Unpacking a Memory Paradox: Memories of Violence and the limits of Transitional Justice

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Trauma, Memory and Representations of the Past

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'You begin to liquidate a people by taking away its memory ... then the people slowly forget what it is and what it was ... the people are unable to survive crossing the desert of organised forgetting'

Milan Kundera, 1996:218
The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

Group identity is created and sustained through memory and in the words of the novelist Milan Kundera a people's identity can also be liquidated by taking away their memory, by organized forgetting. In South Africa we continue to struggle over the meaning of the past, and this struggle is important as it ensures that new stories and new interpretations can find their way into our shared remembering. The ideas presented here are a summary of some of the arguments presented in a forthcoming Routledge book '*South Africa's struggle to remember: contested memories of squatter resistance in the Western Cape*' (Wale, 2016).

This work focusses specifically on local memories of violence and the lessons that the local holds for broader memory discourses within the field of transitional justice. The case-study is memories from the violence of Crossroads squatter settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town in the 1980s, which were collected during doctoral research in 2011 and 2012. The analytical framework is drawn from a politics of memory lens, which recognizes that there is much at stake (politically, materially, and psychologically) in how the past is remembered or forgotten. This paper unpacks a memory paradox found in the interpretative space between local and national memory which highlights the limits of transitional justice in South Africa.

1. Transitional justice and memory politics

This research speaks to the field of transitional justice which is the broad scholarship and practice that attempts to deal with a country's history of violence and human rights abuses, in order to facilitate a transition to future peace and reconciliation (Sriram & Herman 2009:458). It may include tribunals, truth-seeking efforts, programmes of reparations for victims and

institutional reform (Patel 2009). More recently programmes of veteran demobilization are being recognized as part of this field as they contribute to the aims of peacebuilding (Theidon, 2007).

Within this broader field, this work is situated within a group of studies that recognize the importance of 'the local' and specifically perspectives of those who are affected by transitional justice processes (Crosby & Lykes 2011; Vinjamuri & Boesenecker 2011; McEvoy 2012). Memory is a key concept for transitional justice, and specifically the question of how nations remember past violence. This study looks at local memory and how local actors embrace, transform or challenge national memory discourse. This question falls within a politics of memory theoretical approach which recognizes that memory is continually remade in the present for present purposes, thus turning the focus from what memory does, to what we do with it (Olick et al 2011).

In 1977 Michel Foucault theorized the difference between national and counter-memory. National memory is a key example of hegemonic memory, which defines how citizens should relate to and act on their own memories. Counter- memory is then memories which tell a different kind of story and challenge the taken for granted versions of history. However, these are not two separate realms and there is a danger of conceptualizing counter-memory as separate, authentic version of history. Instead the popular memory group who came together at the University of Birmingham in 1980 to think through this issue published an essay on popular memory (1998) where they argued for a relational analysis of these two interpenetrating realms of memory, in their words: as 'private memories (local memory) cannot, in concrete studies, be readily unscrambled from the effects of dominant historical discourse. It is often these that supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through'.

2. National Memory Discourse: How does South Africa remember the violence of the past?

Two key discourses structure South Africa's national memory of violence. The one is reconciliation and the other is the national liberation struggle or NLS discourse. These discourses are also transnational in the sense that they are common discourses used in other post-violence and post-liberation struggle contexts.

Claire Moon demonstrates the hegemonic framework through which people affected by the oppression of apartheid became victims, especially through the TRC narrative of trauma and healing (Moon 2008). As a narrative about transition, reconciliation legitimizes certain political choices (such as amnesty and reparations) while excluding others (such as revenge and structural redistribution) and brings into being particular identities (such as victim and perpetrator) that are central to the dominant narrative and structure how people relate to their own memories (Moon 2008).

Another key memory identity that structures how violence is remembered is the identity of 'veteran' which gains it's meaning through the NLS discourse. National liberation struggle discourse celebrates the national liberation struggle and positions the national liberation party as the natural leader of this struggle (Baines, 2007). It privileges the role of political organizations and constructs the veteran identity as belonging to the military wings of recognized political organizations that were fighting in this struggle.

Within these discourses there is no place to remember the experience of the comrades fighting in an internal struggle for liberation. Their fight was often in response to everyday experiences of oppression and not always connected to legitimate political parties or military wings. During the 1980s period of popular struggle inside South Africa, a number of studies emerged that focused on the identity of 'young lions' or 'comrades' who were engaged in very specific forms of violence based in distinct cultures, discourses and identities (Campbell 1992; Sitas 1992; Marks 2001). In 1996 Monique Marks argued that, before passing judgment on violence, or making calls for reconciliation, we need to develop an understanding of why individuals engage in violence in their own words. This we haven't done and we are perhaps also seeing the implications of not remembering this violence in the challenges we face as a country today.

3. Case Study: Crossroads Memory Community

The Crossroads memory community is an imagined community who share a history of violence in Crossroads and now live in the Cape Town townships of Crossroads, Philippi and Khayelitsha. Crossroads was originally formed in 1975. While the state conceived Crossroads as a temporary camp, the new residents had different ideas and with the help of community and legal organizations successfully resisted attempts at removal (Cole, 1987). Crossroads became well known for its successful resistance and it grew in unity and size. In the early 1980s satellite camps were set up surrounding Crossroads, which became particularly radical (Nyanga Bush, Nyanga Extension, Portland Cement and KTC) and were known for housing comrades. This space became increasingly politicized with the formation and influence of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. The Crossroads squatters formed a key, if complex relationship to the mass democratic movement as both the UDF and state forces attempted to vie for the power of squatters, with tragic results.

In 1983 a plan was announced to remove all squatters to a distant piece of sandy land called 'Khayelitsha'. However, the squatters, with support from the UDF and other anti-apartheid activists, resisted the plan and refused to move to Khayelitsha. As the mass movement took hold in Crossroads, and structures of popular resistance grew in power and leadership, it became increasingly difficult for state forces to enter, control and police squatter spaces (Cole, 1987). An alliance was forged between police and the squatter leader of Old Crossroads, Johnson Ngxobongwana, who was battling to hold onto power against the comrades. Under this alliance, Ngxobongwana's men were armed and marked with white cloths as 'Witdoeke' and instructed to attack surrounding squatter communities. A war between squatter-comrades and Witdoeke broke

out and lasted almost a month from 17 May to 12 June 1986. One by one, Portland Cement, Nyanga Bush and KTC were burnt to the ground. People lost their loved ones, belongings and homes. The forced removals from Crossroads left 13 dead, 75 injured and an estimated 70 000 refugees. The majority of squatters were relocated to Khayelitsha, where families attempted to rebuild their lives and comrades attempted to rebuild their resistance.

Research methods included oral history and in-depth interviews with individuals and groups who were either directly involved in or affected by this violence of Crossroads and especially those who belonged to its more radical satellite communities set up in 1981-1983 and demolished in 1986. Interviews were conducted in people's homes and in shared community spaces such as schools or halls. Life history interview were conducted with 30 respondents; 19 men and 11 women and seven group interviews were conducted. Furthermore an ethnography of the township spaces in which people presently live was captured in a fieldwork journal. This fieldwork journal further served as a space through which to record the dynamic enacted in the very process of collecting interviews. Interview questions were designed to capture memories of past and present violence, and the connection between the two, in the context of respondent's life stories. These were analyzed using narrative and discourse analysis techniques. In addition questions were asked about the experience and interpretation of the interview and research. These questions and the research journal provided key insights into the broader memory drama in which people find themselves and the roles within this drama that they seek to both inhabit and challenge.

4. **Key Findings: The Memory Paradox**

In line with a politics of memory perspective, the first layer of findings captures the nature of the memory agency of respondents. Members of Crossroads memory community are actively involved in doing something with their memories. What they are able to do with their memories is determined by national memory discourses, the identity positions which are created through these discourses, and the benefits which are connected to these identity positions. I develop the term 'keyhole memory identity' to capture the field of memory in which respondents are acting. In this field it is imagined that there is a barrier or door to accessing memory benefits. On one side lie the excluded, and if they are able to whittle their memory into the right form of the key – to prove they are legitimate victims and veterans - then they may be able to gain access to the memory benefits which lie behind the door. Memory activist organizations also play a role in this field, as they advocate for people to lay claim to these identities and the benefits they imply.

One key way in which members of Crossroads memory community engage with national memory discourse is through this notion that certain memory identities are connected to certain rewards in conditions of a transition without transformation. In the words of a research participant:

'Reparation could at least be a prize for everything we have gone through'

For victims of gross violations of human rights who continue to live in conditions of poverty and violence, it is hoped that perhaps reparation could give some relief for 'everything we have gone through'. The identity of victim becomes attached to the hope of a 'prize' in the context of extreme poverty and exclusion. In the same context respondents similarly connect the capacity to prove legitimate 'veteran' identity with the 'prize' of demobilization benefits and special pensions.

However, respondents own histories do not easily align with the histories implied in these memory identities, and this is the memory paradox they face. There are also costs to laying claim to these discourses as they do not adequately capture the reality of the experience of violence in the past or in the present. In the following sections I will deal with the two dominant memory discourses separately in terms of how they structure respondent's memory, how respondent's memories push back and the implication for transitional justice.

4.1. The NLS discourse, veteran identity and the nature of Crossroads violence

The discourse of the National Liberation Struggle celebrates the military violence connected to military wings of political parties, which means that the violence in exile is privileged, not the struggle violence inside the country. If squatter comrades cannot prove that they were linked to the political parties or military command structures, signified by an SP number then they cannot gain access to amnesty, demobilization or special pensions:

> *While we did our application for the special pension, all of us got the response that says we didn't qualify … There are a lot of obstacles that are made so we cannot access this money, because where do I get a number from an army, I was never in an army, how do I get a number from an army? … This money is prepared for people in the MK and APLA. There is nothing that is said about the people who never went to exile. We weren't there, we were here. We are the people that become Khayelitsha and Philippi, the people from Crossroads. Nobody knows about our contribution and recognises it (Interview, 17 August 2011).*

The role of the squatter comrades is further delegitimized and demonized in national memory, through a distinction made between legitimate (political, following a chain of command, clear) vs. illegitimate violence (criminal, not connected to a liberation army, inter-community) violence. This distinction, however, misses the realities of the internal struggle (and the external struggle) where the line between criminal and political were often blurred and where within the fight against the system people also turned on each other. In the quote below, the former squatter leader of Nyanga Bush contests this false dichotomy by describing what the environment was actually like:

We feel, I feel, I will show you one day I've got bullets here in my body, they did not face the barrel, they were scared, they would go through a process of training trying to motivate them, trying to encourage them, trying to instill the war mentality in their minds. We did not need that, we were encouraged enough, we took it upon ourselves to stand up, to get weapons. I had to go out to the boers and take weapons from them in their own residence and then I would bring those weapons. We had to sell dagga, go to the Eastern Cape and bring dagga in so to be able to exchange dagga, and the coloured people from Elsies River, we created a relationship with coloured people, we would go there during the night, they are looking for dagga and we would get their weapons (Interview, 11 August 2011).

The squatter comrades were confronting the enemy at their doorstep. Their experiences of everyday violence, everyday resistance and the creativity this required, do not make sense in terms of the NLS discourse of political vs. criminal, neat vs. messy, clean vs. dirty. As Belinda Bozzoli has shown in her 2004 book entitled *Theatres of struggle and the end of apartheid,* through NLS discourse the violence of the comrades is claimed for the liberation party, while at the same time blaming them for the 'dirtier' aspects of the struggle. Respondents experience the demonization of their memories through a construction of their violence as black-on-black or as criminal rather than political.

People's narratives of these squatter spaces incorporate a mixture of memories of freedom, unity, creativity and resistance in a context of oppression and state violence; but also of criminality, confusion, pain, inter-community, opportunistic and vigilante violence. The implications of the NLS discourse and the paradox it creates for local memory is that in telling a story where violence is either good or bad, there is no space for comrades to think through their more difficult memories of violence and also to gain recognition for the role they played in the context of the struggle. In order to rectify a negative construction of their involvement in violence, comrades will often swing in the opposite direction of legitimizing their role in struggle, which does not facilitate an honest engagement with memories of violence. As the quote below demonstrates:

'Comrades want to cover up the bottom of their negativity and come up and politicize everything, to be seen as heroes (Interview, 13 February 2012).

4.2. The discourse of reconciliation, victimhood and constructions of the present

The discourse of reconciliation tells a story about past violence, transition and peace. In the context of peace, it says, we need to address past wounds from violence, to heal and move forward. Respondents engage with this reconciliation narrative through the connection between past pain and economic reparation in conditions of poverty:

'The truth commission had a few people that got paid an amount of R30 000 that they could get; we would wish it could also happen to us. The same people who were reparated by the Truth Commission, it's the same thing that we went through.'

(Group Interview, Zulu's place, 11 October 2011)

While speaking through experiences of trauma to a witnessing audience can be healing and integrating, this research shows that the connection to financial reparation in a context of extreme poverty confuses this process. Reparation for past pain seems to have come to replace necessary socio-economic transformation. At the everyday level of the memory drama, the psychological and the economic have become confused in ways that do damage rather than repair. As a result many victims who were not able to appear before the TRC experience their engagement with reconciliation discourse as a trauma-drama of hope and despair, rather than a healing process. In the quote below one interviewee describes this as the reliving of painful memories to perform victimhood in the hope of gaining access to reparation and the despair they face when this outcome does not ensue:

It gets very much to me when these issues are spoken about, because we've lost brothers and sisters and our own kids during that fight, we were running over dead bodies, looking at our houses getting burned and our belongings burning inside those shacks, it was a very painful experience and when this issue is spoken about the pain comes back and nothing has happened – we received nothing – we were not compensated, not reparated. We were told of becoming those victims and attending the meetings and we were in and out of those, but nothing happened in reality and we were told that we should have gone to the TRC but we never went to the TRC. (Group Interview Dlamini's home, 24 January 2012).

While respondents live out this trauma-drama, their life history narratives also challenge the assumptions of the discourse of reconciliation by locating their victimhood in the present rather than the past. Respondents challenge the reconciliation assumption that violence is in the past by describing the way in which their lives are still violence filled in terms of crime and in terms of the violence of poverty. They further assert that the violence of today is more painful because it has no purpose, and no hope, it makes no sense. In addition, the pain of the past is in fact made more painful by the conditions of the present:

These things coming up because even today, the suffering we went through then we are still going through today. That is why I'm saying, this situation is getting more painful because you reverse and go back to where you came from when you thought you were through that period but you go back and suffer even today (Group Interview Beauty's crèche, 24 January 2012).

Reconciliation assumes that oppression and violence is in the past, yet it is clear that it continues in the present for survivors of violence, which needs to be addressed. Reparation cannot take the place of socio-economic transformation, as the effects of how this plays out are destructive. In theory reparation is a noble idea, but in practice 'victims' find themselves caught in a reparation drama, where in the context of socio-economic exclusion they perform their stories of pain in the hope of socio-economic reward. There narratives express the frustration they feel as they plough resources into this drama, re-live their experiences of trauma and are pitted against one another for scarce reparation pay outs. In a context of the lack of transformation, this psychological and economic relationship muddies the waters and respondents lose out on both counts.

5. Conclusion: Mobilizing Memory

On the one hand respondents mobilize their memories as a resource in a broader memory drama in an attempt to gain access to the keyhole memory identities of victim and veteran. However these memory identities contribute to a 'forgetting' of the nature of internal struggle and this has implications for how people engage with the meaning of their memories of violence in the present. While Crossroads memory community try to gain the benefits connected to keyhole memory identities, their own histories tell a different story which places them in a paradoxical position but also challenges the hegemony of national memory discourse.

On the other hand, respondent's lived memories capture another kind of story. They hint at a counter memory which challenges the assumptions of the discourses in which the keyhole memory identities of victim and veteran are given meaning. These local memories of violence challenge constructions of national memory on three counts:

1) They challenge the false dichotomy presented in national liberation struggle discourse of legitimate vs. illegitimate violence and the implications of this for remembering the 'dirtier' aspects of the violence of the internal struggle.
2) They challenge the assumption of reconciliation discourse that violence and oppression are in the past.
3) They challenge the way in which national memory discourse foregrounds individual benefits for specific groups rather than collective transformation. This is emphasized in the quote below:

We are really desperate for money … When people are suffering they become aggressive, they are aggressive because they are hungry, they are angry because they are not in a satisfactory living environment. Although we were doing these fights, we were not looking for benefits, we were looking for places to settle and be. We were confused now later when the government is giving certain people money. Some people do get money and some people do not get money so the reason we are looking for money is that we are in the same situation as those who do get funds. Now the government is creating conflict amongst us. But during that time we gave our blood

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and our kids to fight for the liberation of this country, without expecting any benefits,
but then some people get and some don't. That is why you hear that there is a lot of
conflict of interest' (Group interview, Zulu's place, 28 October 2011).

In sum, transitional justice is challenged by these memories to:

1) Address the nature and memory of internal violence in ways that don't demonize and exclude those who were not part of military structures.

2) Foreground collective socio-economic transformation for all South Africans who suffered under apartheid, rather than individual benefits for specific groups of veterans or victims.

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