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*War in Worcester: Youth and the Apartheid State*

*War in Worcester* is an ethnography that addresses what has been left out – what is missing, obscured, and delegitimized in the official doctrines, narratives, and commissions that put forth the struggles of black South Africans and their resistance against the apartheid state. It is a book about young activists who contributed greatly to the liberation movement, yet who are not recognized for their contributions. They are rendered invisible largely because their resistance was one that occurred without public symbols or open acknowledgment. The names of these activists were not recorded in registries, such as those that would detail ANC membership, nor were they given badges, uniforms, or a base to work from (pp. 10, 32). Even in private moments, they were encouraged not to speak or complain about the suffering that they had endured, for it would expose their families, friends, and lovers to potential harm as well as promote the propaganda of terror incited by the apartheid government (p. 63). One might assume that anonymity and decentralized knowledge would offer protection. The opposite was the case. In response to activists’ efforts at dissimulation, the apartheid government targeted entire groups of people – groups like male black youth – who, in turn, refused to accept their oppression, thus unleashing further reprisals from the state (pp. 32, 61).

Harassed, beaten, tortured, shot, and killed, run out of their homes, schools, and communities, these youth lost much in their attempts to overthrow an unjust government. To some extent, the current political dispensation in South Africa acknowledges these sacrifices, as evidenced by a national holiday, Youth Day. However, as with many official renderings of the past, this one presents the violations enacted against youth without fully considering them as activists or as leaders who refused to accept the rule of law and its immense capacity for violence, both normative and exceptional (p. 162). Rather, black youth (more often than not) have been depicted in binary terms of victims vs. perpetrators or as children “swept up” in politics through the excitement of street protests and *toyi-toyiing* (pp. 8-9, 50). Rarely are they seen as having a specific intentionality, one framed by a moral ethic of conduct, or, as Reynolds writes, a “critical self-consciousness to which they subjected their experiences and decisions” (p. 138). And here is Reynolds’ intervention in the
field of political and legal anthropology. Her book systematically redresses the circumscribed understandings of youth’s roles and activities in times of war and conflict.

One of the greatest strengths of Reynolds’ research, with its biographical focus on fourteen young male activists, is its ability to illuminate general processes and trends through the particularities of individual experiences, as formed in Zwelethemba, a small town that makes up the area of Worcester in the Western Cape. Reynolds’ study was conducted between the years 1996 and 2000 with follow up research over the next decade. To a large extent, her work is retrospective, for it primarily focuses on the 1980s, the height of armed conflict during the apartheid era and a time when the young men were the most active in their attempts to overthrow the government. Reynolds’ methodological approach is ethnographic, as she relies heavily on individual and group interviews as well as the creative use of a municipal map that is overlain with social networks and personal stories. Moreover, Reynolds is extremely reflective about her methodology and recognizes some of the limitations of her approach, particularly in regard to constructions of historical memory. As she writes:

“Danger lies in the traps of sentiment, romance, and exaggeration; in writing in ignorance of faults, errors, harm done, or in ignorance of the extent of damage incurred to self, especially over time; and of having heard tales of the past given with hindsight and in accord with current biases or as shaped by me only in the knowledge of the afterward” (p. 138).

To help account for some of these potential biases, Reynolds is careful to provide contextual information with her interpretations and also is conscientious about triangulating her data collection with secondary accounts and complementary research from other studies.

In this regard, Reynolds’ inclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is especially relevant, given that the TRC was formed in 1996, and she had direct access to the proceedings and key personnel. Reynolds’ observations and, in many instances, interventions in trying to fill out forms for individuals to participate in the TRC, help shape her analysis that institutional structures of power and authority often neutralize youth by focusing more on their suffering and less on their contributions to projects of democracy. As Reynolds writes, “The testimonies were like snippets from a collage, cut out of time, place, history, relationships, contingency, choice, and pattern. The general subsumed the particular. It soon became apparent that few young activists were testifying and that little would be documented about the nature of their fight” (p. 162). Certainly, much is missing in the official records of youth’s participation in the liberation movement and, consequently, very little has been offered to them in terms of reparation. Reynolds’ ethnography helps counteract some of these omissions precisely by
transforming these “snippets” into a fine-grained study of life histories that shows the immense commitment of youth who refused to accept the injustices meted out to themselves, their families, and community. What remains to be seen is if this commitment is able to persevere, despite the “neutralizations” of the current political dispensation.