

Essays/Articles

Part I: Re-understanding Biko, Mandela and Memory

Tending Graves: On Twenty Years

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“History is how the secular world attends to the dead.”
—Saidiya Hartman

The Mandela Capture Site is among the newest of South Africa’s memorials. On the R103 outside of the small town of Howick, its centerpiece is undoubtedly Marco Cianfelli’s impressionistic sculpture of democratic South Africa’s founding father. Cianfelli’s work is from comprised of fifty jagged spikes, arranged like pillars or tree trunks, an out of place grove of trees. From close they are scattershot, seemingly random; but as you approach them from the distance you see Mandela’s face, in profile, comprised of their gnarled trunks.

I thought about the capture site recently when attending a jazz concert that was part of a month-long celebration of South African music and culture in New York City twenty years after democracy. Sponsored by the South African embassy, various banks, and other corporate concerns, *Ubuntu: Music and Arts of South Africa* was, in its organizer’s rendering, an attempt to celebrate the “many threads that make up South Africa’s impassioned culture.” Many of the related shows took place at Carnegie Hall, which produced a *Playbill* to mark the occasion. The Mandela Capture Site memorial was there in the playbill, with its many spears, its profiled Madiba, now gone and mourned. He was not alone in the image: there were tourists there as well, including a beautiful couple of ambiguous race, the man crouched, the better to capture the whole of the sculpture and the sky above in his lens, his wife/heterosexual life partner (reassuringly, of the same ambiguous race) with a hand on his back, guiding the shot. This, the advertisement claimed, was “culture,” the opportunity “to retrace the eternal footsteps of Nelson Mandela.” Mandela’s life, so packaged, was part of South African tourism’s new “big five” — safari, culture, romance, adventure, and entertainment.

I am not naïve enough to think that the South African tourism bureau should be advertising its mines, migrant labor compounds, informal settlements, and farm-worker cottages. The Mandela Capture Site is precisely the sort of place that I should applaud South African tourism for highlighting as South Africa's culture. It is important to get the country's visitors to think about imprisonment and race, to see South Africa as a place with a dirty past, which the neatly maintained hotels, pristine wine-lands, and carefully managed game reserves keep at bay. Nelson Mandela was captured by the apartheid government at this site forty-two years ago. We ought to remember this and I'm glad that the South African government is invested in bringing its millions of international visitors to such *lieux de memoire*, to walk in the footsteps of a man who suffered so much.

But I worry about the personalization of the past. Read the ad again: what is South African "culture"? Only Mandela is named. You can visit his house in Orlando, the site of his arrest in the Natal Midlands, or his cell on Robben Island. It is the South African Via Dolorosa—"eternal footsteps" through a land rendered sacred by Mandela's passage through it. This is not surprising; nations need heroes, and we always look to the great men and woman of the past for guidance through the present and future; witness the proliferation of presidential historians offering analogues from the distant past on American television, for example. For a long time in the 1980s, South African historiography ran away from such hagiographic tendencies to pursue the more radical possibilities of social history and the dialectic of collective oppression and struggle; but as the proliferation of new books on the history of the ANC and other liberation movements suggests, the discipline of history is increasingly lurching back towards a graded past, where only the highest peaks are worthy of attention.

I understand the appeal. As I wrote in my study of the Black Consciousness era, the South African struggle, "is a human story brimming with pathos and emotion and that is what I imagine draws us to it in the first place." Our eye is naturally drawn to the struggle's most famous heroes and martyrs, to the Mandelas and the Bikos. Mine certainly was. And like a good tourist, so too was I drawn to the Mandela Capture site on June 16, 2013—Youth Day, marking the anniversary of the Soweto uprising. That year, June 16 was also Father's Day. In the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands it was a

bright, sunny day, lit in dramatic relief by a warm, winter sun that hung low in the southern-hemisphere sky. I went as a historian and as someone interested in public art and memorials, so I spent time assessing the crowd and walking around Marco Cianfelli's amazing sculpture. It was a holiday, so the archive was closed, but I was having a harder time shutting off the archive of my mind. So I also just stood there and watched families.

It was a beautiful day in a diverse country whose better-off citizens like nothing more than to cruise around. Not surprisingly, a steady stream of visitors parked, bought a cup of tea, or browsed the small museum, and eventually headed down the path to walk among the staves of the sculpture. I could rehearse the rainbow-nation doggerel about the blacks, whites, Christians, Muslims, etc. who were there that day, and could analyze who did what at the site, who looked moved and who bored; who posed with a smile, who grimly. I remember fathers hugging their children, I remember children running around, I remember people walking hand in hand and chatting, enjoying the light and each other. I don't remember what race they were—at that moment and place, there was no bigger narrative, no greater lesson than that of people being together with other people, freely and joyfully spending time.

With my ongoing research shuttling through my mind, it occurred to me then that the capture memorial can tell many stories, including some different than that of Mandela's "eternal footsteps." For the past few years, I have been researching the history of a small group of apartheid-era African thinkers—art teachers who were trained and paid by the apartheid state to teach art in the Department of Bantu Education's schools. They were, by definition, collaborators with the white minority state: they worked with it, they negotiated with it, they believed in it—or at least, they believed in the opportunity that apartheid granted them to teach art, a task which most thought essential to the cultural, intellectual, and social progress of black South Africa. Their choices were not Mandela's or Biko's. But standing at the capture site, watching families, I considered how Abednego Dlamini, Silverman Jara, Samson Mahlobo, Patricia Khoza, Sophie Nsuza, and hundreds of other teachers had struggled. Their lives and their work are muted by a history (of art and otherwise) that prefers its politics straight and its ethics uncomplicated. But like Mandela

and Biko, they worked assiduously to maintain the integrity of body, family, and community against the assaults of powerful forces that dismissed their right or need to do so.

With that in mind, the capture site began to speak for them as well. This is a truth of the memorial: in the not-too-distant South African past, some families mattered more than others. The white and wealthy ones could drive the Midlands roads near where Nelson Mandela was captured as they wanted; the black and poor could not. Colonialists, industrialists, and bureaucrats thought little of enacting tremendous restrictions on black family life because it suited their ignorance, their greed, their pettiness, and their fear. When people stood against this—men, women, and children like those Soweto youth in 1976—they courted arrest, imprisonment, and death. The Mandela capture memorial reminds us that the simple joys I witnessed on June 16, 2013 were, in the past, reserved for some; others, forced from their land by settlement and legislation, were restricted in their ability to teach their children, and to promise them a better future. They could only adapt or, courageously, resist.

Nelson Mandela was one of the courageous ones. He was one among the thousands—millions—around the world who struggled against this great injustice. His name is the most celebrated, but it is only one name, and we do him no disrespect by recalling the countless others who also saw wrong and tried to make it right, who spent decades of nights separated from their loved ones, who suffered and died for essentially a simple truth: people ought to be able to live with their families as they choose, to raise their children securely, confidently, with faith that such simple, quotidian joys are the markers of lives well lived and deaths satisfyingly met. South Africa in the past was not a place that agreed about this. Large segments of the white South African population, their political leaders, and their supporters around the world—including many citizens of my country and elsewhere—fought their own struggle to keep Nelson Mandela from his family. Millions turned a blind eye to families ripped apart by resettlement and migrant labor, by poverty, disease, and ignorance, and explained away the killing of children in Soweto's streets. Millions were ignorant of how their politics, their passions, and their fears were manifest in artists' quiet frustrations in denuded townships, depressed reserves, and unlighted homes. The reality of the past is what the

Capture Memorial might actually capture so vividly. I say “might” because I do not think that’s the lesson the ambiguously racial couple in the tourism ad is getting from their visit. But if they wanted to, they could stand up, look around, and imagine themselves fading away, along with so many of the laughing families I saw on my visit.

Human lives are perfect stories: they begin, they have an arc, and then they end. When they end, the story stops, and we all strain to figure out what it meant. When I was younger, the story of Nelson Mandela and the ANC swept me off of my feet and set me on the path to South Africa and the study of its past. Now, I am thinking about other South African lives and deaths: like that of Silverman Jara, an art teacher and school principal in the Ciskei Bantustan, who was stoned to death by his own students in 1980, or Samson Mahlobo, another teacher who was so frustrated by his failure to transcend South Africa’s racialized art and education systems that he took his own life in 1969. I am thinking about Amos Mbuthu, a man about whom I know very little, other than the fact that he was an art student, trained and ready to teach, who was stabbed to death by “thugs” as he made his way home from the apartheid government’s art school in the early 1970s. Jara, Mahlobo, and Mbuthu’s lives and deaths were as much a product of the South African past as Mandela’s, but history, as a discipline, is less prepared to remember them.

This is a pity. I have begun to realize that these deaths are more productive to think with than that of a Mandela, or a Biko. The latter’s death is something with which I have long struggled. The young medical student and thinker, Biko, remains one of my heroes, a youth who designed the intellectual architecture for a truly revolutionary politics. He was murdered because the apartheid government and the white South African population perceived those designs to be an existential threat to their security. His murder changed what his life meant. Elevated to a pantheon of great thinkers and activists, he became something different than what he had been. Like Mandela, he was sacralized. Biko’s own *Via Dolorosa* is not as publicized as Mandela’s; nevertheless, I and many others have walked it in Durban and King Williamstown, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria.

In death, Biko—like Mandela—was removed from context and placed in a time external to the South African past

and alienated from the community with whom he struggled. In memorial and memory, he has become an icon, not a person. The less-famous dead cannot help but remain people. Their lives and losses are legible only within context; they can be read only along the topography of their own time, not the high peaks that poke through the clouds to demand attention in our own. I am not opposed to biographical narratives, yet as a historian I want to be on guard for the ways in which heroic biography often rips the subject from the past for present consumption. Rather than this vampiric relationship with the past, I have come to believe that history—real history, in its ugliness, its shortsightedness, and the muddled way that we perceive the future from the present—ought to do the quiet work of tending the multitude of unmarked graves.

It has been twenty years since South Africans ended white supremacy, twenty years since they elected Mandela president, twenty years since the great twentieth-century narrative of African decolonization and national liberation finally reached the continent's southernmost tip. A lot has changed in those twenty years; one thing that has not is that most people continue to struggle to work, live, and die in a world not of their making, a context not of their choosing. Soon it will be time to write histories of these last, more ambiguous, decades. If history is to be the study of time, not individuals, if it wants to consider social experience, and social struggle, not messiahs and their cults, we need to look away from Cianfelli's fifty staves and consider anew what the Mandela of 1962 was looking at, with his own eyes, in his own time. Rather than be blinded by his brilliance, we must look into the still shadows and continue the quiet work of tending the graves of the past.