

Re-historicising Trauma: Reflections on Violence and Memory in Current-day Cape Town

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Introduction

South Africa has emerged from close to three hundred and fifty years of war. Together with colonial invasion and settlements, slavery and land dispossession it has had to contend with the social and economic engineering of the Apartheid system. The last war of resistance ended with the legal dismantling of the Apartheid system and transition to constitutional democracy. The extent, however, of the human and social destruction is only beginning to be measured in relation to a slow coming to terms with its immeasurable devastation. Understanding, measuring and acknowledging the human cost of war is one indicator that the possibility of peace, so new and so fragile, has indeed been won. As peace activists we reflect inside of this history of the present, inside of a pause, a time to catch breath.

In this period following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, mourning, as a social process for managing change and dealing with loss, and mourning as a political action propelling social change has become both depoliticised and increasingly psychologised. Expressions of anger, resentment, indignation and self-restitution have become increasingly inexpressible in the public spheres. Such expressions are relegated to an interior intrasubjective world free of the politics of collective meaning making as the spaces for making sense of and organising collectively around many pressing socio-economic issues have become increasingly splintered. The discursive power of nation-building-as-reconciliation accompanied by the entrenchment of racialised structural socio-economic inequities close off public spaces for social processes of self-reclamation and fractures the spaces for social action.

Beyond the TRC: Masking the Structural Fault lines

Eight years after the beginning of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's public hearings and beyond its institutional life as one of many state commissions in this country, the TRC's discursive power continues to define, reduce, delimit and foreclose the meanings and modes of individual and collective response -- both material and symbolic -- to these long periods of war and resistance in Southern Africa that have gone before and the normalised and invisibilised violence of the everyday in the present. This can be understood if the TRC and the discursive economies of its historical time-lines, key concepts such as reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, "victim", "perpetrator" and truth telling are historicized. This has excised the entrenched systemic and structural antecedents and continuities of Apartheid and colonialism and the ways that such continuities impact, practically and symbolically, on working through, mourning, and assimilating the trauma and loss. In the aftermath of war, this has serious consequences for initiating processes of psychosocial and economic self-restitution. By reducing historical experience to a set of pre-defined narrative and experiential co-ordinates (categories of victims, perpetrators, events, historical agents, timelines) the TRC process -- an innovative discursive instrument of political and historical consciousness - excluded the violence and survival of the everyday, socio-economic survival, community conflict, trauma, rage and the despair of negated existence. This has hampered further longer-term political and social discourses of meaning making and recovery.

The creation of narrow victim categories and the extension of these categories to perpetrator and beneficiary communities may have averted civil war in the 90's but it has not fostered a community

imagined through national citizenship. By re-categorizing identity brackets into victim and perpetrator relations the TRC occluded most citizens of South Africa for whom each human interaction in the everyday begins with the always already racialized reading of the face of the other inside of a political economy in which the socio-economic inequalities have deepened further since the end of the war.

From the language of its mandating legal act, to the ways in which the Human Rights Violations Committee hearings were conducted, and mediated by print and electronic media, the TRC constructed a speaking subject whose selfhood was defined by a disempowering and passive interiority: The “victim”. The “victim” of human rights abuse and atrocity was represented as a damaged survivor coming to voice in order to be publicly heard and to heal, not as a self-defining author and agent of history, of social action and meaningful change. Moreover, in contexts where language itself is implicated in histories of violence and oppression, “victim” connoted a reductionist label emptied of historical agency and relationality to the victimisers. Absent from the label in a language articulated in the epistemological frameworks of the oppressor is that there exists a deep historical power relation between oppressed and oppressor, the colonial settler who became the Apartheid beneficiary.

From the outset the TRC did not intend to collect three hundred and fifty years of testimony relating to the human theft and inhuman destruction in the name of “white” Christian gods and Enlightenment notions of civilization. As a social process, the TRC also diminished the possibility for people who lived and suffered to explore and understand these histories in ways that make real the chance to transform present reality into a time of mourning, of refinding a language of humanity and of recovery. As part of broader political, historical and human processes in which conflict and post-conflict are not so easily separated the TRC process nurtured rather the possibility for those who benefited and continue to benefit from colonial and Apartheid rule to consolidate socio-economic relations of power informed by direct socio-economic structuring based on previously legally defined “race” categories. .

After the conflict we have endured, the concept of reconciliation cannot be equated with peace if peace translates as the wholesale suffering of the majority of Black South Africans and the continued protection of “white” privilege and benefit whilst colonial and Enlightenment histories of destruction in the name of progress and civilisation are gradually cast into obscurity. For the majority of “white” South Africans peace translates into an unchallenged entitlement to leisure, pleasure and lifestyles that are secured through economic power, the unquestioning valorisation of whiteness and a moral legitimacy that intersects with unlimited access to the global economy. Reconciliation requires that those who do not have access to these lifestyles should accept this, and forgive not only their past tormentors but also “white” identifying communities who continue to deny their structural role in that system in whose name that torment was perpetrated.

Central to this idealization of “truth” and “reconciliation” is the international acceptance that Apartheid, as a “crime against humanity”, has been settled. In this idealization, South Africans are reaching out in forgiveness to one another across previously policed identity boundaries. The idealization of reconciliation as an interpersonal, intercultural, interracial contact zone belies the persistence of social and economic Apartheid and its institutional workings in the present. It belies the pressing need for opportunities for responsible working through or acceptance of how “race” and colour identities continue to constrain the horizons of life for individuals and communities. It also belies how, the creation of a small Black middle-class notwithstanding, and social economic structures have ossified in ways that could never have been imaginable to Apartheid ideologues. .

Mother City: Fractured spaces and the violence of oblivion

Cape Town is a city that remains at war with itself. It is a war that exists through the silences and in the cracks that allow complete histories and realities to slip through. At the same time this city is called the success of Europe in Africa. It is a city that lives the violence and genocide that has been its history through

Apartheid back to Dutch and British settlement three hundred and fifty years ago. Cape Town is a city that continues to be shredded by the complexities of division and violence. The violence of the city, of its extremes of wealth and poverty and the irreconcilable realities that exist inside of these extremes, mark everyone each day in ways that are not always clear, conscious or visible. It feels like a city that is ready to burst with the violent force of the irrepressible realness of its history.

Mostly everything remains colour-coded according to previous Apartheid “race” categories. This is visible in every sphere of society from who works in restaurant kitchens and who owns them; who cleans the roads and sidewalks and who are shop owners, whose children are cared for by nannies and whose children have to fend for themselves. The spatial boundaries of Cape Town remain distinct, obliterating even the memory of how these spaces were manipulated into existence through Apartheid laws of forced removals and group areas. In Cape Town people who were removed from their homes and economic livelihoods - from places such as District Six, De Waterkant, Green Point, Mowbray, Simons Town, Wynberg, Claremont, Kensington, and so on – live in ghettos that remain marked mainly for their low-life expectancy and endemic crime yet they still have to pass the areas they previously inhabited on their way in to and from work in the city each day. For the majority there is almost no dream of return or of compensation. The boundaries of urban geography that historically were engineered to define and bolster racial categorization persist today.

Not only has the war continued inside of the space of everyday living, it has also happened at the points where memory and the spirit of resistance are located. In order to continue the everyday normalised violence against the poor the hope that invested itself inside of the resistance against Apartheid has had to be rewritten. The souls of those who have survived have been cast into the rewriting of the memory of the dead, the literalisation of which is seen everyday on the streets of our city where large sectors of the population damned under Apartheid continue to be damned today. The shiny, bright, and new has not filtered through here, except for the promise that perhaps one-day it might. The obliteration of the humanity of the poor in the name of development has entrenched itself in a political economy that further normalises the violence that created our city. The further construction and development of the city is not in itself problematic, it is that the violence of this development does not break with historical patterns of dispossession, exclusion and injustice.

Prestwich Place: Uncovering the Truth as Lie

During the past year the case of the Prestwich Place Redevelopment Project, a ninety million rands (private sector) real estate development plan on top of a gravesite in the area of Green Point beside the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront has inserted itself into our social imagination. Over one thousand bodies were uncovered in a gravesite after a building at Prestwich Place was demolished in order to start the new development at Prestwich Place. The area that was demolished for redevelopment is around 1000^m². Early maps of the city indicate the area on Prestwich Street as being part of vast burial grounds at the edge of the modern colonial city for slaves, “heathens” and other social “undesirables” at the turn of the eighteenth century. More than one century later under Apartheid and already as part of the core of the city’s developing economy, this area was a forced removal area and its residents were dumped in one of the scores of ghettos that were being set up across the Cape Flats. The uncovering of bodies during demolitions for constructing the Prestwich Place redevelopment is a literal example of the newly redeveloping city centre uncovering the layer upon layer of sedimented histories and economies of destruction and of oblivion. Oblivion because of the active erasure of both actions of destruction and their traces, the recasting of history in the light of its denial and the consignment to the abjected outside in silence and in shame of the dominant social order the experiences and memories of destruction engraved in the bodies, minds and memories of those who have survived.

It has emerged that this is the second such gravesite uncovered in this area since 1994. The bodies found at the first gravesite were exhumed some of which have now been traced to the Medical School of the

University of Cape Town. For the first time since the first democratic elections in '94 this uncovering of bodies provided the haunting evidence that could no longer be denied by the majority of those who live, work and "own" property in the city and in all of the forced removal areas of the peninsula: that people who now live on the Cape Flats have a claim to this part of the city. Since a few thousand people have been given symbolic reparation in acknowledgement of such claims and millions have been denied their right to compensation the process of historical excision has been rendered both more complex and seamless.

Prestwich Street burial ground is more than a fleeting social recovery of the dead and their unrecoverable histories outside of the shadows of historical denial and followed by continuous building over. The uncovering of the "hidden" presence of their bodies in the centre of the city rehistoricises the connection between the development of the Cape Flats, the legislation of "race" categories and its endorsed dehumanisation of all human life not classified as "white", land and property expropriations, forced removals and the human cost of constructing the modern colonial and Apartheid city. The constrained number of versions of the colonial and Apartheid past produced in contemporary public histories, museums, the national commemorative calendar and that circulate in the public spheres, as in the work of the TRC, are explained and contained within a context of social and political transition that has been shaped by a macro-economic strategy sanctioned by the dominant global economic order. In the townships of the Cape Flats, the highly differentiated and segregationist topography that is inscribed by roads, highways, footpaths, intersections, railway lines, cooling towers, industrial zones and open fields have become naturalized as the visible boundaries and invisible thresholds marking structural poverty and the everyday struggle against hopelessness. In this way the structural relationship between township demography, socio-economic deprivation, and the stark extremes of socio-economic realities between the city centre and the marginalized townships are delinked. Colonial and Apartheid social, spatial and economic engineering that created "race" categories and defined human existence and citizenship along scales of legal, illegal, native, migrant, citizen, and subject have been dismantled legally. Yet each day, the public transport system runs a service schedule whose function is solely to transport hundreds of thousands of workers from township economies of servitude, "underdevelopment", and abjection, to the economic centre to eek out a subsistence living in ways that rehearse daily the enforced journeys of land dispossession, displacement, destruction of families, dispersion of communities, and resettlement.

The redevelopment strategy of the present invokes discourses of dignity and reconciliation in order to exhume and rebury the bodies inside of the official discourse but at another site so that the lucrative business of the everyday, its shrinking globe and expanding markets can be quickly pursued. The site of this redevelopment plan on some of the most expensive real estate on the continent attests to the ongoing desecration and plaqueing over. This redevelopment strategy does not bring into question the history of the land being stolen, the people being forcefully removed, and the traces of the damage destroyed except in the very existence of the Cape Flats and its townships. The existence of these ghettos of a few million Black* people on the city's periphery where the absence of hope is marked more and more by extreme levels of social violence in conditions of abject poverty is not even acknowledged as a directed, planned and executed outcome of the different phases of creating the city core's developed economy and its peripheral economies of service. It is here that the war against the poor that continues is most visible.

Prestwich Place: Re-membering to Forget

Changes to the previous Apartheid National Monuments Act in 1997 have made it more difficult for the business of building over to continue as usual. The new National Heritage Act requires that public hearings be held upon the discovery of larger concentrations of bones at building sites. Importantly it states that a process of public consultation should ensue so as to decide on what to do about these discoveries. For the first time a wider range of people are able to know about these "discoveries" and engage them. During the public hearings in 2003 relating to the Prestwich Street uncovering there was an overwhelming consensus

from the floor that this particular development project should not continue until the actual extent of the social destruction represented by the uncovering could be fully apprehended. However it became quickly apparent during the public hearings that interpretations of the new laws were going to be engaged from within “old” epistemological paradigms and that the new law itself would be instrumentalised in order to smother any other claims to the bodies that sought to engage the temporal fracture represented by the physical presence of the bodies as a challenge to the historical timeline of the oppressor. And so, under the guise of “public consultation”, the series of public hearings that took place were framed so as to reify the scientific and curiosity value of bones and not the historicity or humanity of the bodies. The hearings were about finding alternative sites for the bones neither about understanding how the bodies came to be there in the first place nor consecrating the present site as their rightful burial ground. They were about the economic value of the land to the developer not about the meaning of the land to people who have actively been removed from it. They were about the opportunity for historical and scientific study for future generations not about the possibility of forensic intervention for reparations for present generations. And they were about an accidental discovery and not an active uncovering. So whilst the public participation process required by law allowed for some talking but for no listening, it allowed neither a time for talking nor a time for listening. It was striking that both the developer and heritage authorities interpreted the new law in ways that did not address the overwhelming opinion voiced at the hearings which was to suspend exhumations. The official position of the South African Heritage Authorities (SAHRA) was to concur with the legal representatives of the developer that delaying such a development project was not, amongst other issues, in the interests of national reconciliation and to allow the developer to exhume the bodies and continue with the development.

Eventhough the combined power of big business and the official heritage authority was mobilised to quickly close the space opened by the uncovered land and the bodies lying there, it was too late. A challenge was inserted into this fast moving and well oiled development machine. The legal building over could not continue as had been the case during the colonial and Apartheid periods when the city’s management structures, heritage authorities, anthropologists and archaeologists could turn bodies into objects of study and remains into artefacts. In reaction to SAHRA’s decision several mainly former anti-Apartheid activists formed the Hands Off Prestwich Street Ad Hoc Committee. This Committee then invoked the appeal procedures allowed by the new law which effectively halted further building on the burial ground. At the same time the Committee initiated an unofficial public process on the streets of Cape Town that was not easily contained and included vigils at the gravesite, unofficial public meetings, pickets, a petition and use of the media to inform more members of the public about what was happening at the Prestwich Street burialground. The developers and heritage authorities continued to maintain the position that millions of rands was being lost everyday due to the delay and that we were jeopardising future investments into the city which, in turn, was hampering reconciliation efforts. Although the developers intensified their legal efforts they had no choice but to pause and reflect at the possibility of another political outcome. Following a series of appeals against SAHRA’s decisions the future of the burial ground at Prestwich Street no longer rests with the committee granting exhumation permits or with the heritage authorities themselves. At this very time its outcome is being decided by the relevant national government ministry. The redevelopment plans have now been delayed for more than a year. There is no proof that the poor of this city are any worse off than before as had been so vociferously argued by proponents of this type of development praxis. Instead we have extended the time period in which we can define the next phases of recovery, mourning, self-restitution and hope.

The violence recommitted to these bodies has come as a stark reminder that the city where we live continues to make manifest the complex nature of “white” supremacy. The violence we write about is not limited to the nature of the inherited social and economic structure of domination in the city. It is reflected in the experiences of the everyday encounter, in speech, interaction and the contested humanity of the forgotten dead. This violence is located in reconfiguring discourses of “race” and colour identities along a continuum of “development and underdevelopment” based largely on the “white” settler political economy of slavery,

colonisation and Apartheid. Clearly this is not only the resulting consequences of a new “rainbow” economy driven by global “market forces”. The physical opening up of the ground cast another light across the shadows of violence surrounding the discursive implications of the TRC’s legacy. The uncovering of mass graves such as the one at Prestwich Street has presented a unique opportunity to look back at the city’s creation as well as our own experiences of survival through the darker passageways of history-making inside of a real and imagined experience of genocide beyond the already superimposed colonial and Apartheid inventions of “white” supremacist relations of power and domination in the making of “our” history and memory. It is not coincidental that those who now own this land are “white” and those claiming historical connection to the bodies are not. The direct moral and economic benefits that masking and imagining away the atrocities of our colonial and apartheid past could not be so easily dismissed for those beneficiary classes of people who had their skin privileged under Apartheid.

Reclaiming the Spirit of Hope and Dignity

The time of the everyday of development has a different temporality to the time of mourning, self-reclamation and of recovery. The challenge of slowing down and making sense of what the new moment of peace means must neither be taken for granted nor lost to the new war. Claiming back hope, giving time to reclaim time back from the abjected zones of pessimism and fracture to co-create collective spaces for practices of recovery is also to resist. Peace must include the plan to repair the lives and communities who were destroyed. Time and money should also be invested into areas where Apartheid caused most of its damage. It destroyed our souls as much as it did the buildings. Its war against the humanity of people was everyday and all the time.

In this context peace action entails the rebuilding of lives, the opening and insertion of spaces for mourning and self-reclamation into the political economy of rushing on. A peace that will endure should not dissipate into a mirage beyond this present time of pausing and breathing. The memory and celebration of resistance resides precisely in acknowledging the possibility of reflecting in this moment in time. How else will the hope for a time of peace that was carried so fervently at the height of the resistance against Apartheid be sustained into the present and its tomorrows? Peace is more than the creation of a laager of secured, exclusive spaces of residence, economic opportunity, consumerism and leisure in which previous colonial and Apartheid beneficiary classes as well as a few others are able to enjoy the fruits of liberation. It is in the interest of sustaining the peace as well as in the interest of the beneficiaries of the previous systems of oppression and atrocity to act responsibly, to take responsibility, if the history of their making is to avoid an ineluctable repetition so that an active working through of the damage is possible.

* We use this term to refer to anybody who was racially categorised outside of “white” under Apartheid in whatever degree of variance to the Apartheid invention of multiple “black” others.