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Public encounters: the negotiation of ritual, risk and relevance in the performance of Johannesburg's National Remembrance Sunday ceremonies

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Abstract

More than a decade after the demise of apartheid, the South African nation is one still partitioned by deep social and cultural rifts. Carved through decades of discriminatory and exclusionary practices, these faultlines continue to hound the country's efforts to grapple with the monumental task of articulating a unified national character and set of values.

Alongside other longstanding cultural institutions that have continued their life in South Africa's post-apartheid political dispensation, Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday ceremonies stand as locales that must wrestle for legitimacy and relevance in a redefined landscape. Performed since the 1920s to both mourn and honour those who gave their lives to the nation in armed conflicts, the Remembrance Sunday ceremony, in preserving the legacies of those it identifies as the ultimate personifications of the nation's goodness, is an institution that aims to embody and replicate the values to which a community aspires.

While the ritual's aim has remained unchanged since the 1920s, the country's transition to democracy has shaken the certainty of its mandate, and has presented it with a quandary: while the name 'South Africa' remains, the political community to which it refers has inextricably changed. This shift – entailing the rejection of the national history represented by the ceremony for many decades; the emergence of new ideals incongruous with past values; and revised understandings of 'goodness' and 'sacrifice' that threaten to estrange the ceremony's longstanding constituents – has meant that the event's survival in South Africa's distant futures is dependent on the negotiation and identification of practices that begin to bridge social rifts, of narratives that attempt to imagine a common world.

Relying on Warner's theorisation of 'publics' and the circulation of public discourse, as well as the methodologies of cultural studies and anthropological enquiries, this study has worked to document and analyse Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday ceremonies – and their transformation – over a period of three years. In doing so, the project aims to elaborate on the manner by which the search for relevance and legitimacy in a new polity has been balanced with the desire to keep a tradition intact and an existing audience captive. As such, it is also an effort to delineate and contextualise the mutations of public discourse in the process of defining collective identities and common worlds.