

Controlling for Consensus: Commemorating Apartheid in South Africa

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According to the literature, commemorations of difficult pasts can be categorized into two main types, fragmented and multivocal—both of which serve to express, if not to enhance, social conflicts. Our analysis of the first apartheid museum in South Africa, however, points to a commemorative type that aims at agreement, not through disagreement and debate but through overarching consensus. That consensus is constructed through a large degree of control in terms of the form and content of the mnemonic object. Having outlined the techniques used to control for consensus, we briefly explore the social context of the commemorating society, which informed and enabled such a mnemonic construction.

Never look behind you, said the dealer in farm implements. Why not, said
I. . . . Because the past is the past, he said, and regret is vain, let bygones
be bygones. You know what became of Lot's wife, he went on.

—Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*

Just off the highway that links Johannesburg and Soweto stands the South African Apartheid Museum. Visitors to the museum—opened to the public in 2001—can see both from afar. In many ways, the museum's location, at a juncture between apartheid's "white" and "black" South Africa¹ but at quite a distance from both and near a casino and an amusement park, symbolizes the desired (and controlled for) consensual tone of the museum. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999:35) has noted that "social harmony is for us [South Africans] the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought after good is to

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be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge . . . are corrosive of this good.” (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002)

As far as commemoration is concerned, the era of apartheid in South Africa can be classified under the category of “difficult past” (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). A difficult past is not necessarily more tragic than other commemorated past events (although it may be): what constitutes a difficult past is an inherent moral trauma (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), disputes, tensions, and conflicts. It is an event that many (mostly the victims) wish to remember, many (mostly the perpetrators) wish to forget, and many wish that it had never have taken place. In discussing how societies cope with difficult pasts, the literature suggests two types of commemoration, neither of which is consensual. The first one is a multivocal commemoration where a shared space, a shared time, or a shared text carries diverse meanings of the event and thus can be peopled by groups with different interpretations of the past (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). The second way to commemorate a difficult past is a fragmented one that includes multiple commemorations in various spaces and times where diverse discourses of the past are voiced and aimed at disparate audiences (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). Both types of commemoration do not serve to resolve social conflicts but rather to represent and express them. In fact, a fragmented commemoration can even increase them. Using the first museum dedicated to telling the story of apartheid in South Africa as a case study, we find a difficult past commemorated not through disagreement and debate but through overarching consensus. The intended consensus should not, however, be thought of in strict Durkheimian (Durkheim 1965) terms. Rather than organically representing the shared values and norms of the community (if that is at all possible), the Apartheid Museum aims to enact and create consensus through a large degree of control in terms of both form and content.

Ostensibly, this type of an analysis of a public presentation of the past locates itself within the macro “collective memory” rather than the micro “collected memories” approach to social memory studies (see Olick 1999a). In effect, macro social orientations inform most studies of social memory. Speaking out against this trend, while not dismissing it, Schwartz and Schuman (2005) have recently called on researchers to bring the individual into social memory studies and thus to pay heed to the micro as well as the macro sociological dimensions of memory. In many ways, Fine’s (1993) argument that social memory studies in fact rest—implicitly if not explicitly—on the foundations set by symbolic interactionist frameworks could be seen as an earlier moment in which theorists addressed the need to take account of the micro dimensions of memory work. In acknowledging this theoretical and methodological approach, we wish to suggest that the museum constitutes something of a stage with its accompanying props—a stage, to paraphrase Schwartz and Schuman (2005), from which individuals, choosing from the available scripts and characters, will later on be able to negotiate their beliefs and attitudes about the past while constructing their identities (whether personal, situational, or collective). The attention paid to the macro mnemonic object of the museum emanates from an

understanding that the ways in which individual actors perform their memories necessarily entails understanding the broader mnemonic stage that both facilitates and curtails individual and group performances. In other words, micro memory work demands examining the macro mnemonic context in which the micro is located, since the formation and consolidation of collected memories always occurs in the context of collective memory. Moreover, we propose that even before individuals enter the symbolic space of the museum, and thus even before they begin to dialogue with macro instantiations of collective memory, their potential responses are already anticipated, and thus an imaginary dialogue is preemptively entered into by the relevant agents of memory, on the one hand, and the anticipated audiences, on the other.

In this article, we wish to examine how the stage is set for a consensual commemoration of a shameful past by claiming that through a specific form and mainly through a particular content, even a difficult past can be commemorated consensually. Thus we first discuss the choice of a museum as a mnemonic form. Then we present the content of the Apartheid Museum by identifying four interconnected techniques to cope with the past: divorcing the past; legitimizing the present; forgetting through remembering; and experiencing the past. Toward the end of the article, we briefly explore the social context within which the museum emerged to understand why commemorating this difficult past does not conform to either of the commemorative types outlined in the literature. However, before we discuss how and why the museum controls for consensus, we wish to outline the methodology used in the study and then to offer a brief biography of the Apartheid Museum.

METHODS AND DATA

The Apartheid Museum was examined insofar as it is the first physical instantiation of collective memory that takes the entire story of apartheid as its referent. Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can strictly be thought of as the founding moment of memory work in South Africa, the Apartheid Museum serves as a “founding moment” (see Olick 1999b; Schudson 1989; Schwartz 1982, 1991; Spillman 2003; Vinitzky-Seroussi 2001, 2002) in terms of commemorative sites in post-apartheid South Africa.²

The data were gathered by one of the authors during a five-month stay in South Africa (August 2002 to January 2003) and involved eighteen in-depth interviews with relevant agents of memory including the museum’s funder;³ the designer of the museum’s initial plan; the curator, filmmakers, historians, archivists, architects, education specialists; representatives of the Gauteng Gambling Board; the curator of a museum in Soweto; and many others.⁴ The research also consisted of participant observations of the curatorial team on an “assessment tour” of the museum, guided tours of the museum, observations of unguided visitors to the museum as well as visits to other relevant sites (such as Robben Island and the District Six Museum in Cape Town), and content analysis of artifacts, photographs, and text panels that

constitute the museum's narrative as well as documents related to both the construction and the public reception of the museum. Such an analysis entails examining the objects themselves as well as how they are organized in terms of relative space (Brower 1999) and sequence (Crang 1994). In addition, copies of text panels omitted from the museum's final display were analyzed. During the research, countless visits were paid to the museum in which numerous informal conversations were conducted with tour guides, maintenance staff, and security personnel.

The Apartheid Museum: A History of the Institution

Less than ten years after Nelson Mandela was elected president in South Africa's first democratic elections following the dissolution of white minority rule through a negotiated transition, the Apartheid Museum was opened to the public. The context of its construction, however, is embedded less in the history of apartheid and more in the country's newly liberalized gambling legislation.⁵ As such, in accordance with the Gauteng Gambling Act (4 of 1995), casino bidders were required to offer something to the community as part of the competition over a license. When asked why he had decided to give a museum as part of the social responsibility section—when, given the open-ended nature of the legislation, just about anything could have been proposed—the funder first refers to his past experiences with mnemonic issues:

“When I go back to [the idea of offering a museum], obviously cause I'd already [been] immersed from November 94/95 [in] the Mandela Hand . . . *I knew the story of the struggle and apartheid must make a winning concept.* . . . And maybe I was so inspired with the Holocaust Museum in Washington [which I had visited] that it was such a natural thing to do . . . [and my family trip to Lithuania] that must have been something that was so seeped in my body.” (interview, October 30, 2002, emphasis added)⁶

The biography of the funder, as he chooses to tell it, is certainly important, but it must be read in conjunction with current trends of mnemonic discourses. Today, when there is a growing recognition among social agents that “whoever controls images of the past shapes the present, and possibly the ideas of the future” (Levy 1999:51), the diffusion and importance of commemoration can be seen to have reached such an extent that it was clear to the funder that promising a mnemonic site constitutes “a winning concept”:

I knew that if we applied for a casino license and we only had the Theme Park as a drawcard, it wasn't enough. . . . I fought and screamed at the whole board. . . . They said, “Why do you need this?” I said, “We've got to get our license.” And it's proved correctly [*sic*] afterward that the adjudicators mentioned it to other people [that we] got a license because of . . . the Apartheid Museum.” (interview, October 10, 2002)⁷

The funder and others thus approached an Israeli museologist to help them in terms of the social responsibility requirement.⁸ Her proposal—titled “The Park of Freedom”—was submitted to the Gambling Board, and the license was granted under the condition that by May 2001 all the deliverables had to be operational.

However, while the consortium went about building the casino, the Park of Freedom remained forgotten. Then, as a member of the curatorial team recounts, “the Gambling Board . . . came back to them and said, ‘Excuse me, where is your promise to build a museum?’ And then of course all hell broke loose because they had a time-scale to do it” (interview, October 17, 2002). Penalties for noncompliance included the possible suspension of the casino license. In this light, a team of professionals was hastily hired to complete the project within an eighteen-month time frame.

A combination of finances, time constraints, and professional sensibilities generated the metamorphosis of the Park of Freedom into the Apartheid Museum. Thus, rather than have what a member of the curatorial team describes as “a cultural village” (interview, November 6, 2002), which an architect describes as “a series of buildings in an African motif . . . and huge pavilions of about 500 square meters each, dressed up in Zulu and Ndebele and all kinds of cringe-worthy details,” it was felt that “we can do much better than this for the same money” (interview, September 2, 2002). Employing a curator and an academic team also contributed to consolidating the Apartheid Museum concept, as did a second visit by the funder to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., illustrating once again the global influences on mnemonic consciousness. “It hit me like a bomb,” the funder says, “that the Holocaust Museum is the rise and fall of the Nazi regime. . . . I said, ‘What am I doing? It’s the rise and fall of apartheid. So I phoned through . . . I said, . . . ‘You’ve got to stop what you’re doing. . . . It’s got to be a focused museum’” (interview, October 30, 2002).

At this stage the building was already half completed, and thus certain changes could not be made (or were perceived as such), while others were implemented. The museum’s link to a casino bid meant that most of those involved in funding the project had little interest in the museum itself, save that it would secure a gambling license. In effect, all of the professionals felt that while the members of the consortium that funded the museum imposed constraints in terms of time and finances, the museum’s content and design remained quite firmly in their hands. “The [consortium] couldn’t care two hoots about this thing and what it looked like. They just wanted to get it behind them. . . . Nobody came and told us that’s right and that’s wrong. . . . Ja, [*sic*] ultimately [the funder] was the client. But the professionals basically did what they thought was the best for the product” (interview, September 2, 2002). Another member of the curatorial team adds to the point by suggesting that had he worked through the government it would have been “committee, after committee . . . political interest after political interest. . . . so the bizarre situation [is that] you get more freedom out of a casino than you’d get out of a democratically elected government” (interview, October 9, 2002).

At the same time, however, most of the consultants working on the museum express reservations about its origins. “The museum,” as one member of the curatorial team notes, “comes out of a strange background” (interview, October 17, 2002). These reservations have been played out in three related spheres: institutional independence, legitimacy, and architecture. First, in the hope of ensuring the museum’s independence, a “Section 21 Company” has been formed,⁹ but, at the time of

writing, the museum has still not been transferred into “Company not for Gain.” The museum thus is owned by a consortium not interested in being financially responsible for it. The Gambling Board, for its part, however, holds the consortium responsible for the museum regardless of how it is managed. As such, transferring the museum may mean risking the casino license. “If the museum ceases operating because there is no money, yes, we’ll look to [the consortium,]” states a member of the Gambling Board (interview, November 28, 2002). The museum, however, wants to distance itself from the casino as much as possible, since this is seen as a burden as far as fund-raising is concerned. And fund-raising, in turn, is the key to independence.

Second, and related to the ability to raise substantial amounts of money, is the issue of the museum’s legitimacy. While government ministers and political figures—including Nelson Mandela—have visited the museum, it is open to the public unofficially, as the museum’s management is waiting for the state president to agree to open it. This may have to do with the fact that the museum suffers from a certain degree of political criticism. The conflict is difficult to decipher and seems to consist of accusations of plagiarism (directed at the government by certain elements in the museum), competition over mnemonic projects initiated by the government, and the idea that such a museum should not be left in the hands of a casino. Whatever the source of the tension, it affects the museum’s legitimacy, which in turn affects its ability to gain credibility and thus financial independence.

The third sphere has to do with the effect of the museum’s location on its architecture. As one architect notes, “Normally, a building tends to present itself and to interact with its neighbors and to make contextual sense. . . . [Here because of the proximity of the casino and the theme park] we deliberately did the opposite. . . . It kind of turns its back on all sides to the outside world” (interview, September 2, 2002). Thus the museum wished to differentiate and distance itself from its undesirable environment. And indeed, from the road, the building is nondescript, bare, prisonlike, and stark, surrounded by walls and isolated from the street. As we shortly show, this external architecture reinforces the desired narrative offered by the museum.

THE FORM OF CONSENSUS: A MUSEUM

Within the broad category of museums as spaces dedicated to preserving or exhibiting collections (Burcaw 1995), one finds historical museums that are functionally closer to monuments and memorials than to other museums. In effect, these museums function as sites of commemoration. Thus, while Young (1993:4) speaks of the “memorial-monument,” one may speak of “memorial-museums.” These museums, it seems, “focus and direct memory” (Hall 2000:287) and perform similar commemorative functions to monuments (see Ben-Ze’ev and Ben-Ari 1996; Brower 1999; Inglis 1985). The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., which was intended as a “living memorial” (Linenthal 1997), is a prime example of this category.

At the same time, however, museums can be seen as distinct in terms of the positioning of the visitor. In most memorial-monuments, the appropriate prepositions to describe the physical relationship of the visitor to the memorial are *in front of*,

next to, behind. In museums, however, the visitor goes inside and is enveloped within its mnemonic message. Furthermore, messages given over by museums are often more structured and less abstract. Quite simply, there is more space there to tell the narrative. A museum can be seen as organizing space as well as time. Its spatial configuration, argues Crang (1994:32), serves to “inscribe time on space” through dividing space into temporal categories. As Zerubavel (1993:455) has noted, “Despite the fact that time flows uninterruptedly, we quite normally carve in our minds out of historical continuums supposedly discrete periods.” A museum, it seems, institutionally carves out these discrete periods through its use of space. In this way, it is able to tell a teleological story through its use of space and, by extension, its representation of time (Crang 1994). Fine (1996: 1176) adds that “to be valuable for the present, history must be didactic.” Museums, even when they serve as memorial sites, seem to be more didactic than the latter by virtue of how they present and structure the memories that they contain and construct.

The forms that commemorations take are significant in understanding how collective memory is constructed (see Sturken 1991; Wagner-Pacifici 1996). Museums in general are characterized by a high degree of social control (Trondsen 1976) and thus differ from monuments, memorial ceremonies, and other potential gathering areas in the public sphere. Visitors to museums, as Trondsen (1976) observed, are highly compliant with the norms of order and quiet that inscribe themselves on the museum space. In most cases, what can be done around a monument located in the middle of a park cannot take place within a museum.

In the Hector Pieterse Museum-Memorial in Soweto, for example, we find that the memorial (and not the museum) becomes a place for local communities to express divergent perspectives, lessons, and meanings extrapolated from the events of June 16, 1976.¹⁰ The curator of this institution notes that “the memorial is beginning to become a platform for the local community to come in for other things” and continues to document the recent use of the memorial for the issue of HIV/AIDS where “some of the T-shirts [people] were wearing were saying, ‘What is killing our children now?’ So they are linking the pain of ’76 to the pain of today.” The memorial, in addition, has become a site for commemoration “on a party political line.” Speaking of how the memorial is used for concerts on June 16, he notes that “the way . . . June 16 is commemorated outside of the museum, there has been a lot of contestation about whether that format is proper or not” (interview, December 4, 2002). Memories, as Wagner-Pacifici (1996:302) reminds us, “are never formless. They come to us as narratives, pictorial images, textbooks [museum, monuments] . . . and statues.” The forms of these memories may account, at least in part, for the responses they elicit from individuals.

Thus museums—architecturally speaking—do not call for social protest, collective unrest, and so forth. “When we saw the site,” one architect states, “we thought it was arguably the worst site to put a thing like this in.” Trying to explain why, the architect adds that the site had “lots of openness around so you actually had no control as to what would come, what would be happening” (interview, September 2, 2002). The problematics of the site’s openness and the resulting lack of control have

been overcome by creating “a fortresslike enclosure” (interview, September 2, 2002). The museum is a walled complex. As such, it becomes self-referential and self-contained. In this “fortresslike” structure, the tour guides, security guards, and cameras, which heighten the sense of control and surveillance, are never far away.

The controlled nature of the museum’s physical form also means that once one enters the museum’s walled space, its messages become all-encompassing. In this way, the museum’s form serves to focus the attention of the visitor, to envelop him or her in its message and to control for distraction. There is no “looking away” at something else (as one might do at a memorial ceremony or a monument). In addition, the visitor has little freedom in navigating the narrative route. The museum involves, in the words of its architects, “a linear story line” (interview, November 6, 2002), “where there’s the beginning to the story, you get into the guts of it and there’s a conclusion” (interview, November 9, 2002). The form thus allows the museum to be extremely didactic (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). It does not seem to offer the openness and level of abstraction that certain memorials do and, as such, does not invite multivocal readings (see Hass 1998; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). It constructs beginnings and endings (Zerubavel 1993) and thus attempts to control and demarcate the range of available readings. As such, through its controlled form, the Apartheid Museum seeks to offer a consensual reading of the past. Yet content may cause much controversy even within a conservative controlled form (see, e.g., Zolberg 1998). The Apartheid Museum is careful to ensure that the consensual form be translated into consensual content. Thus it sets up a content that, much like its architecture, is carefully controlled to elicit consensus and not conflict.

THE CONTENT OF CONSENSUS: A DIFFICULT PAST AS A CONSENSUAL MEMORY

The Apartheid Museum attempts to construct consensus around its content by using four interconnected techniques: divorcing the past; legitimizing the present; forgetting through remembering; and experiencing the past.

Divorcing the Past

Explaining the context of difficult events and periods is socially risky, as it may involve issues of blame, accusation, and thus accountability; it may also evoke the same conflict that constituted the painful past in the first place (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). Yet it seems reasonable to expect that events be explained and contextualized. In this light, the Apartheid Museum offers a type of explanation that aids in constructing consensus. In its narratives, the museum consistently attempts to divorce the (dreadful) past from the (hopeful) present. The museum thus resists narrative lines that construct the past as relevant to present debates and concerns. Issues of race, religion, belief, prejudice, and the law, which may be as salient for examining the present as they are for understanding the past, are circumvented in

favor of economic explanations that are seen to be historically contingent. In addition, the museum carefully (and in great detail) explains the consolidation of the Afrikaner nationalism that would ultimately give rise to the institutionalization of apartheid policies. As such, the narrative presented continually emphasizes how early conflict between the two settler communities made up of the British, on the one hand, and the Afrikaners—descendants of Dutch, French Huguenot, German, and other settlers—on the other, contributed to consolidating this nationalism. In this way, the museum sets up a narrative that systematically (over)represents this conflict and explains how the Afrikaners, too, may be thought of, in some sense, as victims. By locating the causes of apartheid “one step back,” so to speak, the explanatory framework offered removes the “original sin” from the hands of the Afrikaners and thus controls for expressions of guilt, anger, and accountability that could be directed at this community in the present.

On entering the main exhibition spaces, each visitor is guided by museum personnel into an auditorium to view an introductory film. Although in the rest of the museum there is a definitive narrative route that the visitor must traverse, he or she is in no way compelled to look at, read, or listen to the exhibitions presented. The first film, however, is something that everybody consumes. That film provides a historical context for apartheid.

The film begins with the Bushmen,¹¹ the area’s first inhabitants, who “lived alone on this land” 25,000 years ago, and then documents the southern migration of African groups and the arrival of the European settler communities. “Soon,” states the narrator, “the time of the hunter-gatherers was to end. . . . They would become the people of the mist.” This may be read as euphemistic for their being victims of one of “history’s successful acts of genocide” (Sparks 1991:11). A consultant notes that a large section of the film on how European settlers viewed these people as “not even on the human scale” (interview, November 7, 2002), and thus hunted them for sport, was cut out of the film. As such, the museum can be seen to tell the early history of South Africa in a way that avoids explicitly pointing fingers at white settlers by failing unequivocally to portray them as perpetrators of genocide.

The narrative also distinguishes between the two settler groups. The narrator comments that “at the heart of the British settler community, a deep racism took hold.” The narrative seems to suggest that prejudice arose against both Africans and Afrikaners. The Boers’ prejudices are never made explicit,¹² although a “deep racism” did certainly “take hold” in this community, too. In addition, by stating that this racism “took hold” among the settler community in Africa, the museum, in effect, fails to interrogate the racist notions that European settlers brought with them into Africa. Nowhere in the museum are such issues addressed. Examining the cultural and social dimensions of race and prejudice without the boundaries of a specific historical frame threatens to spill into the present, and raising questions about the persistence of racial conflict is, in turn, highly problematic for a multiracial society trying to reconcile itself with its racist past and to present an image of racial equality, integration, and consensus.

In the absence of race as an explanatory framework for the development of racism in South Africa, apartheid comes to be understood in historically contingent, Marxist economic terms. The discovery of gold and diamonds, the museum tells us, created an “insatiable appetite for labor,” which, in various forms and guises, led to the subjugation of local communities in order to drive them into a cash economy. Added to this was the subjugation of the Afrikaners by the British. The film tells of the conflicts that arose in 1899 “because of the discovery of gold,” where a small Boer state was formed “against the mighty British Empire.” A war ensued between the British and the Boers. Black South Africans were drawn into the conflict, “most on the British side,” and some 20,000 were killed. The British created concentration camps in which Boer women and children were held, and 28,000 of them lost their lives. The end of the war in 1910 was marked by the creation of the Union of South Africa, which included the former British colonies and the Boer states. Humiliated by the British and competing with Africans for jobs, the Afrikaners fashioned a strong nationalism that was “deeply hostile to both British and black South Africans.” In 1948 the Afrikaners managed to seize power, armed with their policy of apartheid. In this sense, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism is contextualized so that the Afrikaners, too, are seen as victims. The museum thus presents the Afrikaners not as the “evil other” but as part of the newly imagined South African community. They are not villains who acted out of irrational prejudice but are themselves victims of oppression, and prejudice against Africans is explained predominantly as emanating out of economic competition for jobs and resources.¹³

This narrative of British oppression constructs for both Afrikaners and Africans a shared history of persecution, which sharply conflicts with the view of South African history as being a story of the oppression of black South Africans by the Afrikaners, rather than *with* the Afrikaners, by the British. In South Africa, where anger, if it were encouraged, would, it seems, be directed against whites in general but against the Afrikaners in particular, the diffusion of blame onto the British appears then to be part of the museum’s overarching aim to encourage consensus while carefully toeing the line dictated by the newly imagined “Rainbow Nation.”¹⁴ Thus the distinction between victims and perpetrators is somewhat blurred, anger (and its potential for conflict) is minimized, and apartheid is shown to be the result of particular historical events that are long gone and irrelevant. By privileging economics as an explanatory framework, thus sidelining cultural issues such as race and prejudice, the museum offers an explanation that is less threatening for the present. Economic explanations usually do not point fingers at individuals. They are somehow presented as external to people’s lived realities, and they are more easily identifiable as historically contingent. As such, they are less challenging to present social order.

An account given by a member of the advertising agency that worked both on the Apartheid Museum and on the African National Congress’s (ANC) 1994 election campaign is a telling comment about the wish to disconnect any ties with the past. Speaking about the 1994 election in light of the museum, he notes: “The natural tendency [during election] is to want to point out how evil the other regime is. . . . One of

the lines that the ANC showed me [was] something like . . . ‘they called you a *kafir*, now they’re calling for your vote.’ . . . It was very negative . . . and we looked at this and we just said ‘Nah [*sic*], this is not what it’s about. You know, everybody knows that already. . . . Don’t emphasize that. . . . You had to sell hope” (interview, September 20, 2002). By suggesting that people are not told “what they already know,” one suggests that people forget what they know, that they move on, move forward, not look back. In the museum’s final exhibition spaces, as the visitor moves through the election exhibit and toward the post-apartheid area, the corridor narrows. The apartheid exhibits can no longer be viewed. They are left behind, as is the past.

Legitimizing the Present

The second major narrative line that enhances consensus involves legitimizing the present by focusing on a consensual hero. That hero is a combination of Nelson Mandela and his party, the ANC, which has held the vast majority in parliament since 1994. Mandela has come to be seen as the personification of reconciliation, goodwill, forgiveness, and acceptance. Mandela does not represent anger, guilt, vengeance, or accountability. Rather, he can be read iconically as having experienced the harsh realities of the difficult past in the most literal of ways in which these inscribed themselves on his body. At the same time, he has responded to the difficult past by celebrating the new South Africa, by positing rupture between apartheid and post-apartheid and by acting in accordance with the reimagined nation.

Mandela, thus, is given prominence even at points when history does not call for it. As such, accompanying a text panel that documents the formation of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) are two pictures. The first is of Mandela, who only later on became the ANCYL president. The second is of Anton Lembede, the ANCYL’s founding president. Thus historical succession is not mirrored in the museum’s representational structure. A consultant explains: “Looking at it from a sort of film-making story, you have a hero at the end, so it’s easy to find a pattern to the narrative” (interview, November 7, 2002).

The focus on Mandela is evidenced again in the final room of the museum’s exhibit. The room documents post-1994 South Africa. As one enters this room from a narrow corridor, the space opens up. The first picture visible is a large, blown-up photograph taken at Mandela’s inauguration as state president. In the picture Mandela is victoriously holding Thabo Mbeki’s hand.¹⁵ The second deputy president, F. W. de Klerk—who was also apartheid’s last president—is not presented. In the post-apartheid era, de Klerk is somewhat superfluous to the focus on Mandela and the ANC. The first image viewed by the visitor in the room representing the new South Africa is that of Mandela—the hero of the story. The current state president and Mandela’s successor, Mbeki, stands next to him, though the view of Mbeki is initially hidden by a glass display in the middle of the room. Mandela, even in the Mbeki era, is the hero of the story and the icon of the nation.

Linked to the representations of Mandela are representations of his party—the ANC. Alongside the history of the oppression, a history of resistance unfolds in the museum. The history of resistance, for the sake of the kind of narrative the museum wishes to construct, focuses predominantly on ANC resistance politics. As such, examples of ANC prominence in the narrative offered by the museum abound even when the historical account presented does not call for it. In the museum's first hall (the Hall of Gatherings), for example, we find "memory boxes," which present the stories of individuals whose families arrived in Johannesburg. Even in the supposedly individual memory boxes, the ANC focus dominates. Thus, among these ordinary South Africans, one finds the grandchildren of Albertina and Walter Sisulu, stalwarts of the ANC, as well as the granddaughters of the early ANC leader Daniel Letanka. We find the prevalence of the ANC even in a memory box containing the story of a nonfamous South African, Mthuthuzeli Macafa, who became the Recreation and Sports Officer for the Orlando East Recreation Center in 1961. Mandela, the text tells us, frequented the center. An installation about the early years of resistance is another case in point. The text begins by telling of the ANC and only peripherally mentioning the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), although it does state that the ICU was the leading resistance movement at the time. The text's heading is further illuminating in this regard: "The Early Years of Resistance: *The ANC* and the ICU" (emphasis added). "[We] don't have a worker's state," a consultant comments: "We might have traced history differently had we had that" (interview, July 11, 2002).¹⁶

By focusing on Mandela and his political party, regardless of other contributions, efforts, and alternative visions by other resistance movements, the museum constructs a memory of the history of the struggle where the ANC's vision of resolving the difficult past seems inevitable. The museum visitor is offered only one option—the ANC's option—and this legitimizes both the current political order as well as the choices made by the ANC when its representatives sat down at the negotiating tables with the apartheid government. As such, it supports the ANC's compromises in terms of memory as dictated by the transition that the ANC played a key role in negotiating. Mandela is continuously reintroduced in the narrative alongside the ANC. His enormous symbolic capital can be read as limiting the actual power of other potentially powerful characters. In the Apartheid Museum, he is the main personality on whom the museum focuses. A leading member of the curatorial team notes that "we haven't gone into the chronology of the heroes of the struggle" other than "the obvious ones" (interview, December 17, 2002). The obvious one, for the sake of consolidating the kind of memory work the museum wishes to perform, is undoubtedly Mandela and the ANC.

Forgetting Through Remembering

The museum was built in an era where those involved in constructing mnemonic devices were very much aware of the discipline and insights of social memory studies, as well as of their own power to shape past images and thus the present and even

the future (Levy 1999). The agents of memory were also aware that criticism of bias, exclusion, and selectivity was anticipated from the audience. Such criticism could potentially undermine the wish to construct consensus around the narrative of apartheid. The Apartheid Museum copes with this challenge not by excluding specific issues (a procedure that seems to be less and less appropriate) but through nominal inclusion. The narrative lines are maintained and repeated time and again, while alternative narratives are treated tangentially. Thus specific issues, though present, are symbolically absent. While complete absence may in fact stimulate remembrance by invoking the indignation of those who have an interest in remembering, marginal presence, for its part, may in fact stimulate forgetting. This technique abounds in the Apartheid Museum. In what follows, we present several key examples.

As mentioned, the Apartheid Museum tells the story of the ANC and its struggle against apartheid. Any other opposition to apartheid is marginalized. “Scant attention has been given to work by white people, apart from half a dozen communists,” a leading figure in “white opposition to apartheid” states in a telephone interview (October 14, 2002); she adds that the museum has paid no attention to organizations such as the Progressive Party.¹⁷ Responding to this issue, a member of the curatorial team notes that this person simply did not see the video and the text on these issues. “We didn’t give her a tour through. She came by herself. I can only suppose that she didn’t see it,” he says (interview, October 17, 2002). This statement points to the relative positioning to this part of the narrative. If someone who has a personal interest in this aspect of the history managed to miss its representation in the museum, this says a lot about its prominence and placing in the narrative. “White Opposition to Apartheid” is peripheral to the museum’s ANC-based story, as are “Women’s Resistance” and “Rural Resistance,” which are similarly accorded minimal narrative space.

Another such case is the representation of the first leader of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. While the text describes him as “a charismatic intellectual,” it fails to document that he was imprisoned on Robben Island for many years—the same place where Mandela was imprisoned. Another representation of the PAC further highlights how movements other than the ANC are co-opted into the ANC-focused narrative. An exhibit on the Sharpeville massacre of March 21, 1960, which the museum had already presented as a turning point in South Africa’s history, is highly illuminating in this regard. The incident occurred as a result of the PAC-initiated campaign against the pass system,¹⁸ which ended with police shooting and killing sixty-nine people. While the text does state that this was a PAC campaign, accompanying pictures represent ANC leaders, Mandela and Sisulu, burning their passes. While the museum does not literally rewrite history by positing this as an ANC event, the juxtaposition of text and photographs clearly co-opts the incident into the museum’s ANC-focused discourse. In addition, the sidelining of the PAC narrative contributes to forgetting the alternative visions and ideologies offered by this resistance movement.¹⁹

The museum also uses similar techniques of absence through presence for issues that may endanger the ANC's positive image. One such difficult issue is the story of the ANC and violence. This, like many other topics, is presented in the museum, but it enters the narrative in such a complicated and convoluted way that it becomes symbolically absent. In an installation on people sentenced to death during apartheid and those who died in detention, the museum represents the stories of three individuals: Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness Movement leader who was severely assaulted while in police custody and died as a result; Neil Aggett, a white trade unionist found hanging in his jail cell at the end of what came to be termed "the long weekend";²⁰ and Andrew Zondo, who was hanged in Pretoria at the age of twenty after having been found guilty of placing a bomb in a shopping mall in Amanzimtoti, Natal, that killed five people. While the museum does not systematically examine cases of violence committed by the ANC and its military wing, mention is made of the fact that Zondo was operating for the ANC when he bombed the mall. The issue of ANC violence is not presented, however, as a subject in its own right but is mentioned in passing under a different topic. Furthermore, by blurring the boundaries between deaths resulting from police brutality and those resulting from a judicial process (justified or not), the ability to discuss violent resistance (justified or not) by the ANC is remembered yet forgotten.²¹

All memory implies forgetting (see, e.g., Norval 1998; Schudson 1997; Sturken 1997). However, as opposed to the idea that forgetting occurs through systematic exclusion, we wish to argue that contemporary dealing with exclusion is more about marginal representation than total exclusion. Potential criticism is preempted. Issues are presented but not explored. They are marginalized spatially or subsumed under other topics. Forgetting is effected through memory.

Experiencing the Past

The issue of interactivity in museums represents a relatively new phenomenon in the history of museums (see Walsh 1995) and is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, within the context of our discussion, it is worth noting the implications of "experiencing the past" in the Apartheid Museum.

The museum offers its visitors the opportunity to "experience" apartheid at various points. When visitors buy their tickets, they enter the Hall of Segregation through different doors depending on the ("white" or "nonwhite") card that they have been given. Inside the main exhibition spaces, they are invited to enter the re-created prison cells and "feel" what it must have been like in solitary confinement. Visitors may also take on the role of the perpetrator and climb into the Caspir.²²

On one level these simulations of the past deconstruct the distance between past and present by offering visitors the opportunity to experience "what it must have been like." The verbal explanation offered by a member of the educational committee on a private guided tour highlights this point. On arriving at the solitary confinement cells, she notes: "This is the only section over here that is actually made exactly as it

should be.” After slamming the door to one cell, she adds, “This is what you would hear” and continues to narrate as one of the authors enters the cell: “So can you feel that? I mean, can you imagine being locked up in it? I mean your heart actually palpitates” (September 12, 2002). While the experiential moment does, it seems, conflate the past and the present to a certain degree, it ultimately isolates the experience and distances the visitor from the difficult past explored. Apartheid may be “experienced,” but it is left behind as the visitor moves out of the Hall of Segregation, out of the solitary confinement cells, and out of the Caspir. The past is left in the past, firmly isolated in the present simulations that only point to how the past is so different from the present, from the moment of “stepping out.” In addition, by allowing visitors to step into and then out of the roles of victims and perpetrators, the past is presented, but its horror is somewhat minimized. Apartheid can be easily experienced and survived harmlessly.

A young visitor’s comment on a questionnaire is telling in this regard. She notes: “They said that we were going to cry but it was not that bad.” “Experiencing Apartheid” may not be a major emphasis at the Apartheid Museum, which pays most of its attention to texts and audiovisual material, but the “experiences” offered strongly support and enhance the desired consensus. How terrifying can a past be if one can jump between roles and just as quickly leave them behind?

COMMEMORATION AND ITS CONTEXT

The literature suggests that what may explain the emergence of specific types of commemoration is the social context in which they are embedded. This context consists of the political culture of the commemorating society, the relevance of the past to the present agenda, and the power of the agents of memory (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2002). The consensual commemoration of the apartheid era seems to be explained by the combination of a consensual political culture and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which operated both as a powerful agent of memory pushing for consensus as well as one that, to a large degree, constructed the past as irrelevant for the present agenda. In addition, the public endorsement of the TRC’s sentiments by people such as Mandela and Tutu, who carry with them enormous symbolic capital both inside and outside South Africa, has reinforced the power of this discursive agent of memory.

The dissolution of white minority rule and the consolidation of democracy in South Africa were effected through a negotiated transition. As such, former victims and perpetrators negotiated the change together. To arrive at an agreement that was palatable to both sides (to which all could “consent”) and that would not marginalize any sector of the soon to be “imagined” (Anderson 1991) Rainbow Nation, where all share equally in the new polity, certain compromises were made (see Fagan 2000). One nonnegotiable condition of the outgoing apartheid regime was amnesty. This condition was articulated in the Interim Constitution (Act 200 of 1993), which set the groundwork for the TRC.

The TRC can be said to be, among other things, a mnemonic enterprise. The nonnegotiable amnesty condition, which brought the TRC into being, created a context of memory through forgetting. Amnesty, and its etymological connections with amnesia (Lowenthal 1999), came to be predicated on memory. General amnesty was rejected in favor of individual amnesty. As such, amnesty would be granted to those who fully disclosed their actions in the past. Remembering became a decisive contributor in forgetting. In the aim of “moving forward” into the new dispensation, certain constructions of memory became evident. As Nuttall (2000:75) has noted, “The past, it sometimes seems, is being ‘remade’ for the purposes of current reconciliation.” Part of this remaking has involved presenting the past as “closed off and complete” (Grunebaum-Ralf 2001:200; see also De Kok 2000). As such, the salience of the past in understanding social, structural, and institutional problems in the present has been deliberately avoided (Posel and Simpson 2002; Simpson 2002; Wilson 2001). In this way, the TRC created a rupture between apartheid and the new South Africa. “Every national identity,” argues Wilson (2001:16), “needs an ‘other’ against which to . . . define itself. . . . The most significant site of otherness for the new South Africa has not been other nations, it has been itself.” While a discussion of the TRC is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that “the authors of the [TRC] report were to write the past in a way that transcended conflicting perspectives; the official truth had to be one to which all South Africans would consent, as an authoritative, impartial account” (Posel 2002:150; see also Cohen 2001). As such, while the TRC did face certain criticisms and conflicts, the public embracing of its hegemonic discourses aided it in sidelining such dissenting voices and in presenting them as illegitimate (see Wilson 2001). In this way, the TRC showed itself to be an extremely powerful agent of memory whose goal was consensus, not conflict. In building consensus, the TRC, as we have seen, also reduced the salience of the past in present debates. The museum’s agents of memory (i.e., the professionals) can be seen to have internalized the main messages espoused by the TRC and other powerful people. Rarely did the professionals object to the expected consensual matter. On the contrary, they felt that the museum was a product (as far as content is concerned) of their own autonomy.

While societies are of course never entirely consensual or conflictual, and while it is hard to discuss the political culture of the commemorating society without essentializing it, some societies are nonetheless characterized by a more or less consensual political culture. Somers (1995:134) defines this concept as “a configuration of representations and practices that exists as a contentious structural social phenomenon in its own right. . . . a political culture *when acted upon*, will shape the outcome, the meaning, and the very course of political action and social processes” (see also Berezin 1997). South Africa carries a history of extreme political conflict and unrest. It is a highly stratified society plagued by deep social problems. Nonetheless, as Price (1997) notes, South Africa, defying all doomsday predictions on the eve of the democratic transition, reflects a great degree of political consensus. As such, racially based political mobilizations have been slow to materialize.²³ The society’s

consensual tone is expressed, for example, in designating days of remembrance in the new South Africa. As such, March 21, the day of the Sharpeville massacre, is commemorated as Human Rights Day, while June 16, the day of the Soweto uprisings, becomes Youth Day. These days are remembered in somewhat amorphous, politically decontextualized forms. In this act, argues an informant involved in post-apartheid commemoration, “you can see the whole reconciliation ideology. . . . [by doing so,] we . . . neutralize it [the day]” (interview, December 4, 2002). Thus all South Africans can share these days, and the potential for social mobilization and conflict is minimized. It is hardly surprising that within a social context that posits a (perhaps artificial) rupture from the past, a political culture that aims at consensus, and a powerful agent of memory, which constitutes a “founding moment” in commemoration and which would not settle for conflict, the Apartheid Museum that has emerged attempts to control its narrative to ensure consensus.²⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article represents our inquiry into the practices employed to secure the desired tone of the museum. Thus, through the museum form and through a specific content that includes the themes of divorcing the past, legitimizing the present, forgetting through remembering, and experiencing the past, even a horrific past can be mostly left behind and its effects on the present can become less threatening. In the aim of constructing consensus, the public memory of South Africa becomes something like the metaphoric Lot who went on without turning to look back.

Memory—whether collective or personal—is an integral part of identity, and it is thus perhaps no coincidence that the characteristics used to describe the ontological nature of memory, such as its being processual, unpredictable, partial, usable, negotiable, dynamic, and dialogical (Olick and Robbins 1998; Zelizer 1995), could easily have been borrowed from the symbolic interactionist literature that speaks directly to the processes through which identity is constructed. Thus the consensus to which the Apartheid Museum aims—constructed as it is through a great degree of control—may in fact foster and reinforce consensus. Alternatively, it may be challenged in the future either by other mnemonic activities that narrate a different story of the past or by audiences who refuse to accept the memory and accompanying identities suggested by the museum.

At the moment, however, it is clear that the agents of memory intend that visitors to the museum use it to construct specific types of identities. One of the most explicit concerns of those involved in the museum is that visitors not become “polarized around race” as a result of the museum visit. “You don’t want people to *leave* the place feeling angry or guilty,” states a member of the educational committee (interview November 27, 2002). A member of the curatorial team agrees: “It’s [the museum experience] not meant to . . . divide people. It’s not meant to open wounds” (interview, October 17, 2002). Identity politics that encourage emotions of anger and guilt delineated along the grounds of race are discouraged. The aim is consensus and

by implication a somewhat universalistic, new South African, Rainbow Nation identity. Both classical and contemporary scholars in the symbolic interactionist tradition caution us, however, about placing the significance of an act in its intended meanings alone. Instead, they argue that significance is produced in its interpretation (Dingwall 2001; Gusfield 2003; Mead [1934] 1962). Whether visitors will consume the messages of the Apartheid Museum in the ways imagined by the individuals who constructed them is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, to understand the significance of audiences' dialogues with the intended meanings, one cannot overstate the importance of understanding the "stage" or social context within which such interactions take place.

Presently, the imagined interaction is consensual, and the professionals involved in constructing the mnemonic object go to great pains to ensure that this imagined interaction becomes manifest in visitors' real interactions with the object. As such, the narrative of apartheid, as presented in the Apartheid Museum, is carefully controlled to elicit the desired consensus and not to express or encourage conflict. The museum building remains isolated; it does not dialogue with the present, with the street. Only the messages of post-apartheid "reconciliation" follow the visitor as he or she navigates his or her way out of the museum. The visitor can sigh in relief: the difficult past can be left behind. Apartheid, like Soweto and Johannesburg, is examined with a sort of distance, in a closed and controlled environment. It is no wonder, therefore, that the only part of the museum visible from the road is the seven pillars that spell out the core values of the South African Constitution (Act 106 of 1996). Each pillar has one word on it: Freedom, Respect, Democracy, Equality, Reconciliation, Diversity, Responsibility. The present and the future are celebrated and loom over the representation of the past. The past, for its part, remains hidden and contained.

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NOTES

1. As defined by the Group Areas Act of 1950.
2. Other commemorative sites do exist, but these do not presume to take the entire history of apartheid as their referent. For instance, the District Six Museum takes the forced removal of District Six as its object; Robben Island focuses on the history of the incarceration on the island (see Coombes 2003).
3. This term is not completely accurate, since a consortium funded the museum. We use "the funder" to refer to a key player in this consortium's involvement.
4. For the sake of confidentiality, we have referred to interviewees still involved with the museum as "a member of the curatorial team." Other interviewees are referred to generically as "consultants." When specific professional sensibilities are essential in understanding the data, the interviewees are referred to as "a filmmaker," "an architect."

5. For an overview of the development of the gambling law in South Africa, see Carnelley 2001.
6. The Mandela Hand refers to a freedom monument that was supposed to be erected on a hill adjacent to the Voortrekker Monument (a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism and pride) in Pretoria. The funder was involved in this project, too. The project failed for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that when the issue of the casino came up, the funder was already thinking about mnemonic activities.
7. The Gold Reef City (GRC) Amusement and Theme Park, located next to the Apartheid Museum, and across the road from the casino, comprises an amusement park located within a reconstructed, early-nineteenth-century mining village (for a short discussion on GRC, see Coombes 2003). While the GRC Amusement and Theme Park complied with the tourism aspect of the gambling legislation, certain elements in the consortium felt that this would not be enough to secure a casino license, since these structures were already in place and operational prior to the casino bid.
8. The Israeli Museologist has been involved in mnemonic projects in various cities around the world.
9. In accordance with section 21 of the Companies Act (61 of 1973).
10. On that day, police opened fire on students in Soweto who were protesting the government's educational policy.
11. We use this term with full awareness of the fact that it has a history of being regarded as derogatory. Its use, however, reflects a growing trend in southern African historiographical terminology to shy away from the once-preferred term *San*, which has also become problematized in recent years. The term *Bushmen* thus refers to early hunter-gatherer societies in southern Africa, who themselves do not have a collective noun with which they self-identify.
12. The term *Boers* refers to the early settler community who would come to identify themselves as Afrikaners.
13. This narrative line is repeated in other installations in the museum.
14. The term is used to refer to the new South Africa—a Rainbow Nation that celebrates unity and diversity.
15. Mbeki served, with de Klerk, as deputy president during Mandela's presidency. He became state president during the country's second democratic election (1999) and entered his second term in office in 2004.
16. The Apartheid Museum similarly sidelines representations of the trade union movement in the late 1970s and into the 1980s despite its important role in creating internal pressures on the apartheid state.
17. The Progressive Party was the only voice of opposition to apartheid in its white parliament.
18. Passes were a type of internal identification document that restricted freedom of movement of "nonwhites."
19. A similar point can be made about how the museum represents the Black Consciousness Movement.
20. During apartheid, such phrases as "was found hanging in his jail cell" or "slipped on a bar of soap" were euphemisms for "was killed by the police while in custody."
21. The TRC did in fact take a stand on this issue by arguing that although resistance movements fought a just war, unjust means were sometimes utilized. Wilson (2001:103), however, notes that "the just war debate triggered the greatest crisis in the whole life of the TRC." In attempting to construct consensus, the Apartheid Museum is careful not to re-create the conflict and debate.
22. Caspirs were the notorious yellow armored vehicles that patrolled the townships.
23. Price (1997:149) suggests that this is so because the ANC (which gained over two-thirds of the electoral vote in the 2004 elections) has "defined itself explicitly in universalistic terms, vociferously espousing a nonracial political orientation." The persistence of social and economic inequalities, articulated along racial lines, combined with the consolidation of empowerment (affirmative action) policies may, argues Price (p. 149), serve to reconfigure South Africa's political culture in the future.
24. See also Deacon's (2000:164) discussion of how, in the aim of celebrating the newly imagined nation, Robben Island "has become a symbol of the future of the new South Africa rather than its past" and thus celebrates the newly imagined nation.

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