

Chapter 6

"I Saw a Nightmare:" Violence and the Construction of Memory

Children have been killed, the truth has been killed.

—Elliot Ndlovu, *Two Decades ... Still, June 16*

Memory is the raw material of history. Whether mental, oral, or written, it is the living source from which historians draw. Because its workings are usually unconscious, it is in reality more dangerously subject to manipulation by time and by societies given to reflection than the discipline of history itself. Moreover, the discipline of history nourishes memory in turn, and enters into the great dialectical process of memory and forgetting experienced by individuals and societies.

—Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*

It is not the task of oral historians to give the kind of evidence required in a court of law. Some are more inclined to study the social history of daily life, while others prefer to study the formation of narratives, and the way in which suffering is remembered and influences all other memory.

—Selma Leydesdorff, "A Shattered Silence"

The body can be maimed in many ways, not only through mutilation.

—Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*

Introduction: Individual and Collective Memory, Violence, and Silence

All memory, collective and individual, is by nature selective and changeable,¹ evolving in a constant transaction of acts of recovery and processes of suppression or forgetting. In the repressive, authoritarian context of apartheid South Africa, collective memory in particular was shaped around large silences and lies. Ordinarily, memory, especially oral memory, provides a way to excavate those silences,¹ but the same authoritarian context produced individual memories formed by the personal experience of violence. In apartheid South Africa, it is therefore violence that holds sway over memory and that is central to an investigation of how the many individual memories, contemporary accounts, historical documents, and commentaries converge to create collective public memories.

Memories of Soweto begin with police violence. For black South Africans the

confrontation with police officers who shot at demonstrating students, immediately killing two of them, transformed their demonstration into a violent and raging uprising. The experiences of the physical violence of this conflict were swiftly drawn into a variety of discourses shaped by and serving different ideological and political interests. The result of this was violence to the processes of memory making, a sort of "discursive violence" that tended to diminish or discount the voices and actions of individual historical protagonists and witnesses.

It is the stories, the words of individuals remembering, and the individual search for meaning, however, that are the stuff of historical analysis. Collective memory is located in the individual. Nombulelo Makhubu spoke before the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in 1996 to discover what had happened to her son, Mbuyisa Nkita Makhubu, the young man who lifted up the dying boy Hector Pietersen from the ground and carried him into history. (See Chapter 1, Introduction: "The Child Is Also Wondering What Happened to the Father.") Her appeal "to know *how* my child died and *when* did my child die" was a deliberate invocation of the past for the present (emphasis added).² (See TRC testimony: Nombulelo Elizabeth Makhubu, testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Human Rights Violations, Submissions - Questions and Answers, Date: 30 April 1996, Case: GO/O133, Johannesburg, Day 3.)

In this chapter I now turn to three bodies of evidence—three stories, as it were, for the telling. In my analysis I have searched out as much as possible of the abundant, varied, and conflicting kinds of information about the past, testing and weighing their reliability. Beyond that I pay "scrupulously close attention to significant human detail."³ Human detail often appears insignificant or small, as individual acts that are inconsequential, extraneous, or even irrelevant. Nevertheless, I argue, it is the soft aside, the individual, lone act of speaking or writing or doing, however small, that creates landmarks of memory, moments in the telling (past or present) in which the individual actively engages collective or publicly sanctioned memories and histories, acting into the spaces and contesting their hold. Individuals are certainly acted upon by the world that surrounds them, but they also interact with the world, and it is these acts that are an expression of the historical will of individuals to "modify, shift, or even remake the public memory."⁴ As in the example of Nombulelo Makhubu above, it is the individual historical actor alone who can and does have the will to contest the "grand patterns and overall schemes"⁵ of history—such individuals as Albertina Mshudulu, Lilli Mokganyetsi, and Patience Tshetlo. This is particularly true when, as in South Africa, physical violence acts in collusion with silence, secrecy, and manipulation of what is known to produce certain kinds of public historical memory or understanding.

While this systematic collusion between violence and silence in South Africa is

observable, there are questions that need to be examined and problematized rather than simply assumed as given. Why is this collusion necessary? How is it done? And why is it not completely successful? In this chapter I grapple with these questions in order to reveal some of the processes of this collusion, to attempt an explanation for their necessity, and to illustrate by way of individual example why it was never absolute.

The stories individuals tell of the Soweto uprising are only in part about a political or social experience, about a place and a time. They are also about pride, anger, truth and lies, secrets, deception and discovery, crimes, punishment, love and forgiveness, suffering, sin and retribution—evidence of and about the "human nature"⁶ of historical experiences. This is not usually a professional space historians like to enter, and it is a particularly and notoriously difficult one to negotiate in terms of reliability, "evidence," and fact. From the conscientious consideration of the details of human lives and of historical facts and evidence tested for their integrity, however, as well as from the attentive listening to and for the expressions of human nature, a picture gradually emerges that pays equal attention to the rich and multilayered texture of a historical event, the individual experience of it, the structural features (trends, movements, patterns) of a particular past or process, and the changing individual and collective understandings of historical events and individual experiences of them.

The places of memory are multiple. Even when they are shadowed, manipulated, or silenced by the oppressive context of their creation, most sources carry within them historical evidence and meaning. For those stories—of the dead, the disappeared, and the wounded—that this chapter tries to recover, I turn to historical documents and oral and written testimonies. The three stories this chapter tells—about the dead (through autopsy reports), the disappeared (through the affidavit and testimony of Albertina Mshudulu), and the wounded (through the oral narrative of Lilli Mokganyetsi)—all present evidence of the individual "talking back," placing herself in relation to the larger collective narratives.

Each of these voices is shadowed in the public apartheid record (primarily the Cillie Report) by an official narrative of lies and deception. Increasingly sensitive to the mounting criticism of the outside world, the South African government felt compelled to explain why it had found it necessary to shoot and kill schoolchildren. To legitimize police action during the uprising, the student movement had to be disparaged. Government officials went about this in two ways. First, they concealed the identities and the numbers of the dead, challenged their ages, discarded their bodies, and belittled their actions. This practice of deceit and concealment was in itself a violent assault on the dignity of its victims and those who came in search of them. Second, the government created its own interpretation of the uprising and the character of its participants and published

this in the official report of the Cillié Commission. How the Commission itself, both in its hearings and in its report, dealt with such allegations of disappeared bodies provides an example for my analysis of how this institution and its violent processes itself tried to alter historical memory.

Notes:

Note 1: André Brink, "Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-apartheid Narrative," in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetze, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35. See also Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), viii.

Note 2: Nombulelo Elizabeth Makhubu, testimony, 30 April 1996, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Human Rights Violations, Submissions (Questions and Answers), Case GO/O133, day 3, Johannesburg.

Note 3: John Demos, "In Search of Reasons for Historians to Read Novels ...," AHR Forum: Histories and Historical Fictions, *American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (December 1998): 1528.

Note 4: Brink, "Stories of History," 34.

Note 5: Atwood, "In Search of Alias Grace: On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction," *American History Review* 103, no. 5 (December 1998): 1505.

Note 6: Margaret Atwood, "In Search of *Alias Grace*," 1516.