

# The Erasure of South African Collective Memory: Building Demolitions and the TRC

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## ABSTRACT

This review article seeks to analyze the effects of post apartheid on the preservation of collective memory of the time period in South Africa. This review discusses the key influences on the path to “reconciliation” in the post-apartheid era, taking into consideration the perspectives of South Africans being given their newfound freedom and a sudden need to erase these memories of restriction under the apartheid system, through the demolition of historical architecture related to the apartheid and through government committees like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (the TRC). The institutionalization of historical erasure and a lack of full justice for the perpetrators of violence, especially in such a short time frame in the aftermath of the apartheid, has lent to the historical censorship of the apartheid. This review analyzes the effects of building demolition and the TRC using past research on the subject of historical erasure and cross-applying these concepts to post-apartheid South Africa. Overall, this review wishes to add to the existing literature on the influence on erasing collective memory in order to perpetuate a narrative that creates a non-existent utopia, far from the reality of the devastation apartheid has left, hindering the ability to go forth into a new future while acknowledging these pains.

## INTRODUCTION

Collective memory is most simply defined as the memory of a shared experience by a group of people that is passed down from generation to generation. This transmission of shared historical events imbeds deeply into the culture of a people, having profound influences on the future of these people. As described by Henry L. Rodiger III, a James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor at Washington University in St. Louis, and Andrew Desoto, an Assistant Director for Policy at the Association for Psychological Science in Washington, D.C., respectively, forgetting collective memories can be institutionalized and intentional– which stands for the erasure of a collective history, despite the darkness of such narratives, and therefore hinders the ability of a society to move forward.

The importance of maintaining a collective memory is evident, referencing Rodiger and Desoto, that it makes up a national identity and describes why a people is at the point that they are in the present and what it means for their future. This concept provides the foundations for understanding history, what is

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chosen to omit is what is chosen to drive the narrative. A common example of this can be seen in the U.S.'s portrayal of the interaction between Native Americans and the Pilgrims, through the myth of the first Thanksgiving, where the depiction of this relationship is positive, however history proves the contrary, and these relationships were built on continued violence and the repeated breaking of treaties by the English towards the Natives. What is chosen to be remembered is essential to what a culture thinks of themselves moving forward, because, using the example, if we supposedly were very good to the Natives, then why attempt to make reparations today?

These ideas can be applied in the context of South Africa, a country that today is only thirty years from the apartheid era, a collective stain on the history of the country that has caused much violence and reinforced classist divisions. The attempts of the country to rebuild itself post-apartheid took measures that have indirectly led to selective remembrance of apartheid, while with good intentions, has had an effect that does take away from the shared history that has forever shaped the country. Organizational bodies, such as the government, took measures such as the demolition of buildings and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (or the TRC) to improve life post-apartheid, but have also overshadowed the pain and remembrance of these events. The building demolitions post-apartheid and the functions of the TRC contributed to the erasure of the collective memory of the apartheid, overall hindering the progression of contemporary South Africa beyond this devastating history.

## **GAP IN LITERATURE**

The current literature on South African apartheid tends to follow a common narrative when discussing the role the TRC played in the rebuilding of South Africa in a positive light. However, this paper intends to contend the current consensus on the TRC's role to act as a critique of the TRC's implementation of policy. By enabling this ignorance of the flaws of the system, systemic issues continue to perpetuate, highlighting the importance of this research. The gap that this paper seeks to address is to analyze the TRC's policies of building demolition and amnesty on the erasure of collective memory, filling the literature with a more nuanced analysis of the influence of the TRC on South Africa today, rather than the picture perfect perspective offered by much studies on post-apartheid South Africa.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

South Africa, established in 1652 as a Dutch colony and later taken over by the British in 1806, was a state of division and white minority rule beginning in 1910. While there was a majority of indigenous South Africans, the white South Africans, although making up around 20% of the population, maintained themselves in power. This disproportionate rule was institutionalized in 1948 with the creation of the apartheid rule.

In the South African election of 1948, the nationalist party, made up of South Africans of Dutch descent, also referred to as Afrikaners, had won by promoting Afrikaner nationalism, the idea of segregating and

limiting the rights of the native South African people. However, Afrikaner nationalism was a long-standing ideology that gained traction partly due to resentment toward British rule and the economic instability post-WWII. Once elected, the nationalist party implemented racial policies, meant to suppress the natural rights of native South Africans.

The nationalist party was led by Daniel Malan, a former pastor for the Dutch Reformed Church. Along with Malan, Hendrik Verwoerd, an Afrikaner who continued the state of apartheid, believed that the apartheid would bring unity to Africa. The state of apartheid brought policies such as the Bantu Homeland Citizenship Act, which forcibly resettled over 3 million Black South Africans into areas with limited resources, employment, and political representation.

By the 1940s, the African National Congress, or the ANC, a political party in South Africa, fundamentally worked to change the country's history. They participated in protests with campaigns of civil disobedience, led by Nelson Mandela, a prominent activist for civil rights. The ANC's goal at that time was to promote more direct military action against apartheid, and achieve more than the peace protests could provide. A turning point in the apartheid was the Sharpeville massacre, a violent representation of injustice where 69 peaceful protesters were killed outside the Sharpeville police station. From 1963-64, the Rivonia trial took place, also known as the trial that changed South Africa. Mandela and 9 other ANC members were sentenced to life imprisonment, on account of quote unquote "two hundred and twenty one acts of sabotage and conspiring to overthrow the state" This trial acted as a final manifestation of the government's prejudice against the ANC's resistance, causing Nelson Mandela to present one of his most famous speeches "I am prepared to die".

F.W. de Klerk replaced P.W. Botha, former president and prime minister of South Africa who was a staunch defender and enabler of apartheid, in 1989 and worked with Mandela secretly with the help of prison guards to end the apartheid era. De Klerk's presidency was the antithesis to Botha's, working to dismantle the apartheid system as a white man in power rather than continuing the cycle of racial division.

Under de Klerk, that same year public facilities were desegregated and many ANC activists were freed. The following year, the ANC ban was lifted. Namibia became an independent state, after being under apartheid South African rule since 1915, and Nelson Mandela was finally released after 27 years in Robben Island Prison in 1990. Klerk and Mandela worked to repeal the last of the apartheid laws, and international sanctions were lifted on the country. That year, sanctions were lifted by President F.W. de Klerk, who proposed to end the apartheid system that had been implemented since 1948. On April 27, 1994, Black South Africans finally gained the right to vote in elections for the first time after decades of white rule. A couple of days later, Mandela was elected president of South Africa. Finally, South Africa returned to the UN General Assembly after 20 years.

## **BUILDING DEMOLITION**

The erasure of the memory of South African apartheid occurred through building demolitions. To understand why the demolition of buildings holds such a great impact on the collective memory of the

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apartheid, we must understand what makes these buildings significant. According to Professor Crain Soudien at The University of Cape Town, the apartheid system brought forth segregated schools, with vastly different resources and curriculum [Soudien 2016]. This resource gap was extremely prejudiced towards Native South Africans. As highlighted by Professor Mokubung Nkomo of the University of Pretoria. These segregated schools were created for the sole purpose of “ensuring the subordinate position of Africans in the South African social and political hierarchy” or in other words assimilating the South African people to the culture of the governing Afrikaners [Nkomo 1981]. Segregated schools, though no longer in use after the end of the apartheid in 1993, act as a symbol for the government's brutal methods to regress the education of certain racial groups. Architectural historian at the University of California, Berkeley, Annmarie Adams, remarks that the destruction of historical buildings “served as a collective way of forgetting violent pasts” [Adams et. al. 2017]. This was exactly what the government was trying to do. By removing the physical entity that represents the brutalities of the past, the government is able to control the narratives behind its history.

An example of this was the destruction of Modderdam settlements in the 1970s, during the Anti Apartheid Movements. Modderdam was a black settlement in Cape Town, many black South Africans live in these settlements, due to the Bantu Homeland Citizenship Act of 1970, which forcibly removed more than 3 million black South Africans, into “black homelands” [Silk 1976]. Located outside these settlements was the Modderdam High school, a racially segregated school during the apartheid, only teaching the White youth of the country. A firsthand account by the National Union of South African Students, described the bulldozing as “an atmosphere for distilled horror- homes wretched apart by the front end loader” [NUSAS 1977]. By removing the physical symbols of history, we are inadvertently removing the cultural memory of the violent event. This stops people from being able to confront and understand the tragedy of the past in order to then grow from it in the future. The idea that buildings hold significant on communities, even when they are no longer in use, isn't just unique to South Africa.

“In Erasing History” by Jason Stanley, Stanley argues that this erasure is a political tactic, to threaten the public understanding of such tragedies. By removing memorialized spaces, history is able to be used as a weapon to cover up injustices, and follow set agendas. [Stanley 2024]. Though most can argue that removing evidence of apartheid in the environment causes the memory of apartheid to be erased, some could argue that the demolition of buildings is a necessary task to allow for the community to move past the haunting events of the past, acting as a symbol for the dismantling of these apartheid systems. As argued in *Native Nostalgia*, By Jacob S. T. Dlamini the Director of African Studies at Princeton University “South African reconciliation was never merely about burying the past, it was about building a future” [Dlamini 2010]. In Dlamini's book, he challenges the common idea that native South Africans do not have any happy memories under the apartheid system. Though this could be said by a select minority of people, it is no secret that the South African apartheid had devastating effects for thousands of families, and has left an imprint on the country years later, settlements such as Modderdam should be preserved, to ensure that their memory is memorialized, and respected, rather than covered up.

## **THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION**

Though the original purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was to promote healing post apartheid, the erasure of the South African apartheid's memory occurred through the amnesty provision. We must step back and understand how the TRC came to be, and how its original purpose was inherently flawed before any mishandling occurred. The TRC was one of many campaigns implemented by president Nelson Mandela in 1995 to facilitate conflict resolution, and to act as a safe haven for the oppressed to share their stories.

The intention of the TRC was to heal communities by allowing stories to be shared and heard, its provision to provide amnesty allowed anyone to confess to crimes and receive pardons. The idea of this pardon was to "promote reconciliation"[Mandela 95], though the inherent effect of dismissing crimes, was overlooking justice. It had a contradictory effect, instead of healing communities, it created a rift between individuals being pardoned and the victims. Amnesty was often given to political leaders such as Adrian Vlok, the Minister of Law and Order in South Africa from 1986 to 1991. Vlok spearheaded many of the violent acts done during the apartheid, such as the church bombings of Khotso House in 1988, and the bomb scares during the cinematic screening of "Cry Freedom" about Steve Biko's death. This clearly highlighted the role he played during the apartheid. As noted by SHAO, the largest independent history education and research institute in South Africa, Adrian Vlok applied for amnesty, admitting his role in the bombings. He was granted full immunity, even going as far as washing the feet of the anti-apartheid member, Frank Chikane, as a show of good faith. This event emphasizes the TRC's priority of forgiveness over justice. Donald Wood, an anti apartheid activist and journalist, remarked that the "Cry Freedom Event shows that they're scared of the truth. They dare not let South Africans see a true story." [Woods 1988], which effectively sums up the issue we are facing today, where the man who promoted apartheid is being absolved of his crimes by the very committee that was created to unify and bring justice to victims.

How can justice be served when truth is valued over consequence? By absolving people such as Adrian Vlok, the TRC was inadvertently minimizing the magnitude of the apartheid and the resistance against it. Though The TRC was also supposed to be an outlet for people to share their struggles safely, many were undermined, according to members of the non profit Foundation for Human Rights (FHR). One of the members said "It is an undeniable fact that there have been virtually no investigations or prosecutions of the TRC cases since the TRC process concluded" [FHR 2025]. This showed that the TRC had a more of a negative impact than a positive one.

The TRC was dissolved in 2003, having unintentionally undermined survivors and rewarded oppressors instead. However, we cannot overlook the argument that the TRC played a crucial role in avoiding a civil war. According to general Major Timothy M. Bairstow from the U.S. Marine Corps, after the TRC was dissolved, citizens felt that the Anti Apartheid Movements provided "some measure of reconciliation a decade after the transition" [Bairstow 2009]. This argument is often followed by the idea that amnesty provisions allowed for people to move forward from the tragedies of the past. Although this argument is somewhat compelling, when examining the impact the TRC had, from a psychological perspective, Dan J. Stein, the Chairman of Psychology at the University of Cape Town found that " Compared to those with a positive experience of testifying, individuals with a negative experience (i.e., the TRC did not spend

enough time, listen to them, and treated them with less respect) scored significantly higher on distress and anger” [Stein et al. 2008]. Showing that the perceived “reconciliation” wasn't apparent for all citizens.

By zooming out and looking at surrounding genocides around the world, we can see a clear contrast between their systems of reconciliation. For example, in Chile, a similar dictatorship had ended ,bringing forth the Chilean Reconciliation Commission. Chile took a different approach to try and heal the country, according to Eric Brahm a Professor of Political Science at the University of Nevada “The Chilean Supreme Court ruling in 1999, that the 1978 amnesty did not apply to disappearances because they were an ongoing crime”. Showing that they had also tried to implement an amnesty provision which was met with backlash by the people.

## **PRESENT DAY**

The erasure of memory continues to shape the country today which is visible in continued government corruption. From 2009 till 2018 Jacob Zuma served as the fourth South African president before being leveled with charges of corruption in 2018, the accusations brought against him being related to fraud and money laundering. In his case, he refused to appear before a judicial commission to be tried for his crimes. The case is still ongoing, but justice continues to be delayed for the South African people for the issues under Zuma’s presidency, much similar to the TRC’s inability to deal out justice.

The South African government’s continued enabling of political corruption through a lack of justice is just a reflection of the effects of the TRC in the apartheid era. The TRC’s framework is representative of one of the first “justice” systems post-apartheid and therefore its effects still are easily seen today, as seen with Zuma. Although avoiding conflict, had the TRC focused more on dealing out justice against the perpetrators of apartheid, the wounds of the nation, though briefly reopened, would have properly healed with propriety rather than being sloppily bandaged up leading to a shaky foundation of a nation post-apartheid.

The cycle continues to repeat, and due to the lack of due process of the law of the South African government, corruption persists, and the people fail to remember the reasons of which people were tried in the first place, against those in agency against the overall welfare of the South African people.

While this paper does provide an essential discussion on the effects of post-apartheid measures on the collective memory of South Africa, there are some acknowledgeable limitations in the paper. Due to the failures of the TRC and the South African government to combat it, much of the literature is speculative on the actual effects of the demolition of buildings and amnesty in the post-apartheid era. Furthermore, since apartheid has been disbanded for under 50 years, anything researching the influence of the collective memory on apartheid does not have enough backing to actually be able to have a proper analysis on how collective memory is influenced as the end was fairly recent. Despite these limitations, the validity in this paper relies on past analysis on the influences of similar institutions on collective memory in other countries, drawing research that can be cross-applied to South Africa.

Selective memories of the events of apartheid lend to a much weaker citizenry, easily subject to abuse by the government, which cannot take their pain from their history and use that knowledge to rise up and get the justice that they deserve. The TRC provided an unsatisfactory way of concluding the issues, by not equating the person behind the crime. Further, the demolition of buildings fosters an ignorance to not preserving these monuments of time, and how South Africa can move forward. The institutionalization of the erasure of collective memory has lent to the devolution of culture and community and the minimization of injustice. South Africa today is just a shadow of what it would be, without its history, the country can only move on, but never *forward*.

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