

REMEMBERING UBUNTU: MEMORY, SOVEREIGNTY AND RECONCILIATION IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

✿ GRAHAM FOX

ABSTRACT

South Africa remains a place where the postcolonial condition is hotly debated, stemming conflicts that make the country a particular challenge for political nation builders. This essay discusses South Africa's quest for truth and reconciliation, with special appreciation for Ubuntu – a 'traditional' philosophy evoked widely in the TRC process as the essence or humanity that binds South Africans together. Essential in understanding, Ubuntu is the act of memory. It is this juncture, I argue, of memory and Ubuntu, which has enabled South African reconciliation to take place, however imperfect it may be.

INTRODUCTION

Colonization leaves an indelible imprint on the lives it encounters. In a superimposition of foreign ideals, colonized societies are forever problematized by the distortion and dislocation of what should be considered one's own and of what should be considered someone else's. Postcolonialism therefore thrusts societies into states of daunting subjectivity and cultural negotia-

tion. As colonization is a process rather than an encounter, the rediscovery of sovereign identities can be prolonged and painful.

In few parts of the world are these dislocations as evident as in South Africa, as the stark divisions and resultant conflicts that have characterized the country create particular challenges in both political nation building and in the reparation of memory, marginality, and personhood. This essay will discuss South Africa's quest for truth and reconciliation in the post-apartheid era, with special appreciation for the notion of Ubuntu – a 'traditional' South African philosophy evoked widely in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process as the essence or humanity that binds South Africans together. Essential in understanding Ubuntu is the act of memory. It is this juncture, I argue, of memory and Ubuntu, which has enabled South African reconciliation to take place, however imperfect we may conceive it to be. The TRC was founded in 1995 in response to the large number of South Africans seeking justice for the suffering that they or their loved one's endured during apartheid. Composed of high profile civil-society members such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission's mandate was to bear witness and to (potentially) grant amnesty to former apartheid conspirators on the grounds of forgiveness.

Without the advantage of ethnographic research, this paper draws on secondary accounts in creating a vignette or narrative of violence, memory and reconciliation during the post-apartheid period in South Africa. I will draw on a collection of indirectly related sources to illustrate the experiences of loss, memory and the significance of Ubuntu, in order to work toward an understanding of how the act of memory is able, or unable, to forge new perspectives on shared suffering, both personal and national. Narrative, as Simpson (1998: 221) points out, is a "a critical instrument of human agency." By deconstructing the narratives that have shaped contemporary South African history, we can better appreciate how violence is both destructive of social ties while simultaneously producing others (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296).

The first section of this paper recounts a particular moment in the apartheid experience; the violence, death and subjective truths surrounding the 1985 shooting of approximately twenty members of a funeral procession on Sharpeville Day in Uitenhage, Eastern Cape Province. The second section will explore the ethno-ethical ideal of Ubuntu, its origins, interpretations and significance in the post-apartheid context. The third section will discuss the act of memory and its significance for post-colonial sovereignty. Lastly, I will attempt to tie these experiences together, arguing for their interrelation and their implications for truth, reconciliation, and nation building.

UITENHAGE

Though the apartheid experience was marked throughout by acute acts of violence, the shootings at Uitenhage (the Uitenhage massacre) were notably gruesome and vividly recollected by those involved. In the early morning of March 21, 1985, a procession of a hundred mourners defied a ban on marching by creating a funeral procession which carried the body of a loved one from the township of Kwa Nobuhle to the neighboring township of Langa, where a funeral was to occur. The route between these two townships led the procession uncomfortably close to the white neighborhood of Uitenhage, an area mainly walled off from the non-white settlements surrounding it. Police received word that a group was planning to defy the ban and planned to intercept them as the procession neared the Uitenhage roadway.

Precisely what drove police to open fire on the procession marchers is unclear and, as my discussion will demonstrate, very difficult to interpret. At least twenty people lay dead from the shooting, women and children among them (Thornton 1990: 223). Witnesses recounted the event with frightening imageries of malice and predation. Police officers were recalled hurtling callous and authoritarian remarks at the procession marchers and fifteen of the dead were reported to have been shot in the

back as they fled from police. Speculative accounts from both marchers and police officers claim Lt. Fouche, the senior police officer present, was intoxicated at the time of the shooting (Thornton 1990: 229). South African authorities staunchly accepted the police's version of events. Official details that were released by state-backed media were met with great skepticism by non-white South Africans (Thornton 1990: 223).

Anthropologist Robert Thornton (1990) produced a detailed ethnography of the Uitenhage shootings, incorporating a number of witness accounts that illustrate the problematic and subjective ways that violence is experienced, understood, and remembered. Of particular interest to Thornton is the way in which acts of violence earn their meaning retrospectively. "The event [at Uitenhage] did not just happen," says Thornton (1990: 218), "it created meaning. It achieved a salience in the political process that people continued to reflect upon and to elaborate in narratives and reenactments." In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, media accounts came predominantly from police officers involved, anxious to justify their actions against the public outrage that immediately developed. These accounts, as Thornton explains, were laden with powerful symbolisms that further complicated differing narratives. The police recounted the two main antagonists in the group as a 'Rastafarian man' and bare-breasted women. These exoticized descriptions, says Thornton (1990: 231), served to mythologize the narrative and further obstruct a clear and objective understanding of what unfolded. Evoking the "barbarity" of these figures, says Thornton (1990: 231), attempted to de-humanize the victims, allowing officers to defend their actions.

A number of other contradictory recollections demonstrated a clear conflict or misinterpretation of language. The police officers, with a limited knowledge of isiXhosa (the lingua franca of many black South Africans in this region) had interpreted the crowd's chanting of "Hai! Hai!" to mean, "Kill, Kill" – an instigation for fellow processioners to attack the police (Thornton 1990: 230). Infact, according to victims, this was a plea urging

"No! No!" as police threatened the marchers with guns drawn. Another critical figure in the police accounts was a young man on a bicycle who saluted the crowd with a raised fist as he swerved through the assembly of police. Officers interpreted this symbol as an antagonism, and in the promptly ensuing violence, the boy was shot in the head (Thornton 1990: 230).

Thornton (1990: 218) also highlights the wider context in which the Uitenhage shootings took place, explaining why this event became so symbolically potent in the anti-apartheid movement. Though only one among many violence incidents that characterized the later years of apartheid, he argues that the Uitenhage shootings "stood out against this background of endemic violence because it displayed so clearly the tacit knowledge of patterns of and for violence shared by almost all South Africans... recognized as an exemplar of a characteristically South African form of social violence" (1990: 226). The shooting at Uitenhage occurred on Sharpeville Day, one of many annual holidays memorializing violent experiences. Other examples include Blood River and Soweto, each evocative of specific political or ethnic struggles in South Africa's history. Thornton argues that the structural systems or social forms of violence in the country require a more thorough understanding, "like violence in religious sacrifice, literatures, dreams, sexual relationships, and friendship, must be understood in relation to the representations of community, self, and identity which it is linked in the daily habits of mind and body" (1990: 229). In the case of the Uitenhage massacre, violence "is not just the consequence of politics but is integral to the social processes that generate symbols and values that provision the political process" (Thornton 1990: 218).

The ways in which the Uitenhage shootings developed such powerful symbolism is reflective of both the authoritarianism of the government and the efforts of people to exert agency or resistance. "Power in these contexts" says Thornton (1990: 224), "is less the ability to cause violence by means of one's will or authority than it is the ability to impose one interpretation - that is, meaning - among competing interpretations after the occur-

rence of a particular incident of violence.” Many perspectives on violence in the social sciences focus on the causes or motivations of violence rather than the significance of its interpretations. “This functional or causal approach”, says Thornton (1990: 224), “appeals to us by its simplicity and its accordance with everyday storytelling and narrative structures of plot and sequence. The real problem of the meaning of violence emerges only after it has happened.” Indeed, the police officers’ versions were accepted as truth and were minimally challenged in apartheid-administered forums such as newspapers. These official silences were understandably saddening for families of those killed and displayed the complexity of challenges that later reconciliation discourses had the daunting task of addressing.

U B U N T U

Most scholarly work on Ubuntu has put to the rest the pursuit of trying to rigidly define it. Extensively explored in the ontological realms of African Philosophy, the relevance of Ubuntu to Afro-Centric models of law and/or debates on morality has been argued if not overstated. In this section I explore the significance of Ubuntu as a potentially meaningful motif for reconciliation and nation building in its capacity to evoke collective values and the memories that enforce them.

The word ‘Ubuntu’ is abbreviated from the Xhosa proverb “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” which translates as “a person is a person through other persons” (Swanson 2007: 55). Though distinctively South African in origin, the meanings and usages of Ubuntu are linguistically present throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Non-Africans familiar with Ubuntu likely attribute their knowledge to the dialogues of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, particularly in the formative months of South Africa’s TRC process. In Tutu’s own words: “Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘Yu, u

nobuntu’ – ‘Hey, so-and-so has Ubuntu’. Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and passionate” (Swanson, 2007: 54). Tutu’s explanation emphasizes two important elements of Ubuntu: one being the quality of generosity or caring, the other being a sense of community or togetherness in forms of friendship and hospitality. These themes are central to and intractable from discussions of Ubuntu.

The majority of literature on Ubuntu describes it simply as ‘an ideal’, or in philosophical texts, ‘a philosophy’. Charles Villa-Vicencio, national research director of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission describes as an ‘ethno-ethical’ ideal (2009: 115), suggesting relevance only to certain peoples or societies. Indeed, a primary challenge for public figures seeking to utilize Ubuntu has been the ability to convey it as a distinctively African ideal. In both the pan African era of the 1960s and again in the post-apartheid era of the 1990s, public discourses based on traditional African ideals were both integral in the struggle for postcolonial identity and sovereignty. Many scholars argue that Ubuntu is an ideal of pluralism and heterogeneity. With its widespread evocation in modern South African politics, Villa-Vicencio (2009: 116) claims Ubuntu is “capturing the interaction between groups originating in Africa as well as those who have come to make Africa their home as a result of colonialism, the heritage of slavery and other forms of mobility.” Regardless of its origin, the use and misuse of Ubuntu are all in keeping with Tutu’s language and description. The underlying principle of Ubuntu, according to Villa-Vicencio is that existence is both communal and interconnected (2009:114).

Especially in South Africa, contemporary scholars continue to utilize Ubuntu as a framework for understanding and articulating the unique challenges African societies presently face. Ubuntu, says Villa-Vicencio (2009: 127) “offers a cultural incentive to promote a level of communal coexistence among individuals, clans, ethnic groups and nations that linger in the ethos and memory of a continent devastated by greed, conflict and

war.” Ubuntu has strategic advantage in its historical rooting in pre-colonial villages, allowing it to reach individuals or communities suspicious of state or religious institutions as instruments of colonialism. Villa-Vicencio (2009: 117) argues that Ubuntu “can be developed and expanded in relation to a range of contemporary challenges facing the modern state”: development, democracy or the forging of nationhood. As Ubuntu evokes ideals of truth and interconnection, it confronts the greed and individualism often found in many post conflict societies not limited to South Africa alone (Villa-Vicencio 2009: 112).

The most significant point to be touched on here is Ubuntu’s potential in the practice of memory. As it is believed to be rooted in historically continuous processes, Ubuntu is greatly symbolic of the act of memory itself. According to Villa-Vicencio, Ubuntu “remembers past generations and ancestors, drawing on the memory of the lived experiences to success and failure. Like any ethical idea, it must adapt in order to survive” (2009:121). Ubuntu is therefore a way of telling one’s story, drawing on symbols and emotions to recount relatable and historically continuous experiences. Ubuntu also encourages non-violence and co-operation. “An Ubuntu perception of the other is never fixed or rigidly closed, but adjustable or open ended,” says Villa-Vicencio (2009: 121). “It allows the other to be, to become. Because Ubuntu gives expression to self-realization through the other, the other needs to be respected and taken seriously” (2009:121). Other authors such as Cornell and Van Merle (2008: 111) describe Ubuntu as an archive in which public memory is stored, a practice or symbol that average citizens understand to be culturally fundamental to their national identity.

Explorations of Ubuntu ontology end very far from discourses on memory or collectivity. Other scholars, such as Sociolinguist Buntu Mfenyana, describe Ubuntu along the nature-culture divide, as “the quality of being human... which distinguishes a human creature from an animal or spirit” (as cited by Villa-Vicencio, 2009: 115). This argument suggests that Ubuntu represents a fundamental quality of personhood. If

the systems of apartheid sought to dehumanize non-whites by equating racial blackness as an animalism or barbarity, Ubuntu serves to “coax individuals back into the folds of humanity” (Eze 2010: 135).

Discussing Ubuntu is inadequate without considering the arguments of those who denounce it. Though Ubuntu’s ethos builds on distinctly positive motifs, critics have targeted Ubuntu as an authoritarian concept or a way of reifying conservative norms (Cornell and Van Merle 2008: 110). If Ubuntu emphasizes the interest of groups or communities over the rights of individuals, it may in fact represent an appropriative or reactionary method of replacing colonial systems of authority and servitude with ones modeled on indigenous knowledges or familiarities. According to Villa-Vicencio (2009: 112), Ubuntu “is frequently exploited and romanticized by those who seek to benefit from its offer of belonging without responding to the sense of responsibility for the other that it presupposes.” Cornell and Van Merle (2008: 110) add that “Ubuntu is such a bloated concept that it means everything to everyone, and as a bloated concept it should not be translated into a constitutional principle.” Critics also claim that Ubuntu “undermines both individual and national development and progress” (Villa-Vicencio 2009: 118) and restricts individuals from rising or excelling beyond their ascribed position in communities. Motha (2009: 321) adds that Ubuntu may be “nothing more than the expression of a feudal and hierarchical setting of social stasis where communal needs supersede the individual.” While new approaches to nation building emphasize community on a national scale, Ubuntu’s traditional origins are in the more micro contexts of families or villages. In the words of Villa-Vicencio (2009: 114), we must “to what extent is Ubuntu little more than a nostalgic longing for a projected sense of pre-colonial cultural homogeneity and coexistence?” It is this aspect that makes Ubuntu so critical in negotiating the subjectivities of colonialism.

As criticisms of Ubuntu are distinctively post-apartheid, disillusionment with its usage may be at least a partial expression

of unhappiness with the truth and reconciliation process or of a fractured state of nationhood in post-apartheid South Africa. As I demonstrate in further sections, truth and reconciliation in South Africa is a negotiation of public memory as well as personal memory. As the experience of truth and reconciliation weighs differently on individuals, the extent to which non-white South Africans are satisfied by this process is a highly contentious question.

MEMORY

Questions of memory are front and center in debates on post-colonial subjectivities, and must be considered in addressing the challenges of democratization for post-authoritarian or segregated states such as South Africa. Anthropologist Richard Werbner (1998: 99) describes the problematic nature of memory in post-colonial Africa. In post-colonial societies, he says, “intractable traces of the past are felt on people’s bodies, known in their landscapes, landmarks and souvenirs, and perceived as the tough moral fabric of their social relations”. As with many social processes, Werbner (1998: 99) argues that the experience of memory is very much an ongoing public practice.

Memory is something to be ‘worked on’, something productive and capable of effecting lasting ontological change. Collective memory is forged in the process of collective narrative, amalgamating individual experiences towards a publicly accepted statement about how history has impacted the present, or in South Africa’s case, encapsulating the impact of apartheid on non-white citizens. By forging collective memory, communities are able to reclaim an aspect of pre-colonial sovereignty, laying the groundwork for a self-determined history, paramount in the process of nation building as well as the personal obstacles people must overcome in post-conflict situations.

Anthropological perspectives on memory offer several suggestions on how memory plays in to notions of identity and commu-

nity. Anthropologist James Laidlaw (2004: 3) argues that people experience memory in two different ways. The first is semantic memory; memories related to general, non-personal, propositional facts, for example, remembering the plot of a film. The other is episodic or autobiographical memory, remembered by an individual on the basis of first hand experience, not necessarily in context. For example, remembering searching for a seat in a theatre on a night out with friends in the past. These different forms of memory, argues Laidlaw (2004: 3), “favor some kinds of representation over others. Thus the kinds of ideas human cultures can consist of will be affected by the forms of transmission and memory that human communities have available to them”. Both sorts of memory are in strong interplay in post-traumatic situations. The negative memories individuals possess are not only personal but historically societal, “the basis for widespread but impersonal solidarity among those who share the same body of doctrine” (Laidlaw 2004: 5). Laidlaw’s comments emphasize the importance of memory in forging a sense of shared experience.

In appreciating the power of memory, anthropologists also emphasize the importance of narratives. Narratives play a tremendous role in how histories are reproduced, and more importantly, how they achieve meaning. Narratives, says Simpson (1998: 221), “give coherence to the otherwise inchoate [aspects of life]”. The concept of a narrative is also directly in play with Christian traditions of conversion and confession, dating back to the ‘Confessions of St. Augustine’, where worshippers recount the personal torment and redemption of an iconic Christian saint (Simpson 1998: 221). As symbols and metaphors evoke meaning on the basis of familiar forms, the use of religious language and narrative is an appropriation of these forms in order to engage possibly disparate sets of individuals.

Narratives allow personal or collective histories to be evoked with different emphases. They are also “a critical instrument of human agency, producing socio-cultural form through an arch of memories, actions and intentions” (Simpson 1998: 221). Permitting these different perspectives and emphases, the TRC

process grants South Africans a degree of personal sovereignty over their individual memory. "Sovereignty enters the fray as that which is at stake in self determination," says Motha (2009: 299-300). "Sovereignty persists as the archive of colonialism – it is the foundation, ground, authorization of what is 'now'". The crucial question, he asks, "is whether the reassertion of indigenous sovereignty can be an antidote to colonial sovereignty and its social and economic concomitants" (2009: 300). In the processes of truth and reconciliation, individuals in South Africa pursued a self-determined identity through the sovereignty of their own memory, utilizing narrative and Ubuntu in consecrating the impact that apartheid had and continues to have on their lives.

RECONCILIATION

To demonstrate the convergence of this essay's key themes, I return to the tragedies at Uitenhage. Over a decade later, memories of the event were recounted on national television by families of the fallen funeral procession marchers. Pieter Meiring, a colleague and confidant of Desmond Tutu's, took notes at the hearing as one mother recounted the loss of her 14-year-old son, possibly the boy that was shot on his bicycle following an ambiguous series of gestures towards police.

With effort she put her tale on the table: of how she, years ago, sent her fourteen year-old son to buy bread. There was unrest in the township and somewhere along the way it must have happened that the boy landed in the crossfire. For some reason the security police arrested the wounded child and subjected him to brutal torture. Two days later, the mother who, panic-stricken, fumbled about to find out what had happened to her son, saw, on her neighbor's television set during the eight o'clock news, the boy being pulled down from a bakkie (open vehicle) by his ankles – (Meiring 2000: 190)

The mother went on to recount how police eventually gave her an address telling her, with no further detail, that she could go to this location and find her son. Unfamiliar with her destination, she arrived to realize it was a mortuary. She told the commission how her son's body was burned, bruised and gaping with bullet holes. She recounted cleaning his body in silence as mortuary staff stood silently at the threshold of the room (Meiring 2000: 190).

The details of the mother's narrative demonstrate the methods by which the meaning of her experience and sovereignty of her memory were expressed. Her language in the narrative evokes the image of an innocent young boy, obediently completing chores for his mother, an unknowing victim of events beyond his control. The mother's experience of panic evokes loss and trauma. The narrative communicates her loss as, like other themes, a process. The image of mortuary workers, not necessarily indifferent but stoic to her pain, represents humanistic figures constrained by their vocations within the structures of apartheid. The secondary characters, including the police, can be considered symbols of apartheid, and her son, the tragic victim, the innocence and freedom the system maliciously consumes. In the processes of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the story of this mother was forever sanctified.

Finally, Meiring's depiction of the mother's story demonstrates the way in which Ubuntu factors in. The introduction to the Act on the Promotion of National Unity, a landmark bill outlining policy for how truth and reconciliation processes should be carried out, addresses Ubuntu as follows: "and since the Constitution states that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimization" (Meiring 2000: 118). In these terms, Ubuntu is synonymous with understanding and reparation, dichotomized against victimization. In my preceding discussion I emphasize the significance of Ubuntu via two important qualities: interconnectedness and continuity, both of which

in many ways embody the value and virtue of understanding and reparation. In sharing her loss with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the mother performs the public practice of remembrance, evoking images and sentiments felt by many other non-whites, and her allegorical experience of trauma and suffering. As a single episode in the thousands of stories heard, her individual story contributed to a national dialogue in negotiation of memory, an expression of sovereignty in the freedom to recount and be acknowledged in a state-sanction forum. The public practice of memory is therefore an expression of Ubuntu, forging the collective through the shared experience of individuals.

CONCLUSION

While the South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was designed to acknowledge and honor the memories of individual South Africans, it is arguably problematic to force this process on people unconvinced of its efficacy. Supporters of the South African TRC fail to recognize the irony of forcing reconciliation on those unwilling or unready to whole-heartedly participate. "The environment of repressive tolerance that consistently reproduces such scenarios" say Meskell and Weiss (2006: 94), "recognizes cultural difference only insofar as the cultural difference proves profitable and, hence, amenable to popular stereotypes". Indeed, the TRC process was, and remains, highly imperfect, and likely reflective of the few options South African leaders had to hold their nation together.

The challenge of public memory in South Africa continues to be addressed by the country's foremost intellectuals. The works of Nobel Laureate J.M. Coetzee, for example, in both apartheid and post-apartheid eras, have acknowledged the importance of memory in the pursuit of nationhood and peace. Coetzee has warned that all South Africans "must be mindful of the past and about our crafting and retelling of it – specifically the ethical narrating of a shared past" (Meskell and Weiss 2006: 96).

Indeed, the careless evoking of different memories could be socially destabilizing in many South African contexts. "It has proven difficult in a climate of inclusivity and 'rainbow nationess'" say Meskell and Weiss (2006: 93), "to reinforce the specificities of deep past because they may prove even more divisive and destabilizing." Even the classic and fundamental discipline of history has faced major contention in modern South Africa. This reflects the anxiety of putting order and reason to the conflicting events that mark South Africa's history. According to historian Terrence Ranger (cited by Meskell and Weiss 2006: 95) "history [in South Africa] is becoming today what anthropology was in Africa in the 1950s, the discipline that dare not speak its name." Understandably, evoking historical events will reveal many different meanings from different parties, some who may associate events with violation or sadness, others with triumph or unity. As South Africa attempts to foster national unity, honoring the histories of one group may inevitably infringe on another's. "The conflict between popular and state memorialism", says Werbner (1998: 100), "reaches to the very right of a citizen to have a recognized memory in public, to have the politically caused trauma and loss openly acknowledged." Addressing this issue is paramount in South Africa's democratization and the development of a South African nationhood.

Ultimately, South Africa's TRC had one important goal; to engage and negotiate the country's troubled past towards establishing a public memory and some semblance of a national identity. Developing an identity, argue Cornell and Van Merle, is an ongoing and dynamic process experienced by both communities and individuals. "Individuals become individuated through their engagement with others, and their ability to live in line with their capability is at the heart of how ethical interactions are judged" (2008: 111).

Sharing certain common memories is therefore critical towards sharing a *national* identity, motivating the TRC to "create a common memory that can be recognized or acknowledged" (Ntsebeza 2000: 118). A Chilean lawyer who worked on truth

and reconciliation processes in his own country wrote that “memory *is* identity. Identities consisting of false or half-memories easily commit atrocity” (Scott 2000: 111).

Finally, it is important to emphasize the pervasiveness of duality or two-sidedness in many of this essay’s themes. Ubuntu, memory, sovereignty and reconciliation, can each be characterized as having both a personal and communal aspect; Ubuntu, memory and peace with oneself, and Ubuntu, memory and peace among others. In the context of South Africa in particular, Werbner argues that “the work of imagining the nation has been in great measure the memory work of coming to terms with past political violence which is dual in nature – both anti-colonial, in a sense this being external, and also internal, traumatically directed against a collective enemy within the nation”(1998: 98-99). The events at Uitenhage in March 1985 are a clear representation of languages, symbolisms and other cultural factors in direct and heated conflict. The context and pretext to the Uitenhage shootings gave the violence a meaning that, in its popular recollection, committed that violence to history and memory.

The search for truth and reconciliation in South Africa is arguably ongoing, and continues to be problematized by the country’s unique social, political and economic contexts. With leading global murder rates and proven propensities for xenophobic violence, South Africa remains an important case study in the postcolonial encounters of violence and history. “While the fact of death is itself banal,” says Thornton, “the interpretation of specific deaths gives other lives their meaning” (1990: 218). If violence is as structural as Thornton’s work suggests, the ways in which violence is remembered and signified must be considered foundational in anthropological understandings of many social debates in post-apartheid South Africa.

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