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The Story of Cape Town's Two Marches

Personal Reflections on Going Home

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March 30 1960: 30,000 Africans march on Cape Town from the African townships on the outskirts of the city, a distance of over eight miles. They head for Parliament but detour to the Police headquarters at Caledonian Square when they hear that the army has surrounded it. It is a call to end the pass laws, to end apartheid. This march took place nine days after the notorious Sharpeville massacre.

September 13, 1989: 30,000 South Africans of all races march on Cape Town, from St. George's Cathedral to the Cape Town Parade, a Peace March. It is a call to end the unbridled state violence, to end apartheid.

The first contributed to my leaving South Africa. The second contributed to ability to return to the country I never ceased to consider home.

It is early March 2011 and I am back in Cape Town, back "home", for three months to work on the book I am writing about the confluence of forces that demolished apartheid. Day by day I get to know the city I grew up in, the city I left in my early twenties. With no specific agenda than to absorb post-apartheid Cape Town, I do something different each day. A few days after I arrive, I enter the newly opened exhibition space in the crypt of St. George's Cathedral, the Cathedral of Arch-Bishop Desmond Tutu.

I stop before a floor to ceiling blown up photograph that captures the 1989 march. At the head are religious leaders, Christian and Muslim, providing gravitas to the event. There are other prominent leaders that represent a swath across South Africa's political and economic life– trade union, the Mayor of Cape Town, business leaders, community leaders, academics. The march was sparked by the recent killing of 23 people in Cape Town's black segregated townships in the aftermath of yet another violent response by the South African police to the resistance that was at its height throughout the country.

I am moved, emotions wrenching as I stare into the dense mass of thousands upon thousands of Capetonians, black, white, men, women, young, old, in business suits with ties, in shirt sleeves and t-shirts, serious faces, smiling faces, somber faces, glowing faces Christians, Muslims, Jews, non-believers. Faces of a people who know they are winning although they could not know that just five months later Nelson Mandela would be released. The ANC would be unbanned and the stage set for democratic elections.

As I stare the memory of another march numbering 30,000, twenty-nine years earlier, flashes into my mind when country-wide anti-pass protests were organized in African townships all over South Africa. It was when, on March 21 1960 69 peaceful demonstrators were killed in what has become known as the Sharpville Massacre. Nine days later 30,000 protestors set off from the African townships

on the edge of the city for an eight mile silent march into the center of Cape Town.

The pass laws forced all Africans living in urban areas to carry pass books in the land of their birth to prove that they had permits to be there. These laws defined every movement and aspect of their lives. Relegating them to no more than units of labor, they provided a draconian means of controlling and directing a cheap—*very* cheap—labor force. The pass laws were one of the main pillars of apartheid and the fuel for a vibrant South African economy. In 1952, four years after the apartheid government came to power, the laws were extended to include all male Africans over the age of 18 regardless of whether they lived in the towns or the rural areas; four years later African women were lassoed into the law.

The call went out: Leave your passes at home, present yourself to your local police station and be arrested. Township after African township throughout South Africa responded. In Sharpeville, calm and cheerful protesters sent jitters down the spines of the skittish police, young and inexperienced. They fired wildly into the crowd. Most of the victims were shot in the back while trying to flee, including ten children, some on the backs of their mothers. The killings caused reverberations around the world, bringing with it unprecedented shock and horror at the extent of the brutality of the apartheid regime, which the world had largely managed to tolerate and ignore. The Johannesburg stock exchange went into a tail spin to be saved by a consortium of US banks.

The protests had been confined to the areas proscribed for Africans. Such demonstrations could be contained by the local police. Not so Cape Town. The specter of 30,000 Africans walking deliberately and silently out of the townships of Nyanga, Langa and Gugulethu scared the bejeebies out of the white government.

At the head was Philip Kgosana, looking even younger than his twenty-three years. Kgosana, one of the few Africans admitted to the University of Cape Town lived in the all-male sub-standard barracks

built for grossly underpaid 'migrants' (foreigners in their own country) as 'temporary' (they were in fact permanent) housing whose wives and children were not permitted to accompany them. Becoming steeped in their stories of suffering and witnessing their living conditions, Kgosana dropped out of university to work as a political activist.

At the head of 30,000 strikers crammed into the narrow streets of Cape Town, Kgosana demanded a meeting with the Minister of Justice to present their demands. The police spokesman agreed to a meeting later that afternoon on condition that Kgosana tell the marchers to return home. Fearful that the police would begin to fire and cause life-threatening havoc he knew he had no choice but to ask the protestors to turn around and retrace their steps.

When Kgosana arrived at the designated time, it was not the Minister of Justice who was waiting for him but police reinforcements. He was arrested. After nine months in jail he was released on bail. He fled his country and went into exile. (He is now, like many exiles, back home.)

I was in my last year of high school the day of the march. Our school went into virtual lock down. All five hundred students were instructed to go to the auditorium where we listened as the ominous words of the principal explained the threat outside. Fear rippled through the boys and girls sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor. I caught it full force. My father's law practice, in keeping with his left politics, was not in the center of the town where most white lawyers attended the needs of white clients, but in Athlone, a so-called 'Coloured' area, where he and the young black lawyers he mentored attended the legal needs of a black community. I feared for his safety.

Later my mother, sister and I waited anxiously for his return. I was struck by my father's uncommonly quick and light step, lacking any of his usual end-of-day draggy tiredness. He was positively glowing. No sooner had the news of the march spread to him in his law

office, than he was in his car driving to a vantage point to view the extraordinary phenomenon.

"*This is the beginning of the end!*" he announced at the dinner table. "*The government cannot deny what has happened today. The passes have to go.*" Unlike my principal, my father saw no threat. What he saw was a disciplined and a determined mass of African workers taking up the struggle, flexing their collective muscle to protest the scurrilous pass system, warning the oppressive ruling class that they were ready to take on the revolution. The workers had risen. There could be no turning back. Or so, on that day, he fervently believed.

He underestimated the might of the apartheid machine.

A State of Emergency was declared that afternoon, presaging a severe clamp-down on political activism and activists for decades to come. In short succession the Unlawful Organizations Act was passed, which declared the African National Congress and the Pan Africanist Congress illegal; the Terrorism Act was passed, which allowed for indefinite detention without trial; the Communism Act was more stringently enforced. Thousands fled into exile. Thousands were arrested and tried, meted out harsh sentences; or detained without trial and often tortured. Others were banned and/or placed under house arrest. The tyrannical state was bent on crushing any resistance and for a while it succeeded. For the next eight or nine years, the revolution was in the doldrums and South Africa experienced a hiatus in open political activity.

I recently found online black and white white grainy photographs of the 1960 march that were banned from publication in South Africa at the time. African men, I discern no women, packed tight as they walk silently into the center of the city to add their protest to the anti-pass campaign. Looking at the power captured in these photos and reflecting on what followed to crush it I am reminded why I am not a face in the crowd in the photos of the 1989 march. For me as a young white South African caught in these hiatus years, I

could no longer tolerate the brutality of the South African regime, nor could I continue to live under perpetual privilege. I could see no alternative but to leave.

Twenty-nine and a half years would separate the two marches and almost thirty years before the combination of forces—the end of Portuguese colonialism, heightened armed struggle, intensification of internal resistance, and international success in isolating the apartheid regime—would render the walls of apartheid so porous they would topple down. By the time the pass laws had been repealed four years earlier in 1986, 20 million Africans had been arrested and charged, and then either imprisoned, fined or 'deported' to the so-called Bantustans, the cornerstone of apartheid policy which assigned 13 percent of the most non-arable territory of South Africa as ethnically-based "homelands" for the 80 percent African majority.

It was only after I emigrated to the United States in 1967, that another march caught my imagination and attention. On August 9, 1956 African women marched on Pretoria, the seat of the apartheid government, to protest the expansion of the pass laws to include African women. Their call to the Prime Minister Strijdom became a rallying cry beyond South Africa: "Now you have touched the women, Strijdom! *You have struck a rock!*

As a new feminist, involved in the vibrant women's movement, I could appreciate how the march was a catalyst for challenging the prevailing stereotype in South Africa—and beyond—that women were tied to their families and disinterested in politics. It sparked my interest and I began to learn about the strong role of women throughout the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, a role that became a source of inspiration to me and to others activists in the solidarity movement in the US.

The march, numbering up to 20,000, brought women from all over the country from all backgrounds. While the majority was Afri-

can, the only one of apartheid four designated racial categories to be affected by the pass laws, the protest included a significant number of whites, Coloureds and Indians, a diversity reflected in the leadership. The marchers, resolute and dignified, gathered in front of the Union buildings, the seat of the South African government administration. When the Prime Minister refused to meet with the leaders, they placed a petition with over 100,000 signatures at his office. A particularly moving moment was when the women stood for half an hour in perfect silence.

As successful as the event was at rallying so many South African women it failed to stop the extension of the law to include African women.

After leaving the exhibition in St. George's crypt I am invited to have lunch with the Cathedral's Sub-Dean Fr. Terry Lester, Lynette Maart, organizer of the exhibition and Josette Cole, a researcher focusing on the current struggles of the informal settlements. They are committed to educating the next generation about what happened under apartheid and about the role St. George's Cathedral played in supporting the resistance, as Maart states it, "to excavate the social history of the Cathedral, using its role in the struggle against apartheid as a lens through which to view current social justice issues." As I listen I reflect on the words of Amilcar Cabral: "When our revolution is over, that is when our struggle will really begin."

They talk about how Cape Town is being transformed into a city for foreigners, for tourists to enjoy.

They talk about resources being poured into making the centre of Cape Town safe and beautiful, a magnet for the privileged.

They talk about lack of access to resources for those who continue to live in dire conditions on the Cape Flats which apartheid had relegated to the so-called Coloured and African people.

They talk about how those continuing to live in these inhospitable outskirts of the city are trapped there, given Cape Town's exorbitantly high property rates.

They talk about iron shacks, and crowded tiny brick houses, and lack of water and lack of electricity; of inferior education.

They talk with concern about what they see as a the lack of political will on the part of the government to forge change, so that for too many what they had marched for, what people by their thosands had died for is still in the realm of dreams.

What I hear too is that what was learned in resisting apartheid continues to fuel protest for real transformation.

I know, and knew, that the South Africa I would return to, would be a complicated and often distressing place. Without living here, without being engaged is specific aspects of working for change, can I, I wonder, regard South Africa as home?

'Home', imbued as it is with emotion and feelings and personal perspective, is a fluid and often mercurial concept. While it can be attached to more than one place and space, for me Cape Town, the city of my birth still resonates as "home." Or as African friends would say, "home home."

Meanwhile, as the days of my visit stretch forward, I continue to be captivated by the history of struggle in South Africa, to be inspired by the tenacity of those who lived through it and won and by those who continue as activists to struggle against continued inequalities, a new form of privilege and a growing injustice. I am moved in a way that seems only possible because I was born there. Being raised and socialized in Cape Town and South Africa became intrinsic to who I would become, as part of me as genetic makeup.

I cannot give it up or give up on it.