

Chapter 4

The Participants

The story of apartheid is, amongst other things, the story of the systematic elimination of thousands of voices that should have been part of the nation's memory. The elimination of memory took place through censorship, confiscation of materials, bannings, incarceration, assassination and a range of related actions. Any attempt to reconstruct the past must involve the recovery of this memory—much of it contained in countless documentary records.

—Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Final Report, 1998

Introduction

If the first casualties of the physical violence of the uprising were schoolchildren, then the first casualties of the discursive violence that followed were the stories of what they had experienced. 1

The student participants could do little to prevent the disastrous treatment their experiences received at the hands of the South African state in the Cillie Commission Report. They also had no control over how the resistance movements appropriated their stories into a larger historical narrative of resistance—one more heroic, perhaps, but not theirs. Unlike the state or the resistance movements, the students had neither a single institution speaking for them nor the power to produce a single authoritative version of what happened on that day. However, the students *could* speak from *inside* the experience of the uprising.

Countless circulars, banners, speeches, and pamphlets attest to the eloquence with which the students spoke for themselves. They have also spoken in such government institutions as courts and interrogation cells, and in less coercive settings they have spoken to journalists and researchers. They have spoken as time passed, sometimes repeatedly and sometimes for the first time. Only in their own voices could the students explain those aspirations and recount their own experiences. Events since June 16 reflected a profound lack of understanding for "the aspirations of our Black youth," as one student put it in handwritten notes¹ accompanying a speech that was delivered on December 16, 1976, and that was given in memory of those who had died in the previous six months.² Student voices, retrieved through oral life histories, together with documents the historical actors produced at the time, allow us to recreate some of the stories from the inside. Participants speak now but their voices change. Distance from these events provides some historical perspective. (See: "ANC Flyers 1976"; "Purpose of the Solidarity Call")

This chapter will show that participant narratives are overshadowed by the experience of violence, which casts its chill influence through time and into

memory. They are a reflection of how the participants saw, understood, and described Soweto. These versions of what happened on June 16 and later in Soweto and all the other places that the uprising spread to are messy, fragmented, and complicated, full of tensions, fear, jubilation, heroics, and anxiety.

The Soweto uprising was quite different from and far more complex than either the government or the ANC accounts allowed. In their oral testimonies, the participants present Soweto in rich detail from the inside perspective, where each face in the crowd takes on an identity and each story adds another singular chapter. The voices of the participants accumulate, full of the subtlety of personal experience. They are marked by the depth of individual emotion and memory and each person's individual struggles to make meaning of events that are often ambiguous, frightening, exciting. Taken together, these voices present a sense of the individual and collective *consciousness* of each young insurgent in dialogue with herself, the group she identified with, and the world at large, including parents, politicians, and the police.

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Like the different roads that led to Phefeni Junior Secondary and Orlando West High School, the experiences and actions of ordinary students were vastly different. Different influences existed in the schools, classrooms, streets, and homes. Multiple and unique identities circumscribed how experiences were remembered. None of the lines dividing those who participated in the uprising were static, and they often gave way to new differences and divisions as the uprising unfolded and created new challenges. It was only with time that the boundaries and differences were blurred by the solidarity engendered by severe police repression.

Inside and among the political organizations that they formed, neither the chain of command nor the ownership of the uprising was ever completely clear. No doubt this was to a large extent the consequence of multiple changes in command, as individual leaders were detained or left the country to avoid arrest or police violence. In addition, and again partly in response to the state's repressive measures, the students formed several organizations. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to impose order on an account of the way the events or different historical actors in Soweto (and later in other parts of the country) interacted with each other.

The first part of this chapter introduces the voices of four participants of the uprising. These voices capture the richness of the multiple voices of the young historical actors at the heart of the uprising, voices that the government and the ANC in their official accounts sought to silence or appropriate. Lilli Mokganyetsi, Sam Mashaba, Patience Tshetlo, and Zakes Molotsi spoke from inside the historical events of June 16, 1976. Their experiences were different from each

other but have the authenticity of the eyewitness and the historical agent at the time. Their memories resonated with the outrage, exhilaration, fear, and fervor that the experience of this historical series of events still aroused. They also spoke to quotidian concerns—about, for example, a good pair of shoes left behind in a looted store.

Perhaps the most significant if self-evident point about those who participated in the uprising is that they did not speak with one voice. The life stories of these four participants made clear that the narratives of the participants were different according to the positionality, identity, and historical memory of the actors themselves. They opened up new perspectives of experience, understanding, and meaning, depending on where in time and place, figuratively and literally, the narrators spoke. There was not one dominant, "authentic" voice of *the* young participant, just as there was no single consciousness, but rather a varied multiplicity, a series of contending and contradictory voices that, together, constituted the participants' narrative. How the Soweto uprising was experienced depended on what point in life the individual was at when these things happened, and they in turn were reflected in how the uprising was built into the narrative. When each person's story of the uprising is seen as embedded in the narrative of a life course, it becomes possible to account for the differences in each individual account while still seeing them as part of a collective memory. The life course of the individual explains disagreements and differences in terms of age, gender, generation, and geography. It is also suggestive of parallel changes within the struggle against apartheid itself. Like individual lives, the youth movement itself went through processes of initiation, growth, and maturity. How the struggle and political actions developed and were represented changed over time, in response to the historical context in which such representations were made and to the historical stages through which the resistance in South Africa moved.

Such richness and variety—or chaotic individuality—would seem to defy **10** categorization or coherent analysis. But out of the chaos and cacophony of voices a picture gradually appears, just as, out of the stinging clouds of teargas and smoke and out of the pandemonium of screams and gunfire, the slender, upright figure of Mbuyisa Makhubu emerged, bearing in his arms the almost lifeless body of the child Hector Pieterse. The second part of this chapter goes beyond the stories of Lilli Mokganyetsi, Sam Mashaba, Patience Tshetlo, and Zakes Molotsi to include other voices and documents produced by participants in the uprising. As this part illustrates, a careful hearing of the lived experiences of participants in the uprising alters the conceptual perspective, sometimes contradicting old orthodoxies and opening up new categories of analysis. It becomes clear that the uprising was not simply a male-dominated, Soweto-based social movement from within which the historical actors spoke and acted in a coherent or singular manner. Instead, participants' stories shift the perspective literally away from Soweto into the countryside, forcing a new analysis—one less constrained by the

Soweto-centric view that has shaped historical analysis, or by the discourses of the apartheid state and the ANC.

The stories of participants of the uprising also revealed that young women and girls, far from being "just in the background,"³ as their male counterparts would have it, were central to the uprising. Although their numbers in the crowds were impossible to determine, their voices were everywhere and their faces as much part of the pictures of Soweto as those of boys and young men. Their experiences, however, were often quite different. Many girls used to their advantage their "invisibility" on the exclusively male landscape of the police, exploiting openings that appeared in the struggle with their growing political and social awareness, even if this landscape was dominated by male leaders. With the increasing threat of arrest and detention, it was often girls and young women who took on more public duties as their male friends went into hiding.

The shift in point of view to the voices of the participants reveals differences—in gender, age, experience, and geography—that shaped the historical memory of participants. It also shows how some of these categories overlapped or contradicted each other. From the perspective *inside* the crowd—the participant perspective—it became apparent that differences were reflected in institutional affiliations and in claims to ownership of these historical events. These in turn laid open the uprising as a site of contest, adaptation, and compromise, in which the question, whose stories were heard was as complex as the participants themselves and the challenges they faced. What is revealed is difference and dissent across the student movement and the different, sometimes multiple subjectivities that exist within each individual person. The student movement and the category *youth* are not homogeneous; each person within that movement or category has multiple, changing identities and subjectivities.⁴

Despite these differences, we are left with an overriding sense of unity of purpose and resilience in the youth movement—it took the government a full year to retake control of the townships, and it was never fully to suppress resistance again. There is compelling evidence of solidarity and determination among the youth despite internal differences and the immense destructive force brought to bear on them. This apparent paradox between collective consciousness and difference, between solidarity and division, raises important questions about the nature of social and youth movements and about collective and individual memory.

It is important to consider the conditions under which the need for solidarity prevailed over the differences and divisions within the youth movement. The evidence suggests that the extreme violence of the state, its persecution of young activists, and its attempts explicitly to exploit the differences and divisions among students and resistance groups forced students to set aside some of the things

that divided them, to forge alliances across gender and generational boundaries, and to be inventive in their defiance of the state.

How divisions and differences were overcome is as much a consequence of 15 factors internal to the student movement as it is of external factors. Strong leadership, courage, vitality, inventiveness, and the talent to organize and communicate contributed to the formation of a collective purpose among the students. Among the external factors to consider is the point in time—the historical moment—at which this uprising began. For many years, there had been no other visible or organized resistance. After a period of passivity following the destruction of the ANC and the PAC in the mid-1960s, resistance had begun to be articulated in the labor movement and in the Black Consciousness Movement, which found its main constituency among students. In addition, there are a series of solidarity-creating moments (the first encounter with tear gas, the initial confrontation with the police) during which it becomes clear who identifies as a student and who belongs. It is at times like these that collective consciousness comes into being. There were many potential causes or rallying points for organized resistance, but the government practically handed the *Black Consciousness* Movement its cause on a platter. The imposition of *Afrikaans* as the medium of instruction provided not only a suitable rallying point but a physical space in which to organize (the schools) and a constituency of actors (the students). Through strategic alliances with parents, older Black Consciousness activists, girls, and rural student groups, student activists were guaranteed outside support. Those alliances, together with a general social climate in which Black Consciousness provided the language, thought processes, and answers to the growing sense of frustration among young people, are among the external factors that helped create solidarity and forge a collective consciousness.

The paradox between collective consciousness and difference, between solidarity and division, has implications for collective and individual memory of the uprising. It is clear that the living memory of the Soweto uprising is made up of many, sometimes conflicting stories. Life histories and other documents provide clues to the reasons for differences and divisions, as they do for the strength and unity of the movement. In her work on the resistance of TANU women nationalists in Tanganyika/Tanzania, Susan Geiger has proposed that collective memory is the consequence of a negotiated relationship between a widely shared social sense of an authentic past and the individual's process of remembering and storytelling. This negotiation between the individual in his or her memory of an event and the public, widely shared remembering of it (often celebrated in commemorations) is a creative act in itself and becomes readily visible in life-history interviews.⁵

There are potentially many competing historical actors and institutions that participate in the processes of creating a shared sense of what constitutes the authentic past. It is important not simply to analyze the factual evidence in life

stories but to take into account that there are many historical actors and institutions that participate in the creation of memory. The individual, in his or her story, is in a constant process of interacting with other stories, whether they are produced by other individuals or by institutions, whether or not that is a conscious process, and whether or not the story has to change with time to accommodate or resist other versions. This complex process of memory-making by the individual, over time and in dialogue with other discourses (including her own earlier ones) may explain changes, inconsistencies, and differences within life histories as the individual negotiates her own relationship to the collective story. There is thus a parallel between individual memory's relationship to collective memory and the relationship between difference and solidarity, explained by the need of individual people to negotiate their place within a community with shared values and experiences while simultaneously making sense of their unique, idiosyncratic, and individual experience and identity.

It appears that, as time passed, the need for solidarity was no longer compelling. Certainly for many years, especially at the height of the antiapartheid struggle, the heroic master narrative tended to eschew dissent and difference. But the participants, in their memories and stories recounted twenty years after the uprising, no longer needed to hide their individuality, their ambiguity, doubts, and tensions. The evidence produced at the time of the uprising in 1976 nevertheless indicates that these divisions always existed and were part of the many challenges the student movement faced.

Some of the evidence suggests that it was part of the genius of the youth movement, and perhaps the *Black Consciousness* Movement, that it understood how to use internal divisions as a resource (for example, young women were able to use their temporary invisibility to government eyes to support male activists) and that the differences among students were understood as a source of creativity. It allowed for the diversification of leadership (for example, by integrating student leaders from rural areas) and thereby allowed the movement to survive longer.

These were the voices the state sought to silence and appropriate. In order to control the public discourse of the uprising, the South African state felt compelled to make some participant voices and evidence part of the public record and discourse. Not only were those students physically abused through torture and the coercive circumstances under which they were forced to produce their statements, but their stories were cruelly twisted and then thrown back at them in the very public setting of the Cillie Commission, which was widely reported on in the media. In the essay "Winnie Mandela - Youth Leader," which accompanies chapter 3, I describe how the Cillie Commission and the official state discourse coerced and maligned the voices of the participants. I also show how, in the face of ridicule and violence, the students continued the struggle to make themselves

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heard.

The Cillie Commission was then put in place and used to try and find justification for what the police did in Soweto and other townships. They interrogated us at John Vorster Square, they tortured us to get statements from us, statements that would implicate other people and statements that would suggest that no one was behind the planning, [that] students could not have planned this.

—Murphy Morobe, testimony, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*.

Notes:

Note 1: Author unknown, "Purpose of the Solidarity Call on 16 December," handwritten notes, among materials seized by the South African Police, evidence in SAB WLD 6857 (1977), WRAB v. *Santam*, box 436.

Note 2: The Day of the Covenant is the day on which white Afrikaners celebrated their victory over the Zulus in a bloody battle on the banks of the Ncome River in 1838, a battle that cost the lives of thousands of Zulu soldiers and not of a single white person. In 1961 the ANC reclaimed December 16 as Heroes Day to commemorate the formation of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, its armed wing. An ANC flyer distributed in the townships around 16 December 1976 linked this particular observance of Heroes Day to "all those who have fallen in battle." It claimed the "heroic children" of June 16 and reassured their parents that "they have not died in vain." The ANC would "continue the battle until victory is won." For the ANC document "The Struggle Continues! Victory Is Certain! Flyer distributed by 'leaflet bomb' Commemorating the Anniversary of the Formation of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, 16 December 1976," see the Web site of the ANC, (Historical Documents, Major Campaigns and Struggles—3. Underground Documents[accessed 6 September 2004]); and *Sechaba: Official Organ of the African National Congress South Africa* 11, no. 2 (1977): 3. The students themselves planned to observe this day in memory of those who had died in the uprising.

Note 3: Sam Mashaba, interview by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, tape recording, Johannesburg, September 1993.

Note 4: In thinking through the implications of these complicated phenomena, I have looked for explanation and inspiration to Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1997); Gillian Straker, "When Is a Woman a Woman? Multiple Identities and Coalition Politics," *International Review of Women and Leadership* 4, no. 2 (1998); and Heidi Gengenbach, whose close reading and thoughtful discussion pushed my analysis further. Writing in a different context—trying to explain by way of two case studies how gender identity among women can lead to constructive cooperation on the one hand and, on the other, to deadly division among women when that identity is relinquished—Gillian Straker raises a number of questions about the relationship between solidarity and division/dissent within a group.

Note 5: Susan Geiger, *Tanu Women*.