

‘The day that fell off the calendar’: June 16, South African newspapers, and the making of a national holiday 1977-1996*

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This article explores the repertoire of commemorative activities that developed around the anniversary of the June 16 1976 Soweto schoolchildren's march against the imposition of Afrikaans that was fired upon fatally by South African police. It uses the newspaper coverage of June 16 commemorations from 1977 up to 1996 to think through the role of newspapers, journalists and editors in the framing of this day as a ‘national’ moment. Newspaper reports reveal ongoing conversations and debates over who were, and should be, commemorating June 16; how they should do so; the place of youth in this commemorative community; and the intersecting boundaries of race, nation and commemoration. I argue that examining this contested commemorative tradition and the ways in which English-language newspapers tell national narratives through their reporting of the anniversary offers one way of gaining a ‘clearer sense of the national’ in the history of the liberation struggle. This aims not so much at collating a comprehensive picture of the struggle as it played out within the borders of South Africa, but asks how it was that the liberation struggle was thought, performed and narrated as national. It reveals a broader range of actors than liberation organisations themselves were involved in these processes.

Introduction

On 20 June 1986 page 14 of the *Weekly Mail* was almost entirely blank except for the headline: ‘the day that fell off the calendar’. The front page announced that ‘our lawyers tell us we can say almost

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nothing critical about the Emergency. But we'll try'. The *Sowetan* carried a similar set of headlines on June 17: 'ALL QUIET ON JUNE 16. And if anything DID happen we are not allowed to tell you'. These two English-language South African newspapers carried blank columns prominently on their front pages in the days after June 16 in 1986. They were highlighting the stringent government restrictions on reporting under the state of emergency that had been declared on June 12. This state of emergency prevented journalists from reporting on the actions of the South African security forces and the only information that could be published on 'unrest areas', was that which had been supplied by the Bureau of Information. It was clear that the apartheid state had anticipated an upsurge of political unrest centred around the tenth anniversary of the June 16 Soweto uprising. Just a week earlier the Minister of Law and Order had banned all public gatherings between June 4 and June 30 that commemorated 'any incident of public disturbance, disorder, riot of public violence which prevailed or occurred on June 16 1976' or the adoption of the Freedom Charter.¹ In 1986, June 16 was a date firmly embedded in the calendar of the anti-apartheid struggle – so much so, that the apartheid state attempted to erase the date, to ban any commemorative events, and any national news coverage of the violence used to enforce that ban.

Ten years later June 16 1996 was a national public holiday in South Africa, and what had been known as Soweto Day, or the Student's Day became, officially, Youth Day. The African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) took out a full-page newspaper advert in the *Sowetan* in 1996 to call upon 'all youth' and 'in particular, white youth' to 'work together for the promotion of reconciliation, nation-building and transformation'.² The years 1977 to 1996 saw remarkable changes in the form and meanings of commemorative activities centred on June 16. There has already been considerable academic attention paid to the ways in which June 16 1976, and other moments of anti-apartheid resistance or apartheid state brutality have been commemorated and memorialised in post-apartheid South Africa.³ The ongoing commemoration and memorialisation of the liberation struggle

¹ The United Democratic Front (UDF) had announced that it would link its own commemoration of the tenth anniversary of June 16 with their planned celebrations of the signing of the Freedom Charter on June 26 1986.

² *Sowetan*, June 14th 1996.

³ On commemorating June 16 see: Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, *'I Saw a Nightmare...' -- Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Gary Baines, 'The Master Narrative of South Africa's Liberation Struggle: Remembering and Forgetting June 16, 1976', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40, no. 2 (1 January 2007): pp.283–302; Ruth Kerkham Simbao, 'The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Soweto Uprisings: Reading the Shadow in Sam Nzima's Iconic Photograph of Hector Pieterse', *African Arts* 40, no. 2 (1 July 2007): pp.52–69; Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South-Africa* (Brill, 2010); for more on the broader commemoration of the apartheid past see: Annie E Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); the special issue Leslie Witz and Ciraj Rassool, 'Making Histories', *Kronos*, no. 34 (1 November 2008): pp.6–15; Chana Teeger and Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, 'Controlling for Consensus: Commemorating Apartheid in South Africa', *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 1 (1 February 2007): pp.57–78; Stephanie Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering and Commemorating Atrocity in South Africa: The Bisho Massacre and Its Aftermath, 1992–2012', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 1 (2 January 2015): pp.83–102.

has been shown to be a fraught and contested process. In particular, a growing number of studies reveal the ways in which, post-1994, the governing African National Congress' hegemonic impulses have overridden local concerns or alternate, often more ambiguous and personal, histories and memories of the liberation struggle.⁴ In this article I want to look back at the repertoire of commemorative activities that developed around June 16 *during* the liberation struggle, and I want to use the newspaper coverage of June 16 commemorations from 1977 up to 1996 to think through the making of this day as a 'national' moment, and eventually a public holiday.

Between 1977 and 1996 South African newspapers reported and commented upon a set of commemorative traditions that grew up around June 16 – commemorative traditions that challenged the apartheid state's own national symbolic calendar – and suggested that June 16 belonged to an alternative nation-in-waiting. Newspaper reports reveal ongoing conversations and debates over who were, and should be, commemorating June 16; how they should do so; the place of youth in this commemorative community; and the intersecting boundaries of race, nation and commemoration. The newspapers considered here are spaces in which June 16 commemorations were folded into national narratives, consumed nationally and used to project different versions of a future nation in which June 16 would be honoured.

In what follows it is clear there is a dialogue between newspapers and the evolving June 16 commemorative traditions from the observation of the first anniversary in 1977 onwards. I argue that newspapers were always a part of the commemorative dynamics of June 16 and that they are central to the processes by which June 16 has been reiterated as a 'national' moment. The role played by newspapers shifted over time but had a dual significance: they brought the story of June 16 and its anniversary to a national audience but they also spoke through the moment to invoke a national community and position themselves as authentic voices for such a community. In drawing attention to the ways in which June 16 was made into a national event this article is one way of answering the recent calls for 'a clearer sense of the national' in the history of South Africa's liberation struggle.⁵ The 'sense of the national' that I try to develop here is of the ways in which the liberation struggle was thought and performed as national by a broader range of actors than liberation organisations

⁴ Baines, 'The Master Narrative of South Africa's Liberation Struggle'; Sabine Marschall, 'Visualising Memories: The Hector Pieterse Memorial in Soweto', *Visual Anthropology* 19 (2006): pp.145–69; Belinda Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Victor, 'The Politics of Remembering and Commemorating Atrocity in South Africa'.

⁵ Jeremy Seekings, 'Whose Voices? Politics and Methodology in the Study of Political Organisation and Protest in the Final Phase of the "Struggle" in South Africa', *South African Historical Journal* 62, no. 1 (1 March 2010): p.23.

themselves. June 16 was a recurring moment through which localised anti-apartheid practices could be folded into national narratives; a moment in which to ‘think’ the liberation struggle as national.⁶

I begin with a brief summary of the existing historiography and consider the particularity of June 16 as a day in the ‘anti-apartheid calendar’ with an un-interrupted tradition of commemoration. I then focus upon South African newspapers and their political positioning after 1976 and begin to think through the place of reporting on the Soweto uprisings and then the commemoration of June 16 as a moment for the redefinition of the political legitimacy of black journalism, despite white newspaper ownership. I then explore newspaper coverage of June 16 commemorations from 1977 up to 1996, paying attention to when and how national narratives begin to crystallise around this day.

June 16 Commemorative Traditions

It was in the years *after* the march of six thousand Soweto schoolchildren, protesting the imposition of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in their schools, was fired upon fatally by the South African Police in 1976, that June 16 was made into a national commemorative moment and eventually a public holiday. It is perhaps unsurprising that an attack by armed police on unarmed schoolchildren would elicit a powerful response. As Anderson has noted, nationalist imagining is deeply concerned with death and a need to transform ‘fatality into continuity’ and this need, both emotional and political, was perhaps especially strong for such young victims.⁷ Yet, a brief comparative glance at the history of commemorating the earlier Sharpeville massacre reveals that there was nothing inevitable or predictable about the continued commemoration or memorialisation of this dramatic and fatal moment of anti-apartheid resistance and its repression. On 21 March 1960, 69 people were shot dead by police in the African township of Sharpeville when an anti-pass law demonstration gathered outside the police station. The killings received immediate national and international news coverage, as June 16 1976 would sixteen years later.⁸ However, the politics of commemoration and international solidarity played out differently around 21 March and June 16. The forms commemoration took - church services, grave visits, political rallies and eventually, public holidays - were similar. The most striking difference was that whilst June 16 was commemorated in South Africa every year, uninterrupted, from its first anniversary, according to Tom Lodge there was no

⁶ The phrase ‘to think the nation’ is borrowed from Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006), p.22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10-11.

⁸ On the international media’s reporting of Sharpeville see: Howard Smith, ‘Apartheid, Sharpeville and “Impartiality”: The Reporting of South Africa on BBC Television 1948–1961’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13, no. 3 (1 January 1993): pp.251-98.

commemorative observation of 21 March in South Africa for the twenty or so years between 1964 and 1984, despite an international commemorative tradition which developed from 1966 onwards.⁹

According to Lodge, in the first three years after the Sharpeville massacre, a catholic priest Father Rudolph O'Flynn organised a special memorial church service on 21 March but following his deportation from South Africa there were no further commemorative activities in Sharpeville until 1984.¹⁰ It was amid the Vaal Uprising in 1984 that this commemorative silence was broken when a memorial to the dead of 1960 was erected in Sharpeville and on Christmas Day 1984 the local Congress of South African Students and Youth Steering Committee called for volunteers to clean the graves of the victims of the massacre. Lodge suggests that 'thereafter 21 March as an anniversary became a communal reflex' for Sharpeville residents and the anti-apartheid liberation organisations.¹¹ 21 March was made a public holiday after 1994, as Human Rights Day.¹² Activists in Soweto and elsewhere in the country observed the anniversary of the June 16 school children's march from its first year in 1977. Was this, as Lodge suggests of 21 March, simply a 'communal reflex'? I argue there is considerably more to the story than this. From the first anniversary there were debates over who should commemorate June 16 and how – these debates became widespread and in South Africa's newspapers became 'national' conversations. The idea of commemoration as a 'communal reflex' does not capture this contestation, nor the multiple actors involved in making June 16 a focus for political confrontation, mobilisation and narrations of the national.¹³

The existing studies of the commemoration and memorialisation of June 16 focus largely upon the transformation of the day into a post-apartheid public holiday, after 1994 and the construction of the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto.¹⁴ We have a much clearer idea of the ways in which June 16 figures in post-1994 'nation-building' projects than the history of its commemoration during the struggle. However, two studies do cover the period explored in this article from 1977 up to 1996. Helena Pohlandt-McCormick has uncovered the struggle to define the meaning

⁹ According to Lodge, 21 March was the 'most significant symbolic anniversary in the international Anti-Apartheid Movement's annual calendar' after the UN's adoption of the date as 'International Day for the Elimination of Racism' from 1966. Tom Lodge, *Sharpeville: An Apartheid Massacre and Its Consequences* (OUP Oxford, 2011), p.333.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.334.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.298.

¹² For more on this process see Sabine Marschall, 'Public Holidays as Lieux de Mémoire: Nation-Building and the Politics of Public Memory in South Africa', *Anthropology Southern Africa* 36, no. 1–2 (1 January 2013): pp.11-21.

¹³ As Micheal Tetelman has shown in his analysis of the 1983 funeral of Canon J.A. Calata moments of memorialisation and commemoration can produce both a 'dismantling and remantling of social relationships and notions of political power and tradition'. Michael Tetelman, 'The Burial of Canon J.A. Calata and the Revival of Mass- Based Opposition in Cradock, South Africa, 1983', *African Studies* 58, no. 1 (1999): p.6.

¹⁴ Baines, 'The Master Narrative of South Africa's Liberation Struggle'; Marschall, 'Visualising Memories: The Hector Pieterse Memorial in Soweto'; Marschall, *Landscape of Memory*; Simbao, 'The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Soweto Uprisings'.

of the uprisings between rival ‘official narratives’ of the apartheid state and the African National Congress (ANC). The apartheid state attempted to remake the meaning of June 16 in particular through the concealment of the identities and numbers of people killed by police and through the writing of its own version of events in the hearings and report of the Cillie Commission of Inquiry.¹⁵ Pohlandt-McCormick shows how the ANC in exile sought to ‘bind’ the events of June 16 and the actions of the schoolchildren in Soweto ‘to their own cause’, despite the challenge to their authority represented by the ‘ambiguities’ of the youth movement and the inspiration provided by Black Consciousness ideology.¹⁶ Similarly, Ali Khangela Hlongwane has provided a history of June 16 commemorative traditions, largely through oral accounts, which gives us a richly textured view of the escalating battles to lead the commemoration of June 16 in Soweto. Hlongwane reveals that the forms that commemoration took between 1977 and 1996 were shaped by both the government’s continued attempts to suppress and disrupt commemoration and the ‘imperatives of political mobilisation’.¹⁷

Together these studies reveal the state, the ANC, and local groupings were all deeply enmeshed in shaping June 16 as an annual political event. In this article I seek to broaden our historical understanding of June 16 by considering the ways in which the day became a ‘national’ moment. I do so through an exploration of newspaper reports and commentary on June 16 commemorations. Anderson famously argued for the central importance of newspapers and print capitalism for imagining the nation, and for the important connection between readers and national publics.¹⁸ Subsequently Anne McClintock suggested that since the late-nineteenth century the singular power of nationalism lay in its ‘capacity to organise a sense of popular collective unity through the management of mass, national commodity spectacle’.¹⁹ In examining the role of newspapers in reporting, and linking, local commemorative activities to the idea of a nation in mourning, the material discussed here is suggestive of the ways in which print and performative nationalism are entangled. I argue that exploring newspapers for what they say about this moment of popular collective (dis)unity can show us how what were, necessarily, local and international commemorative traditions were nevertheless given a ‘national’ meaning that culminated in the recognition of June 16 as a national public holiday in 1995.

¹⁵ See chapter three of Pohlandt-McCormick, *‘I Saw a Nightmare...’ -- Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976*.

¹⁶ Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, “‘I Saw a Nightmare...’: Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)”, *History and Theory* 39, no. 4 (December 2000): pp.23-44; Pohlandt-McCormick, *‘I Saw a Nightmare...’ -- Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976*.

¹⁷ Ali Khangela Hlongwane, ‘Commemoration, Monuments and Memory in the Contested Language of Black Liberation: The South African Experience’, *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2, no. 4 (June 2008): p.144.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁹ McClintock, Anne, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race and Nationalism”, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.102.

South African Newspapers: Ownership/Readership.

In the mid-1970s the commercial mainstream press in South Africa was white-owned. Commentators have generally distinguished between the so-called English-language press, broadly characterised as politically liberal and anti-apartheid, and the Afrikaans press that was tied closely to apartheid ideology and the National Party government.²⁰ Both branches of the press were owned by effective duopolies: the English-language press by South African Associated Newspapers or Argus Holdings, and the Afrikaans press by Naspers or Perskor.²¹ In South Africa radio, and after 1975 television, were almost solely the preserve of the state broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and as such were even more closely tied to the government's ideology and perspective. Whilst the SABC covered the Soweto uprisings on radio and television (it was one of the first events reported upon by the fledgling TV service) these reports followed the government line on the 'riots', and as Pohlandt-McCormick has recalled left 'no place for discussion or explanation of these events'.²² In subsequent years newspapers reported, not without self-interest, that the SABC did not cover June 16 commemorative services.²³ English-language newspapers were the primary 'national' site for reports and discussion on June 16 commemorations.

The English-language press has generally been accorded a significant, albeit limited, role in opposing the apartheid state during the 1960s and early 1970s.²⁴ As Pollak noted, whilst English-language newspapers did not advocate the total abolition of apartheid they nonetheless provided 'a highly visible forum' for information and critical ideas inside South Africa and these stories were 'relayed around the world by a corps of sympathetic foreign correspondents'.²⁵ This last point is particularly significant for the reporting of the Soweto uprisings – since the international circulation

²⁰ Circulation figures for the English-language press were generally much higher than those for Afrikaner publications. In 1978 the Rand Daily Mail had a circulation of 129, 068. Die Beeld had a circulation of 63, 032. Les Switzer and Donna Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho: A Descriptive Bibliographic Guide to African, Coloured and Indian Newspapers, Newsletters and Magazines 1836-1976* (Boston Mass: G.K. Hall & Co, 1979), p.14.

²¹ Sean Jacobs, *Tensions of a Free Press : South Africa after Apartheid* (Cambridge, Mass. : Joan Shorestein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1999), p.2.

²² Pohlandt-McCormick, 'I Saw a Nightmare...' -- *Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976*, p.10.

²³ See: 'SABC ignores the June 16 services', *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 June 1979, in Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) clippings collection: Television 1975-1986. Available at: <http://saldru.lib.msu.edu/> retrieved on 28/09/2015.

²⁴ See for example the classic liberal argument for the importance of the press, as made by Elaine Potter, *The Press as Opposition: The Political Role of South African Newspapers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975); In contrast the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report concluded that the English-language press 'unwittingly validated the apartheid state' Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 4 (Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998), p.189.

²⁵ Richard Pollak, *Up Against Apartheid: The Role and the Plight of the Press in South Africa* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U.P, 1981), p.9.

of Sam Nimza's photograph of Hector Pieterse's death undoubtedly inflected the subsequent dynamics of commemorative practices.²⁶ The two exceptions to the liberalism of the English-language press in 1976 were the *World* and the *Citizen*. Whilst the *Citizen*, first published in September 1976, took a pro-apartheid political line, in contrast, the *World*, owned by Argus but run by a black editor Percy Qoboza, was, 'steeped in Black Consciousness'.²⁷ The *World* was very important in the initial reporting of June 16, a point we will return to below.

The political positioning of the English-language press as a commercial enterprise was shaped by an ambiguous dynamic of white-ownership and black-readership. Les and Donna Switzer have argued that by the mid-seventies the mainstream English-language press 'found itself increasingly dependent for economic survival on the cultivation of its own black readers'.²⁸ According to a 1979 study, 'in Johannesburg more blacks read the *Star*, the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Citizen* taken together than whites. Including the huge black readership of the daily *Post*, blacks now outnumber white readers of Johannesburg's four English-language dailies, by two to one'.²⁹ Many mainstream dailies at this time were producing 'township' editions of their newspapers, aimed at a black readership and employing black journalists. The Switzers have argued that whilst these supplements have been 'much maligned for polarizing racial stereotypes and entrenching a ghetto press mentality' they were successful in attracting black readers.³⁰ It was the black journalists of the supplements, who as the reporters who could legally and most easily enter the townships, brought the story of June 16 and its aftermath into the mainstream press.³¹

The role of black journalists in the history of June 16 is of central importance: their stories appeared not just printed in newspapers but they testified before the apartheid-era Cillie Commission of Inquiry into the 'riots' and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing in post-apartheid South Africa. The early attempts by academic/activist circles to explain and understand the Soweto uprisings involved collating and analysing the material that the English-language newspapers had published.³² From June 16 onwards black journalists and newspapers were a part of the dynamics of

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of the interpretation and reinterpretation of Nimza's photograph see: Simbao, 'The Thirtieth Anniversary of the Soweto Uprisings'.

²⁷ Guy Berger, 'Publishing for the People: The Alternative Press 1980-1999', in *The Politics of Publishing in South Africa*, ed. Nicholas Evans and Monica Seeber (London: Holger Ehling, 2000), p.74; for the story of the *Citizen*, see Adam Jones, 'From Rightist to "Brightest"? The Strange Tale of South Africa's *Citizen*', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 2 (June 1998): pp.325-45.

²⁸ Switzer and Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho*, p.14.

²⁹ William Hachten, 'Black Journalists under Apartheid', *Index on Censorship*, June 1979, pp.43-48.

³⁰ Switzer and Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho*, p.16.

³¹ Albeit offering conflicting accounts and 'mistakes' in their initial accounts, for a discussion of the 'accuracy' of this initial reporting see chapter three in Pohlandt-McCormick, 'I Saw a Nightmare...' -- *Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976*.

³² Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm: The Origins and Development of the Uprising in Soweto and the Rest of South Africa from June to December 1976* (London: International Defence

the 1976 uprising and its meanings. These journalists and editors were not outside the liberation struggle looking in; they were deeply entangled in it. Yet it is still only in the work of novelists such as Miriam Tlali (*Amandla* published 1980), Siphosiphiso Sepamla (*A Ride on the Whirlwind* published 1981), Mongane Serote (*To Every Birth its Blood* also published 1981) and Mbulelo Mzamane (*Children of Soweto* published 1982) that the role of black journalists in shaping the histories of the uprisings has been critically examined at any length.³³ As Kelwyn Sole has noted of these Soweto novels, ‘a constant theme is the abnegation characters in the novels feel for the dominant white ideology fed to them by some black journalists’ but this is coupled with dependence upon those same newspapers for vital news and information.³⁴

These four authors engaged with the role of newspapers and journalists in different ways but all are revealing of a fraught ambiguity surrounding the authenticity of newspaper reports. In *The Children of Soweto* Mzamane used direct quotes from newspaper reports in his narrative. In *A Ride on the Whirlwind* Sepamla began each chapter with a short newspaper headline that the reader was thus invited to compare with the fuller story that followed. Most extensively in *To Every Birth its Blood*, Serote explored black journalists’ relationship with society as personally dangerous, necessary and ambiguous. In one scene the disillusioned reporter, Tsi, questioned his colleague about the purpose of his photography:

‘I mean, I feel there is something about being there taking pictures while a fight, a clearly unbalanced fight goes on.’

‘Unbalanced, what do you mean?’

‘Morongwa could be locked up, purely because she is black, fighting a white person- and you know the price of that’.

‘Well, I have a clear stand on that. I am a black photographer and that is how I fight’.

‘What if she was killed?’

‘I have recorded it’

‘What do the records help? Who believes them?’

‘Records are not to be believed, but used, that is how I look at it.’

and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1980); Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1979); and John Stuart Kane-Berman, *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978) all cited newspapers as their central source on the uprisings.

³³ Miriam Tlali, *Amandla: A Novel* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1980); Siphosiphiso Sepamla, *A Ride on the Whirlwind: A Novel* (Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1981); Mongane Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004); Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, *The Children of Soweto: A Trilogy* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1982).

³⁴ Kelwyn Sole, ‘The Days of Power: Depictions of Politics and Community in Four Recent South African Novels’, *Research in African Literatures* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1988): p.73.

‘Used? By whom? How can you use a thing if you do not value it?’³⁵

The stance taken by the photographer in this fictional scenario is remarkably close to Sam Nimza’s reported statement that ‘a struggle without documentation is not a struggle’.³⁶ Serote uses the character of another reporter, Dikeledi, to highlight the particular position of black journalists during the uprisings. Dikeledi writes a newspaper column called ‘Window on the Township’, a title which summed up her position as an intermediary for white readers. However, as the novel unfolds Dikeledi discusses issues that actually matter to her community in her column and as a result gains an avid readership and respect within the township.³⁷

Serote’s fictional reporters and newspaper echo the role played by the *World* on June 16 and in the subsequent uprisings. There is a dual significance to this role. Firstly, according to Berger, the *World* ‘played a major role in giving national prominence to the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC) and the Committee of Ten,’ who were at the centre of the uprisings.³⁸ Secondly, as the Switzers point out, it was through its coverage of June 16 that the *World* ‘suddenly became a respected leader of black opinion again’.³⁹ It has been claimed that in 1977 the *World* was the largest selling newspaper south of the Equator.⁴⁰ The nature of the *World*’s changed political role and its popularity in the wake of June 16 did not escape the government and the publication was banned in October 1977. The paper’s editor Percy Qoboza was detained. The *World* was immediately reconstructed and published as the ‘increasingly vocal’ *Post*, and following a further banning as the much more ‘tightly constrained’ *Sowetan*.⁴¹ In the mid-1970s reporting on the initial Soweto uprisings was thus a moment in which black journalism re-made its own political legitimacy by reporting on the unfolding events in ways which resonated with their readership. As Qoboza told the *Washington Post* in 1978: ‘the black journalist found himself in a new role...their sheer guts and professionalism during those days gave notice that the black journalist had matured and is now arrived’.⁴²

However, with the continuation of white ownership and the increasing limits set by the government to what the print media could publish during the 1970s and 1980s this ‘arrival’ was not straightforward. The extent of any press criticism was tightly controlled by an extensive array of

³⁵ Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, p.106..

³⁶ Baines, ‘The Master Narrative of South Africa’s Liberation Struggle’, p.289.

³⁷ Serote, *To Every Birth Its Blood*, p.215.

³⁸ Berger, ‘Publishing for the People: The Alternative Press 1980-1999’, p.74.

³⁹ Switzer and Switzer, *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho*, p.124..

⁴⁰ Aubrey Mokadi, *Narrative as Creative History: The 1976 Soweto Uprising as Depicted in Black South African Novels* (Johannesburg: Sedibeng Publishing House, 2003), p.51.

⁴¹ Berger, ‘Publishing for the People: The Alternative Press 1980-1999’, p.76.

⁴² Carlyle Murphy, *Washington Post*, 28 July 1978 as quoted in Hachten, ‘Black Journalists under Apartheid’, p.43.

security legislation constraining the reporting and publishing practices of newspapers, editors and individual journalists during the 1970s and beyond.⁴³ Black journalists were particularly vulnerable to detention and police harassment, in ways their white colleagues were not.⁴⁴ The declaration of local and national states of emergency during the 1980s constrained newspapers even further. However, as the introduction to this article highlights, this also brought the English-language press into more direct confrontation with the government. This more oppositional stance may also have been a response to increased competition for readers. In the mid-1980s a so-called alternative press emerged that challenged the predominant voice of the English-language newspapers in criticising apartheid, exemplified by papers such as the *Weekly Mail*, set up by former *Rand Daily Mail* journalists⁴⁵, and *Grassroots*, *New Nation*, *South*, *Vrye Weekblad* and *New African*. These papers aimed to be more overtly critical of apartheid and were closely linked with a re-emerging internal liberation politics based in the trade unions and civic organisations that through the United Democratic Front (UDF) aligned itself with the ANC and the Congress tradition.⁴⁶ At the same time Argus launched the *Sowetan*, a paper which, especially under the editorship of Aggrey Klaaste from 1988, would go on to define a particular role for itself as representing black opinion but which was seen as continuing the Black Consciousness of its predecessors the *World* and the *Post*.⁴⁷

Berger argues that the reportage of the alternative press influenced the mainstream, and emboldened mainstream journalists and editors to assert their editorial independence.⁴⁸ Alternatively, Anthea Jeffery has more recently suggested that the alternative press romanticised organisations like the UDF and obscured its role as an instigator of violence in the mid-1980s.⁴⁹ She suggests that the UDF was similarly successful through ‘persistent and determined efforts’ in influencing the commercial English-language press to ‘slant their coverage’ in their favour.⁵⁰ In 1991 it was suggested by some black journalists that from the mid-1980s they had increasingly faced violent intimidation from political activists if they were seen to promote division within the struggle by

⁴³ The widely used *Newspaperman’s Guide to the Law* listed this legislation and its potential pitfalls, including original statutes and their amendments: Suppression of Communism Act, Terrorism Act, Riotous Assemblies Act, Public Safety Act, Criminal Law Amendment Act, Official Secrets Act, Prisons Act and Publications Act, for discussion see: Kelsey Stuart, *The Newspaperman’s Guide to the Law*, (Durban, Butterworth and co., 1977).

⁴⁴ Rodney Davenport and Christopher Saunders, ‘The English-Language Press under Apartheid’, *South African Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (1 November 2000): p.274.

⁴⁵ In 1985 The *Rand Daily Mail* which had gained a reputation as a strident critic of the government was controversially closed, allegedly for financial reasons. For one account see, Rex Gibson, *Final Deadline: The Last Days of the Rand Daily Mail* (Claremont, South Africa: David Philip Pub, 2007).

⁴⁶ Berger, ‘Publishing for the People: The Alternative Press 1980-1999’, p.82.

⁴⁷ Lesley Cowling, ‘Building a Nation: The Sowetan and the Creation of a Black Public’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40, no. 2 (4 March 2014): pp.325-41.

⁴⁸ Berger, ‘Publishing for the People: The Alternative Press 1980-1999’, p.89.

⁴⁹ Anthea Jeffery, *People’s War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers SA, 2009), pp.78-80.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

reporting on rival liberation organisations and that as a result press reports in South Africa were only 50% accurate.⁵¹

In 1991 the *Sowetan* was South Africa's biggest selling daily newspaper with a circulation of 208, 591 and would remain the most widely read daily for the next ten years.⁵² The end of sanctions in the early 1990s witnessed some significant shifts in the South African commercial media industry, but it was really after 1994 that ownership patterns changed significantly.⁵³ After 1994 two new dynamics altered the landscape of South Africa's print media: black ownership and foreign ownership. Sean Jacobs has argued that the 1990s also saw emergent tensions between the new ANC-led government's conception of a 'patriotic' media and press owners, editors and journalists who were largely influenced by a 'liberal-humanist' notion of their role in the new democracy.⁵⁴ This was evident in the ANC's apparent expectation that black journalists and editors in particular, should be 'allies' of the new government.⁵⁵

All of this means that newspapers cannot be read as any kind of straightforward record of the commemorative practices surrounding June 16, nor is it easy to identify a simple chain of causation through which reportage and practice influenced one another. However, newspapers do allow us to trace some of the ways in which June 16 came to be framed as a national moment, and how ideas of the nation were reframed to incorporate June 16. In the analysis which follows I concentrate on the reports on June 16 commemorations and associated editorials and comment pieces in two newspapers in particular. The principle focus is upon the *World* (and its later incarnations the *Post* and the *Sowetan*) as a way of exploring the entanglement of black journalists and editors with the story of June 16. The *Rand Daily Mail*, (and following its closure, the newspaper set up by some of its former journalists, the *Weekly Mail*) is read alongside as a way of highlighting both what is unusual about the *World* and what it shares with the liberal English-language press. As newspapers that targeted a black readership and were published in Johannesburg both newspapers offer a chance to explore the interplay between a local commemorative tradition and national narratives, as well as the ways in which reporting on June 16 helped define these newspapers' self-image and their visions of the South African nation.

⁵¹ See the discussion in South African Institute of Race Relations, *Mau-Mauing the Media: New Censorship for the New South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1991).

⁵² Gordon S Jackson, *Breaking Story: The South African Press* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p.32; Cowling, 'Building a Nation', p.339.

⁵³ For a discussion of these changes see: Keyan G Tomaselli, 'Ownership and Control in the South African Print Media: Black Empowerment after Apartheid, 1990–1997', *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies* 18, no. 1 (1 January 1997): pp.67-68; Jacobs, *Tensions of a Free Press*.

⁵⁴ Jacobs, *Tensions of a Free Press*, p.1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.7.

Commemorating June 16

1977-1986

In 1977, the first anniversary of the June 16 march was commemorated through a church service at Regina Mundi Catholic Church in Soweto and a period of mourning. The early commemorations were a part of wider practices instituted during the uprisings themselves of political mobilisation through funerals and night vigils for those killed by the state. In subsequent years, to the church service was added the laying of flowers at the graveside of Hector Pieterse, widely believed to be the first victim of police shooting on June 16, and the erecting of a special gravestone commemorating Pieterse as a symbol of the wider struggle. Commemorations outside Soweto seem to have followed the forms established there. In the first decade up to 1986, as these ritual practices of public mourning strengthened June 16 as a source of moral and political authority, the anniversary, its symbols, and spatial sites became increasingly contested by the state itself as well as different liberation organisations. The organisation of the service at Regina Mundi emerged as an indicator of local and later national political legitimacy and authority. Contestation over the June 16 anniversary between organisations that on the one hand declared adherence to the 1955 Freedom Charter and others who expressed an 'Africanist' or Black Consciousness ideology broke out openly in 1980 – according to oral accounts.⁵⁶ It was through the framework of 'the day of mourning', established in the first few years of commemorations, that newspapers themselves would begin to weave their national narratives from around 1980 onwards.

The first anniversary of June 16 1976 was 'inside' the uprising that the protest march, and the fatal shooting of schoolchildren, had precipitated. In 1977, amidst the ongoing uprising neither the student leaders nor the newspaper with the closest relationship to them, the *World*, placed special emphasis on June 16 itself. Instead, the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC) announced, and the *World* reported, a call for a four day mourning period to be observed from June 13-16. The *World* relayed that 'the students have called on all the people of Soweto- and *all the blacks in the country*- to observe this day as a holiday to commemorate those who died during the riots'[emphasis added].⁵⁷ This included instructions to wear black and attend prayer services; that shebeens, discos, cinemas and shops within the townships should be closed; scheduled soccer matches should be suspended; and a minute of silence should be observed by taxi and bus services. Another SSRC leaflet requested that parents stay away from work to 'pledge solidarity with their children' and demanded

⁵⁶ See Hlongwane, 'Commemoration, Monuments and Memory in the Contested Language of Black Liberation: The South African Experience'.

⁵⁷ *World*, June 10 1977.

that parents be allowed to work extra hours in the run-up to June 16 in order 'to cover work for the two days 16 and 17 June in which they shall be with their children'.⁵⁸

In these commemorative activities of June 1977 there was recognition of the heroism of student sacrifice and respect for the leadership of the SSRC which was tied-in with the calls for mourning.⁵⁹ Although predominantly commemorating and remembering those who had died, there were also messages about (re)dedication to the cause of liberation. At the beginning of the four day mourning period on June 13 the *World* quoted Reverend Lebamang Sebidi addressing a Regina Mundi church service: 'Our children sacrificed themselves to die for the freedom of us all, and they are still prepared to push their struggle for the liberation of the black man further'.⁶⁰ An editorial in the *World* on June 15 1977 summed up the way in which tradition, dignity and respect were invoked through this commemorative mourning and the claims that were being made to moral authority in the face of conflict with the apartheid police force:

It is because of our strong and deeply embedded cultural heritage that we treat the memories of those who have departed with the dignity and respect they deserve. Now, more than ever we must exhibit the moral strength to respect that tradition...We must be in the street only as far as it is necessary to walk to the churches or halls where such memorial services are to be held. Congregating on street corners must be avoided at all costs...Many people are expecting trouble tomorrow. We have a duty to disappoint them. We dare NOT make their predictions come true.⁶¹

World editor Percy Qoboza wrote explicitly as member of the community which was in mourning and there was a clear concern with the way in which commemoration should be practiced. The emphasis on avoiding the street as the site of potential conflict placed the church in contrast as the appropriate site of commemorative mourning. In this editorial there was an importance attached to appropriate behaviour which has been shown elsewhere to have marked adult interaction with youth politics, but also followed the SSRC leadership's own emphasis on discipline and respect.⁶² The relationship between the *World* and its readers drew upon the notion of a shared 'cultural heritage' but there was no explicit invocation of a national community.

⁵⁸ 'SSRC Leaflet. Exhibit Handed in during State Case in State Versus W.W.C. Twala and 10 Others.', 1977, University of South Africa (UNISA) Audio Visual Collections.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill suggest in *Whirlwind before the Storm* that the notion of 'freedom through sacrifice' found in this and many other SSRC leaflets was peculiar to Soweto as it was not a prominent theme to be found in the material produced by the student organisations in the Cape Peninsula. Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm*, p.227.

⁶⁰ *World*, June 13 1977.

⁶¹ *World*, June 15 1977.

⁶² See for example the emphasis placed on 'good behaviour' by the civic organisations of the 1980s in Tetelman, 'The Burial of Canon J.A. Calata and the Revival of Mass- Based Opposition in Cradock, South Africa, 1983', p.23.

The difference in the coverage of the first anniversary of June 16 in the *Rand Daily Mail* highlights the special position of the *World* as speaking from within the community of mourning. In the *Rand Daily Mail* the emphasis was on the ongoing unrest and the continued causalities of the uprising particularly in the Eastern Cape.⁶³ It was reported of Soweto only that the township ‘had one of its quietest days since the start of renewed unrest marking the anniversary of the June 16 riots last year. Police reported only three incidents, none of them serious’.⁶⁴ On June 10, the *Rand Daily Mail* had also reported another anniversary marked by the students of Naledi High in Soweto that seemed to displace the centrality of June 16 as the moment of political awakening.⁶⁵ On June 8 in 1976 student demonstrators had expelled from the premises two policemen who had entered their school to speak to the headmaster.⁶⁶ On 9 June 1976 they prevented policemen who had returned with reinforcements from entering their school and making arrests. This initial story had barely appeared in the press in 1976, contrasting, of course with the immediate coverage that June 16 received nationally and internationally.⁶⁷ A year later, in 1977, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that Naledi High students held a ‘demonstration’ to commemorate the June 8 incident.⁶⁸

Helena Pohlandt-McCormick has argued that the way in which June 16 has been understood and framed as a ‘turning point’ in history erases the work of Black Consciousness and the school based struggles that led up to the march of June 16.⁶⁹ This June 8 anniversary marked by Naledi High students suggests that such a focus on June 16 and a concentration of symbolic political energy on that specific day was not immediately exclusive. However, what is also interesting to note is that the June 8 commemoration took the form of a ‘demonstration’ as opposed to the practices of mourning which marked the week of June 16. When the *Rand Daily Mail* did begin to report on June 16 commemorations in more detail, the focus was very much upon the rituals of mourning which were performed in Soweto. In 1978 the *Rand Daily Mail*’s coverage was extensive, and included a full-page spread of photographs from the Regina Mundi memorial service on page two, and a detailed description of the service on page one.⁷⁰ The coverage continued for several days after June 16. In

⁶³ The main headline read: ‘7 Shot dead in E. Cape’, *Rand Daily Mail*, June 18 1977.

⁶⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 18 1977.

⁶⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 10 1977.

⁶⁶ According to an interview conducted in exile with Tebello Motapanyane, a former student of Naledi High and general secretary of the South African Students Movement (SASM). The interview was published in (a) *Phakathi* No.4 April 1977; (b) *Sechaba* 2nd quarter 1977. See discussion in Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind before the storm*, pp.89-90.

⁶⁷ See discussion in Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm*, p.90.

⁶⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 10 1977.

⁶⁹ Pohlandt-McCormick, “‘I Saw a Nightmare...’: Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)”, p.28.

⁷⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 17 1978.

1979 the paper advertised in advance the location of more commemorative services, outside Soweto.⁷¹ It was out of this interest in the local practices of commemorative mourning performed on June 16 that the *Rand Daily Mail* would later develop its own national narratives.

Coverage in these early years was underpinned by a particular view of youth political action that was broadly sympathetic in the face of government efforts to label the students as rioters. However, there was always tension over the use of violence. The comments of one student leader Oupa Mlangeni, reported in 1978 made clear that participation and leadership of commemorative activities offered young political activists the chance to foster both political community and legitimacy. Mlangeni suggested that the 20,000 attendees at the Regina Mundi service in 1978 demonstrated the unity that existed in the black community but also that the students ‘had proved to the system we are not stone throwers’.⁷² A sympathetic view of youth political action was also manifest in a specific discourse surrounding young women who had been injured on the June 16 protest march. As early as 1977 an SSRC leaflet had asked the ‘Black people of Azania’ to ‘remember ‘our crippled brothers and sisters who have been disabled deliberately by people who have been trained to disrespect and disregard a black man as a fellow human being’ alongside those killed on June 16.’⁷³ In the early 1980s interviews and profiles of a number of injured young women appeared repeatedly in the pages of the *Sowetan* in the days before and after June 16. For example, on June 17 1983 Poppy Buthelezi, Phindile Mavuso and Mavis Ngubane were featured in a story in which Phindile Mavuso was quoted: ‘One look at myself reminds me that we haven’t reached our goal yet. All others who were seriously maimed and relatives of those who died at the hands of the oppressor, should not wallow in self pity, but always remember that the black man has to be free and that we are not very far from attaining our goal’.⁷⁴

In these newspaper reports these young women were invested with a particular moral authority based upon their youthful female innocence, purity of motive and strength in the face of sacrifice. A similar story published in 1981, after reporting the words of Phindile Mavuso ended: ‘she smiles and all her beauty shows as she recalls the incidents that cost her a leg’.⁷⁵ The heroism accorded to these young women by the *Sowetan* in the early 1980s incorporated them into narratives of the ongoing liberation struggle – this was not an explicitly national narrative but more often addressed a racial community or a community of struggle. The *Rand Daily Mail* didn’t publish any such profiles but it did report that the Lenasia memorial service in 1983 was addressed by Poppy

⁷¹ The services advertised were in Lenasia, Mamelodi, Kagiso, Tembisa and Kwa Thema Springs: *Rand Daily Mail*, June 16 1978.

⁷² As reported in the *Rand Daily Mail*, June 20 1978.

⁷³ ‘SSRC Leaflet. Exhibit Handed in during State Case in State Versus W.W.C. Twala and 10 Others.’

⁷⁴ *Sowetan*, June 17 1983.

⁷⁵ *Sowetan*, June 16 1981.

Buthelezi, who told the audience that they should ‘not feel pity for her as her injuries were a symbol of the struggle’.⁷⁶ However, by this point both papers had also begun to narrate explicitly national stories through their reporting and editorialising of June 16 commemorations.

In 1980 the *Rand Daily Mail*’s editorial set out a position in which the national significance accorded to June 16 as a day of mourning was a way of eliding the day’s political significance in the context of the ongoing anti-apartheid struggle. In 1980 the *Rand Daily Mail* editorialised that June 16 should be a ‘day for all to remember’, lamenting that whilst South Africa’s white community celebrated the latest national rugby team victory; June 16 was black South Africa’s ‘equivalent to the Day of the Covenant’.⁷⁷ The juxtaposition, nevertheless invoked a national community, albeit one differentiated by racial communities and their contrasting behaviours. In 1981 the *Rand Daily Mail* distinguished its own stance on June 16 through some mild criticism of the government’s attitude to the day:

It is five years today that a pupils’ protest march in Soweto turned into nationwide rioting which raged on and off for four months and left 575 people dead. It was an enormously destructive event, shattering lives, property, inter-racial goodwill, confidence and trust. Each commemoration is marked by dread that there will be renewed conflict. Police are on standby, meetings are banned, and individuals are detained. This time, university and coloured school unrest has maintained the tension...such a preoccupation with the maintenance of law and order is unavoidable but it detracts from the dignity and spirit which should mark June 16. Instead of a day of national mourning, it is a day of national preparedness.⁷⁸

The *Rand Daily Mail*’s liberal politics and limited criticism of the apartheid state are made clear by the editor’s preoccupation with the maintenance of ‘inter-racial goodwill’ and the notion that security measures were ‘unavoidable’. Here the idea of a day of national mourning was used to suggest June 16 should be above or outside politics and political confrontation.

Whilst the *Rand Daily Mail* spoke explicitly of ‘national mourning’, in the *Sowetan* June 16 was embraced as a day that should have special significance for black South Africans. In 1983 columnist Aggrey Klaaste called for a public holiday on June 16. He commented that he thought his sentiments were widespread and that ‘it might be interesting to note in parenthesis that we hardly ever considered or held similar views about Sharpeville Day, which was just as tragic’.⁷⁹ In a similar column the following year he attributed a foundational importance to June 16 for black South Africans, arguing:

⁷⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 17 1983.

⁷⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 16 1980.

⁷⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, June 16 1981.

⁷⁹ Aggrey Klaaste, ‘On the Line’, *Sowetan*, June 20 1983.

If, as a white person or whoever, you have problems with the politics that is evoked around this day, then I suggest you do what I have done to the Christian story. Make it a symbol. Children after all are children. Children on this day died. It does not matter what the circumstances but they died. It is a crying shame that all races, including the Jews, Indians and Whites have their public holidays and Blacks don't. Let's have June 16 a public holiday and build a new nation on that.⁸⁰

Here Klaaste suggested that black South Africans could be included in 'a new nation' through the acceptance of June 16 as a public holiday. Interestingly the symbolic abstraction that he suggested white South African's perform in remembering June 16 as a day on which 'children died' was not so far from the position taken by the *Rand Daily Mail*. In both newspapers June 16 was incorporated as a national moment through mourning.

At the same time those political groups organising June 16 commemorations were also expanding the symbolic importance of June 16 through the idea of a 'day of mourning'. In 1983 a number of organisations chose to link their commemorations of the Soweto uprising with protest over the recent hanging of the 'ANC Three'.⁸¹ The UDF and Congress of South African Students (COSAS) announced the day's commemorations would 'highlight all those who had died under apartheid'.⁸² The two major histories of the UDF suggest that the organisation of June 16 commemorative services outside Soweto were, alongside funerals, one of the ways in which local UDF branches consolidated their organisational capacities and channelled popular protest that exploded in many urban areas in 1984.⁸³ June 16 commemorative services were themselves the targets of police repression and resulted in further killings. The losses of June 16 1976 were thus repeated through commemoration and confrontation. The idea of simultaneous commemoration of June 16 was underpinned by a narrative of the struggle and was a way of stitching moments of resistance together.⁸⁴ When one group of students debated folding the commemoration of another young victim of police repression, Emma Sathekgga⁸⁵, killed in 1984, into June 16 commemorations they did so because otherwise 'peoples' calendar will be full of holidays'.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Aggrey Klaaste, 'On the Line', *Sowetan*, June 18 1984.

⁸¹ On June 9th 1983 three ANC members were hung after being given the death penalty for attacks on police stations. They were, Jerry Mosololi, Marcus Motoung and Thelle Mogoerane.

⁸² *Rand Daily Mail*, June 14 1983.

⁸³ Jeremy Seekings, *Heroes or Villains?: Youth Politics in the 1980s* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993), p.147; Ineke Van Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.99, 183.

⁸⁴ This is a process suggested by Micheal Tetelman in his discussion of the funeral of Canon Calata in 1983. Tetelman, 'The Burial of Canon J.A. Calata and the Revival of Mass- Based Opposition in Cradock, South Africa, 1983'.

⁸⁵ In 1984 as part of school based protests, in the context of the UDF campaigns to boycott elections to the tri-cameral parliament, fifteen year old school girl Emma Sathekgga was run over by a police vehicle in Atteridgeville near Pretoria. She was in the words of Van Kessel 'a symbolic marker'; 'the first "unrest victim"'

1986-1996

1986 marked an important shift away from the framework of a day of mourning in both commemorative practices and reporting. June 16 gained a national significance which was no longer always traced back to the deaths of 1976. In part this shift was due to the government's declaration of a nationwide state of emergency which explicitly targeted the planned tenth anniversary commemorations of June 16. The tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising was linked by the UDF and its affiliates to celebrations of the signing of the Freedom Charter on June 26 – a move which made joint celebrations with the 'Africanist' National Forum organisations that rejected the Freedom Charter a political impossibility. The Regina Mundi service was overshadowed by the UDF's organisation of a rally at Orlando Stadium on June 16.⁸⁷ The *Sowetan* reported that in Durban both the UDF and the Inkatha Youth Brigade had applied to hold a rally at Currie's Fountain, also a sports ground.⁸⁸ The move from churches to stadiums, and services to rallies, in 1986 was undoubtedly partly a matter of crowd capacity - a sign of the reinvigoration of internal political opposition to apartheid - but also a decisive shift to the view of June 16 as a day for potentially massive and overt political mobilisation for liberation organisations from across the political spectrum. The increasing levels of violence and the 'vanguard' role of township youth in the mid-1980s township uprisings also fed into reinterpretations of the meaning of June 16. The involvement of young people in the violence of the 'ungovernable' townships in the mid-1980s was such that Jeremy Seekings has argued youth were viewed according to an 'apocalyptic stereotype' which had links to broader historical discourses of fear surrounding rapid twentieth century urbanisation.⁸⁹ A decline in the moral authority of youth as political actors shaped the character of commemorations as ANC pre-eminence was established in the 1990s.

In 1986 it was the newspapers themselves that could be found speaking through the moral authority of June 16 when they used their enforced silence on the tenth anniversary to make explicit their opposition to government controls on their content. The *Sowetan* emphasised its relationship with its readers in their front page editorial on June 18: 'All that we and the other media have to contribute at this time when the country is facing its worst ever crisis has been effectively banned. We could have offered our readers' a comment on the trivial but that would have been an insult to them

in the statistics on casualties of political violence, which would exceed five thousand before the decade was over'. Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams*, p.26.

⁸⁶ This discussion took place in a letter, found in the Detainee Parent's Support Committee (DPSC) archives, which was written by a group of students detained under the emergency at Modderbee Prison. The letter is undated but likely comes from 1986/7, although could be from anytime after Emma Sathekga's death in 1984. The DPSC was a UDF affiliate set up to monitor the state's detention of children. 'Letter from Modderbee Prison', Wits Historical Papers, AG2523, Box B2.1.

⁸⁷ *Sowetan*, June 6 1986.

⁸⁸ *Sowetan*, June 12 1986.

⁸⁹ Seekings, *Heroes or Villains?*, pp.2-5.

and us'.⁹⁰ Taken together the blanked out columns and front page editorials that made visible newspapers' enforced silence were dramatic performances of resistance, which nevertheless avoided breaking the law. They were also dramatic performances of national imagining: invoking a nation and its happenings that due to state censorship could not be reported upon. The editorials surrounding June 16 1986 made clear the role that these newspapers saw for themselves as vital conduits of information – without their reportage June 16 was as the *Weekly Mail* put it the 'day that fell off the calendar'.

On June 18 1986, Sam Mabe, the *Sowetan*'s political correspondent wrote a piece entitled 'June 16 a public holiday?' In it he looked back over the previous ten years since 1976 and concluded 'whatever the reasons people stayed away this year's June 16 was acknowledged, wittingly or unwittingly as different from ordinary working days. It was not the same as the other nine and is not likely to be the same in the future. Its extraordinary quietness added to its significance'.⁹¹ He likened the day to 'the ANC's passive resistance of the late 40s and early 50s in its spirit' and thus tied June 16, through its commemoration, into a narrative of ongoing, ANC-led struggle.⁹² In the same year the *Weekly Mail* published a series of articles by Shaun Johnson discussing youth as a distinct constituency within the broader liberation struggle. On June 13 he interviewed one time president of the SSRC and by 1986 member of the Soweto Youth Congress and the UDF, Dan Montisisi. Described by Johnson as 'a child of Soweto' Montisisi's political journey again placed June 16 in a narrative of ANC-aligned struggle.⁹³ In a further article in 1989, Montisisi was again placed as the political leader judged to have emerged most successfully from June 16.⁹⁴ In all of this, the idea of June 16 as a day of mourning was displaced, although not erased.

Between 1987 and 1993 each year the majority of the black workforce in Johannesburg, Pretoria, the Cape Peninsula, Port Elizabeth and Durban were reported as staying away on June 16. By 1987 many trade unions had individual agreements with employers either recognising the day as a public holiday or reaching some other compromise.⁹⁵ In 1989 an article in the *Sowetan* reported an Institute for Industrial Relations spokesman as claiming that 161 employers recognised June 16 as a paid holiday for their workers.⁹⁶ Employers in the metal working industry, represented by Steel and Engineering Industries of South Africa (SEIFSA), had worked out a deal with unions whereby employees would vote whether to 'swap' Founders Day for June 16.⁹⁷ This arrangement illustrated

⁹⁰ *Sowetan*, June 18 1986.

⁹¹ Sam Mabe, 'June 16 a public holiday?', *Sowetan*, June 18 1986.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Shaun Johnson, 'Looking back on that fateful day in June', *Weekly Mail*, June 13 1986.

⁹⁴ Gavin Evans, 'Thirteen Years On', *Weekly Mail*, June 15 1989.

⁹⁵ *Sowetan*, June 16 1987.

⁹⁶ *Sowetan*, June 8 1989.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

alternative commemorative traditions in direct symbolic competition but also, by 1989, accommodation. This was exactly the kind of ‘component’ nationalism that Klaaste had advocated in the early 1980s – with South Africa’s different communities incorporated into the nation through the recognition of ‘their’ symbolic days.

At the same time June 16 was being folded into new narratives of the ‘state of the nation’ that cited the Soweto uprisings as a turning point for the societal position of young people. The newspaper depiction of youth as political actors shifted during the township uprisings of the mid-1980s when they began to carry more reports and commentary on the violence between, and committed by, young people. In 1987 Aggrey Klaaste used his *Sowetan* column on the eve of June 16 to consider the ‘monstrous forms of anger and dissent in young black South Africans’ and to suggest that ‘the class boycotts of the 70s should have warned us that we were nursing the type of ruthless and often ugly monster we would not be able to understand ten years later’.⁹⁸ June 16 thus became in discussions on youth violence a turning point that had catapulted young South Africans into a position of authority that was perceived as dangerous for them and society.

In the early 1990s, in the context of the move to a negotiated settlement the representation of victimhood associated with June 16 also shifted. Individuals, whom newspapers had once put forward as possessing the moral authority of sacrifice, now reappeared as pitiful victims who symbolised the tragedy of South Africa’s youth. In 1993 a series of articles revisited amongst others Poppy Buthelezi and Phindile Mavuso.⁹⁹ In one article entitled, ‘June 16 scars will remain forever’ Phindile Mavuso was interviewed by Joe Mdhlela. The article began,

Even though they live, they are in many ways dead, their ambitions killed in the repressive system. Their aspirations to become lawyers, doctors, engineers, scientists and indeed anything else their abilities permit, all shattered. Now they shuffle about, some with broken limbs, with very little hope of making meaningful contributions to society and the economy. At best they are just content to survive and see another day dawn.¹⁰⁰

Phindile Mavuso was quoted, ‘Why do you think these people should not be bitter. They may say they are not but what does the violence in this country tell you? It says there are people who are angry and the government retaliates by killing them’.¹⁰¹ This kind of victimhood was a marked change from the glorious martyrdom Phindile Mavuso had previously seemed to embody; now her moral authority lay

⁹⁸ Aggrey Klaaste, ‘On the Line’, *Sowetan*, June 15 1987.

⁹⁹ See, for example: ‘Triumph of the Schoolboy Martyrs’, *Sowetan*, June 15 1993.

¹⁰⁰ Joe Mdhlela, ‘June 16 Scars will Remain Forever’, *Sowetan*, June 15 1993.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

in having been left forgotten and bitter. These articles foreshadowed the narratives of victimhood that emerged in the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission five years later.¹⁰²

Debates over who should be involved in commemorating June 16, and how, intensified in the early 1990s. ANC aligned organisations advanced a greater emphasis on young people, following a perceived need to reintegrate youth into organised structures that their engagement in violence had taken them away from. This translated into talk in 1990 of ‘celebrating’ rather than commemorating June 16.¹⁰³ In contrast a range of critics from Africanist organisations to teachers’ unions and educationalists drew on the history of the commemoration to suggest June 16 should be ‘solemn’, ‘meaningful’ and not ‘commercial’ or a ‘holiday or break’.¹⁰⁴ In 1994 such criticisms were compounded when the new Government of National Unity was not ready to declare June 16 a public holiday and the Employment Minister Tito Mboweni had to call for workers *not* to stay away on June 16 1994. Since 1988 the *Sowetan* had been edited by Aggrey Klaaste, who in the first year of his editorship initiated a ‘nation-building’ campaign. Through this campaign Klaaste claimed an inclusive position involving ‘all political schools of thought’ in re-building communities amidst the fraught and violent contestation between different liberation organisations and the apartheid state.¹⁰⁵ Lesley Cowling has recently argued that the *Sowetan* positioned itself as representative of, and even as a convener of, a black public and as such claimed a role in imagining a new nation into being.¹⁰⁶

The positioning and claims made by the *Sowetan* which Cowling has highlighted were expressed in the paper’s reporting of June 16 commemorations. In 1996 the *Sowetan* argued in an editorial that, the day ought not to be one for political campaigning in the form of separate rallies for separate organisations. The newspaper first attributed a special moral authority to the 1976 students and then spoke as the guardian of their legacy: ‘such a show of disunity must be discouraged as it sends the wrong signal to our youth, to whom youth day should be bequeathed in memory of the gallant forays of the Class of ’76 students. Ironically the June 16 upheavals were characterised by an unprecedented show of unity amongst the youth, who displayed unexpected maturity when challenging the might of the apartheid state machinery’.¹⁰⁷ In 1996 a non-factional image of June 16

¹⁰² For more on youth and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission see: Karin Chubb, *Between Anger and Hope: South Africa’s Youth and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001); Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid*.

¹⁰³ See for example, statement from the South African Youth Congress or SAYCO in *Sowetan*, June 10 1993.

¹⁰⁴ See *Sowetan*, June 15 1994 and *Sowetan*, June 14 1996.

¹⁰⁵ South African Institute of Race Relations, *Mau-Mauing the Media: New Censorship for the New South Africa*, p.55.

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, in October 1989 when the *Sowetan* announced a ‘nation-building week’, this started with a prayer meeting at Regina Mundi Church which Klaaste was keen to emphasise was a ‘dignified affair’.

Cowling, ‘Building a Nation’, p.338.

¹⁰⁷ *Sowetan*, June 17 1996.

could thus be used to imagine a united national community (and ‘our youth’), and to project the *Sowetan* as the mirror of that authentic nation’s traditions.

Conclusions

Contestation over appropriate ways to commemorate June 16 did not end in 1996. In post-apartheid South Africa June 16 has been a day in which the nation’s relationship to the past, ANC versions of history and the place of youth within national and political communities continue to be debated. Here I have tried to show that June 16 has a longer history as a site for such debates. In particular I argue that exploring newspaper reports of the commemoration of June 16 as they changed from 1977 onwards, shaped by apartheid state restrictions and violent suppression as well as the changing imperatives of political mobilisation for divergent liberation organisations, can reveal some of the ways in which commemoration was ‘nationalised’. Soweto activists established June 16 as a day of both mourning and mobilisation from 1977. However, it was as a day of mourning that June 16 was framed as a national moment by newspaper editorials and reports. As political contestation over the anniversary intensified in the 1980s, newspapers used their enforced silence to highlight their own political position and simultaneously continued to use the idea of a day of mourning to suggest June 16 should be above or outside politics altogether. I argue that from the moment of the 1976 uprising itself newspapers, and in particular black journalists and editors, have been deeply entangled with making the meanings of June 16. Newspapers were a crucial site through which June 16 commemorations were consumed nationally and narrated as national moments. Newspapers’ own attempts to speak-through June 16 are interconnected to but not reducible or explainable through an increasing ANC dominance over the repertoires of commemoration.

It has been suggested that the historiography of the struggle of the late seventies and particularly of the 1980s has focused on individual localities and their cultures rather than ‘the localities’ contributions to and articulation with the overall national political culture’.¹⁰⁸ Exploring articulations of the national in South African newspapers as they crystallised around June 16’s local commemorative traditions offers one way of gaining a ‘clearer sense of the national’ in the history of the liberation struggle. This aims not so much at collating a comprehensive national picture of the struggle as it played out within the borders of South Africa, but asks how it was that the liberation struggle was thought and performed as national. The anti-apartheid struggle was international in scope, trans-national in its connections and local in its practices, and so the national should not be taken for granted but rather be a subject of our investigations in and of itself.

¹⁰⁸ Hilary Sapire, ‘Township Histories, Insurrection and Liberation in Late Apartheid South Africa’, *South African Historical Journal* 65, no. 2 (1 June 2013): p.178.

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