Coming to terms with trauma: The TRC and memorials to the victims of apartheid violence

Introduction
Memorials can be strategic tools in laying claim to symbolically important and potentially contested aspects of the past. Yet this political and functionalist perspective invariably obscures the psychological significance and the emotional fulfillment that many individuals, families, communities and party members may genuinely associate with the presence of a memorial. This chapter therefore starts out by investigating the installation of memorials as part of the personal, family-based, often religiously motivated desire for proper burial and community remembrance of deceased loved-ones. However, beyond the confines of private mourning and community remembrance, public monuments and memorials are always also addressed to a wider audience and become interwoven with larger, public processes of commemoration and societal discourses about the past and its relationship to the present.

While the previous chapter highlighted the potentially divisive effect of public commemorative markers, this chapter affirms the possibility that they may indeed play a role in reconciliation. I will discuss memorials as a public acknowledgement of suffering and loss, which can restore a sense of personal dignity and lead to societal healing. This perspective received potent endorsement through the TRC’s recommendation that memorials be built for the victims of apartheid violence as symbolic measures of reparation and to promote national unity and reconciliation.

Despite some criticism, the importance of the TRC – both as a process of historical research, upon which much of our understanding of the apartheid period relies, and as an instrument of healing – can hardly be overestimated, as McEachern’s (2002) insightful analysis shows. Like the TRC hearings, memorials to the victims of apartheid violations can be instruments of healing, but they also constitute lasting, tangible public
representations of the stories uncovered by the TRC process. Some memorials are joined by an adjacent museum or interpretation centre, while others are equipped with extensive text plaques or visual images, which provide information but also inevitably an interpretation of events. Often equipped with a catchphrase label – the ‘Pebco Three’, the ‘Cradock Four’, the ‘Gugulethu’ Seven’, the ‘Trojan Horse’ incident – some such cases have been brought to much more prominence in the collective memory than others, both through media coverage and especially the establishment of an imposing memorial.

On the one hand, post-apartheid memorials represent a formidable break with the commemorative practices of the previous order, precisely because they are directly inspired by and linked to the hearings of the TRC. They can be interpreted as representing ordinary black people’s experiences and acknowledging their suffering. They give a public voice and lasting representation in the official memory landscape to people who have been marginalised and humiliated for most of their lives. But on the other hand, the state-supported process of memorialising the victims of apartheid violence is also propelled by an ideologically-driven political dynamic that involves a hierarchical ranking of victims, the state-endorsed remembrance of certain victims, and the convenient forgetting of others. The practice of selectively remembering victims attests to a continuity with the commemorative pattern of previous South African governments, and is in fact found in most societies as a result of the ‘necessity’ to celebrate heroes and recount inspiring narratives in support of the nation’s myth of origin and newly defined identity discourses. This thought will be pursued further in Chapter Seven.

**Apartheid violence and its victims**

I want to begin with a brief historical sketch of the apartheid era, focusing generally on violence and resistance, and specifically on the events that have prompted the installation of memorials and monuments. The reader should recall that this book does not aim to investigate what really happened in the past, but rather how the past is represented and appropriated. In a deeply divided society characterised by the co-existence of different visions, ideologies and nationalisms, both popular perceptions of the past and the academic study and research of history are inevitably divided. During the apartheid period, many historical accounts and attempts at recording, describing and critically analysing past events were influenced by or constructed around the ideological drift of, for instance, white Afrikaner nationalism or a pan-South African black nationalism as

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1 Sometimes also spelled Guguletu.