

Chapter 7

Final Thoughts

In the end, the students could not hope to match the firepower of the police. In the end, the state moved decisively against the organizations and the individuals it understood to be at the center of the uprising and its continued vehemence. Many died and many more were left injured in body and in spirit. Many left the country, fleeing in day-long marches across the borders to Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, and Mozambique.¹ All over South Africa they left behind them African townships and communities steeped in new experiences of violence at a scale they had never seen before. All schools were closed by government order. They remained empty and many were burned down until schools were reopened in January 1977. Even though arrangements were made to let older students prepare to make up examinations, only primary-school students returned to school, and attendance at secondary schools remained extremely low. During 1977 violence flared up again and again. The students had created and maintained against great odds an active and effective political strength. They organized several successful stay-aways and strikes, which built bridges between the generations and the classes and brought about the collapse of the *Urban Bantu Councils* and several school boards. It all came to an end with the banning of all *Black Consciousness* organizations and the detention, finally, of the key leadership of the Soweto Students' Representative Council. Beside the disappointment and anger, there was, however, a new spirit of defiance, a recognition of the courage with which young people had taken on the apartheid establishment, and there was a determination to continue the struggle. 1

We should not be afraid of the banning orders. For there is one important thing the Minister can't do: and that is to ban ideas in men's minds. We shall not fail in our struggle, so long as we are one. We shall also not fail because God is behind us. And the God we have is God of Liberty rather than oppression.²

The evidence is compelling that students not only knew what they were doing and what they were facing but also learned fast and adapted remarkably well in the face of massive and ongoing repression by the police. Students responded to the oppressive education system out of pride. They were unwilling to stand down or to calm themselves, especially when the authorities responded to their initial protests with a show of force. Biko acknowledged the students' fearlessness, their perseverance, and their determination.

And hence, what happened, happened. Some people were killed. These riots just continued and continued. Because at no stage were the young students—nor for that matter at some stage their parents—prepared to be scared. Everybody saw this as a deliberate act of oppressive measures to try and calm down the black masses, and everybody was

determined equally to say to the police, to say to the government: we shall not be scared by your police, by your dogs and by your soldiers. Now this is the kind of lack of fear one talking about which I see is a very important determinant in political action.³

In the entire uprising there was really only one moment—it came in the very beginning—during which the police were caught unawares and ill-prepared. In his closing argument defending the SSRC students whom the state sought to punish in the trial against Wilson Twala and ten others, Advocate Wentzel called it an "invitation to violence."⁴ But it was exactly this moment that transformed what had begun as a relatively peaceful protest march into a blaze of violence, as police officers chose to meet students head on in Vilakazi Street and suddenly found themselves surrounded and overwhelmed by the numbers and the resolve of the students. Instead of backing off, they stood their ground and thereby forced the confrontation. 5

[I]f only somebody had listened and not allowed this to come up to where it is, particularly earlier, prior to all the burnings, prior to all ... the children were moving and marching to seek consultation with some authorities and it was very unfortunate that in the process of their movement, we don't know if Hector Peterson [sic] had not been killed, or whether just one incident, if it hadn't happened, if it would not have changed the course of events for that particular day. Perhaps if this had not happened we would not even be where we are today [1979]. I don't know whether, all I am trying to say is the children ... but one doesn't know if that one little incident of shooting that one child, if it hadn't happened because they were moving somewhere to go and consult with somebody. If probably they had been given an opportunity to get there then what happened afterwards, maybe we would be able to gauge this in a different light..⁵

The thought "if Hector Peterson had not been killed" has echoed through time, reflecting then the sense of outrage and horror at the violence that had engulfed Soweto and, perhaps only much later, allowing those who remember to think of this moment with some sense of accomplishment. It is this violence that has shaped historical memory and experience in South Africa in the past thirty years.

In a world occupied with questions of division and global responsibility in the face of war, terror, and political dissent, it is necessary that we understand the politics of memory and history and that we understand how societies and individuals tell stories. How individuals understand the past and what they remember of it determine how they act in and understand the future and need to be part of public and collective historical memory.⁶ Post-conflict societies often need to tell a unified story in the interest of nation-building and unity. The politics of how such stories are composed and how societies deal with dissent and difference in composing such a unified story have grave implications for the future.

This book was written in a time of change, a moment in history when events

were moving fast in South Africa and the speed of change seemed to accelerate historical time. It was important to distinguish between the event and the texts (narratives, discourses) produced around the event. The texts, however they are obtained, are stories about a particular time and place, a particular understanding of an event at the time and place. They are texts that, analyzed over time, allow us to reconstruct the making of a national narrative. In the case of the Soweto uprising, the uprising itself represented a turning point, or it was constructed as such in the narrative of resistance against apartheid, but there was a second turning point: South Africa's transformation from the apartheid state to an ANC-led democratic African government. As the narrative of the uprising passed through these times, it changed, and along the way new texts were constructed so as to fit the story into new political purposes and agendas, changing historical understanding and interpretation in the process and even changing ways of doing history or understanding history. For example, history before 1990 was seen as a vehicle of resistance, of counternarrative to the apartheid understanding of the past; after 1990, history became a tool for nation-building and for reconciliation.

My sympathies lie with South Africa's nation-builders and with a unified story. But 10
old patterns of exclusion and validation, in political practice and in historical work, still exist in the new South Africa. How postapartheid South Africa has dealt with the stories of the Soweto uprising, framing them as a turning point and separating the uprising from its roots in the *Black Consciousness Movement*, is an indicator of a tendency in South African historiography to isolate complex and ambiguous stories rather than embedding them in a long history of resistance, "retrospectively and prospectively."⁷ Public collective memory is now similarly in danger of overlooking the contributions of others in the nation, among them its least-favored child, the exile, particularly that generation that is both the youngest and the most recent, the exile generation of the 1980s. It was this generation that was inspired by and grew out of the Soweto uprising and that was perhaps most affected by the increasing violence of the past thirty years.

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) created a new context for memory and history. It signaled a profound shift from the secrecy and lies of the apartheid years to a deliberately revelatory encounter with the past. The stories that the TRC collected were absolutely necessary in a historical context that, for many years, had distorted and silenced the narrative lines by which people make sense of their lives and their roles. But the stories collected by the TRC cannot themselves become a rigid or "comprehensive" version of the past. They must rather be the threshold to new exploration. Already, the TRC has shown signs of exclusion, of passing over. Those whom it has failed, whose stories were not heard, or whose stories jarred with an emerging myth of the tragic and heroic past, are in grave danger, and may themselves eventually become a threat to the new found order. It is clear from the language of the TRC and from the

recommendations of its report that it is absolutely necessary to the future of South Africa to continue to tell the stories of the past. American author William Kittredge has warned that people sometimes turn to "heedless anger" when they are "are excluded from what their society has defined for them as the main rewards of life, when they sense that they are absolutely out of the loop."⁸ But it is not simply fear of such heedless anger that must compel us to action. We need to gather stories, we need to tell all stories—even the complex, ambiguous, and terrifying ones—because "complexity is actual" and we will not truly transform society, undo the damage of the past, and break established patterns of power, control, or exclusion until society, historians, writers, and governments include all of those stories and continually adjust to fit even those that do not at first seem to be part of our master narrative.

Edward Said's words might serve as a warning here:

Triumphant, achieved nationalism then justifies, retrospectively as well as prospectively, a history selectively strung together in a narrative from: thus all nationalisms have their founding fathers, their basic, quasi-religious texts, their rhetoric of belonging, their historical and geographical landmarks, their official enemies and heroes. This collective ethos forms what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, called the habitus, the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitation. In time, successful nationalisms consign truth exclusively to themselves and relegate falsehood and inferiority to outsiders.⁹

Notes:

Note 1: Pauline Morris wrote of a "large scale exodus of students" and quoted the chief of the security police, Brigadier Zietsman, who on 2 June 1978 had told reporters of the *Rand Daily Mail* that an estimated 4,000 black South Africans were undergoing "terrorist training in various African countries" (Pauline Morris, *Soweto: A Review of Existing Conditions and Some Guidelines for Change* [Johannesburg: Urban Foundation, 1980], 19). A UN mission to Botswana estimated that 880 refugees had entered Botswana in 1976. In June 1977 the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that there were about 900 South African refugees in Botswana and 300 in Swaziland. In June 1977 the UN high commissioner for refugees reported an estimated 100 South African refugees in Mozambique, between 800 and 1,000 in Lesotho, 500 in Tanzania, and 400 in Zambia. In October 1977 the UNHCR said that a total of 3,000 black South Africans had found refuge in Southern African states. The SAIRR in its *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1977*, from which this data was extracted, commented that only about 7 percent of these South African refugees had committed themselves to military training and either the ANC or PAC. Most of them had expressed a desire to continue their educations (South African Institute of Race Relations, *Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1977* [Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1978], 129-130). See also Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: J. Currey; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 84-102.

Note 2: Trofomo Sono handwritten speech, notebook entry, undated, SAB, civil-court case WLD 6857/77, *West Rand Bantu Administration v. Santam* (WRAB v. Santam), vol. 411.

Note 3: Steve Biko, "Our Strategy for Liberation" (1977), in Steve Biko: *I Write What I Like: Steve Biko—A Selection of His Writings*, ed. Aelred Stubbs (London:

Bowerdean, 1978), 146.

Note 4: E. W. Wentzel, closing argument, 1 May 1979, SAB TPD, *The State v. W. W. C. Twala and Ten Others*, case K/P 282/78, p. 2735.

Note 5: Ellen Kuzwayo. Testimony, 1 May, 1979; SAB TPD, case K/P 281/78.

Note 6: Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 176.

Note 7: La Capra 2001, Mamdani 2002; Said, "Reflections on Exile," 176.

Note 8: William Kittredge, "Doing Good Work Together," in *Who Owns the West?* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996).

Note 9: Said, "Reflections on Exile," 176.