

The Politics of Public History in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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A site has been set aside to pay tribute to heroes of South Africa's struggle for freedom. Situated outside of Pretoria, Freedom Park is to include a Garden of Remembrance where the pantheon of heroes of the liberation struggle is to be memorialised. Unsurprisingly, the Freedom Park project has sparked controversy about who exactly should be honoured in its precincts. In response to the insistence of certain historians that Boer War leaders have no place in the Garden of Remembrance, the journalist Max du Preez tried to make the case for including figures such as General Christiaan de Wet. He proposed that:

we [journalists? Afrikaners?] should rescue our history from the clammy claws of our nation's historians. They seem unable to grasp that it is something far more profound than academic research; that it is actually something that forms our individual and communal consciousness that defines how we relate to each other and view the future.

Without a hint of irony, he admonishes his readers that

We should not over-romanticise our history, and we should never allow anyone to manipulate it to serve any kind of political or other purpose.

And concludes that

We should claim our common history as South Africans, otherwise we will remain the victims of the past.¹

Du Preez correctly recognizes that those groups who are relegated to the margins of society and whose histories become peripheral to that of the nation, are likely to become politically powerless in the present. But he fails to recognize that his call for the construction and sharing of a common history is itself a form of manipulating the past to serve a political purpose. The question of whose version of history gets disseminated and institutionalized is, after all, a political one.²

The view that historians have ownership of the past is risible. Historians have served as midwives to the birth of a new South African history in at least two ways: Firstly, they claim to offer us the "true" account of "what really happened" as opposed to the false history of the apartheid state and its ideologues. Secondly, they help us to "remember" salient incidents that were previously omitted from the official version of history. At the same time, we are taught how to "forget" other incidents that are no

¹ Max du Preez, 'Rescue our rich national history from academics', *The Cape Argus*, 20 December 2003

² David Glassberg, 'Public History and the Study of Memory', *The Public Historian* 18, 2 (Spring 1996), p. 11.

longer of consequence to the new official version of history.³ But is it our function to “correct” the past to comply with new interpretations propounded by the government of the day? Should historians condone selective and partisan history? Jeff Guy laments the “failure of historians in the academy to fulfil one of their essential social roles – as guardians and propagators of informed, critical, disinterested history”.⁴ So have we compromised our integrity and abdicated our social responsibility? I believe we do so when we become apologists for history’s winners and complicit in legitimating the emergence of the new political order. This is tantamount to becoming his master’s voice. On the other hand, it is clear that academic historians do not have a monopoly on historical knowledge. Neither are they able to compete with the popularizers of history, namely, the mass media and the heritage sector as the gatekeepers of memory. In fact, the gap between academic history and memory is widening. With the commodification of the past, consumers have taken to shopping for souvenirs and packaged memories. For it is popular history produced by mass culture rather than academic history that determines how the past is remembered by society at large. Does the market for popular history necessarily imply that history is being “dumbed down” for mass consumption? How should professional historians respond? Retreat into our ivory towers because we do not have the resources to compete with those who have greater access to the marketplace of cultural or popular memory? Or come out with guns blazing shooting missives in dense and publicly inaccessible discourses?

The (post-modernist) notion that reality is socially constructed has undermined the predications of positivistic history. This epistemological crisis for the historical profession has called into question its authority and credibility with the public.⁵ In South Africa the crisis has translated into declining enrolments in university history departments. Students have been negatively influenced in their choice of subjects by the mindset that regards history as poor career move. Conversely, there has been significant growth of the heritage sector that has been welcomed as a lifeline by some in academe.⁶ This has occasioned mixed reactions from professional historians. Some are dismissive, wary or even suspicious. Others have embraced it and even taken to teaching courses in the field of public history and training students to work in the heritage sector. This sector is subject to the twin pressures of political expediency and the hegemony of the market. It seeks, by and large, to promote nation-building in our fledgling and fragile democracy. As well intentioned as such projects might be, the idea of a past that all South Africans can share is chimerical. Guy asserts that “the heritage industry invokes a sentimentalized past which makes bearable a sordid and painful present”.⁷ I share his concerns insofar as heritage projects construct simplistic,

³ Leonhard Praeg, ‘Transformation and the politics of memory’, *Grocotts Mail*, 2000.

⁴ Jeff Guy, ‘Battling with Banality’, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 18 (1998), p. 168.

⁵ Joyce Appleby, ‘The Power of History’ *American Historical Review* (February 1998), p. 2 citing Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narration, and the Philosophy of Science’ in Gary Gattling, ed. *Paradigms and Resolutions* (Notre Dame: Indiana University Press, 1974).

⁶ Jane Carruthers, ‘Heritage and History’, H-AFRICA Forum #2 on H-NET <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-africa&month=9810&week=c&msg=sv82DZpkATFzGc7zqbKFKa&user=&pw=>

⁷ Guy, ‘Battling with Banality’, p. 157

sanitized versions of the past that amount to mythicization. We should interrogate projects that seek to validate or confer legitimacy on politically correct versions of the past. And we should critique official versions of the past and deconstruct the narratives that reify this sort of history.

In the guise of nation building, the apartheid regime abused the past for ideological and political ends. In post-apartheid South Africa the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has put history to equally utilitarian uses. This is by no means exceptional. Indeed, the recasting of public history is always an explicitly political project. With this in mind, I shall examine how the emergence of identity politics in the new South Africa has affected competing claims to the ownership of the past.

Nation building and identity politics in post-apartheid South Africa

According to Benedict Anderson, a shared history is the crucial element in the construction of an “imagined community”. This facilitates identity formation that enables disparate individuals and groups to envision themselves as members of a collective with a common past, present and future.⁸ In the West especially, history has served as a “school of patriotism” for it has sought to construct the master narrative of the “imagined community” of the nation. Where there is a lack of consensus as to how the nation should be defined, it follows that whoever wields power has the wherewithal to decide who is included and who is excluded from the “imagined” community. And whenever national identity is contested, collective memory is the key to legitimating the status quo in terms of the past. For collective memory and national identity are mutually constitutive.⁹

However, in the late twentieth century we have arguably entered a post-nationalist era wherein the socio-political dynamics have been transformed. Joyce Appleby contends that:

“[I]t may once have been important to construe the nation as the holder of the collective experience for our “imagined” community, but the trope carries too much baggage to persist. The identity politics of our day have emerged precisely in reaction to the claims of the nation to represent a homogenized people..¹⁰

Appleby may have had the West in mind when writing these words, but identity politics have come to play a crucial role in many multicultural societies, especially those in a state of transition. Notwithstanding South Africa’s heterogeneity, the ANC has since 1994 embarked on a project to build the “imagined” community of the

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, rev. ed. 1991), p. 15.

⁹ Jan-Werner Müller, ‘Introduction: the power of memory, the memory of power and the power over memory’ in Jan-Werner Müller, ed. *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe* (2002), p. 21.

¹⁰ Appleby, ‘The Power of History’, p. 11.

nation.¹¹ It has attempted to fashion a new national history to legitimate the current status quo. This narrative seeks to realign collective memory with a new national identity thereby re-defining what “being South African” means. Thus new “sites of memory” – memorials, monuments, public holidays, national symbols, commemorative events and civic rituals – are created or established so as to forge a national consciousness. But national identity and collective memory survives only to the degree that it satisfies individuals’ demands for a usable past.¹²

In this climate of where an understanding of the past is clearly contested, two discourses appear to be competing for primacy. These discourses are constructed through historical memory and the interplay of different social forces. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but do exist in a state of tension. The first might be termed ‘rainbowism’ and exponents emphasize that South Africa has a common, shared history. The Truth & Reconciliation Committee (TRC) has been the most public attempt to refashion a collective, national memory for the sake of reconciliation and laying to rest the beast of the past.¹³ This vision stresses the need to forge a co-operative future from the cauldron of our conflict-ridden past. The second discourse might be termed ‘Africanism’ for it proclaims African leadership of the national liberation struggle and in government. This version of the past is exclusive and triumphalist, and is epitomized by President Mbeki's "Peoples' History" project which seeks to construct an official history which would make the liberation struggle the master narrative of our national history. Struggle history is also evident in the academy. In reference to the proceedings of the 1994 Wits History Workshop, the eminent American historian, Eric Foner, observed:

Many South African historians, without intending to do so, are now producing an ANC-centered history, constructing narratives that highlight the (perhaps exceptional) multiethnic and multiracial cooperation of the 1980s that overthrew apartheid..¹⁴

Because the ANC controls the government and can (rightfully) claim to have been the vanguard of the liberation struggle, black consciousness and other ideologies have been marginalized in the new dispensation. This ‘Africanist’ (or ANC-ist?) version of the past foregrounds a narrative of resistance but also endorses nation building (albeit of a different form to ‘rainbowism’).

Notwithstanding the government’s prioritisation of the nation-building project, the emergence of identity politics in post-apartheid South Africa has derailed this project to some extent. Stakeholders and cultural brokers from a variety of political persuasions and communities have become engaged in attempts to renegotiate the

¹¹ Gary Baines, ‘The rainbow nation? Identity and nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Mots Pluriels*, 7 (1998), <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP798gb.html>

¹² John R. Gillis, ‘Review Essay: Remembering memory: A Challenge for Public Historians in a Post-National Era’, *The Public Historian*, 14, 4 (Fall 1992), p. 98.

¹³ Colin Bundy ‘The Beast of the Past: History and the TRC’ in W. James & L. van de Vijver, eds. *After the TRC: Reflections on truth and reconciliation in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), pp. 9-30.

¹⁴ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), p. 102.

meaning of the country's and their own past. Old versions of the past have come to be regarded as either redundant or unacceptable, and previously dominant ideologies have been challenged. With the assertion of sub-national identities in the context of the centripetal forces caused by globalization, new (hi)stories are being constructed to replace extant ones. Representatives of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional and other particularist identities are seeking their own "sites of memory", an obvious case in point being the Sarah Baartman memorial erected by the Khoisan community. Given the existence of a dominant group, whether perceived to be along lines of race and/or political affiliation, smaller groups have defined themselves as "minorities". Such groups invoke their own versions of the past in order to justify their claims to a discrete cultural identity, as well as being a constituent part of the nation. This growing interest in ethnic, local and even family history seems to confirm that we have entered a post-nationalist era with a proliferation of particularist histories and memories.¹⁵ Issues of memory and identity have become pivotal to political discourse and practice. And this manifests itself out in the realm of competing claims to ownership of the past.

If we are to grasp how group identities are used in this process, we need to understand how history, memory and heritage function in our society. Are they the same thing? Are the custodians of history, memory and heritage one and the same? Who are the custodians of the past? Or perhaps the notion of 'custodians of the past' is itself problematical? Should the past belong to any one (group) in particular? Or does it belong to everyone and no-one? And, finally, who owns and controls the past? The following section will touch on these matters.

History, Memory and Heritage

Memory, like history, is a reconstruction of the past from which meaning is derived. Obviously, however, history and memory are not synonymous. Pierre Nora holds that memory is in a permanent state of flux, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, whereas history is a representation of the past, a critical discourse which is suspicious of memory.¹⁶ In other words, history and memory are in a fundamental state of tension. In Sturken's view history and memory are "*entangled* rather than [necessarily] oppositional"¹⁷. History and memory are often in contestation but they need not be. Indeed, there can be intersection or elision between history and memory for they are mutually constitutive. So the juxtaposition of history and memory is something of a false dichotomy to start with. What we are actually interested in is memory *in* history, the role of the past in history or, for that matter, in contemporary politics, and what Habermas once called 'the public uses of history'.¹⁸

¹⁵ John Gillis, 'Introduction' in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 3-24; Charles Maier, 'A Surfeit of Memory: Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial', *History and Memory*, 5 (Fall/Winter 1993), pp. 136-52.

¹⁶ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de memoire, Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 8-9.

¹⁷ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 5

¹⁸ Müller, 'The power of memory', pp. 24-25.

Memory is not built incrementally but is continually crafted and recrafted as material from the past is reencountered and reinterpreted. The dominant memory emerges after a struggle between conflicting interpretations of historical events and serves to validate and legitimate the status quo. The past becomes an excuse for the present, justifying the social or political order on the grounds that it was ordained by history. Accordingly, historical memories are constantly refashioned to suit present purposes.¹⁹ Foucault expresses concern that historical writing tends to celebrate the oppressions of the past and present as necessary and inevitable. He is equally concerned that teleological thinking demands closure, that it requires disciplining the uncertainties of the present to conform to some a priori vision of the future.²⁰ The dominant memory serves to support and validate a certain social order ordained by the past. Consequently, it prescribes what should be remembered (as well as how it should be remembered) and what should be forgotten. Because all knowledge is political, and memory is a form of knowledge about the past, memory can be conceptualised as a kind of 'symbolic power' that can be marshalled in much the same way as material power.²¹

Counter-memory can exist in opposition to the official (hi)story. Individuals who do not subscribe to the dominant memory, who refuse to forget or remember what it prescribes, become part of society's counter-hegemonic groupings. Their memories exist in private spaces and individual minds. Their memories are subaltern and exist as a potentially threatening undercurrent to the social order. Their ability to survive depends on what claims to political resources and state power the group is able to muster.²² Yet even in totalitarian societies, the state does not control individual or social memory completely. Agents of civil society can play an active role in strategies of remembrance; sometimes in collaboration with the state, sometimes against it.

George Lipsitz's understanding of counter-memory differs somewhat from that of Foucault. In his view, counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate and the personal.²³ Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that locality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds onward toward a total history. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths which seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an enduring suspicion of both categories. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives

19 Daniel F. Bouchard, ed. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Select Essays and Interviews with Michel Foucault* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), p. 144.

20 Bouchard, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 150.

21 Müller, 'Introduction', p. 25.

22 Müller, 'Introduction', p. 32

23 George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: collective memory and American popular culture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 213.

purporting to represent universal experience. Thus, counter-memory is not a rejection of history, but a reconstitution of it.²⁴

The tendency to collapse categories such as history and memory, is replicated in some of the work on heritage. David Lowenthal, for instance, might have some astute observations to make when discussing the nature of heritage.²⁵ But in his determination to discredit heritage as antithetical to history, he often conflates memory and heritage. Heritage is usually conceived as residing in objects unique and exclusive to a community, not shared with those defined as being “outsiders”. So national heritage is deemed to belong to all those residing within a country’s boundaries. But not all public history activity refers to the nation.²⁶ Traces or vestiges of the past of sub-national communities are also assigned meaning by practitioners of public history. Trained historians working in museums, historic sites, and community history projects confront the problem of historical representation on a regular basis and encounter perspectives on the past that their colleagues in universities and colleges are unlikely to engage. In presenting history to the public, they discover that the public is talking back to them. An understanding of this exchange between historians and their audiences (or consumers) might cause academic historians to rethink their relationship with society and how public history is used. What Michael Frisch has called the shared authority of the public historical enterprise has profound implications for how all historians will do their work in future.²⁷

The Ownership and Control of the Past in South Africa

An understanding of how public history functions in society is evident in the growing interest in the topic of memory by the historical profession. The rapid expansion of the study of memory in scholarly discourse has gone hand in hand with an interest in the part of political actors in the representation of the past.²⁸ This emphasis in some of the works in the growing corpus of literature called ‘memory studies’ has been on the social construction of memory, particularly on efforts by the state and powerful political groups to invent traditions that could serve their interests.²⁹ As those with the power to control the construction of the past have the means to shape memory, it is essential to understand how they do so. This means addressing the question of agency: who are the custodians of public memory, its producers, distributors, and consumers? If we do not pursue this line of inquiry, memory studies is in danger of becoming pre-occupied merely with the content of representations of the past and ignoring whether

²⁴ Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, p. 227.

²⁵ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); ‘Fabricating Heritage’, *History and Memory*, 10, 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 5-24.

²⁶ Glassberg, ‘Public History and the Study of Memory’, p. 22.

²⁷ Michael H. Frisch, ‘The Memory of History’ in S.P. Benson, S. Brier & R. Rosenzweig, eds. *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (1986), pp. 5-17.

²⁸ Gadi Algazi, ‘Editorial: The Past in the Present’, *History & Memory*, 13, 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), p. 1.

²⁹ This was pioneered by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

it might or might not have relevance for politics.³⁰ Clearly, all public acts of remembrance, commemoration or monumentalization are in some sense political. But whilst this is obvious where the state is involved in valorizing official memory, the political dynamics are not so clear-cut when civil society is involved. Memory is capable of being appropriated, repressed or de-politicized by a variety of groups in civil society. Thus, it is necessary to disaggregate the competing and conflicting interests and identify the parties staking a claim to ownership of public history.

The United States has experienced a number of high-profile “cultural wars” engendered by claims and counter-claims as to who owns the past. A case in point was the controversy over the proposed exhibit of the Enola Gay by the Smithsonian Institute on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima atomic bombing.³¹ The shaping of a past worthy of remembrance in the present is contested and involves a struggle for supremacy between stakeholders such as politicians and other interested parties. It is memory rather than history that provides (self-) justification for claims to ownership of the past between competing factions. Particular versions of the past are selectively invoked to add credence and authenticity to truth claims,³² as well as to assert the right to a particular legacy and identity. Lowenthal cites a civil rights veteran who puts his case succinctly: “If we don’t tell the story or control the telling it’s no longer about us”.³³ The issue is one of ownership and control of the past, and how to get others to “buy into” a specific version thereof. And this is where public memory comes into the picture.

Public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future. It is fashioned ideally in the public sphere in which various parts of the social structure exchange views. The major focus of this communicative and cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both dominant and subordinate cultures. Public memory speaks primarily about the structure of power in society because that power is always in question in a world of ideological differences and because cultural understanding is always grounded in the material structure of society itself. To the extent that public memory originates in discourse or the presentation of divergent viewpoints, it is not simply manipulated. For manipulation and invention do not go far enough in explaining how certain symbols assume dominance in public memory. Although public memory is constructed from discourse the sources of cultural and political power are diffuse and unequal.³⁴

³⁰ Müller, 'The power of memory', p. 3.

³¹ There is a voluminous literature on this episode that includes Michael J. Hogan, ed. *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and a special issue of the *Journal of American History*, 82, 3 (December 1995).

³² John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 15

³³ Lowenthal, 'Fabricating Heritage', p. 28.

³⁴ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, p. 19.

John Bodnar holds that public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions.³⁵ Official memory originates in the concerns of cultural brokers or authorities at all levels of society. These include those in local government, officials in regional government departments, bureaucracies, and educational institutions. Such local and/or regional government and civic leaders share a common interest in preserving the status quo by upholding the official version of the past. Vernacular memories, on the other hand, are employed by ordinary citizens to sustain ties of family and local community. Their views of reality derive from first-hand experience in small-scale communities rather than the “imagined communities” of a larger nation. However, Bodnar’s framework pitting official memory against vernacular memories also oversimplifies the play of forces shaping public history. In fact, there are multiple official histories as well as multiple vernacular memories. Since it is nearly impossible to reach a consensus on the interpretation of a historical event to which people attach considerable significance, public historical representations such as a museum exhibit, war memorial, or commemorative ceremony are often deliberately ambiguous to satisfy competing factions.³⁶ If this is the case, what are the implications for the politics of identity in post-apartheid South Africa? Does this mean that history is becoming less contested as it moves from educational institutions into the public domain? Does this, in turn, imply that public history has uncritically embraced the nation-building project?³⁷

Curating the Past in and on behalf of the new South Africa

Since 1994 numerous new sites of memory have been commissioned to remember aspects of South Africa’s reconfigured past. These include national, local and community-based public history projects. Certain of these, especially battle sites, memorials and monuments, have sought to promote nation building by emphasizing a shared rather than a conflictual past. Others have celebrated ethnic-nationalist history. Still others have focused on telling the stories of local communities but have inserted these within the master narrative of struggle history. In some instances, the initiative for the establishment of these sites came from civil society or the private sector. Funding has come solely from central, regional or local government in some cases, whilst in others one or more of these tiers of government has formed a partnership with the private sector. I will focus on museums in the discussion that follows.

As state-funded institutions, South African museums give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory. In this way, museums invariably – although not always - anchor official memory.³⁸ During the apartheid era, museologists insisted on the objective nature of their exhibits and

³⁵ Bodnar, *Remaking America*, p. 13.

³⁶ Glassberg, ‘Public History and the Study of Memory’, pp. 13-14.

³⁷ Carruthers, ‘Heritage and History’ poses similar questions.

³⁸ Patricia Davison, ‘Museums and the reshaping of memory’ in S. Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds. *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 145. There have been cases, such as the aforementioned Smithsonian’s proposed Enola Gay exhibit in 1995, where museum curators have challenged the meaning of an event in collective memory. In this instance, the commemorative voice prevailed over the historical one and the exhibit in its original form was cancelled.

the knowledge conveyed by them. Since then it has been widely acknowledged that “the conceptual frameworks that order collections and underpin exhibitions also mirror dominant forms of knowledge.”³⁹ For museums are not simply repositories of artifacts but active producers of knowledge. They employ a discourse which, in Foucauldian terms, is a historically specific material practice that produces knowledge and establishes power relation between subjects who occupy specific positions – in this case, curators and the public. In other words, museums tend to reproduce the unequal political relationships of a society. And the ability of ethnic groups and local communities to have their version of history accepted as the public history rests on their access to power and resources. In recognizing that they are part of civil society and should provide spaces where members of society can explore and make sense of their past, certain museums have in recent years sought to involve communities in their projects so as to give them a sense of ownership of their heritage.⁴⁰ But this has not always been the case for a variety of reasons. I wish to examine two instances – one a municipality-initiated and the other a foreign-funded project – which bear this out.

Danish museum curator Maria Rytter, in conjunction with Faaborg Prison Museum, produced an exhibit in 1999 simply called “Nelson Mandela”. Sponsored primarily by Danish funders, it was handed over to the Robben Island Museum in 2001. Following its display in one of South Africa’s premier cultural tourism attractions, it has become a traveling exhibit under the name “Long Walk to Freedom”.⁴¹ It derives its title from Mandela’s autobiography (co-authored by Richard Stingle) and tells, in part, the life story of Mandela and how this intersected with the resistance struggle against apartheid. It consists of 34 display boards with captioned photographs and texts, as well as artifacts such as a South African Police uniform, a replica of Mandela’s Robben Island prison cell, and items associated with the hard physical labour performed by political prisoners in the limestone quarry on Robben Island. The structure of the display would seem to suggest an attempt to marry a “slice of life” thematic focus on the prison experience of Mandela with the broader (and chronological) history of his role as a political leader. In fact, much of the exhibit concerns the experiences of the Rivonia Trialists and other political prisoners on Robben Island. Mandela is depicted as a dignified leader of men despite the circumstances of his incarceration. The display also deals with Mandela’s subsequent transfer to Pollsmoor and Victor Verster prisons from whence he entered into negotiations with the De Klerk government that resulted in the release of all political prisoners and the end of apartheid.

The exhibit was constructed during the “honeymoon period” of the Mandela era when national reconciliation was high on the agenda, and when the rhetoric of “rainbowism” was ubiquitous. It is clear that the curator was influenced by the expressions of goodwill by former political enemies who were prepared to sink their differences in order to find a way out of the protracted conflict and the spiraling levels

³⁹ Patricia Davison, deputy director of the South African Museum, Cape Town, cited by Praeg, ‘Transformation and the politics of memory’.

⁴⁰ Sandra Klopper, ‘Whose Heritage? The Politics of Cultural Ownership in Contemporary South Africa’, *NKA Journal of Contemporary Art*, 5 (Fall/Winter 1996), pp. 34-37.

⁴¹ I viewed it at the Albany Museum, Grahamstown.

of violence. There is reference to the “miracle of the negotiated revolution”. The main text reflects admiration for Mandela and his selfless efforts to secure a peaceful political transition. This is evident from the choice of quotes attributed to Mandela, including the statement that:

We need to remind ourselves that the quest for reconciliation was the fundamental objective of the people’s struggle, to set up a government based on the will of the people, and build a South Africa which belongs to all.

The teleological narrative leads the reader/viewer along the path of reconciliation. The final display board has the heading “The Power of Reconciliation” and shows photographs of a reunion between former political prisoners and warders. The sub-text would seem to be that even functionaries of the apartheid regime had sufficient humanity to recognize that all that separated them from the erstwhile inmates had been the politico-judicial system that they were obliged to enforce. The exhibit undoubtedly extols the magnanimity of Mandela and his associates but suggests that their jailers, too, were honourable men. Sources cited include James Gregory’s *Goodbye Bafana: Nelson Mandela, My Prisoner, My Friend* (1995) and stories relayed by another prison warder named Christo Brand. These acknowledgments would seem to imply that Mandela’s former jailers were quite prepared to tell their stories once Mandela had emerged as an icon. In this way, their own stories were refashioned to coincide with the history of reconciliation in the new South Africa. And the exhibit serves to validate the nation-building process.

History is not only reworked to reflect changing political circumstances but it may be appropriated by civic and political leaders. This can be illustrated with reference to the sequence of events and circumstances surrounding the proposed development of a museum in the century-old township of New Brighton. Port Elizabeth’s local authority – previously the City Council and now the Nelson Mandela Metropole – has a long-standing commitment to upgrade the Red Location which is the oldest part of the township. It was envisaged that the first phase of the project would entail the erection of a Freedom Struggle Museum and the restoration of corrugated iron houses from which the Red Location derives its name. The project was launched in June 1998 with an architectural competition designed to solicit a suitable design for a cultural complex which is to include an art gallery, a creative art centre, a market, a library, a hall, conference centre and visitors’ accommodation.⁴² On 1 April 2003, the Metropole’s Executive Mayor Nceba Faku performed the sod turning at a ceremony to mark the commencement of what was now to be called the Red Location Cultural Museum. The Metropole’s communications manager, Roland Williams, said that the project “formed part of the council’s strategy of upgrading previously disadvantaged communities”. He added that the Red Location had “major political significance”.⁴³ The project has been inextricably connected to a political vision of why New Brighton’s past should be remembered; a version of New Brighton’s history which invokes the history of the struggle against apartheid and commemorates it as a

⁴² *The Municipality of Port Elizabeth, Competition for the Transformation of Red Location* (Port Elizabeth, 1998), p. 8. This publication was compiled by Albrecht Herold.

⁴³ *Eastern Province Herald* 2 April 2003, (‘Mayor kicks off Red Location museum project’).

“site of resistance”. This vision that New Brighton be remembered in this way was first articulated by certain (former) Councillors.⁴⁴

Since being mooted, the Red Location Cultural Museum project has been owned and promoted by the Mandela Metropole and the heritage tourism industry in Port Elizabeth. The project has taken some five years to get off the ground even though the central government promised to match the funding budgeted by the Metropole. While the authorities claimed to have consulted with residents to ascertain how the money should be spent, they ignored the express wishes of Red Location residents who have insisted that priority be accorded to the development of infrastructure and the provision of essential services rather than the cultural/historical precinct. Nonetheless, the Metro has proceeded with the project. Irrespective of the motives of its initiators and planners, the project represents a real danger that outsiders might impose their vision of what New Brighton's past should mean for those who have lived there. It is not my wish to denigrate struggle heroes, but the struggle for liberation was not the only defining experience of New Brighton's residents. Richard Werbner holds that the "right of recountability" entitles citizens to have their memories made known and acknowledged in the public sphere.⁴⁵ Insofar as they have been heard – as with the TRC hearings – the voices of New Brighton residents have been framed by the metanarrative constructed by public memory and/or official history. If ordinary voices do not fit the dominant narrative they are silenced and exit the space of public memory. Although this need not necessarily mean that they are forgotten, they most certainly are marginalised. For when memory is repressed or de-politicised, it is deprived of its claims on political resources and state power.⁴⁶

Whereas personal memory based on the individual's lived experience fades with the passage of time, the authority of public memory increases for it becomes the more widely accepted version of the past.⁴⁷ The public memory of New Brighton's past privileges the experiences of political activists over those of ordinary people. The stories of their everyday lives have been subsumed by the triumphalism of the liberation struggle. As the liberation struggle becomes the dominant narrative of our national history, the stories of smaller communities are subordinated to this metanarrative. So New Brighton is remembered as a "site of resistance" and a "stronghold of the African National Congress". This is typified in reminiscences published in books, journals, web sites and local newspapers that lionize both living and deceased "heroes of the struggle" who happened to have lived in the township. And this will, no doubt, provide the template for the fashioning New Brighton's public history when it comes to be written and displayed in the Red Location Cultural Museum.

⁴⁴ It appears to represent the vision of former Cllrs Rory Riordan and Jennifer Bowler. See *Weekend Post*, 24 June 2000, p. 6 ('Vision of township apartheid museum becoming a reality').

⁴⁵ Richard Werbner, 'Beyond Oblivion: Confronting Memory Crisis' in R. Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the critique of power* (London: Zed Books, 1998).

⁴⁶ Müller, 'The power of memory', p. 32.

⁴⁷ Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 3

Conclusion

There have been claims that post-apartheid South Africa has developed “collective amnesia”, that it has conveniently forgotten certain unpalatable facts about the country’s recent past. John Wright reckons that the ANC is embarrassed by its past as its radicalism of the 1980s cannot be made to square with its current conservatism (neo-liberalism?).⁴⁸ I believe that the quality of the country’s transformation to democracy can be improved through dealing openly with the past. Conversely, forced silence and forgetting might derail the process. We should avoid repeating the mistakes of the past when the poor and oppressed were generally excluded from or confined to the margins of the apartheid master narrative that legitimated white supremacy. The disempowered had to construct their identities in counter-memories that existed outside the authority of official history. Their stories have, belatedly and to some extent, been recovered through cultural heritage projects, oral history, memoirs and some social history. The recovery and recognition of the memories of poor and oppressed groups will provide a corrective to the reification of the official version of South Africa’s past; perhaps even constitute a true peoples’ history. However, it cannot be taken for granted that counter-memory is automatically liberating, or that such counter-memory should have legitimacy per se. Counter-memory might contribute towards preserving another version of the past, but it does not necessarily follow that it is the truth.

So, instead of manipulating public memory and subverting the past in pursuit of a political agenda, we should accept and even welcome conflicting and competing memories as an inevitable part of the transition to democracy.⁴⁹ If public memory is to be more than a dominant mythology, new ways of evoking multiple memories and a plurality of historical voices will have to be found. As Nuttall and Coetzee argue,

it remains a challenge to all who are, in some way, involved in memorialising the past, to keep multiple versions of the past alive, and not to privilege, as has so often been done, a few master narratives that offer a sense of unity at the cost of ignoring the fracture and dissonance.⁵⁰

Similarly, Appleby holds that:

The challenge now is to think ourselves outside these old [singular/nationalist] categories, not in order to weaken the country to which we give our political allegiances but to free ourselves from a kind of intellectual bondage.⁵¹

She suggests that what is needed is not a refashioning of obsolete paradigms but the creation of new ones. It is not enough to declare nationalist metanarratives passé but what is needed is recognition that the new world order requires gatekeepers of the past

⁴⁸ Wright is cited in ‘South Africa glosses over its history’ by Bryan Rostron published in *New Statesman*, 6 December 1999, <http://www.newstatesman.co.uk/199912060024.htm> reproduced by H-SAfrica

⁴⁹ Müller, ‘The power of memory’, pp. 32-34.

⁵⁰ Nuttall and Coetzee, ‘Introduction’ to *Negotiating the past*, p.14.

⁵¹ Appleby, ‘The Power of History’, p. 11.

who take cognisance of the changing world environment and the new politics of identity in the country itself. And it is professional historians who should assume this responsibility.