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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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The Reserve Force Council started talking to the different parties – the MK and so on – back the in the early 90s – to say that we need to have a strong reserve force. We also started an initiative that said that we must remember the sacrifices that the veterans made. Especially the MK veterans, because they had nothing. For 30 years they were in exile they come back to nothing. So we had to make provision for a viable reserve force and we had to put in the statute book legislation to look after veterans. On an equal basis. In other words, everybody would be subjected to the same regulations, the same age and the same services. It didn't matter where you served. The context of this was the whole story of looking at veterans and other people who would not be able to integrate into the new Defence Force. ***So there was an interest in remembering****. And there was legislation like the new South African Heritage Act where they were talking about inclusivity and so on. And that then gave us the lead to say that we needed to make it inclusive. Remembrance Day, the reserve forces, they need to be transformed like the regular force. I think that then started an interest going, and especially because people like Joe Modise and Ronnie Kasrils supported this, it became credible, and it was important that it would be implemented… So now we say a veteran is a veteran.*

Rear-Admiral (JG) Lukas Bakkes, 2006

Director, Reserve Force Council

1. Introduction

1.1. Foreword

At 11am, on the 11th of the 11th month, 1918, Germany signed the armistice agreement that finally ended the carnage of World War I. A year later, on the orders of King George V, the first Armistice Day commemorative ceremony took place in Whitehall, London. In conjunction with the overwhelming public response to the Cenotaph (that was erected as a temporary funeral canopy that same year), the ritual of the Armistice Day began to unfold. In the immediate years to follow, as the event extended throughout the reaches of the Allied countries and the colonial and commonwealth worlds, a multinational ritual was gathered from a patchwork of customs and ideas gathered from far and wide[1].

85 years later, on the Sunday preceding the 11th of the 11th month at 2pm, the quiet weekend streets of downtown Johannesburg came to life: to the sounds of trumpets, drums and bagpipes, South Africa's finest – military servicemen, veterans, school children and volunteers of the country's national reserve forces – paraded past the city's cenotaph to remember those who had paid the supreme sacrifice on behalf of the South African nation. In the city of gold, as in many other cities of the commonwealth, this was the ceremony's 84th consecutive performance.

Johannesburg's 2004 ceremony demonstrated that throughout the years – and almost a century had lapsed since its inception – the Johannesburg Armistice Day event[2] kept the distinct character and customs that developed around it during the early days of the 20th century, and which apartheid had done very little to disrupt. Its primary components: red poppies pinned onto lapels and chests; a special church service; a joint parade of veterans and serving members of the armed forces; the laying of wreaths by dignitaries; the observation of a two minute silence; the sounds of the bugle playing the *Last Post*; the uniforms of the 'Traditional' regiments[3] – some of which have changed little since 1902[4]; the cenotaph – itself a close replica of that in London – remain key identifying features of the event throughout the world, as in Johannesburg.

[1] A more detailed account of the development of this ritual is to follow.
[2] Some official documentation refers to this annual event as 'National Remembrance Sunday Service And Wreath Laying Ceremony', while others refer to it as 'The National Civic Remembrance Day' or simply 'Remembrance Sunday'. Hence there is no uniform and official manner of referring to it. This study will utilise these titles interchangeably, together with the title of the original event on which this ceremony is founded, 'Armistice Day'. It should also be made clear at this point that as the titles suggest, the Johannesburg Remembrance Sunday event is South Africa's national instance of this ceremony. To clearly differentiate it and emphasise its locality I will however refer to it as Johannesburg's event.
[3] The term 'Traditional Regiments' refers to those regiments established prior to World War I by British Colonial forces or the South African Union government. They include regiments like the Transvaal Scottish, the Rand Light Infantry and the South African Irish regiment, to name but a few. Mostly established in the first decade of the 20th century, these were maintained (sometimes reluctantly) by South Africa's successive governments (see Joubert Park Project: 2005, as well as Krige: 2003).
[4] According to the Transvaal Scottish website. ('Regimental Museum': n.d.: ¶ 'Transvaal Scottish first active service')

Of course, in the lapse of more than eight decades, some things had changed. As World War I did not live up to its name as 'the war to end all wars', following 1945, the ceremony was rededicated as *Remembrance (Sun)Day* so as to include within its ambit the memory of those who had fallen in World War II. Gradually, as the dead of subsequent conflicts were also incorporated into the ceremony, the event evolved to what it is today: a day in which nations 'remember *all those* who have given their lives whilst serving their countries' (CoJ & Classic Feel: 2005: 47, emphasis added).

More importantly, while in some senses the 84th consecutive observance of this collective commemoration was 'business as usual', the 2004 Remembrance Day ceremony coincided with another important anniversary: in 2004, South Africa celebrated its first decade of freedom – 10 years to the fall of apartheid and the rise of democracy, 10 years to the birth of a 'new' nation. To a collective honouring almost a century of sacrifice and duty to 'the nation', this could hardly be of insignificance. The nation paraded for on this day, after all, was a vastly different entity to the nation paraded for in 1920, or 1993: by the simple fact that it recognised the country's black residents as citizens, it had a remarkably different makeup. This dramatic political shift meant that the limits, nature, values and understandings of 'the (South African) nation', its boundaries and mechanisms of belonging, inclusion and exclusion, had to be reformulated and drafted anew.

And so, at a point in time marking a decade to democracy, as soldiers and veterans together paraded down Johannesburg's inner city streets, among the numerous traces of continuity, there were clear signs of change. African National Congress (ANC) dignitaries lined the steps of a city hall once serving the interests of the white minority in a racially segregated city. The religious service, once centred on Christian doctrine, addressed adherents of Jewish, Hindu and Moslem faiths and was led by a black woman cleric, previously an exiled member of the liberation forces. A new plaque on the cenotaph carved a conceptual framework for the parade's new intended participants: among others the veterans of liberation armies *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) & Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), by acknowledging all those who had fought for a free nation. Black soldiers were among those current members of the national armed forces parading to pay their respects to those who before them had served and sacrificed – for a nation also called South Africa, but a different one.

Rewind to the first half of the 1990s, the turbulent days of transition to democracy, and no one could have anticipated that a decade later the Remembrance Day ceremony would be granted social, political – public – space to be practised – or conversely, what a precarious space it would be. While one cannot underplay the great significance with which the ceremony is regarded by the veterans of World War II, their families and other loyal serving members of the South African armed forces, it is a ceremony that also, especially through its military parade, carries the iconography of Africa's colonisation, decades of frustrated hopes for

equality and the violent enforcement of racial segregation to those who were not privileged enough to have been citizens in the previous life of that 'other' South Africa.

Since 1994, South Africa's political and social leadership has set out to redefine the meaning of the nation, its boundaries of belonging, its patterns of inclusion and exclusion against the antithesis of apartheid. This study sets out to explore how the Remembrance Day ceremony, a practice inclusive of histories and associations ambivalent in the new nation, has attempted to situate itself in the reformulated narrative of 'South Africa'. What is behind the granting of social, political and public space to the Remembrance Day commemorations in this 'newly born' nation? What are the underlying processes that make this ceremony's space one which is precarious or non-precarious, its presence 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' to the polity? How have continuity and change, tradition and revised moral values, the impulse to acknowledge, retell history and the ideal of inclusivity been negotiated? What are the implications of the ritual's shifting cultural iconography? Who does the ceremony address, who does it hope to gather in the folds of its recurrence, and how?

In attempting to answer these questions, this study will draw conclusions about that which is at stake: the processes of belonging, the articulation of collective identities, and the negotiation of ambivalence within the formulation of a political collective.

1.2. Aim and Rationale

Running alongside the military procession of 2005, camera in hand, I trailed the columns of parading soldiers as they covered the final stretch of the procession route: down Harrison Street with faces turned to the right towards Beyers Naudé Square – where the cenotaph rises, past the City Hall steps, lined with posed dignitaries, on the left. Completing this final expanse, the parade turned right into Market Street, so that they could join audiences in Beyers Naudé Square from a different direction. No longer parading for an audience, and hidden from the eyes of the public behind a large building, I was astonished to see the quiet, orderly parade explode into ululations, freedom songs and toy-toying – much to the dismay of a senior officer who endeavored to hush the troops. Turning the corner back into the square and the public eye, soldiers again were silent and orderly (with the help of the senior officer).

Was this the illustration of a ritual relegating competing impulses, understandings and desires to the shadows of the backstage? Or was this the simmering of a new order threatening to spill into the limelight, to compromise the customs of yesteryear?

This study sets out to explore what such a moment, and its adjacent, contradictory instances – the solemn church service, the parade of plumes and kilts down Johannesburg's downtown streets, the mournful cry of the 'Last Post' – reveal about South Africa at this historical juncture. More precisely, it searches for an account that discloses the details by which South Africa's transition – and specifically, that of heritage, tradition, and ultimately, the values and identities which they narrate and legitimate – have been negotiated within the first decade of democracy. In doing so, this project hopes to extract an account of belonging within South Africa's reconciliation and nation building projects.

In setting out to explore these issues, this study will contribute to a body of academic literature both substantial and diversified that explores the significance of public 'narrations' of history through ritual, landscape and performance – with regards to memory and geography, social or political power and ideology, the making of a unified history from contradictory memories, the force of collective ritual and public spectacle, the negotiation and staging of identity, value and tradition.

In post-apartheid South Africa, this body of critical analysis has flourished around the impulse to reflect on the refiguring of South Africa's archive – the documentation of absences, the rise of new mythologies and the public narration practices that recall apartheid's `hidden histories'[5] – as represented through urban geographies, monuments, exhibitions, the invention of traditions and grand public exercises like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – which within this area of study has been the deserving subject of extensive exploration. This body of literature, concerned, in a sense, with auditing South Africa's transformation, has worked to both illuminate and question the underlying values and conceptual frameworks which have shaped South Africa's transition. Ultimately, it is a literary corpus that attempts to pin down the form and content of the evolving entity of the new nation.

Despite the extensive attention which this field of study has received in post-apartheid South Africa however, relatively limited attention has been paid to the rituals with which the Remembrance Day ceremonies can be associated – those which performed white South African identities throughout the periods of colonialism and apartheid – and their re-evaluation from the present, or transformation in the post apartheid era. The handful of critical contributions exploring this topic include reflections on the commemorations which celebrated anniversaries of the Anglo Boer War (Nasson:2000; Grundlingh:2004; see also the *South African Historical Journal* Special Issue: South African War 1899-1902: Centennial Perspectives: 41 (1999), the grand festival assembled to mark the tercentenary of Jan Van Riebeeck's arrival in the Cape (Witz:2003; Rassool & Witz:1993); the ceremonies associated with the commemoration of the Great Trek (Grundlingh & Sapire:1989), and the annual rituals marking the Battle of Blood River (Ehlers: 2003). Enquiry into public commemorations of South Africa's involvement in the two world wars, with the exception of Bill Nasson's work (2000 and 2007) is particularly meagre. Similarly, the analysis of

[5] Widely circulated examples include Hamilton et al (2002); Coombes (2003); Rassool and Prosalendis (2001); etc.

performed rituals which framed black or coloured identities and their redefinition in the post-apartheid period has been partial, with Cape Town's Minstrel Carnival (Baxter:2001) an exception.

While it is understandable that literature on the revision of South Africa's history has focused on documenting those memories eclipsed by apartheid and the manner by which today they have been brought to the fore, it is unfortunate that the analysis of long-standing and well established rituals and traditions such as that of Remembrance Sunday has been neglected. In the past such events purported to represent the (exclusively white) South African 'nation' [or, as Warner (2002:66) would note, *the* public][6] today, these are traditions that are acknowledged to address very particular and limited communities within a greater public; their journey of transformation through South Africa's 'miracle' is valuable in numerous ways.

As journeys which narrate the manner by which particular communities – sites for the continuity and reproduction of white identities associated with the apartheid and colonial powers, and therefore sites which did not propel political change – have interpreted, responded, internalised or revised the circulating ideas which attempt to articulate the 'new' nation. Although it is unlikely that such accounts could indicate to what extent communities have been impacted by the project of transformation, it could outline *how* communities have been impacted by the visions of the new nation. Most importantly, the mutation of rituals embedded in these communities – more exercises of reform than invention – precisely because they are no longer sites of legitimate political power, become processes which entail the cooperation of multiple parties, and significantly, the negotiation of ambivalence.

In engaging with the pageantry associated with Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday, therefore, this project will examine the attempts of this public event to construct an identity 'appropriate' and legitimate within South Africa's revised political landscape. As the body of literature mentioned above, this project will attempt to unravel the manner in which South Africa's transition has played itself out, the meaning and implications of this process and will work to make coherent complex processes of negotiation and adaptation. Additionally, given the sparse information about the practice of the Remembrance Sunday ceremony in South Africa, this study will simultaneously also begin the task of constructing a history for a little documented social ritual.

While contributing to this body of literature, this study attempts to not only locate the discursive framework(s) within which the Remembrance Sunday ritual and its symbols are embedded, but also undertakes to unravel the processes by which its project of change has unfolded. In this sense, this study is not only a study of discourse, but more pertinently, a study of the processes by which discourses, and the rituals narrating them, change, the making and unmaking of public history: when and why do rituals have

[6] Warner's notion of publics and how they are differentiated from *the* public is discussed in chapter 2 of this study.

to change? What is their fate in rapidly changing times? Who or what is change driven by? How are appropriate directions identified? What is the process by which it is decided which direction prevails?

To explore these questions, I have relied on the theoretical framework of 'publics' and 'counterpublics' proposed by Michael Warner. Warner's work allows one to recognise a central tenet of public history: 'there are many producers, at various sites, who utilise different historical methodologies to process a range of pasts' (Witz: 2003: 7). Moreover, it recognises that even a single past is 'processed' by a variety of producers, in different sites, through different methods. In proposing a structure for the study of the social nature of change, that is not exclusively guided by the hand of a powerful elite[7], Warner's elaborations take into account the encounters of different communities within a society and the impact of these encounters[8]. In doing so, they propose ways in which social integration and dissolution can be studied, and therefore hold particular significance for contemporary South African society, fragmented and divided through centuries of social and racial separation and discrimination. This is also particularly relevant to the study of changing cultural forms, which often are purported to be agents of social integration.

Finally, while Warner's theories hold such pertinence and relevance to the study of public pageantry within changing societies, to my knowledge, at the time of writing this project their application has been scarce. Despite the potential which Warner's theories offer, therefore, they appear to be largely 'untested'. It is the hope of this study that its attempt to apply Warner's theoretical underpinnings will contribute to the development of a methodology on the basis of which the notion of publics can be developed.

1.3. Methodology

Documenting Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday ceremonies over a period of three years, this study constitutes an attempt to not only unpack the discourses underlying this public ritual, but also account for the manner in which these discourses and their public representation mutate. To do so, it has taken an approach which integrates the methodologies of cultural studies (e.g. Falasca-Zamponi:1997), as well as those of political geography which can be seen as anthropological enquiries (Gregory: 1994; Davis:1986). As such, it has taken into its ambit of consideration the event's development and historical context, the social relations which characterise its performances, the diversity of positions and perspectives which illustrate the contestation around it, the symbolic significance of the geography and space in which it is performed, its strategies of constructing spectacle and circulating discourse(s), and of course, the interpretation of narrative, ritual and symbolic behaviour that constitutes discourse.

[7] As demonstrated in the literature review below, many of the studies that constitute the general (as opposed to the South African) body of literature on this topic argue this position.
[8] This is a simplified explanation for the purposes of introduction. An elaborate discussion which attempts to engage with the elusive and complex nature of publics follows below.

The research process has thus unfolded in three stages:

In the first, primary data was collected through a variety of methods. I attended and observed two of the ceremonies which this study explores, the Remembrance Sunday service of 2005 (staged on 13.11.2005) and 2006 (staged on 11.11.2006). The account of the Remembrance Sunday ceremony of 2004 (performed on 14.11.2004) was constructed with the help of original documentation (letters from the Office of the Chief Rabbi and the Infantry Association referring to the 2004 event were important), press coverage of the event, as well as interviews with Reverend Jack, the leading cleric of the event, Eric Itzkin and Admiral Bakkes (see description of their roles below). In addition, similar and adjacent events were also attended: the Rand Light Infantry's centenary memorial service (23.10.2005) at the South African Museum of Military History (SAMMH) in Parktown, as well as the Freedom to the City parades 2005 and 2006 (in both years performed a day prior to Remembrance Sunday). All events attended were documented through notes, the recording of short unstructured interviews of participants or fellow audience members, collection of associated memorabilia and press coverage (including the recoding of the radio broadcasts of the religious services in 2006 and 2007), and extensive photographic and film documentation. Subjects interviewed were informed of the purpose of the recording and verbal consent was solicited.

Both concurrent to and following this initial stage, open ended interviews of different lengths were conducted with key stakeholders. These included (in alphabetical order):

Bakkes, Lukas, M. (Rear-Admiral JG). Director, Reserve Force Council; Chair of Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday Task Team[9]. Interviewed on 14 December 2006, with questions of clarification sent via email during February 2007 (these were responded to telephonically).

Giles, Godfrey. (Lt. Col.) Reserve Force Council Association Chairman; Communication officer, Reserve Force Council. Interviewed on 22 November 2005. This constituted a very early and exploratory interview.

Itzkin, Eric. Deputy Director: Immovable Heritage; Arts Culture and Heritage Services, City of Johannesburg. City's representative on the Remembrance Sunday Task Team. Interviewed on 24 November 2006. Questions of clarification responded to telephonically during Feb 2007.

Jack, Carol (Reverend). Lead cleric of Johannesburg's Remembrance Sunday ceremonies, 2002 – 2004; MK veteran. Interviewed on 5 January 2007. No follow up questions submitted.

[9] The Remembrance Sunday Task Team, or its formal name, 'The Mayor's National Remembrance Sunday Technical Task Team' 'is comprised of members of the non statuary forces and ex-service organisations and members of the Regular and Reserve forces of the SANDF with the support of councilors and Senior Officials of the City of Johannesburg'. (CoJ – Office of the Exec. Mayor: 2006: Letter to General Ngwenya ¶ 4). The team has been chaired by Rear Admiral (JG) Lukas Bakkes for a number of years and plays a key role in co-ordinating the annual event. This study will refer to this body either as The Remembrance Sunday Task Team' or simply the 'Task Team'.

Mellitchey, John. (Lt. Col.) Commanding Officer of the Rand Light Infantry (RLI). Interviewed on 23 October 2005. This constituted a very early and exploratory interview.

Msibi, Jack. Chairman of the Soweto branch of the South African Legion; World War II veteran. Interviewed on 17 January 2007. No follow up questions submitted.

Thokoane, Strike. AZANLA Veterans Association representative; Remembrance Sunday ceremony participant. Interviewed on 3 January 2007. No follow up questions submitted.

(Transcriptions appear as appendices at the end of this study).

All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interviews and all (with the exception of Godfrey Giles and John Mellitchey, due to the exploratory nature of the conversations) were sent the transcription of the interviews conducted with them. Only Admiral Bakkes responded, and his comments were taken into account. A final draft version of the study has also been sent to interviewees. Unfortunately, despite repeated efforts, the representative of the MK Veterans association on the task team was not available for an interview. While there is no doubt that further interviews would have benefited this study, these were beyond the scope of this project.

Further collection of original data was facilitated through the kind help of Reverend Jack, Eric Itzkin, Godfrey Giles and especially Admiral Bakkes. Additional documentation was collected through visits to the library of the South African Museum of Military History (SAMMH).

In the second phase of the research, relevant literature was consulted. While the close reading of Michael Warner's essay 'Publics and Counterpublics' was central, it was complemented by a review of literature examining public performances and the notion of spectacle, as well as texts interrogating the making of public history both within South Africa and beyond. Within these, specific attention was paid to issues relevant to the Remembrance Sunday: the development of commemorative rituals around World War I, ceremonies involving military parades, and the making of public history in South Africa. Additional readings which contextualised the research included perspectives on South Africa's transition as well as texts documenting the transformation of Johannesburg's inner city. An absence within the literature reviewed is a comprehensive consultation of readings on the public sphere and Habermasian views of public life. Unfortunately, the limitations which come with this level of research would have made it difficult to engage at length with Habermas's original work, his subsequent revisions and the extensive and complex critiques that have been mounted of it.

In the last phase of the research, the study involved the application of the above approaches to a visual and textual analysis of the Remembrance Sunday ceremonies, their backgrounds, motifs, and organisation. Within this stage, I was guided by Leslie Witz's assertion that:

> *the significance of symbols often lies in their instability, mobility, and history, which make them 'not always easily decipherable'. This requires that we… search for disjunctions… These fault lines which occur in the process of construction, evocation, selection, presentation and reception… are integral to showing not only 'how multiple meanings are produced', but also how the subtle ambiguities… the layerings of history and context' come to be eliminated .*
>
> (Witz: 2003: 10-11).

As such, analysis was guided by the search for disjunctions, perhaps signs of 'discursive mutation', as well as 'discord, debate and negotiations' (ibid.) over meaning. Guided by the approach of many of the readings examined in the literature review, I took cognisance of the fact that public representations, paraded as collective symbols of unity, are the products of intense internal contestations, and that an analysis of these (against a background of the ritual's development and history), could reveal the manner by which the event's identity has been both 'risked' as well as refigured.