

THE 'SINGING FREEDOM' EXHIBITION: PAINFUL HISTORIES, COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND PERCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM

Paul Tichmann and Shanaaz Galant

Social History Collections Department

Iziko Museums, Cape Town

p.tichmann@iziko.org.za

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the research conducted in order to prepare the 'Singing Freedom: Music and the struggle against apartheid' exhibition, which was launched at the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum in Cape Town in March 2014. As part of this research, interviews were conducted with various musicians and other stakeholders involved with 'struggle songs' specifically and freedom songs more generally. The interview questions were informed by the current discourses and scholarship around collective memory and trauma.

Keywords: collective memory and trauma, freedom songs, Singing Freedom project

The exhibition, 'Singing Freedom: Music and the struggle against apartheid', was launched at the Iziko Slave Lodge in Cape Town on 20 March 2014. A core component of the research for the exhibition was an oral history programme that entailed interviewing twenty-five informants, comprising a mix of former political activists and musicians. Extensive reading and research were carried out before the

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list of interviewees was compiled. The researchers tried to exhaust as much reading on the intersection of music, people, activity and apartheid struggle as possible. In addition to this formal approach, we were guided by our own experience and personal involvement in the struggle against apartheid. In every interview, we started off with biographical questions that not only provided a useful context, but also helped to personalise the narratives and reduce the tendency towards an official narrative. The oral history process elicited narratives that ranged from the period of the 1952

Defiance Campaign to the present and included local as well as national events even though the majority of interviewees were from the Western Cape.

In recent years, acrimonious and at times emotional debates around the singing of two songs, *De la Rey* and *Dubul' iBhunu* raised critical questions around the meaning and relevance of freedom songs in post-apartheid South Africa. *De la Rey*, a song about South African/Anglo-Boer War General Koos de la Rey, was launched by Bok van Blerk in 2006. The video launch showed Afrikaner women and children as victims in concentration camps and men in trenches. Some commentators saw the popularity of the song as evidence of a new Afrikaner identity that dealt with issues of guilt and challenged the failure of the post-apartheid state. Others expressed concern about its potential appeal to Afrikaner right-wing sentiments. The Department of Arts and Culture (2007) stated, in a media release:

Sadly the popular song is in danger of being hijacked by a minority of right-wingers who not only regard De la Rey as a war hero but want to mislead sections of Afrikaans-speaking society to think that this is a 'struggle song' that sends out a 'call to arms'.¹

In April 2011, AfriForum Youth, which is part of the mainly Afrikaner rights lobby group, AfriForum, opened a civil case against Julius Malema for his repeated singing of the struggle song, *Dubul' iBhunu*. AfriForum argued that the song amounted to hate speech and contravened the Constitution. Several senior African National Congress (ANC) figures threw their weight behind Malema, arguing that the song was part of the ANC's struggle history. Serote (2011) testified in the hate speech trial and argued that freedom songs were 'as important as the Voortrekker monument.'² Judge Colin Lamont ruled that the words of the song undermined the dignity of certain people and were hurtful and discriminatory. The ruling led to a great deal of debate about the role of struggle songs such as *Dubul' iBhunu*. Mabogoane (2010) criticised the singing of *Dubul' iBhunu* and argued that freedom songs were important for the ANC as 'buoys to keep it from sinking and threads to attempt to hold it together as it unravels'. He further stated that 'songs take on an exaggerated significance with the ANC given its failed military struggle.'³ Ramoupi (2011) entered the fray with the argument that freedom songs are 'the archive of the people of South Africa – black and white' and that there should be no attempt to censor them.⁴ Esau (2011) expressed the opinion that '[s]truggle songs like *Dubul' iBhunu* cannot be erased from our collective memory, and merit preservation for their role in mobilising the people

against injustice and discrimination. Yet as such, they may now be best preserved in South Africa's many sites of memory and history, and not sung publicly.'⁵

From the outset of the Singing Freedom project, we realised the enormity of the narrative we were attempting to tell and we recognised the importance of oral history in such a narrative. We not only wanted to be able to include multiple voices in narrative but also to ensure that the stories of the diverse organisations involved in the struggle against apartheid were included. At the launch of a book on the history of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), Bonner (2011) argued that the history of organisations such as the trade union movement, the United Democratic Front (UDF) and others had been 'air brushed out of the struggle to be substituted by the dominant nationalist grand narrative of liberation'. We were only too aware of the trap of falling into a 'dominant nationalist grand narrative' and saw oral history as a way of avoiding such a trap.

We also hoped that oral history would help to inject some element of dialogue and debate into the narrative. We soon realised that in the case of almost all of the interviewees we were dealing with aspects of a painful and traumatic personal history. Magubane (2006: 251) argued that 'Even when we celebrate the "new South Africa", we should not forget the deep wounds that it left in the hearts and minds of its victims.'⁶ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2013) strikes a warning about the impact of trauma on memory:

When we are confronted with unimaginable and unbelievable human brutality the effect is to rupture our senses. When the rupture of one's senses is a daily occurrence – as was the case in South Africa's violent political past – old memories fuse with new ones and the accounts given by victims and survivors are not simply about facts. They are primarily about the impact of facts on their lives and the continuing trauma in their lives created by past violence.⁷

We attempted to deal with the risk of 'damaged memories' by comparing the activists' recollections of particular events and also by checking against available literature wherever possible. However, we found that freedoms songs served as powerful triggers of memory and helped interviewees to make links with particular individuals, events and organisations. We would strongly agree with the argument put forward by Impey (2008: 34) that 'sound, perhaps more than any of the other senses, has an enveloping, affective character that creates in us an awareness of proximity, connectedness and context and thus plays a significant role in the analysis of social, historical and political experience.'⁸ Ramoupi (2011) argues similarly:

Music becomes more ingrained in memory than mere talk and this quality makes it a powerful organizing tool. It is one thing to hear a political speech and remember an idea or two. It is quite another to sing a song and have its politically charged verse become emblazoned on your memory.⁹

One of our interviewees, Wendy Yapi (2012), recalled how, as a young girl, she had become politicised through the songs her brother, who was a member of the ANC Youth League, sang: 'Even though we were too young to be part of those meetings, through the songs we got to know what was happening.'¹⁰ Prior to setting out on the interviews, we had tried to gather as much information as possible about various freedom songs. Fortunately, one of the researchers had worked within the trade union movement and had participated in various political events and was familiar with many of the songs.

While the question of collective memory and trauma has been taken up in relation to the holocaust, the two world wars, the Rwandan genocide and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, there has not been a great deal of research regarding collective memory and trauma with regard to apartheid. Some research has focused on the Soweto uprisings and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Many of the people we interviewed shared traumatic experiences relating to police killings, detentions, imprisonment, exile and other aspects of apartheid brutality. From an early stage in the oral history interviews, it became apparent that the songs were important in evoking narratives of various aspects of the struggle against apartheid. What also became apparent at an early stage was that the songs evoked painful memories. As Pohlandt-McCormick (2000: 23) points out, in apartheid South Africa

[v]iolence, in its physical and discursive shape, forged individual memories that remain torn with pain, anger, distrust, and open questions; collective memories that left few spaces for ambiguity; and official or public histories tarnished by their political agendas or the very structures and sources that produced them.¹¹

We realised the importance of being sensitive to the traumatic aspect of the memories that were being evoked; to offer comfort when interviewees were clearly distressed and to use strategies that would allow the interviewees to speak about such aspects without feeling under pressure or embarrassed about their emotional state. As we video-taped each interview, we were also careful to stop the recording whenever necessary and also to check that the interviewees were comfortable with us continuing to record.

Sean Field (2006: 31) makes the point that '[o]ral history will neither heal nor cure but offers subtle support to interviewees' efforts to recompose their sense of self and regenerate agency'.¹² We would argue that this is an important point. We certainly did not regard our intervention as bringing some healing to the interviewees. However, for all the interviewees, there was recognition of the importance of telling the story of the role of music during the struggle against apartheid. They saw their involvement as part of a broader narrative that has important lessons for the present and future. For example, Marcus Solomon (2013), a former Robben Island political prisoner, stated:

We must again become conscious of the need to reclaim our heritage. It's not about Mandela's photo or the years he spent on the Island. It's about the deep things; about your values; spiritual things. It's not about religion. I'm talking about deeper things. Your friendship, your love for people, solidarity, peace, culture.¹³

Many of the interviewees spoke about the importance of keeping alive the principles of non-racialism and democracy, and the spirit of community issues they felt had started to lose their importance in the 'new South Africa'. One of the moving moments of the interviews was Ben Turok's (2012) recollections of incarceration in Pretoria Central Prison and hearing Vuyisile Mini¹⁴ and his comrades singing freedom songs as they were being led to the gallows:

And for me it was terribly upsetting because I knew what was coming. And on the morning when they were hanged ... I could hear their singing going down the corridor as they were going to their death, the hanging section. It was the worst moment of my imprisonment.¹⁵

In a similar vein, Priscilla Jana (2013), a former attorney, recalled her experiences during the trial of Solomon Mahlangu:¹⁶

And when he was sentenced to death there wasn't a single black person, except for his mother and brother, who were in the audience. The entire courtroom was packed with white people. It is very difficult not to get emotional but I'm going to try not to. And during that sentence, as the judge pronounced that he'd be hanged to death, they were taking him away, he lifted his hand and he said 'Amandla!' and there was no one in the audience that responded, so I, as an attorney sitting in the front; I responded. I got up and I said 'Awethu!', and of course, you know, they pounced on me like I can't tell you. I was detained and the law society had me charged for misconduct and what have you.¹⁷

For one of the interviewees, the recollection of a song sung during church services in the township brought back memories of the suffering of his parents under the brutal conditions brought about by the pass system and other apartheid laws. We had to stop the interview and allow him some time to recover his composure.

Several of the interviewees recollected times in detention or in prison. Zubeida Jaffer (2013), a journalist and political activist who had been through several periods of detention and torture at the hands of the security police, stated:

And then I did a story on police killings which resulted in my being detained and then having complete transformation in my life, you know. I was never the same again after that, I was badly tortured. And, uhm, in fact I've now for the first time in 30 years finally gotten a treatment that is helping me. That is helping me overcome the post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁸

Cecyl Esau (2013), in recalling one of his earlier periods of detention, stated:

That detention wasn't a very nice one because it was the middle of winter and it was cold staying in a single cell all by myself. With two sides of a mat and a couple of blankets. I think on the first month or so, we stayed indoors about 22 or 23 hours a day. We were only outside

to collect our food and half an hour exercise strictly in the morning and a half an hour in the afternoon.

Even the banning orders that many activists were issued could be quite devastating as Lionel Davis (2012), another former Robben island political prisoner, recalled:

A banning order can be so harsh, especially a house arrest order, that you are crippled mentally, emotionally, you are crippled. People pack up and they go; they leave because

it is worse than being in prison I promise you. In prison I had company, the conditions of a banning order or a house arrest order is so severe that all you want to do is get out or get away; pack up and leave the country.¹⁹

One of our interviewees, musician Neo Muyanga (2013), who had been a primary school student during the turbulent times of the Soweto uprisings, reported:

I have a very bad memory of childhood. I had slight memory loss around that time of the beating and I don't know how much of that is related to that directly but I don't remember too much of my childhood actually. Patches, patches in my information.²⁰

Much research has, of course, been done on the effects of trauma on memory and that is also something that oral historians have to take into account when dealing with traumatic histories. Another interviewee, Ruth Carneson (2012), provided insight into the isolation that faced white activists who sometimes stood out as lonely figures among communities that supported the status quo:

Well, I mean I'm very proud of my parents, incredibly proud of them and their courage, but it wasn't easy; it was very hard; it meant we were ostracised and we became, over the years, we became increasingly isolated. I mean we were supposedly part of the white community because that is where we had to live, because of the Group Areas etc., but we were completely ostracised, treated as lepers, you know at school, uh, the children didn't talk to me.²¹

For activists and their families who fled into exile to avoid arrest and persecution, there were the difficulties of adjusting to a different cultural environment as well as the problem of not feeling rooted:

[B]ut when I went to London it was like such a shock to the system, it's like I had no reference points, I didn't. I lost who I was, I lost any sense of yeah, who I was or, nothing made sense, it is like I couldn't because culturally it was such a shock. I didn't know how to relate to people. It is almost as if I felt I was talking too loudly and laughing too loudly and I had to just really completely tone myself down, almost to the point of, well, to the point of just obliterating myself, and then also people having no idea about where I had come from.²²

Of course, the emotions generated by recollections of struggle are not only sad and traumatic ones. In recalling the launch of the UDF at Rocklands in Mitchells Plain, Cape Town, in 1983, Zubeida Jaffer said:

It was a magical thing, and the singing the voices, you know, the whole thing was, now as I'm older I realise, it was a spiritual experience because it was sort of, people their hearts were crying out. And I couldn't believe that there were so many people you know, we estimated I think 15 000 people, inside and outside.²³

Even for those in long-term imprisonment on Robben Island, there were recollections of happy times arising from comradeship. This point came through quite strongly in the interview with former Robben Island prisoner, Lionel Davis (2012), who recalled:

[Y]ou know the story of Robben Island is not just about the pain, we had a lot of laughter because this is how we kept our spirits alive, if it was not for education and the ability to laugh at yourself I think we would have lived a very dreary life, hey. When I spoke to this one woman once, many many years ago long after jail, and I talked about nostalgia; it was not nostalgia for being in jail but to remember all these things that helped you to uplift yourself, that helped make you a better person; the comradeship on so many levels. So this girl just thought 'this ou is 'n bietjie taatie; hy is klomp mal; hy praat van nostalgia' [this chap is a bit mad; very mad; he speaks about nostalgia].²⁴

We would also argue that freedom songs are about collective memory. The struggle against apartheid was a collective struggle that saw disparate people unite with a common purpose. It is therefore to be expected that those involved in that struggle would have collectively shared representations of that past. Now, the concept of 'collective memory' has been met with some scepticism and has been the subject of a great deal of critique since Maurice Halbwachs first put forward the idea that memory is also a social phenomenon. Assmann, in her article 'Transformations between history and memory' (*Social Research* 75(1) 2008: 55), argues:

Institutions and groups do not possess a memory like individuals do; there is, of course, no equivalent to the neurological system. Institutions and larger social groups, such as nations, governments, the church, or a firm do not 'have' a memory – they 'make' one for themselves with the aid of memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments.

Many supporters of the concept have argued very persuasively for the notion of collective memory. The dynamics of collective memory include a variety of emotional responses and commemorative practices. We would argue that freedom songs too have their firm place within the making of group memory. So powerful is the collective symbolism of many of the freedom songs that even barriers of language were overcome. Interestingly, several of the interviewees who understood very little isiXhosa could identify strongly with songs sung in isiXhosa. Cecyl Esau (2013), for example, recounted:

Uhm, and I remember an incident in 1986, I was detained in April '86 for my activities as part of the underground of the ANC then, and I was held for some time, for about 3 months at uh, Robertson Police Station. And uh, then I was, during my exercise time I would sing in the courtyard, and this was now shortly, I think either before or after, uh the declaration of the

state of emergency. And uh, as I was singing one day, somebody called out to me next door in isiXhosa and I burst out laughing and I said to him, no I can't speak isiXhosa I can only sing [laughs]. So he said the way I sing it was as if I can speak.²⁵

The mention of a song like *Senzeni na* would often bring to the fore memories of protest meetings and funerals from young and old interviewees. This association of songs with particular events and moments in the struggle for liberation was a continuous thread running through the oral history interviews.

In his study on the impact of forced removals on coloured identity in Cape Town, Henry Trotter (2009: 50) argued:

Their removal to racially defined townships ensured that they shared their memories almost exclusively with other coloured people, and only infrequently with Africans, Indians or whites. Apartheid social engineering determined the spatial limits within which coloured memories circulated, creating a reflexive, mutually reinforcing pattern of narrative traffic.²⁶

During the course of our research, however, we found that experiences within the trade union movement and political organisations broke through spatial boundaries and resulted in shared memories across the 'racial' divide and even across political boundaries. *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* was mentioned by many of the interviewees as one of the inspirational freedom songs that gave them a sense of unity and purpose.

As discussed earlier, the *De la Rey* and *Dubul iBhunu* sagas raised the question of the role and relevance of freedom songs in post-apartheid South Africa. We were therefore keen to find out what role interviewees saw for freedom songs today. Most of the interviewees felt that there is still a role for freedom songs within post-apartheid South Africa. Geoff Mampota (2012) argued that there is even greater need for freedom songs today, stating:

I believe that we have reached the first phase of freedom which is political. And we have become complacent as a nation. We need to move to the next phase and people may see the economic freedom which belongs to, I think, to a later phase. We need psychological freedom.²⁷

Moeka Ismail (2012) was of a similar opinion, arguing that 'freedom songs will always be relevant because there is still a lot of suffering'.²⁸ From the perspective of Wendy Yapi (2012) also, there is still an important role for freedom songs:

Unfortunately I feel, yes we are in a way liberated but there are still situations that put individuals under some kind of enslavement.... Now we are still experiencing that in our society, different forms of oppression.²⁹

A number of interviewees were critical of the way in which some of the freedom songs were being used. Turok (2012) argued that, while freedom songs had played an important role in uniting people during the struggle against apartheid, some songs were being manipulated by certain leaders and their supporters to denigrate political opponents within their own party:

I think it's an important point, the old freedom songs, which were songs of tradition, which bound everybody together, seem to have been replaced by these rather nasty songs. It's very personal and attacking individuals and actually sloganeering cheap stuff and attacking the personality.³⁰

Similarly, Jaffer (2013), while recognising the relevance of freedom songs today, cautioned about the context of some of the songs:

You need to still have those freedom songs where it is relevant because some are not really relevant, you understand, some are very, very violent, you know, and military, some came from the camp so no I don't think that is relevant. But the ones that are relevant, yes. And I mean it is big in the union movements.

Ronnie Nyuka (2013) felt strongly that there is still an important role for freedom songs today: 'I do see the relevance of the freedom songs. In particular where we see that some of the people who hold strategic positions in government, are not delivering on the things that we have sacrificed our lives for.'³¹ Wendy Yapi (2012) was concerned about the impact of some of the freedom songs on reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa.

We also need to interrogate the place of freedom songs within reconciliation, given that these songs emerged under situations of struggle and turmoil. The use of the terms '*Bhunu*' and '*Boer*' in some of the songs suggests to some commentators that the singers are not committed to reconciliation. Wa Bofelo (2010) states:

It is true that in the freedom songs and slogans, it has become tradition to use 'Boers' as a kind of generic term to refer collectively to people who benefitted from and actively supported the system of Apartheid-Capitalism to the point where people had come to use the terms 'Boers' and 'the System' interchangeably.

He further points out: 'It was therefore not unusual to hear people chant "Pansi namaBhunu" and in the same breath sing songs of praise to Bram Fischer, Joe Slovo.'³²

Many of our interviewees stressed that the use of such terms was directed at the apartheid system rather than at 'white people'. Turok (2012) and Carneson (2012) even mentioned singing such songs themselves. Concern was expressed, though, about the possible impact of such songs on moves towards reconciliation. Moeka Ismail (2012) felt that, in the context of a democratic South Africa, 'if you feel it is going to aggravate certain people it is not necessary to sing the song there are other songs you can also sing to make a point'. Zubeida Jaffer (2013) also felt strongly that the singing of certain songs was unnecessary, arguing: 'I don't think we should sing those songs, unless it is in a play or unless it is in a certain context you know. But not to encourage people to go shoot the farmer'³³ A lone dissenting voice was that of installation artist, Roderick Sauls (2013), who argued that there should be no restrictions on the singing of freedom songs:

It is Malema's constitutional right to sing *Dubul iBhunu*. After all, it's only singing and far worse acts were inflicted on us from slavery and colonialism all the way through to apartheid.³⁴

Our final question to each interviewee was on how they defined freedom. For all the interviewees, the feeling expressed was that what they had fought for, had not yet been achieved. The general agreement was that while political freedom had been achieved, there were still other types of freedom, such as economic freedom, that were yet to be achieved. We end the exhibition, which was on display at the Iziko Slave Lodge in Cape Town at the time of writing, with a quotation from Cecyl Esau (2013):

I think there are different aspects to freedom. It must encompass political, economic, social, individual; all those kinds of dimensions, right. But it's not something necessarily which is attained and forever there; that you need to wage one struggle and that is it. It's as that BC [black consciousness] song says, 'Freedom isn't free'.³⁵

NOTES

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14. Vuyisile Mini, a trade unionist and an ANC member who was recruited into uMkhonto

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15. Turok, B. 2012. In an interview recorded on 15 May, Cape Town.
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