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

Ben-Zeev, Keren

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THE CITY OF JOHANNESBURG HONOURS
ALL THOSE WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE
IN ALL WARS, BATTLES AND ARMED STRUGGLES
FOR FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY AND PEACE
IN SOUTH AFRICA
10 NOVEMBER 2002

It would be easier to just reject it [the Johannesburg Remembrance Sunday Service]. *Some people have tried to do that. But then are you not marginalising yourself? When people don't see you there and they see others, and they do not know the history, you have no instrument to say the reasons why you did not see us there, are the following. So in the end you marginalise yourself. People will say 'no, you never took part in any struggle'. So you have to go there, and symbolically go through the ritual... Time will come when we will correct this picture.*

Strike Thokoane,
AZANLA Veterans Association representative,
2007

6. Conclusion: Fruitful Perversity?

Using Warner's elaborations on 'publics', this study has aimed to delineate the manner by which a particular commemorative practice in need of a new audience – that of Johannesburg's annual Remembrance Sunday ceremony – has had to balance the desire to keep a tradition intact, and the pressure to respond through changed ritual to the transformed political and social landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. The issues at stake are multiple: the survival of a social practice and the values and identity which it narrates, a platform on which to shape the character, values and image of a new nation, the staging of a contested history, but most importantly, the privilege of belonging.

As I have elaborated earlier in this study, the concluding decade of the 20th century in South Africa was one of interregnum and flux. While the collapse of the political structure of apartheid was rapid, its economic, social, and geographical magnitudes remained uninterrupted, its bureaucratic machinery steadily continued, and the process of defining a new society, imagining and defining values and parameters was uncertain and haphazard. Despite the adoption of a new constitution, the staging of the TRC, talk of the 'rainbow nation', and the (later) materialisation of a number of heritage initiatives (mostly post-2000) – all laying foundations for the collective espousal of revised values and frameworks – collective identity in this 'new' nation is yet to be consolidated.

As rituals intimately connected to the notion of the nation and the embodiment of the values on which it stands – and further, events that had 'performed' what many saw as an illegitimate South Africa for more than seven decades – Johannesburg's Remembrance Day ceremonies had to undertake visible shifts to acknowledge that while the name 'South Africa' remained, the political community to which it referred had inextricably changed. While such shifts would intrude on the 'sacred' ground of tradition and ritual, they were necessary for the ceremony to retain not only its mandate of honouring those who had given their lives for the 'nation', but to begin with, secure a legitimate space in the new political entity for its existence.

While the military was undergoing complex processes that looked to integrate the country's previously warring groups and create an armed force that served the transformed nation, these developments largely bypassed the Reserve Forces – key participants and proponents of the Remembrance Day ceremonies. As a curious mix of both military and civic mandates and interests, lodged in both the authorities of the city and those of the Reserve Forces, Johannesburg's Sunday Service, in order to ensure its continuance, had to carve its own future trajectory.

The requirement for change, however, was not the result of political imperatives alone. As the narratives recounted in this study show, the decline of Johannesburg's Remembrance Day ceremonies was linked to a twofold crisis that began long prior to the 1990s and South Africa's dramatic political transition. In the first instance, as World War I and II veterans – those who had loyally frequented the events for over seven decades – aged and passed on, the ceremonies and the public which they constitute experienced the haemorrhaging of first hand memories and the conviction in the ceremony's symbolism. Simultaneously, alongside mounting criticisms of the apartheid government, the swelling of the anti-conscription movement and the questioning of the legitimacy of South Africa's rulers, the event failed to replace the aging with the young. As political transformation appeared on the horizon, the Remembrance Day ceremonies faced not only crises of legitimacy, but also ones of memory and relevance.

Combined, these factors brought this public to a point which could be described as bordering on political isolation: when gazing into the mirror of the nation, this public no longer found its image reflecting back. Put in Warner's terms, the event, an 'instance' of a public, had lost not only its circulatory networks, its scenes of citation, uptake and performance, but further, faced a situation in which the emergence of future sites for the simple re-characterisation and replication of the values and identities which it narrated had become unlikely. From a public, it was on the threshold of dwindling to a group.

Taking opportunity in a time of fluidity and openness, the Reserve Forces, the Traditional Regiments, veterans of World War II and others to whom the Remembrance Day ceremonies constituted an irreplaceable rallying point, set about reforming the event and attempting to ensure, if not the reflection, than at least the inclusion of their image in a nation that sooner or later would be defined. As Warner notes, however, 'one cannot conjure a public into being by force of will' (Warner: 2002: 128). To gain a foothold again, to expand the networks of citation and performance, the discourses underlying the Remembrance Day ceremonies had to rely on extant scenes of circulation. South Africa's new nation building narratives were prime conduits for such a task. Reframing its address in the language of reconciliation, the Remembrance Sunday attempted to capitalise on attention and audiences of the nation already present. Propelled by strategic partnerships and the willingness to answer some of the prerogatives of the new political dispensation, and drawing from talk of the rainbow nation as well as the 'religious redemptive' discourse of the TRC (Wilson: 2001: 104), it is through the notion of inclusivity that the Remembrance Sunday ceremonies interpreted the notion of reconciliation and facilitated a project of legitimation.

In making real the re-orientation of the Remembrance Sunday address to 'the nation', some of the key 'enabling postulates' articulated through the visual codes on which spectacle relies had to be shifted. Through an analysis of these – the cenotaph and the event's geography, the religious ceremony, and the display of the body in the parade – and the manner by which they have been negotiated, some conclusions can be drawn.

Divided nation, equivocal symbols. I have narrated various instances of contestation in the event: the ambivalence with which many of the event's key participants perceive the cenotaph; the outcry surrounding the religious sermon of 2004 and its narration of history; and finally, the deep conceptual and emotional divide between veteran 'freedom fighters' from veteran 'soldiers'. While it seems that the issue at heart is that of the core values orbiting the idea of the nation's 'goodness': duty, courage, sacrifice – and whether all those parading in the Remembrance parade truly deserve to be considered as embodiments of these values – there is no doubt that tensions largely run along political and racial divides. While for some of the event's participants, the cenotaph is an empty tomb representing all those *soldiers* who answered the 'call of duty', to others, the call of duty answered by 'soldiers', is not as grand as that answered by the freedom fighters, and the cenotaph stands as a symbol of past illegitimate authorities. While some of the event's participants measure courage and sacrifice through the lens of conviction, to others what counts is the willingness to serve democratically elected governments as one is ordered. Given these deep divisions, however, what is striking is that seemingly, contestation is not about form or structure, but rather content: no one disputes that some individuals should be honoured for having sacrificed, rather, it is the question of who more genuinely sacrificed; no one disputes that there should be a monument to honour those individuals, what is disputed is what memorial would be appropriate; the only contestation which has come close to questioning the underlying structures of the ceremony is that of the role of religious speech (I will return to that below) but even here the dispute is not whether there should be a religious component at all, but rather, what kind it should be. Further research would be required to ascertain whether the form of spectacle – specifically the parade – is the most appropriate in the context of the 'new' South Africa and the event's project of legitimation.

Impersonal or personal address? The Remembrance Sunday ceremonies have undertaken a number of significant shifts that have worked to change the event's appearances – and therefore the visual language by which the audience of a spectacle is articulated. The joint parading of South Africa's reserve forces, the Traditional Regiments, veterans of both the liberation struggle and the SADF and soldiers newly recruited to the SANDF; a ceremony inclusive of the country's mainstream religions, and the intervention into the monument of the cenotaph can all be seen as playing a key role in attempting to broaden the event's channels of circulation and potential membership in important ways. Simultaneously however, one has to note that the invisibility of the liberation army veterans in the parade means that the impact of this intervention – no doubt the most critical one – is limited as their presence is not clearly articulated through the visual codes on which spectacle relies. This point, as well as my discussion of the cenotaph and the event's geography, lead me to the preliminary conclusion that although Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday ceremonies harp on national sentiments and the primacy of belonging to the nation, they target a particular and limited public, and – at least at this point in time – do not attempt to constitute spaces of true national scale and appeal. In this sense, the Remembrance Day's address to 'the nation' is simply a form of

impersonal address, disguising a set of conditions that predefine the public targeted. This suggests that while the Remembrance Day ceremonies have put a great deal of effort into shifting the appearance of their address, their primary concern has been the legitimation of an existing public and tradition in the eyes of political institutions rather than the appeal to a broader public. The transformation of the Remembrance Sunday ceremonies however, is a gradual process that to date has been 'ad-hoc – in the sense that it largely driven by individuals and has no long term strategy. The dedication of the 2006 ceremony to police personnel killed in action and the inclusion of police forces in the event, seems to suggest that the Remembrance Sunday service, now that it has reached some level of political legitimacy, is searching for ways to broaden its relevance, and hence its appeal.

Being in public, being a patriot. Some publics, Warner notes, 'are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public' (Warner: 2002: 117). That the shifting of its core enabling postulates has allowed the Remembrance Day ceremonies to speak with confidence and legitimacy in South Africa's democratised social landscape leads to the conclusion that alongside the country's shifting boundaries of citizenship, the parameters of what constitutes legitimate public discourse have also shifted. Further, that it seems that recognition as 'South Africans', and recognition as ones representing the 'nation's goodness' – the difference between the 'men from Johannesburg' and those who are '*ours'*– are two different things, is perhaps an indication that the frameworks within which 'patriotism' is understood have shifted as well. While the Remembrance Day ceremonies had to interpret the discourse of reconciliation through the notion of inclusivity, the integration, or uptake, of the visual symbols of 'reconciliation' into the anatomy of the event suggest that to be a patriot in the new South Africa, whites, or those close to the former authorities have had to show willingness to reconcile. Moreover, as my discussion of the event's geography shows, in striking a partnership with the Johannesburg city authorities, the performance of the Remembrance Day ceremonies in the inner city – which although geographically central, is also a space which socially and economically has been marginalised – attempts to inspire a 'new' kind of patriotism that claims both the streets, as well as the fallen, as *'ours'*. Within this context, I have also proposed that pariah status of the inner city allows a depoliticisation and an imagining of a new audience which would not be as easily accepted in loaded spaces such as the Hector Peterson memorial, which leads me to the next point of discussion.

Depoliticisation as a condition for continuity: My discussion**s** suggest that both the event's most fruitful shifts, as well as its most controversial moments were related to the depoliticisation of both the event as well as its key subjectivities. Firstly, I argue that religious discourse enables the Remembrance Sunday ceremonies to establish themselves as 'pure' spaces – ones cleansed from political interests, free of conflicting ideologies or agendas, a '*tabula rasa*' in which all members of a nation – regardless of their political outlooks – can participate. Through religious speech, narratives of wars are underpinned not by notions of ideology, but rather translated into a sanitised discourse that privileges ideas such as 'supreme

sacrifice'. In this process of 'translation', the discourse circulated disguises its political perspectives under the cover of the eternal values of god, and works to conceal political differences and allow a posture of a unity disassociated from politics. In this sense, events in the last years have shown that while the ceremony has become more inclusive to faiths other than Christianity, shifting the role which religious speech plays – the underlying structure – is, at least at this point, not acceptable to the public's attentive members, and its pursuit would threaten their alienation. The inclusion of the SAPS in the 2006 event, on the other hand, presents one of the event's most advantageous shifts. In juxtaposing both the topical issue of crime as well as the figures which battle it with the veterans of the parade, the 2006 Remembrance Day ceremony proposes a manner by which the event's key subjectivity – and its goodness – can be depoliticised through association, shifting attention from the tensions of presenting both former SADF soldiers as well as freedom fighters as heroes.

What is the meaning of the liberation army veterans in the 'new' South Africa? Despite being central to the Remembrance Sunday's project of legitimation, it seems that the inclusion of the liberation army veterans is something that matters only temporarily. Their invisibility in the parade, the failure to articulate their presence through the visual codes on which spectacle relies is a case in point. It is the case that the MK and other liberation armies, given their relatively short terms of activity and necessarily secretive operations, did not strongly establish any particular visual or performative articulations of identity and values. Simultaneously however, the visual trajectory that was established as part of 'the' struggle, would be at odds within the politically 'neutral' space of Remembrance Day ceremonies and the display of military 'professionalism': while toy-toying, the clenched fist, freedom songs, the icon of Mandela were key in framing the apartheid era activities of the liberation armies, it seems that beyond the opposition to apartheid, beyond the fighting of a particular war which has been politically neutralised, the liberation armies have not articulated a meaning and identity relevant to the new political community of South Africa and the underlying framework of reconciliation. Like the Traditional Regiments, their fight is for relevance in modern day South Africa and thus far, because of their strongly established customs and frameworks, the Remembrance Day ceremonies do not seem like appropriate spaces to negotiate such meanings. The visual absence of the liberation armies from the parade is one of implications: while both SADF and freedom fighter veterans will pass, the current reliance of the Remembrance Day ceremonies on the uniforms, music, symbols, regimental tartans etc., of the traditional units for the creation of spectacle, ensures that (potentially) what is preserved is not only the identity which these customs narrate, but more importantly, the sites within which these publics are performed, and hence maintained and reproduced. It means that while these spaces will remain as sites of induction for future recruitments, it is difficult to know what traces of the processes of transition and inclusion they will have maintained.

There are a number of questions that this study has not sufficiently answered. Further research would be required to ascertain the attitudes of liberation army veterans to this event, and what futures they imagine

for it, if any. One could also look more deeply into the current commemoration practices that exist within individual liberation army associations. An interesting historical study would be one articulating the cultures or publics of the Traditional Regiments and their commando counterparts, and drawing lessons from the survival of the former and the demise of the latter. Investigation into other previous colonies, and how they perform the Remembrance Day ceremonies would also shed further light on this study. The role that international solidarity plays in the performance of the annual Remembrance Sunday has not formed part of this study and would be of interest to explore elsewhere.

Further, the topic of this study would no doubt benefit from an in depth exploration of public sphere theory as articulated by Habermas, as well as the ongoing debate and critical reflections that Habermas' original work continues to inspire. Hopefully this issue will be considered elsewhere.

Finally, while Warner's elaborations on publics provided a useful model for the articulation of social change, it is clear that further attempts of its application are required in order to devise a methodology that would guide its use. If a text must have numerous instances to be a public, and Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday service is but one, which are the others? It is incredibly difficult to delineate where one public ends, and another begins. Is it simply the numerous geographical communities around the world who simultaneously practise the same rites? Is the performance of the Freedom to the City parade, held regularly with many of the same participants and underpinned by overlapping discourse, part of this public or a different one? Do other commemorative events, that of Delville wood or the SS Mendi fall within the same bounds? And what of the liberation army veterans group who while participating in the Remembrance Sunday events and holding some of the beliefs which make it viable, come with differing historical perspectives, political interpretations and aspirations? While the nature of publics is one of volatility, for the purposes of application, how does one draw their boundaries?

The question I would like to ask in conclusion is, is this 'fruitful perversity'? In his work, Warner contends that a public is an 'engine for (not necessarily progressive) social mutation' (Warner: 2002: 113) and that it is the public's disposition to risking its concrete world that is the impulse of its 'fruitful perversity' (ibid.), a space of play between that which exists, and that not yet born. It is clear that the Remembrance Sunday ceremonies have risked their fate – in allowing liberation army and SADF veterans to parade together, the Remembrance Day ceremonies had to contend with the questioning of honorability and goodness which would arise. However, one has to question whether this 'risk' has been sufficient to 'create a space of play between that which exists, and that not yet born', if its primary motive has been legitimation in the eyes of political institutions rather than broader appeal. While transformations to date have established a strong basis from which to work in the future, in the long run, it is the development of approaches like that taken in 2006 – those working to broaden the audiences and appeal of the event – that will be key not only for its success as a space of social imagination, but further, its continuing existence in decades to come.