



VISUAL CULTURE

AND PUBLIC MEMORY

IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA

Annie E. Coombes



HISTORY AFTER APARTHEID



History after Apartheid



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Annie E. Coombes

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For Nicholas Thomas, who brings me joy.

And in memory of Fiona Coombes (1947–1997),

who had an angry young sister for most of her

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ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Amnesty Commission
ANC	African National Congress
AV	Afrikaner-Volkswag
AVF	Afrikaner Volksfront
AWB	Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging
AZAPO	Azanian People's Organisation
BCCSA	Broadcasting Complaints Commission of South Africa
CMMH	Commission on Museums, Monuments and Heraldry
CP	Conservative Party
CPA	Cape Provincial Administration
CREATE	Commission for Reconstruction and Transformation of the Arts and Culture
DACST	Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology
DNE	Department of National Education
FAK	Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings
GEAR	Growth and Employment Policy
GNC	Griqua National Council
HODSC	Hands Off District Six Committee
HRVC	Human Rights Violation Commission
HSRC	Humanities and Social Science Research Council
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites
IDAF	International Defence and Aid Fund
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
MUSA	Museums for South Africa Intersectoral Investigation for National Policy
NEUM	Non-European Unity Movement
NGO	Nongovernmental organization

NMC	National Monuments Council
NP	National Party
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
PAC	Pan African Congress
PWV	Pretoria, Witwatersrand, Vaal Triangle
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
RIM	Robben Island Museum
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SADF	South African Defence Force
SAMA	South African Museums Association
SANCO	South African National Civic Organisation
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UDF	United Democratic Front
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WOSA	Workers' Organization for Socialist Action

INTRODUCTION

Making History Memorable

The strategic-political and ultimately moral-historical question is how to move towards understanding without ever forgetting, but to remember without constantly rekindling the divisive passions of the past. Such an approach is the only one which would allow us to look down into the darkness of the well of the atrocities of the past and to speculate on their causes at the same time as we haul up the waters of hope for a future of dignity and equality.

— Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country*

History after Apartheid is an analysis of how new stories of “home” and “nation” were created in the public sphere during one of the most startling periods of political and social transformation in recent history. The first democratic elections of April 1994 finally ushered in the formal demise of apartheid in South Africa. However, the difficult task of setting up a workable economic, political, and cultural infrastructure that adequately represented the transition to democracy had only just begun. This book explores how various forms of visual and material culture dramatized the tensions involved in such a momentous shift while at the same time contributing to the process of transformation itself. It argues that the visual and material manifestations of new public histories are both produced by and effectively inform changing definitions of “community” and “nation” during periods of political transition where such concepts become crucial stakes in the resolution or management of social conflict and / or renewal.

In the summer of 1999 I had an exchange with an interviewer on Australian national radio that graphically exposed both the difficulties entailed

in such a project and my own reasons for persisting despite these. A paper I had just given on the complications involved in promoting Robben Island as the site of the emergence of the “new” nation (now chapter 2 in this book) had caught the eye of the Australian reporter. In the course of a telephone interview conducted while I was still in my pyjamas she asked me if it would be accurate to describe the political situation in South Africa as primarily a case of black versus white. I explained that I was neither a South African nor living in the country, but that as an “outsider” who had spent a great deal of time there since 1994 the thing I found so compelling about the situation as I encountered it was that the nature of political debate actually seemed to resist characterization in terms of a simplistic binary of black versus white. On the contrary: most black and white activists were only too well aware that while apartheid had attempted to set up the ideological and juridical structures that were intended to cement such divisions, and that indeed had produced an oppressive regime assisted by color segregation, the sophistication of political consciousness and debate in the country meant that within the broader culture of the various lefts most individuals recognized friend or foe through an identification of complex political affiliations and not on the basis of skin color alone.

Back in South Africa the shoe was on the other foot. This time I was doing the interviewing. My subject was a disconsolate Max du Preez, one of a small band of outspoken Afrikaner journalists who had been consistent critics of apartheid.¹ Harried by the draconian censorship laws of the apartheid government, many of these journalists had ended up in jail on more than one occasion.² My interviewee’s disillusionment was due to the media row that had just broken out following an article in which he had warned against reconstructing, as he saw it, the racial categories of apartheid: “Stop using the term ‘African’ to mean exclusively black. As both Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki did during the election campaign: they referred to ‘whites, coloureds, Indians and Africans.’ Because that implies absolutely that whites, coloureds and Indians can’t be Africans.”³

Du Preez’s remarks also deliberately referred back to a 1996 speech by Thabo Mbeki, speaking on behalf of the African National Congress (ANC) to mark the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of the Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill. Ironically, in 1999, at the time of du Preez’s intervention, Mbeki’s speech was being cited to reinforce claims of inclusivity for the “African Renaissance”: “Just as there are black Jews and Europeans today, there are today European Africans and Arabic Africans.”⁴ The concept of the African Renaissance was early promoted as Mbeki’s distinctive contribution to the presidency, as opposed to the image of South Africa as

a “rainbow nation,” which epitomized Mandela’s government of “national unity.” A sympathetic definition might describe it as a pan-Africanist philosophy attempting to identify and harness potential alliances (economic, political, and intellectual) from within the African continent as a means of shifting the axis of power away from a neocolonialist dependency on Western democracies.⁵ While a potential strategy of decolonization, and one that in its “official” definitions claims to be inclusive of *all* South Africans, the African Renaissance has also lent itself to a more fundamentalist ethnic absolutism. It was partly anxiety over prioritizing this tendency that stimulated du Preez’s article. Du Preez’s polemic provided the ammunition for a series of attacks and counterattacks in the press concerning who had the right to call themselves “African.”⁶ Ironically, du Preez had found himself defending an Afrikaner’s right to the title “African” and had been duly denounced as a white racist.⁷ While there were certainly interesting aspects to this debate that are not reducible to racialized argument, it was nevertheless clear that much of it was being conducted on a presumption of rights on the basis of color. Once again the political goalposts had shifted. It seemed that I might be forced to revise the pronouncement I had earlier made to my Australian interlocutor.

DEFINING “COMMUNITY”

This book, however, is partly about why I believe that such a revision would be unpardonably premature. To understand the history of South Africa solely in terms of the tensions arising among ethnic groupings that were constructed under colonialism and apartheid would be to eradicate a complex political culture on the left that has proved itself to be much more resilient than either colonialism or apartheid and through which alliances and negotiations across ethnic and color divides have immeasurably complicated the complexion of the “new” nation. Of course it would be naive to imagine that the prejudices and discriminations encouraged and enacted under apartheid have not also been internalized to a certain degree, and this has had an impact on the kinds of cooperation possible among different constituencies. Both factors need to be taken into account in order to understand the stakes involved in the struggle for historical memory and public history in South Africa.

In many ways South Africa is anachronistic in the extreme. On the one hand, it is a country that to the outsider with some experience of other African states bears only a slim resemblance to many of them, having an infrastructure of roads and other support institutions (even if not always the

services they should supply) that has more in common with a highly developed industrialized capitalist state. On the other hand, South Africa shares many of the problems of developing nations with histories of extremes of unevenly distributed wealth. In South Africa this resulted, during colonialism and under apartheid, with the majority population ending up with little or nothing by way of housing, education, and health care. In addition, South Africa (as a number of journalists have pointed out) remains, even now, a highly segregated society where the legacy of the 1950s Group Areas Act has ensured that the different populations of the major cities are often oddly dispersed and unintegrated. Nevertheless, despite local awareness of the ways in which colonialism and apartheid have contributed to both the artificial construction of apparently homogeneous ethnic constituencies and the destruction of other forms of viable community, the single most frequently used justification for much government expenditure in the public heritage sector is a much vaunted recourse to an ideal of “community.”

For some time now, in international museum forums, there has been an expectation and an ethical injunction to establish wider consultation and active participation from members of the public not professionally engaged in museums and other publicly funded cultural institutions. In the most opportunistic scenarios the idea of “community” invoked here may simply be a bureaucratic fiction strategically deployed to legitimate an institution and its projects. On the other hand, there are many museum professionals who have a serious commitment to broadening participation at all levels, and in many instances this has resulted in genuine attempts to engage groups outside the institution. The dual legacy of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa means that such efforts are the locus of especially complicated tensions. In addition, further difficulties have arisen in South Africa, as elsewhere, since the rhetoric of “community” is the result of a genuine attempt to incorporate a more representative multicultural diversity in many aspects of public life but can also be a slipshod way of “managing” the more contradictory and potentially troublesome aspects of cultural and political diversity. The ideal of “community” on these occasions is not necessarily the same for those in whose name and interests it is invoked. Paradoxically, exclusion is therefore, to a certain extent, part of the logic of the way “community” is often mobilized in official rhetoric. Similarly, because it is a concept that is seen to provide leverage in official circles, it can precipitate problematic essentializing gestures as a means of authenticating a claim to “community.”

Consequently I want to elaborate on the idea of “community” by focusing on the particularities in which such a concept is mobilized and con-

structed in instances where specific histories or sites imbued with historical significance are being contested. This is partly done in order to avoid the reductive black versus white binary that so often applies to the way the country's history is perceived outside South Africa. But I also believe that such a methodological move has the additional advantage of emphasizing the heterogeneity of the concept of "community" more generally, outside as well as inside South Africa, and thus makes it easier to understand what stakes might be involved in negotiating different pasts and histories at times of social and political transition in the history of any nation when the very notion of what constitutes a "citizen" is being radically redefined.⁸ Similarly attempting to complicate our understanding of how the concept of "community" circulated differentially at the very moment in South Africa when in the official rhetoric of "nation-building" it is being deployed as a strategy of unification has the effect of emphasizing the local and internal dynamic of the debates around heritage and history, whether in response to national or international pressures and expectations.⁹ This, in turn, shifts the emphasis of the analysis away from the usual interpretative framework, which has become fossilized as a rather monolithic representation of "global" versus "local" forces and which casts Western capitalism as the driving force behind all exchanges and encounters to the exclusion of complex local and regional motivations and contingencies.

"PUBLIC" HISTORY

Many commentators have written about the shortcomings of the new dispensation and the fact that so many of the promises made in the euphoric wake of the first democratic elections have not been met. But it seems to me that if nothing else, the South African debates on history and heritage, on "truth" and lies, and on memory and make-believe—which are the subject of this book—demonstrate the health and vitality of a political culture of critique and countercritique that was forged under the most difficult of circumstances and whose main protagonists have often paid dearly for their beliefs. Most important, this tradition is not confined to the academic sphere alone, possibly as a result of the political education for liberation that sometimes had the capacity to cut across class and ethnic boundaries and that provided rigorous intellectual training and a familiarity with vociferous debate. Consequently the contested histories that form the chapters of this book are not just internal debates among a small elite but concern a much larger public than might normally be the case. During the period that is the historical focus of *History after Apartheid*, the debates on what con-

stituted an appropriate public history for the “new” nation were frequently played out in the national media across different and sometimes conflicting parties. In other words, from 1989 to 2000 such questions were very much “live” issues and formative for the ways different constituencies wanted to produce themselves as part of the new nation and subsequently formative for how such an entity might then be understood by the rest of the world.

History after Apartheid is written in dialogue with and draws on important recent work on the representation of the past (or pasts) by scholars in South Africa, where history as a discipline has developed a challenging and rigorous internal dynamic. But it is also aimed at a wider audience whose frame of reference about South Africa is shaped without the benefit of the attention to internal contradictions and detailed understanding of local conditions and circumstances that informs the best work of these intellectuals.¹⁰ However, a number of scholars (mainly anthropologists and historians) have commented on problems endemic to the area studies approach to history. In particular they cite the isolationist tendency to produce scholarship that speaks only to its own community of similarly focused academics and produces a set of internal debates that circulate among specialists in the geographical field under scrutiny and that foreground the implications of their work in a singular national arena.¹¹

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship looking to the shared legacy of settler colonialism and British imperialism in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United States has sought to look comparatively at contemporary debates around belonging and identity in these countries in an attempt to better understand the particularities of how such a shared past might impinge on the ways in which new subject positions can be forged in the present. *History after Apartheid* is intended as a contribution to such comparative analysis.¹² It seeks to shed light on some of the more recent developments in debates concerning public history in South Africa by deploying some of the insights provided by an understanding of how such debates have been played out elsewhere. Most important, the book also maintains that a more detailed consideration of the South African context and the fierce debate and intelligent scholarship it has engendered provide particular insights for any emerging polity or radically transformed society. This is because South Africa encapsulates a number of dilemmas that have faced both those nation-states recovering from long periods of colonization and those that have recently emerged from a long period of totalitarian rule—the situation in both Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of the Communist regimes. In addition, some of the problems that faced South Africa on the eve of the first democratic elections were shared by de-

veloped capitalist countries with a history of settler colonialism (such as New Zealand, Australia, and Canada), where hitherto marginalized ethnic and / or autochthonous communities have, to differing degrees, emerged as constituencies with greater political clout and (as important) the organization and will to wield it in order to gain greater influence on institutions purporting to represent their histories and interests.¹³ In other words, this book maintains that it is possible to see the case of South Africa during the period of transition to democracy from the late 1980s to 2000 as an example where a constellation of conditions that usually exist independently of one another come together. Here the political and social legacies left by the complex layering of histories of colonization, settler colonialism, totalitarianism, and organized resistance movements (both Boer and black) combine to produce a context where the effects of each of these historical conditions jostle against one another to produce significant tensions during periods of reconstruction.

MEMORY

Two events in recent years have foregrounded debates about the nature and use of historical evidence in the public sphere. These debates have carried important implications for the construction of new national histories. Both events have also served to raise questions about the nature of personal or “collective” memory as a tool for the production of historical narratives, particularly where traumatic abuses of human rights have been involved. In 1996 a small band of historians was charged with a task that would take four years to complete. In order to counter the libel suit brought against Penguin Books by David Irving, these historians would have to mount enough evidence to confirm Deborah Lipstadt’s charges in her 1994 book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, that Irving’s denial of the Holocaust was a deliberate misrepresentation of events and a falsification of history. In April 2000 Irving’s detractors successfully defended the case, and he was denounced by Justice Charles Gray as a racist anti-Semite and Holocaust denier who had manipulated historical evidence for his own ideological ends.¹⁴ While the trial was not directly concerned with the nature of national history, it is true to say that the debates over the representation of the Holocaust, particularly in the United States and in Germany since reunification, have assumed the dimensions of a national dilemma, although for very different reasons in either case.¹⁵

Meanwhile, also in 1996, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, held the first of

its hearings. Set up ostensibly to investigate gross human rights violations between 1960 and 1994 and modeled in part on the Comisión Nacional para la Verdad y la Reconciliación (set up in 1990 in Chile to deal with abuses of human rights under the military junta between 1973 and 1990), the TRC was given the power to grant amnesty to those who made full disclosure of their crimes against humanity in cases where political motivation was proven. The declared emphasis of the commission was to enable the “truth” of events under apartheid to be spoken in order to heal the wounds of the divided society that had been so violently created. Its larger objective was to facilitate a national reconciliation between victim and perpetrator. The TRC has been heavily criticized within South Africa for the compromises made in the name of “national unity” and reconciliation that allowed so many to walk free while the conditions they had perpetrated under apartheid and that had reduced so many to poverty and powerlessness remained intact.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the TRC has also grudgingly been acknowledged as serving a positive function.

By linking these events, I am not suggesting that they are commensurable. Both, however, were high-profile media events that raised issues about the nature of historical evidence and the role of the historian that have potentially far-reaching consequences. In particular, both have necessitated a reflection on oral witnessing and testimony. Irving’s denial of the systematic killings that went on at Auschwitz was based on undermining the credibility of eyewitness accounts and oral testimony per se. It was based on the unreliability of eyewitness evidence. The TRC, on the other hand, was founded on precisely the necessity and “truth” value of such witnessing and, as a corollary, on the possibility of atonement offered by the voicing of guilt through the admission, and more particularly through the description, of deeds. In fact, one of the criticisms of the process was, as Deborah Posel has pointed out, its tendency to elide memory and truth and to equate forensic with personal evidence.¹⁷

History after Apartheid is premised on the understanding that all memory is unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness and shared social processes so that any understanding of the representation of remembrances and of the past more generally must necessarily take into account both contexts.¹⁸ In addition, research on the witnessing and testimony collected in the aftermath of genocide, war, or systematic political repression (such as in the case of South Africa) has pointed to the impact of trauma on memory and the distinction between narrative and traumatic memory.¹⁹

Many commentators have remarked on the somatic nature of traumatic

as opposed to narrative memory, “full of fleeting images, the percussion of blows, sounds, and movements of the body—disconnected, cacophonous, the cells suffused with the active power of adrenalin, or coated with the anaesthetising numbness of noradrenalin.”²⁰ The fragmentary nature of this somatic recall reproduces the sensation of what for many South Africans were common occurrences under apartheid—the experience of detention, displacement, or unannounced police harassment in the dead of night. Such destabilizing experiences carry with them temporal repercussions. As we now know, holding on to the possibility of a past, a present, and the prospect of a future is essential in order to stem the dissolution of self in conditions where everything conspires against the memory or imagining of any of these. Some time ago I wrote a piece about the significance of miniature objects made in secret by detainees in the infamous prison camp at Khiam on the South Lebanese border.²¹ I suggested that the extraordinary miniaturized items that the detainees had manufactured were in some measure a means of countering the destructive effects of detention both by marking time (productive time) in a context designed to eradicate it and by witnessing not the terrible conditions under which they were made but their makers’ ability to transcend such conditions against all odds. If the detainees expressed concern that their time in detention should not simply be “lost,” then the objects they made became an embodiment of nostalgia for misplaced lives, but also and crucially they became evidence of lives spent productively—of an “other” existence. Similarly, one of the results of Primo Levi’s experience in the Nazi death camps, and one that Charlotte Delbo also recalled on her return to Paris after liberation, was the terrible erasure of a capacity for feeling.²² “The survivor must undertake to regain his memory, regain what he possessed before: his knowledge, his experience, his childhood memories, his manual dexterity and his intellectual faculties, sensitivity, the capacity to dream, imagine, laugh.”²³

In such contexts the act of making and objects themselves can become an insurance against forgetting and thus against the loss of personhood through reinstating—particularly in the case of whimsical manufactures—the capacity for fantasy. By invoking the personal, the naive, and the fantastic despite the grim context of political suppression and resistance, these objects signal the complexity and contradictions of sustaining the self while also seeking membership in an ideal of political community. These observations are also relevant in the context of a country like South Africa, scarred by the political repression and violence of apartheid but whose many activists in the struggle for liberation have all insisted on the productiveness of their years in detention and of the necessity of working toward a construc-

tive future rather than dwelling on the destructions of the past. On the other hand, it is also true to say that such a past raises particular questions about its representation in the present and about forms of representation that can adequately act as an insurance against the amnesia of future generations but that can offer more than either a palliative or a reproduction of the pain. *History after Apartheid* is thus concerned to explore the effectivity of different kinds of expression—both pedagogic and imaginative—as appropriate means of embodying the trauma of surviving apartheid.

What interested me in the South African case was precisely the tension represented by two kinds of historical research. One of these was an important tradition of historical writing from the left that prioritized a “history from below,” a history of “the people,” as a strategy for redressing the absences and structural violences of the official “national” histories circulating under apartheid. This tradition also acknowledged the contribution of oral testimonies. However, for all its significant recovery work, it also had a tendency, as some critics have commented, to homogenize its subjects as primarily “representative” of a larger political ideology.²⁴ On the other hand, the TRC seemed to offer another significant model of historical knowledge based on an appeal to individual experience as the foundation of a new national history postapartheid. Because South Africa is a nation whose recent past has been irrevocably marked by trauma, as the testimony presented at the TRC has demonstrated, I became interested in the question of how one might embody new national histories in the public sphere that engaged larger structural narratives and material conditions *and* individual lived experiences without reducing their public expression to either some monolithic representation of “the struggle” or some unlocated and ahistorical notion of individualized experience and that might adequately signal (if not represent) the compromised, complicated texture of living under and fighting against apartheid. Contemporary South Africa provides a fertile context for such an inquiry. And indeed recent developments in the teaching of history and heritage at the University of the Western Cape, the University of Cape Town, and the University of the Witwatersrand have all worked to foster a self-reflexive awareness of, if not this particular concern, certainly the contested nature of historical memory and knowledge and of the power relations involved in the production of such knowledge.²⁵

History after Apartheid makes no claim to comprehensiveness. It is neither a history of South Africa’s transition to democracy nor an exhaustive account of policy decisions regarding culture and history over this period. Instead I have deliberately selected a series of case studies that seemed to me to dramatize the most significant aspects of the debates around historical

representation in the public sphere during the early phase of the transition to democracy. Because the book is essentially about constructions of national history and the intersection of local and international interests in the construction of such histories, it emphasizes sites or institutions that have a national profile and have consequently been subjected to intense debate in the South African and sometimes international media. Inevitably this has meant sacrificing accounts of other important local initiatives, such as the artists' collective at the Crossroads Township outside Cape Town, the women's housing cooperative at Protea South, and the extraordinary work accomplished with abandoned and orphaned children by Maggie Makhoana at the Mokhele art therapy and education project in Soweto. Since completing the writing for this book, there have been a number of new national commemorative initiatives, many of which represent significant advances on some of the examples discussed in *History after Apartheid*. The Apartheid Museum outside Johannesburg, the Hector Pieterse Memorial Museum in Soweto, and the Women's Gaol, which forms part of the larger "Constitution Hill" project, are all immensely impressive experiments in producing appropriate models of public memorial after apartheid. They represent the beginning of a new phase in collaborative public history projects in South Africa. They are also, arguably, the result of a far greater consensus than that represented in the less resolved attempts at reinventing national history just prior to and after the first democratic elections. It is the conflict and contestation over different models of historical knowledge and narrative that are the focus of this book, and this is why I have concentrated on the formative period of Mandela's government of "national unity."

One of the objectives of *History after Apartheid* is to analyze how strategies for embodying different models of historical knowledge and experience are negotiated in public culture through a variety of material visual means—in monuments, museum narratives, the reanimation of particular sites and spaces, and through contemporary fine art.²⁶ I have chosen such disparate objects because they are all forms of public spectacle that together enable an analysis of the different possibilities on offer for the realization in visual and material form of narratives of belonging, of "nation" and "community," and sometimes of the impossibility of either and of the tensions between the two. The comparative frame aims to shed light on the conditions that make certain cultural strategies more appropriate in some geopolitical contexts than others and to better define the limitations and potential of these diverse forms of representation as they appeal to various constituencies.

Throughout the book instances of South African artists' engagement with their own and their nation's pasts are analyzed where their work intersects

with the concerns and debates elaborated in any given chapter. This is not because I think that contemporary fine art has a more effective way of dealing with such issues or that it communicates to constituencies to whom monuments, city spaces, and museums cannot. On the contrary, the spaces in which fine art circulates are, of course, similarly delimited and are circumscribed by such factors as the art market and its institutions and by its recourse to a visual language that may rely on a vocabulary truly accessible only to a cognoscente. At the same time, artists operate within a highly privileged realm that provides a certain license (which is not to say that they do not take real risks), and this sometimes enables them to work through taboos and contradictions in a relatively “safe” space in ways that other arenas do not permit. For this reason I have found it instructive and always intellectually enlivening to draw the reader’s attention to the insights and challenges provided by such work.

A number of commentators have reiterated the argument that the more monumental the scale of a public sculpture, the more likely it is to be ignored or forgotten over time.²⁷ My contention is that monuments are animated and reanimated only through performance and that performances or rituals focused around a monument are conjunctural. The visibility of a monument is in fact entirely contingent upon the debates concerning the reinterpretation of history that take place at moments of social and political transition. Their significance is consequently constantly being reinvented but always and necessarily in dialogue with their past. Thus the dejected political figure consigned for years to an indifferent amnesia paradoxically gets a new lease on life through the actions of later generations. When the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square in London was given a Mohawk out of bright green turf, a dash of blood dribbling from the side of his mouth, and an insignia emblazoned on his lapel during May Day antiglobalization demonstrations in 2000, Prime Minister Tony Blair condemned the vandalism as “beyond contempt.” However, the cause of the coalition of eco-warriors, Green Party activists, socialists, and anarchists was greatly aided by the irresistible photo opportunity provided by the “modified” Churchill, which produced an undeniably witty companion-image to the direct action that was the subject of significant coverage in the national press. The usually unremarked statue had taken center stage in the press coverage if not in the action itself (see figure 1).²⁸

And so in South Africa it is also the case that even the dullest public statuary that has lain dormant and unattended for years can be and is reanimated. In 1997 *Tribute*, a glossy magazine aimed at a middle-class black entrepreneurial readership, issued a statement to accompany its action of shrouding



1. Front cover of *The Editor*. Supplement to *The Guardian*, 5 May 2000.

Below 2. Bust of J. G. Strijdom in Strijdom Square, Pretoria. Photo by the author.



in black cloth certain public statues in Johannesburg and Pretoria: “Monuments that have stood for ages, erected to men who represent all that we have struggled to change, are a little darkened this morning. *Tribute’s* team has openly taken a stand against public artworks that mean nothing to the vast majority of people. With that thought weighing heavily on our conscience, we covered them up, literally. Statues in Johannesburg and Pretoria have been transformed into billboards of visual justice.”²⁹ Among these statues thus “transformed” was the absurdly gigantesque bust of J. G. Strijdom (prime minister from 1954 to 1958) in Strijdom Square in Pretoria (figure 2). Earlier, in 1992, the ANC had held a celebratory cultural festival at the foot of Strijdom’s head in the same square as a means of “liberating” Strijdom Square and reclaiming it for the black majority.³⁰ By the time of Thabo Mbeki’s inauguration the statuary around the Union Buildings (the administrative center of the South African government) and outside the state theater in Pretoria was the focus of attention again. Plans to drape those statues connected with either colonialism or apartheid proved controversial by 1999, although the criticisms—mainly that the past should be visible as a reminder that it should not happen again or that such a gesture would undermine the importance of what the struggle had overcome—came this time from critics of the ANC, such as the New National Party, the Democratic Party, the Federal Alliance, and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).³¹ And the far right, who may not be seen as a particularly potent force or threat to the democratic process in South Africa now, has nonetheless also been vocal in the monument debate. In 1997 twenty-four hours after the unveiling of the statue of Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness leader murdered in 1977 in police custody (during the premiership of B. J. Vorster), the right-wing Afrikaner paramilitary organization Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) had spray-painted its acronym in black on the plinth of the statue.³² Two weeks later a further attack by an unidentified group resulted in white paint over the statue.³³ It is clear that monuments in South Africa during the transition to democracy became a focus for symbolic transactions. For the time being they have become *more*, not *less*, visible. And as the following chapters will reveal, even the old stalwarts of the apartheid regime have subsequently become reanimated and reappropriated in surprising ways as the staging posts for new and competing identities.

POLICY

With the unbanning of the ANC and other liberation groups in 1990, the shaping of policy with regard to culture and heritage issues began in earnest.

est inside the country. Earlier attempts at formulating strategy had been hosted outside the country in July 1982 in Gaborone and December 1987 in Amsterdam with the “Culture in Another South Africa” festival and conference.³⁴ Cape Town had attempted to host “Toward a People’s Culture Arts Festival” but had been thwarted by the banning imposed through the Emergency Regulations.³⁵

By 1991 the ANC had established a Commission on Museums, Monuments and Heraldry (CMMH) within the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), although by 1993 it had replaced the CMMH with the Commission for Reconstruction and Transformation of the Arts and Culture (CREATE), which was intended as a “think-tank for the ANC.”³⁶ One of CREATE’s tasks was to examine museum legislation and policy set up by the previous (National Party) government; the task led, in turn, to the scrutiny of a document produced within the museum establishment proposing strategies for transforming the museums sector. This report, entitled “The Museums for South Africa Intersectoral Investigation for National Policy” (MUSA), was the subject of considerable heated debate and derision from the ANC. In his address, “‘Give Life to Learning’: The Way Ahead for Museums in a Democratic South Africa,” CREATE spokesperson and Director of the Mayibuye Center for History and Culture in South Africa André Odendaal summarized the ANC view:

The challenge to MUSA was to try to reconcile the views of a museums sector rooted in the colonial and apartheid past with a democratic vision of the liberation movement and impending democratic state structures. Almost predictably, I regret to say, the old apartheid bureaucrats and the museum establishment who dominated MUSA were unable to come up with the answer. As far as the African National Congress is concerned, MUSA does not even get out of the starting blocs. . . . The nature and timing of the report, started two months after Bloemfontein [a major ANC meeting on heritage and cultural issues] and completed one month before the onset of a democratic dispensation, can only be seen as an attempt by the old state bureaucracy and the museums establishment to unilaterally restructure the South African museums sector, preserve the status quo and pre-empt democratic processes and changes.³⁷

Furthermore, according to Odendaal, “the ANC [had] serious objections to both the process by which the MUSA report was compiled and the content of the report,” which it deemed unrepresentative.³⁸ The authors of the report were accused of blocking structural changes to their institutions on two fronts. In terms of intellectual content “the conscious and unconscious

ideological functions of [their] collections” had been ignored, and “no dynamic strategy or major innovations are suggested to counter-balance the weighty baggage of the past.”³⁹

Odendaal drew attention to instances in the museum world where strategies reminiscent of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings (the Federation for Afrikaner Cultural Organizations—FAK) purchase of the Voortrekker Monument (discussed in chapter 1) were being deployed by museum administrators who had a vested interest in the status quo.⁴⁰ It may be tempting to see this as a conspiracy theory, but Odendaal’s examples present convincing evidence. New members were obviously being hurriedly appointed to the clearly unrepresentative boards of trustees of national institutions, ensuring that these key appointments remained in the hands of the old guard.⁴¹ A mere three months before the handover to the new government, no brakes had been put on what Odendaal describes as “the unilateral development” of Robben Island, and no assurances had been given that a more representative joint forum would be set up to decide this crucially symbolic island’s future.⁴² In addition, the outgoing government had in 1993 passed the Castle Management Act apparently “without consultation with the ANC or community and other interested organisations,” the implication being that the castle, the oldest building in Cape Town, would be unavailable for certain kinds of educational and cultural uses once the democratic government was installed.⁴³

CREATE’s concerns were obviously that “Continued unilateral restructuring by the expiring minority government . . . could seriously impair the ANC ability to effectively reconstruct and transform heritage resources if these moves are not checked and reversed where necessary.”⁴⁴ Evidently the MUSA document was seen by most ANC spokespeople as a last ditch attempt to secure the museums establishment for the old guard in much the same way that the hurried legislation referred to above had been designed to stem the tide of liberal reform in the panic (of some) preceding the elections.⁴⁵

But the museum sector was not the only aspect of cultural heritage being barricaded by the outgoing government. Another crucial instance of an attempt to block changes was the reappointment of members of the National Monuments Council (NMC) as late as April 1994, reported in the last *Government Gazette* to appear before the elections—in other words before 22 April.⁴⁶ The ANC “voiced its strong opposition to this move to influence the policies of a new, democratically elected government by loading the Council of a national institution with members appointed in an arbitrary and bureaucratic manner” and further, “The ANC considers the reappointment of the old members of the National Monuments Council to

be a provocative and counter-productive action and will take strong action to see that the appointment of this illegitimate Council is nullified.”⁴⁷ The NMC seemed amenable to rethinking both the process of appointment and the timing and advised the ANC to take the issue up with the Department of National Education (DNE), to whom the NMC was accountable. While these organizations seem mostly to have reached an amicable settlement, the minutes of the meeting between the ANC and the DNE in Pretoria read as a much tetchier affair, with both parties standing their ground and defending their positions. The document is a good example of the kinds of entrenched positions that the more progressive recommendations of the new government would encounter in the early years of office.

This elaboration of the debates over the main bodies responsible for policy in national institutions dealing with history and heritage is similarly instructive of the significance placed on museums and other cultural heritage sites by the waning political powers—partly, one assumes, because of the desire to hang onto jobs once the new government was in power, but also because of the ideological leverage that such institutions potentially provided. By the same token, it is obviously important to recognize that the ANC was similarly invested in museums and other public institutions and monuments as purveyors of heritage and history and was aware of the potential of such institutions and sites for the new dispensation well before the elections, which is why it was keen to stop what it perceived as the blocking of positions and change by the National Party government.⁴⁸ In fact the ANC had been quite explicit about the significance of the NMC for the incoming government: “The ANC considers the composition of the National Monuments Council to be an issue akin to the appointment of the new South African Broadcasting Corporation board (SABC). The National Monuments Council has a vital role to play in the new South Africa in the conservation of the tangible historical, architectural, scientific and cultural heritage of the people of South Africa and in fostering a sense of South African nationhood.”⁴⁹ These statements also tell us much about the tensions between the ANC and National Party incumbents of Mandela’s new government of national unity, as well as the ANC’s anxiety to maintain a strong foothold on all fronts from the outset. In April 1994, an ANC victory in the first democratic election may have been a foregone conclusion, but a new struggle over South Africa’s past was just beginning.

TRANSLATING THE PAST

Apartheid Monuments in Postapartheid South Africa

All Afrikaner monuments [should] be removed from the mainland and placed in the cells in the prison on Robben Island. It could then be called “Boerasic Park.”—Evita Bezuidenhout, Ambassador to Bapetikosweti (otherwise known as the satirist Pieter Dirk Uys)

In July 1992 the South African History Workshop in Johannesburg hosted a conference, “Myths, Monuments, Museums.” The poster for the event depicted a crowd fighting over one of the national monuments most closely identified with the apartheid regime—the Voortrekker Monument outside Pretoria (figure 3). The effectiveness of the image derives partly from its ambiguity. From one perspective the crowd is shoring up the monument, but from another it is clearly intent on pulling it down. The thorny question of the fate of monuments erected to commemorate regimes that have since been discredited and disgraced is not solely a South African dilemma, of course. In the recent past the future of most of the public statuary in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the infamous Berlin Wall, has been the subject of intense debate. In a moving documentary, *Disgraced Monuments* (1994), which manages to evoke nostalgia without sentimentality, directors Laura Mulvey and Mark Lewis explore the fate of public monuments under successive regimes in the former Soviet Union, and the apparently endless cycle of monumental sculptural programs celebrating the favored leader of the moment, followed inevitably by their iconoclastic dismantling and removal. Just such a sequence was most famously captured by the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein when he filmed the toppling of the statue of the czar in *Oktobr* (1927). As the art historian Natalya Davidova comments in

Disgraced Monuments, in Russia it has always been a case of “a struggle with the past that was realized through a struggle with monuments.” Indeed the film charts instances from Lenin’s famous decree on public monuments in 1918 and the iconoclasm that followed to the more recent waves of iconoclastic fervor in the 1990s after the fall of communism.¹ In the opening scenes of the film the camera pans the shelves of a Russian factory where busts of former Soviet leaders sit mute, bundled up in brown paper packaging and tied with string, awaiting a delivery call that will probably never come. In a park in Moscow enclosed by low railings huge sculptures of Lenin, Feliks Dzerzhinsky (former head of the secret police), and Stalin lie toppled on their sides, one elbow supported by a broken column—an apt allegorical support for a fallen leader. This is the Temporary Museum of Totalitarian Art, Russia’s solution to the now embarrassing memory of demoted Soviet heroes. In Budapest a similar park exists serving essentially as a cemetery for the defunct leaders of previous Communist regimes. A skeptical observer in *Disgraced Monuments* remarks that since the onset of perestroika in August 1991 the only real changes visible in Russia are a spate of new subjects for yet another wave of monuments. After all, he says pessimistically, “Concrete is easier to change than reality.”

It is not surprising that similar scrutiny has been leveled at much of the public sculpture set up over the long apartheid years to commemorate key moments and figures in the Afrikaner nationalist canon and that these debates took place in the highly public forums of the national press and television, especially between 1993 and 1996. Indeed, comparisons with both the former Soviet Union and other East and Central European countries were a feature of some of these debates.² The humor of the moment was not lost on the acerbic South African cartoonist Zapiro, who preferred to corral the “displaced” statues and portraits of apartheid’s political leaders into a wild game reserve and theme park for the benefit of tourists (figure 4).³ As the monument debate raged, reputations were made and lost over the issue. The Voortrekker Monument provides a useful point of entry into the complexities of the debates around appropriate forms for commemorating the past and envisaging the future in the “new” South Africa. Some recommended keeping the monument as a reminder of the oppression of the apartheid era—to learn from the lessons of the past. Although some critics favored abandoning the monument altogether and demolishing the site, the South African solution has been notably unlike the East European counterparts. The ANC spokespeople involved in outlining cultural policy for the new democratic government were adamant that most of the Afrikaner monuments should remain, including the Voortrekker Monument.



3. Penny Siopis, poster for "Myths, Monuments, Museums" conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 16–18 July 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

Below 4. Zapiro, *Boerassic Park*. *Mail and Guardian*, 1 February 1996. Courtesy of Jonathan Shapiro.

