Chapter 4

The Participants

Conclusion

The shift in perspective toward the historical experiences of the participants in **260** the uprising, closer toward their memories and stories, revealed that the students shared a unity of purpose and resilience that resisted the individual differences residing in life histories and in the political fractures that the government sought to exploit. The stories of the participants in the uprising show them to have been, in keeping with *Black Consciousness*, grounded in individual experience but also in the common ground of the historical experience of others, with the result that powerful solidarity among them was generated.

Nevertheless, the very real divisions and differences within and among the students' organizations, as well as conflicting political consciousnesses—some of which were still being formed—resulted, even among the students, in struggles over claims to ownership and in attempts to determine a single, dominant, authentic voice. As time passed, and with increasing historical perspective, such struggles have become more pronounced and have determined whose stories got told and whose got lost, especially where the politics of the present determined who claims ownership and authenticity and for what (new) political purpose.

As was brought out in the confrontation between advocate *Yutar* and the student activist *Murphy Morobe*, the divisions among the students and between organizations were something that the government, through its spokesmen, ruthlessly exploited even while trying resolutely to isolate or identify an individual or a group of culprits in order to deflect attention from its own culpability. When Kgalusi Koka was questioned by "the system"

> [they] asked me, "Who is behind the 1976?" I said to them, I said, "You are behind it, because your attacking of the people is causing everybody to react like that." When the students took up to the streets on June the sixteenth, *everything changed*. The countdown of the fall of apartheid empire had started, and South Africa would never be the same.[Emphasis in the original.][151]

The compulsion to institutionally fix the organization and leadership of this uprising, or to attribute it to a distinct and identifiable group of individuals, betrayed once again the need to appropriate it, regardless of which side of the stark political divide those who did this found themselves on. Regardless of its political expediency, even indispensability, it was an appropriation: Stories were seized and the experiences of the actors in this uprising were placed into a storyline, whose subject was *not* the actors themselves, and not even the uprising, but the larger narrative either of resistance against apartheid or of the

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challenge to, but ultimate victory of, the apartheid state.

By imposing on the history of Soweto such notions as causality (especially where **265** that analysis walks dangerously close to the reasoning and explanatory models of the South African government and its spokesmen), by concurring with a historiography and a collective history that understands the Soweto uprising as a vital link in a protracted struggle that ended with the victory that the ANC now claims as its own, or by accepting uncritically the Soweto-centric view of this historical moment, one is dangerously close to what Guha has called an "act of appropriation," which excludes the protagonists of the uprising as intelligent and purposeful subjects of their own history and deforms and homogenizes them into circumstantial participants of another history—that of a tradition of nonracial struggle—with another subject, the ANC.[152]

Notes:
Note 151: Kgalusi Koka, in *Two Decades … Still, June 16*.

Note 152: Guha, "The Prose of Counter-insurgency," 32-33.