiated counter-memory project in Cape Town. That invitation obliged me to extend my understanding of the South African scenario of “transition” and my place and accountability inside of it and outside of the academy. In 2000, WECAT formally became a non-profit organization, the Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory (DACPM) and I was invited to stay on and work full-time in the organization.⁷ During my years at the centre (until 2006) my understanding of the history of South Africa’s transition began to shift and take a different direction. Over the past years and in many workshops, debates, conversations with colleagues, as well as with participants and students during the DACPM’s peace-building workshops, numerous theoretical and ethical knots were pointed out. But many more were unraveled. These relate to the role and responsibility of the listener in hearing and acknowledging what anti-apartheid activists, guerrilla and survivors of the wars (in South Africa, Namibia, Angola and elsewhere in southern Africa) say, interpret and write of their experiences. As well as of what is left out. Indeed, much is left out. Particularly since the current structural conditions of unfreedom that characterize the present times materially limit activists, guerilla and war survivors’ ability to give voice, to theorize, to write and to publish. The theoretical knots also relate to how interlocutors/addressees hear, internalize, react, respond and understand these accounts; accounts which often constitute a deeply personal but also intimately collective experiential matrix of the lived, of the humanly possible and of the humanly endurable. And they relate to the ways that memory, subjectivity and social agency may be expressed.

Through these discussions, as well as through the memory-work of the DACPM itself, compelling questions of a political, ethical and economic nature were raised with regard to academic, scholarly, documentary and artistic justifications for the use of testimony. These questions extended to the intersubjective interface of research, that interactional and transactional space where peoples’ experiences are rendered into knowledge by a researcher whose intellectual (and progressive politi-

cal) credentials have been established through the unequal intimacy of participant-observation and action-research methodologies.⁸ Whilst this study came to be organized around a set of inter-related *thematic* questions, my approach to exploring these issues in the context of the memory-work of the DACPM required a different tack. This led to two decisions that have shaped the form and content of this work. Firstly, I undertook to write, in the most literal sense possible, a “negativist”⁹ critique of the impact of the TRC process on historical consciousness in South Africa. A critique, that is, that would not draw directly, as would a more “positivist” critique or qualitative ethnography, from interviews or from testimonies. The significance of this methodology is that it avoids using testimony in a qualitative or an empirical way in responses to two distinct concerns which often overlap with regard to making of knowledge in and about “developing” or postcolonial contexts. The first concern relates to the ways that dominant Euro-American conceptions of knowledge continue to inform research practices globally and which are not necessarily resolvable by ethically sensitive, socially engaged and politically astute academic research practices. The second concern relates to the limitations and foreclosures that understandings of atrocity and large-scale violence may produce in the rush to create “knowledge,” particularly when drawing from testimony. A different approach was required in order to highlight the challenges of thinking, writing and examining the consequences of state criminality and structural violence for meaning-making as a meta-theoretical issue. Particularly in a society such as South Africa where the commission of a crime against humanity remains largely unaccounted for. This also contributed to the decision *not* to use testimonies as evidence to ground or illustrate the arguments in this book. The final stanza of a poem I had written called, “Keyhole,” became a metaphor for this “negativist” approach to dealing with the methodological challenges just described:

Is a keyhole, without the key,
 but a tiny cipher of the longer shadows of exile?
 Can it be that words are keyholes embracing the absence of what once was?
 Or is it that memories are the keyholes; and words, the key
 that words alone remain
 the memorials to unhomed dreams?

In thinking about method as an epistemological category, I decided to write about the key, metaphorically speaking, by theorizing the keyhole.

A second decision on method relates to my non-critical discussion of two counter-memory initiatives in Cape Town in the third and fourth

chapters. This arises out of a need to appreciate the consequences of the narrowing of democratic civic, social and public spaces in South Africa for memory practices that are activist in that they are founded on more radical notions regarding the links between memory-work, social action and justice. Constituting dynamic counter-practices of memory and of remembrance, these practices represent new and creative interventions. Such interventions may seem to rub against the grain of the social and historical meanings advocated in the foundational perspectives of the “new.” By heeding the ways in which truth commissions may reify particular memory, justice and history-related concepts over others in the rendering of time and experience into “the past,” engaged memory-activists have had to remain alert, creative and responsive to the broader context in which counter-practices of memory are situated. Memory-activists emphasize, as Benita Parry describes it, our “responsibility of narrating the past in ways that subject the strategies validating violence, exploitation and persecution to scrutiny and judgment, and which animate the desire to bring a just future into being.”¹⁰ Given the broader context in which public, social and civic spaces for more radical and socially regenerative practices of memory have narrowed and in which the early stirrings of emergent, fragmentary and contestatory alternative practices of memory are incubating, I do not hold up the counter-initiatives which I describe for the same critique, or evaluate them according to the same measures of critical judgment which I do the regimes of meaning and reference generated through the TRC process.

Although I draw from a wide range of primary and secondary sources and from diverse theoretical and disciplinary orientations, many of the engaged theorists, such as Parry cited above, and thinkers I reference in the text have inspired the drift of my discussions by providing me with critical and theoretical road-signs. These road-signs are more than critical tools with which to think. They remind that “discourse,” “theory,” “the intellectual” and “the academy” are historically and materially determined concepts enfolded within, acting upon and acted upon by a broader and ever-unfinished, a provisional, a determined, an ever-changing, as well as a changeable, macroscopic context. They recall me continuously to the limitations, possibilities, risks and historical debts of critical scholarship, never outside of the social, material and historical context of its production. In this book I hope to attend to these limitations, possibilities and debts in a locale shaped by the harshness and the hope of the everyday in the wake of administrative violence. But also in the wake of the narrowing of social spaces for alternative modes of

collective meaning-making where the fostering of a just, secure peace and an egalitarian democracy in the longer term ensure that the stakes in the remembrance of lost futures remain high.

Outline of the Work

The aim of this book is to examine the epistemic underpinnings of the TRC beyond its specifically institutional functionalities. The referential economies and the moral and ideological reach of terms such as truth-telling and nation-building, reconciliation and forgiveness, injury and loss, trauma and healing, victim and perpetrator, transitional justice and conflict-resolution, memory and the past have set the grounds on which certain aspects of human experiences of atrocity are highlighted whilst other aspects are rendered invisible. Constituting a set of (nationally and globally) sanctioned social, moral and political discourses (and practices) of transition, these terms operate to disaggregate “the past” that they underwrite from the historical, material and structural etiologies of violence in which they are embedded. These terms—relating to the past—provide, by extension, a material set of boundaries for what kinds of institutional, community, civil society and state socio-economic, psychosocial and peace-building initiatives receive reparations, resources, legitimacy, support and funding. How then has the TRC generated, beyond its implementation and operation, a set of concepts and discourses which has shaped the ways in which “the past” is produced, “the present” understood and “the everyday” inhabited in the postcolony?

Chapter one examines the constellation of key concepts and discourses embedded in and generated through the TRC that have been reproduced and re-inscribed through the public sphere. These discourses have produced a compelling regime of historical meanings that have contoured social perceptions of political change and thus of time; time as lived (an experiential category related, in different ways to “memory”), and time as a historical category (what comes to be represented as “the past” and what does not). Time in the postcolony requires theoretical elaboration as it impacts on the ways in which “the past”—as a sign of *knowledge* and *experience*—is produced. I explore how the TRC has organized notions of time in the production of a “past” and a “present.” As the TRC has been part of a growing global economy of institutions of political “transition management,” I unpack how a civic language of remembrance and reconciliation has come to stand in for a state practice of redress and for a social debt of responsibility. It is from this perspective that the referential economies of the key terms of the TRC such as truth, reconciliation, and