

## Spotlighting young activists in South Africa's liberation struggle

**Pamela Reynolds, *War in Worcester: Youth and the Apartheid State***

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Pamela Reynolds describes her book *War in Worcester* as being about:

... youth fighting for freedom and a state's retaliation ... the young not consenting to the kind of adulthood on offer ... the character of revolt under ... tight surveillance ... negative forms of governance of children ... the violence of the state ... government sanctioned cruelty ... the labor of youth in the work of war ... [and] their reach for ethics despite experiences of pain and betrayal (p i).

In it she relates the stories of 14 men from a township an hour outside of Cape Town who were young leaders and activists in the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s and who are now in their forties and fifties. At the time the youngest

activist was 13, the oldest 24. Most were detained and tortured, some were shot, eight were betrayed. In the intervening time few completed formal or further education, some lost homes, relationships, jobs. Others raised families, built careers and contended with depression and anger. Over the course of the study four died. She met these men during the Truth and Reconciliation hearings in 1996 and met with them over three years formally and informally over a further eleven years.

The resulting book, however, is more than a collection of narratives. Instead it offers a deep and reflective "analysis of what the children did against a system of governance they did not like and how isolated they were in the certainty of confrontation with authority" (p 16). *War in Worcester* is a master class in anthropological method – politically critical, self reflexive and characterised by exceptional, evocative, even lyrical writing. Reynolds weaves her account between "the [Truth and Reconciliation] Commission, the activist, and the State", and does so with "restraint ... [and] a style of bareness" that is both heartbreaking and eye opening (p 18).

In her focus on *the activist*, she aims to fill gaps in our knowledge about the role of youth in the war against the apartheid state. She does so by working with these men to map sites of activism in the township, to mark places of torture, arrest and shootings in the nearby town, and to identify places where members of the apartheid security police lived or worshipped (or still do) and reflect over meals and football games on the violence experienced and the sense made of it then and now. This lengthy engagement results in rich data on their political induction, the nature of their activism, their torture, ill treatment, and suffering at the hands of the apartheid state, along with the complicated relationships they endured with family and loved ones. Most striking is these men's reflection of the morality of their actions. The choices made to protect loved ones by keeping their actions secret so family members would "not have anything to say to the police" (p 112); the strong propensity to forgiveness and empathy even when confronted with compatriots who through coercion or weakness betrayed them ("He didn't think properly ... he couldn't stand the pain. He was still too young" (p 123) and the dilemma of conflict with elders for young men brought up in a culture of age related respect (p 110).

To illustrate this moral consciousness, Reynolds relates a story of two young activists. When accused by a group of mothers whose children had been arrested, of leading their children into danger while avoiding arrest themselves, they responded by walking "into a police station and gave themselves up" (p 144). But she also tells of the young men's reflections on how "we used our status to have access to their hearts and their bodies" (p 153) referring to their sexual conquests at the time.

The violence of *the apartheid state* is thrown into stark relief not only in the heinous accounts of torture, cruelty and callousness but through the ways it was achieved: "a hierarchy of dominance, control, and limitations over the majority of the population" (p 13). Reynolds painstakingly shows how the state "gave the young who joined the struggle inside the country no quarter; indeed, they targeted them" (p 11) and "how the governance of children in one country was separated out" (p 14) with black children being treated "as remainders, rejects, undesirables,

servants, labourers” (p 160). She shows how the state harmed senses of hearing, smell and touch resulting in “limbs lost, hearing diminished, sight gone, concentration shattered” (p 104). She documents the mechanism of harm and evil in small local actions of low level members of the security police, for example, with devastating consequences. She speaks with quiet understatement of the “terrifying predicament” of being terrorised by authority figures “while their parents and other adults who held them in their care were unable to protect them” (p 88) and where “some school principals and teachers protected ... some encouraged them in their revolt ... some collaborated with police in identifying activists (p 89).

The two stories that splinter the mind are of a young activist regaining consciousness in the hospital after being shot “to find that though he was paralysed, his wrists were chained to the hospital bed” (p 146). And another being told by a policeman not to worry about having his leg amputated as a result of being shot since it would grow back again. Reynolds shows how the state targeted youth because they were young and black, not necessarily because of evidence of activism and the multiple ways in which the state sowed mistrust by cultivating informers and encouraging vigilantism.

She also provides careful work on the figures of youth killings, abductions and torture from multiple sources from the official TRC report through to various estimates compiled by NGOs. She shows how almost half of all those killed, tortured or abducted were young people under 24 with nearly a third under 18 years of age. Reynolds points out that the TRC’s record is therefore only “a scrap of cloth” compared to the vast story of youth activism and harm that remains undocumented, with implications for the current neglect of youth who were not regarded as warriors and agent but as victims.

Her criticisms of the TRC include its *modus operandi*: how it operated; the platform it offered those who participated as victim rather than activist; the ways in which it exerted further violence on participants through bureaucracy. For example, needless and repetitive form filling, arbitrary cut off dates and ages to qualify for reparations (claimants had to be 35 or older in 1996 to be eligible for reparations); and non systematic information gathering. She also highlights the TRC’s inane questions such as: “Did gross human rights violations hurt your feelings?” (p 99). Included in this critique are ways in which children under 18 who were harmed during the struggle are collapsed within the broader category of youth aged under 24, despite special protection being afforded to children under 18 by international treaties the world over.

*War in Worcester* is divided into nine sections an introduction, five chapters, two largely narrative chapters which Reynolds calls “Interludes” and seven brief but important appendices. The introduction sets up her key empirical questions and describes her methods. In chapter one she tells of these young activists’ induction into politics a struggle for which they volunteered while still at school and for which they received very little support or direction. It describes involvement through student organisations, through initial participation in mass action, through encouragement by teachers or older siblings, or merely coming to awareness that “a black person is not a member of the public” when trying to visit a public library (p 52).

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In chapter two Reynolds focuses on how and why pain and suffering should be portrayed and reported on. In chapter three she offers a deep analysis of betrayal “as a major tactic of war by the South African government” (p 143), and how “the spread of mistrust helped to break or fracture social ties, to strain bonds and obligations, and to disturb structures of care” (p 130). In chapter four Reynolds picks up the theme of “how the child comes to a political and ethical understanding” (p 15). In chapter five she offers a thorough critique of the TRC having referred to various elements of it throughout the book.

The appendices situate the town of Worcester and the TRC within its geographical and historical context. They précis the findings of the TRC in relation to violence in the Western Cape, the numbers of children and youth killed, tortured, ill treated or abducted, along with the commission’s findings on children and youth and its recommendations in relation to this group.

The book does not (how can it?) do justice to 15 years of collected data. Reynolds has a rich vein of primary sources, of oral history, to which we are not sufficiently exposed. Historians are likely to be left somewhat dissatisfied. At times her consciously literary turns of phrase may be too much and some will notice the absence of African theorists in her analysis. While Arendt, Sebald, Foucault and Levinas are all important contributors to theories of responsibility, power, violence and moral restraint, so too are Mamdani, Mbembe, Fanon and Nyamnjoh who are absent in Reynold’s consideration. But these are small criticisms of a book that provides a compelling analysis of children in war of “how difficult it must have been for them ... in relation to their brief lives thus far” (p 16). *War in Worcester* offers deep insight into the lives of young activists in the South African struggle for democracy, a severe critique of the shortcomings of the TRC’s method of obtaining testimony, adjudicating harm, rendering youth invisible as warriors rather than victims, and offers a scathing indictment of the apartheid state’s disregard for the lives of children. This is a critically important book.

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