

Chapter 6

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

Conclusion

Among the silences in South Africa, there are undoubtedly those that are the result of the individual experience of trauma: the response to acts and experiences for which words fail. But there are also those that are the product of fear, or guilt, and that are a necessary part of disguising the truth and concealing reality. In 1983, reflecting on the events of the 1970s, Oliver Tambo said:

[T]he white public ... is suffocated with lies about the South African situation. They are being misled, deliberately, constantly, consistently. They live in something of a false world, a *laager* has been formed around the white population in terms of information, in terms of knowledge about the realities of our time...⁷⁸

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As a young person growing up in South Africa, Black South Africa existed on the periphery of my conscious life. I come from a German family. The Germans were once a nation of storytellers and writers, but in my family there were none. There were many silences in my mother's house. Undoubtedly not everyone met what happened during the Third Reich with silence, but many in Germany did. Unwilling to confront their accountability for the National Socialist past, many Germans have what Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, writing in 1967, identified as the German "inability to mourn" (*die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern*). My parents' generation was one that shrouded itself in silence, both personal and political. The silences were echoed in the country around me. This was not the silence that is the result of having experienced or seen the unspeakable, the resonant silence that is a reaction to the inadequacy of words to capture the reality of the individual experience of apartheid. With my family's immigration to South Africa, the silences of my mother's house were echoed by those of the apartheid regime that opposed the truth and consciously manipulated history and what was known, or what was allowed to be known. This was the silence of guilt, of complicity, of passivity. It was a silence that countenanced what was done in our name. The 1970s were a time of lies and deception in South Africa. It was a time of the obscuring of knowledge. A Censor Board protected us from lascivious and politically radical materials equally, there was no freedom of information. The state's fear of information and news, and of not being able to control what was known, meant that there was no television until the late 1970s. I grew up in this time. People lived in racially segregated areas, forbidden by law to socialize or intermingle. A plethora of restrictions curtailed the press. Books were banned, as were many people who had spoken out or protested apartheid. Beyond the deliberate deceit of the government, most South African whites were happy in their ignorance, unwilling or too fearful to challenge either the government or

their own conscience and to look beyond the boundaries that separated black from white.

Soweto changed that. In one transformative moment it was no longer possible to explain away the contradictions and the questions that went unanswered. The silences that met my questions back then have stayed with me. I needed to know, needed to find a measure of truth, hear the stories. My work, my research, my becoming a historian, this topic—these were all acts of rebellion against the silences. Social history, with its focus on daily lives and the agency of historical actors, and the method of oral history, with its focus on individual lives, both promised to demystify an official understanding of the past that sought to oppress not only bodies but also minds.

What had happened in Soweto did not happen only to those who were killed there, or who waited outside the coroner's office for news of their children. In some sense what happened in Soweto happened to everyone. It happened to those who lived in African communities outside of Soweto and who picked up the cause. It happened to those on the other side of the racial divide. My physical freedom from state violence in the safe world of white privilege was obtained at the expense of the physical violence done to Black South Africans. Their ability to articulate or act against oppression amplified our passivity and silence. It was not surprising that the most deadly clashes between the police and the youth happened in Alexandra township. It borders directly on a white suburb. It is here that police intensely patrolled the boundary between black and white.

History and memory are mutually and multidirectionally constituted. The past in South Africa is mutually constituted—nowhere was this more clear than in my research, in the telling way that my work needed to be constructed around the relationships I entered into with the narrators of this history. I learned to listen, I learned to learn from those around me. Lilli told me her story because of who I was. In the course of time, she came to know me, a white South African who suffered from grief and guilt that she also felt. Lilli anticipated that I would understand how it was that she participated in that killing—just as she could understand and accept how it was that I could be antiracist. In the heroic story of black South Africa's struggle against apartheid, there was not much place for guilt or grief: Events and occurrences that produced guilt were quickly relocated in a narrative that made them part of collective action and therefore absolved the individual. Lilli could tell me her story because she knew that Soweto was part of my experience as a white South African as much as, because she was there, it was part of hers. We came together to reconstruct a memory of the country that was not Black or White, but Black *and* White. The multiple truths of those memories are sometimes difficult, their terrain treacherous, and the stories I heard were not always as simple as heroic master narratives had wanted them to be. The stories did not always fit a coherent, nationalist narrative of heroism or

sacrifice. Personal memory was often fragmented and painful, full of grief, and many larger official or public narratives have neglected to include the humiliations and pain of the everyday experience of racism under apartheid. Personal memory recast as a nationalist narrative of liberation reconfigured and erased the fragmented character and the silences of embodied experiences of violence.

In South Africa, where the past is one of crushing violence against the majority-black population and of the consequent culpability of the remainder, memory has been shaped by that violence. The long-term experience of violence has left many with a sense of vulnerability which is aggravated by a still-strong memory (often personal, but certainly collective) of the silences and lies, of the way people disappeared, and of how information about the way "things were done" by those so recently in power was hidden. The need to penetrate the silences, to know where somebody was killed, what exactly happened, to "see" a body and know the torturer, (see Chapter 1, "Story Without End" references to Nombulelo Elizabeth Makhubu,) reflected a need to locate a person or an event in history, to find a place or a site for memory—a place or a site in which memory can orient itself, create boundaries and spatial dimensions that are no longer so immense that they are frightening. It was also a need finally to place an individual memory, dislocated by violence, in relationship to a historical context, where it is public and shareable, where its relationship to collective memory and meaning can be negotiated. **105**

This book is about those and for those who helped me break silences.

Notes:

Note 78: Oliver Tambo, "Our Bases are Inside South Africa," interview by Carlos Cordosa of the Mozambique Information Agency, July 1983, in Adelaide Tambo, *Preparing for Power: Oliver Tambo Speaks* (New York: George Braziller, 1987), 166.