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The Shooting at Uitenhage, South Africa, 1985: The Context and Interpretation of Violence

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# the shooting at Uitenhage, South Africa, 1985: the context and interpretation of violence

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## Epigraph

Creon: Now tell me, in as few words as you can,  
Did you know the order forbidding such an act?  
Antigone: I knew it, naturally. It was plain enough.  
Creon: And yet you dared to contravene it?  
Antigone: Yes.

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

On Thursday, 21 March 1985, members of the South African Police opened fire on a crowd of people on Maduna Road between Uitenhage and Langa in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Many of those shot had been going to a funeral.<sup>1</sup> At least 20 people were killed<sup>2</sup> and several more injured on the road between Langa, one of the Black townships associated with Uitenhage in the Eastern Cape, and the White residential area of Uitenhage. The shooting occurred on Sharpeville Day, a day of remembrance for a similar shooting in 1961 that has come to be a major symbol of state violence in recent South African history. The funeral had been banned by the government—in fact, at the time, it was not possible both to bury the dead and to honor the law. Like Antigone in Sophocles' tragedy, several of the people who were shot had chosen to bury the dead in defiance of the edict. The Uitenhage shooting could easily have become a major national symbol of military excess in the pursuit of political repression. Locally, it has in part usurped Sharpeville Day, and March 21 is sometimes commemorated as "Langa Day" in the Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage area of the Eastern Cape. It is a classic of South African political tragedy.<sup>3</sup>

Several hours after the event, the Minister of Law and Order, Louis Le Grange, made a statement in Parliament about the shooting. The Minister claimed that his statement provided an authoritative version of events that morning and that the behavior of the crowd had justified the police action. Within hours it was discovered that the Minister's statement had only a tenuous connection to what had actually happened. Several extraparliamentary political and re-

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*This article examines the fatal shooting by the South African Police of 20 people among a small crowd in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. It explores some cultural characteristics of violence as a social process and social form. In this incident, the intentions of the actors were not simply confrontational, yet the event had the shape of other "classic" confrontations in South African history. Since direct political chains of command were not functioning at the time, explanation is sought in terms of the actors' cultural representations of "community," "self," and "the state," rather than in terms of instrumental action within a formal political system. Here, social power is presented as the ability to impose an interpretation among competing interpretations after the occurrence of violence, rather than as the ability to cause violence as the instrument of policy or as the intended consequence of intentional social action. [South African politics, violence, explanation in the social sciences, political culture, cultural representations, conflict]*

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ligious organizations began to collect information on the events. Journalists from all over South Africa and the world reported various versions of the stories that emerged. As a consequence, the story of Uitenhage is a complex one, told by many people from many perspectives.

Here, I offer an interpretation of a lethal encounter between a contingent of police and some people marching along a road. In doing so I try to go beyond a mere explanation of violence to reveal the meanings given to violence as it unfolds.<sup>4</sup> Conventionally, to explain an episode of violence is simply to show that it is a necessary consequence of events and structures that have preceded it. Recent attempts to account for violence in this way, such as those of James C. Scott (1976, 1987) and Michael Taussig (1984, 1986), among others, provide historically and culturally nuanced accounts of violent events, yet remain conventional in that they present violence as instrumental to the process of domination, hegemony, and resistance. The focus of their concern is not the event and process of violence itself, but rather the political structures and processes in which it is embedded, either as acts of coercion or acts of resistance. I argue here, on the contrary, that at least some episodes of violence cannot be successfully understood in this way. Events, violent ones in particular, are often characterized by indeterminacy (Moore 1987:729), which may render causal and normative accounts of them inadequate. Violence itself, raw and unthought, is meaningless. Whether or not violence is taken to be coercive, or the extent to which it can be seen as resistance, depends on the complex interplay of points of view, modes and metaphors of power and legitimation, and the narratives in which it is subsequently cast. To understand the event of violence—that is, to go beyond an account of the structures and concepts that provide its context and make it more or less likely to happen—we must look at how violence itself comes to constitute social forms and meanings, and at how it comes into being as a peculiar kind of social interaction. In doing this, I take the view that violence of the sort I examine here is not just the consequence of politics but is integral to the social processes that generate the symbols and values that provision the political process. Mine is an interpretive account.

The raw fact of violence in South Africa, of course, does not require interpretation to see: the injustices, the sense of outrage and violation, the loss and the hurt are, as Antigone says in the epigraph, “plain enough.” The violence at Uitenhage was only one among many similar episodes in a broader context of endemic violence. But it is precisely the background of violence that throws this event into high relief. Hundreds of similar episodes of crowds confronted by police contingents could have resulted in massacres but did not.<sup>5</sup> Others did result in violence, but on a lesser scale. The Uitenhage shooting, however, became a political symbol. Since it happened during what now appears, in retrospect, to have been a peak of violent protest against the state, and since it came to prominence before the imposition of the succession of states of emergency that remain in force today (early 1990), the shooting at Uitenhage (or Langa) is remembered by most South Africans. Even so, it is probably not seen as a turning point, however, nor has it come to have the national significance that memorial days such as Sharpeville Day or Soweto Day still have. Yet for multiple audiences—local, national, Black, White, party-political or politically naive—the event did not “just happen”: it created meaning. It achieved a salience in the political process that people continued to reflect upon and to elaborate in narratives and reenactments, in court cases and demands for restitution, in monuments and myths and government decrees. While the fact of death is itself banal, the interpretation of specific deaths often gives other lives their meaning.

The records relating to the shooting are sufficiently rich to permit a nuanced interpretive understanding that reveals a multiplicity of perspectives. The government seems to have recognized immediately that the event had serious political implications and hastened to provide an authoritative account that would successfully repress all alternative accounts. According to Asad (1979:621), this is precisely what we would expect, since authoritarian ideologies such as that of the South African government seek “continually to pre-empt the space of radically opposed utterances and so to prevent them from being uttered.” Eventually, however, an offi-

cial government commission of inquiry was empowered to investigate the matter. Only one person was appointed to the commission, Justice D. D. V. Kannemeyer, who interviewed selected survivors and witnesses of the shooting as well as police who had been involved and some of their superior officers. His "Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Incident which Occurred on 21 March 1985 at Uitenhage" (Kannemeyer 1985) was delivered to the office of the state president on 4 June 1985. By agreeing to pay compensation to the injured and the families of the dead, the government admitted—some two years after the event and without calling attention to the fact—that the details of the Commission's findings were correct. However, on 20 July 1985 a state of emergency was imposed on 36 magisterial districts, including the Uitenhage/Port Elizabeth area in the Eastern Cape.<sup>6</sup>

## what happened?

However carefully we go about attempting to construct a factual narrative of what happened, we encounter again and again conflicting accounts and inconclusive versions. There are, however, some facts about the initial state of things on the morning of 21 March, and we will begin with these.

On the day of 21 March, the police had been notified of the possibility of increased "unrest" on Sharpeville Day and had prepared for it. They went on patrol at 5:45 a.m. in several armored personnel carriers (known as "Casspirs"). The police were armed with shotguns, R1 rifles, and 9mm. sidearms.<sup>7</sup> The two Casspirs involved in the shooting were commanded by a Lieutenant Fouché and a Warrant Officer Pentz. At the beginning of their patrol, Lt. Fouché went to Langa while Warrant Officer Pentz took his patrol to Kwa Nobuhle on the other side of Uitenhage. In addition to these Casspirs, there were two others, commanded by a Warrant Officer Bam from Port Elizabeth, a Sergeant Le Roux, and a Sergeant Lekuba, as well as a troop carrier under the command of Sergeant Makgobokoane.

Kwa Nobuhle and Langa, the two Black townships associated with the White group area of Uitenhage, lie on opposite sides of it and are separated by a distance of ten kilometers. They are connected by Maduna Road, which passes through Uitenhage and over the Swartkops River. When public transport is operating normally—and it was not on the day of 21 March 1985—the intersection of Maduna Road with a side street, an intersection known as "Maduna Square," is the normal terminus of the bus service into Uitenhage and Kwa Nobuhle. This is where the crowd first came together that morning.

After patrolling Langa until about 8:00 a.m., and finding it quiet, Lt. Fouché went on to Kwa Nobuhle. About an hour later, Sgt. Lekuba noticed that a crowd had begun to assemble at Maduna Square. It seemed to him to be led by a "Rastafarian," who directed the crowd to part so that Lekuba's Casspir could proceed along Maduna Road. Lekuba apparently attempted to radio this information to his headquarters, although he would say later that his radio had not been functioning. He drove into a side road farther along Maduna Road and parked his vehicle. In the meantime, Fouché had joined Pentz in Kwa Nobuhle. Pentz then drove into the White residential area to pick up a police officer who had not been a part of the original contingent. There is no public record of whether, or with what, this officer might have been armed, since he had not joined the patrol at the station. After this, Pentz drove back to Langa down 23rd Street and came upon the crowd that Sgt. Lekuba had already seen. At this point the accounts begin to diverge and, frequently, to conflict.

Pentz claimed that he stopped his Casspir and asked the crowd in Afrikaans why they were there. A man whom Pentz (or someone—the evidence is not clear on this point) called a "Rastafarian" answered him in Afrikaans—but in words recalling Antigone's challenge to the unjust decree of Creon, King of Thebes, in Sophocles' tragic dramatic sequel to *Oedipus Rex*: "*Ons gaan begrafnis toe*" ("We are going to the funeral"). When Pentz told him that funerals had

been banned, the Rastafarian replied, “*Ek weet dit. . . . [J]ulle sal ons nie keer vandag nie*” (“I know that. . . . You will not stop us today”) (Kannemeyer 1985:19). The crowd then began to walk along Maduna Road toward Kwa Nobuhle and Uitenhage. The accounts collected by the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) monitoring committee,<sup>8</sup> however, insist that the police had arrived in 24th Square (in Langa) in a Casspir soon after people started assembling (to attend the funeral) and had prevented them from boarding vehicles there. This was said to have been the immediate cause for the group to begin walking to the cemetery by way of Uitenhage’s White residential area (*The Argus* [Cape Town] 26 March 1985).

There was also considerable confusion over whether or not the funerals of several young men who had been killed by earlier police action would be held on that day. According to evidence presented in the Commission report and the news media at the time, Captain Goosen of the Security Police had sought an order from the Chief Magistrate, M. H. Steyn, banning funerals on weekends. The order was issued under the Internal Security Act and banned all funerals on Saturdays, Sundays, Mondays and public holidays; it was aimed at limiting popular participation in funerals because the police feared they would become foci for political organization. Sometime later, Captain Goosen realized that Thursday, 21 March, was Sharpeville Day and that funerals held on that day were likely to provoke “unrest.” In response, the Uitenhage magistrate, M. J. Groenewald, issued an order banning all funerals except on Sundays (*The Argus* 28 March 1985; Kannemeyer 1985:29). Both orders were legally in force at the same time, thus simultaneously banning funerals on Sundays and funerals except on Sundays. The Kannemeyer report noted that this situation “could only lead to a sense of frustration and resentment among the residents of the townships” (Kannemeyer 1985:28). On the previous day (20 March), the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC)<sup>9</sup> had broadcast the order banning “all funerals” (this was a new wording by the SABC that apparently contradicted the magistrates’ wording), and measures had been taken to make this known in the townships, where orders were broadcast by loud-hailers from police Casspirs in both official languages (English and Afrikaans) and in Xhosa.<sup>10</sup> Under the circumstances, residents of the townships apparently decided to hold the funerals on Thursday, Sharpeville Day. No matter what they did the funerals would be illegal, and the dead had to be buried.

Other aspects of the events preceding the shooting surely contributed to dark forebodings of disquiet. The Kannemeyer Commission report states that one round of R1 ammunition<sup>11</sup> had been fired that day prior to the massacre (Kannemeyer 1985:74). The Commission report does not attempt to explain why one round of lethal ammunition should have been fired in a place that the police described in their evidence before Justice Kannemeyer as having been “peaceful.” If this indicates a pattern of random shooting from police vehicles, as suggested by much evidence in the nonofficial accounts, then even by the official account there is little reason to believe that people would stand close enough to a police vehicle to hear correctly orders given in several languages, orders contradicting other orders given in newspapers and by the SABC. The Kannemeyer Commission report, however, seems to find this fact unremarkable.

All accounts agree that the procession continued to move along Maduna Road. Pentz claimed that he preceded it along the road and stopped by the side of the road some 100 meters beyond Maduna Square. He told the people again that the procession was illegal. The “leader” (the Rastafarian) responded with a gesture that Pentz “understood to be a coarse indication that he and his men should leave” (Kannemeyer 1985:19–20). The crowd by now had grown to “about 1000,” in Pentz’s estimation. He had radioed to Fouché that his patrol needed assistance and then accelerated along Maduna Road to a rise between the crowd and the White residential area. He would later claim that his Casspir had been stoned on the way. He stopped and was joined by Fouché. The two vehicles then formed a cordon across the road, facing the crowd in a “V” formation. They waited at this point for the crowd to approach. When the crowd was sufficiently near, Fouché and Pentz reported, they ordered the crowd in Afrikaans “to turn

back." An interpreter in Fouché's group translated this into Xhosa, and Fouché and Pentz, so they claimed, augmented their orders with "hand signals." Kannemeyer says that

According to the police evidence, the crowd, now several thousand strong, hesitated at this stage, but the Rastafarian who was leading swore at the police and urged the crowd on, saying that they should not be afraid, as the police were merely trying to frighten them. [Kannemeyer 1985:21]

There are multiple stories about the climax of the event, the instant when the shooting started, and its immediate cause. There are almost as many stories as witnesses; even the dead have a story, one that can be read from what they had and what they left behind, their bodies as they fell. Fouché claimed that when the "leader" was about ten meters from Fouché's Casspir the lieutenant fired his R1 rifle "into the ground next to his foot in the hope of bringing him to his senses" (Kannemeyer 1985:21). There is no evidence that Fouché in fact did fire this cowboy-Western style "warning shot," but even by his own account it did not work: Fouché claimed that the Rastafarian whom he took to be the "leader" did not stop but instead "produced a black notebook and a bottle with a reddish contents from inside his cloak and held these items aloft" (Kannemeyer 1985:21). According to the account given by police to the Commission, a woman then came forward and threw a stone at Pentz's Casspir. Both Pentz and Fouché claimed in their testimony that the crowd had been singing a song about "killing the white people" (Kannemeyer 1985:40–41) in Uitenhage and that when the rock was thrown, Fouché became convinced that he and his men were in serious danger from the crowd. Pentz claimed in testimony that the crowd had been "screaming, dancing and shrieking" (Kannemeyer 1985:18–19). Since he does not understand any Xhosa, he was unable to understand what they were saying. He claimed that he felt there was no doubt he and his men would be killed by the crowd and that he did not believe "there was another way out other than to defend ourselves" (*The Argus* 30 March 1985). By this time one officer was "cowering in fear" on the floor of the Casspir. Fouché said later, "I thought that if something drastic didn't happen we would be in mortal danger." He gave the order to fire. Fouché told the court: "A coloured woman with bare breasts threw a stone at the Casspir. Simultaneously the crowd threw stones. I realised 'here is trouble,' and immediately shouted 'fire' " (*The Argus* 30 March 1985).

In the ensuing pandemonium, the crews of the two Casspirs fired at least 41 rounds of SSG shotgun ammunition ("buckshot"), three rounds of sharp R1 ammunition, and an unrecorded number of 9mm. bullets from their automatic pistols. According to some eyewitness accounts, they also used a machine gun. This claim was dismissed by the Commission as "unreliable." Since no record was kept of the number of 9mm. rounds fired from the automatic pistols, their fire combined with that of the 44 rounds that were accounted for could easily have been enough to sound like machine gun fire. In the official version, Justice Kannemeyer concludes tersely: "In this they were wrong" (Kannemeyer 1985:75).

Many of the general findings as well as the particular details of the court record were challenged by alternative accounts collected by church groups and the Progressive Federal Party's independent investigation. One observer who was involved in collecting these accounts and who also sat in the audience during the Commission's hearings tells of asking one of those who had been present at the shooting to nudge him "whenever the police witnesses lied." He reports that he was nearly jostled off his chair throughout the police testimony (personal communication from a member of the PFP Monitoring Committee, September 1988, Grahams-town). In his report to Parliament on the incident, Louis Le Grange claimed that the crowd had been only five meters from the vehicles, while the police interviewed by the Commission claimed the distance had been ten meters. The physical evidence of clothing and other objects left on the roadway by the fleeing crowd shows a minimum distance of at least 18 meters from the Casspirs. Disputing the police account, Errol K. Moorcroft, Member of Parliament for the PFP (Albany), related to the press that he had paced off a distance of 30 meters from where Pentz and Fouché claimed their vehicles had been parked across the road to where blood had stained the surface of the road. The Commission, however, accepted the police testimony that

the crowd had been only 10 meters from their Casspirs. We might reasonably take the maximum and minimum dimensions to be the limits of a range in which the police in the Casspirs opened fire. Given the lethal nature of their ammunition, the difference between 10 and 30 meters is relevant only to the veracity of the police report, which contradicted the physical evidence at the scene.

In any case, Lt. Fouché was not able to say conclusively whether he had opened fire before or after stones had been thrown. He was also not able to say why there were no stones within 18 meters of the Casspirs or why no stones had landed in or on the Casspirs (which have open roofs) after the incident. Under cross-examination, Fouché initially suggested that the stones might have "bounced off" his Casspir, but this theory was rejected by the Commission. He later admitted that the Casspirs had not been under attack by stoning. When the Minister of Law and Order made his initial statement in Parliament at approximately 5:00 p.m. that afternoon, he alleged that the "police were suddenly surrounded and pelted with stones, sticks and other missiles including petrol bombs" (South African Government 1985:501). But the police provided no evidence, and the Commission did not accept that there had been any threat to the Casspirs from "stones, sticks and other missiles." These allegations appear to have been fabricated by the police immediately afterward in order to excuse their actions, and they were accepted without criticism by the Minister and repeated by him in Parliament.

The Commission did accept the police report about the presence of petrol bombs and reported this as the official view. This view was based on the presence of the necks of two bottles (one a Fanta bottle, the other a milk bottle) among the debris left after the shooting. One of these had the fingerprints of the "Rastafarian" on it. Both bottlenecks were stuffed with newspaper from the same issue. Neither item was found near any of the bodies lying on the pavement. The Commission reports that "traces of petrol" were found on the paper. Again, the physical evidence tells a different story. Despite the fact that the police scrupulously collected all stones and other items that might have been used as missiles, they found not a single glass shard that could have come from either bottle. Since Warrant Officer Pentz, in one of several contradictory statements, claimed that a bottle of "reddish liquid" had been brandished by the Rastafarian, and since two bottlenecks were found with organic deposits and paper in the openings, the Commission decided that evidence of petrol bombs was "conclusive"—despite the fact that no pieces were found other than the bottlenecks and that, moreover, no attempt to ignite or to throw any petrol bombs had been observed (Kannemeyer 1985:51–53, 120). Errol Moorcroft, who investigated for the PFP, reported that there were no burn marks at the scene and testified that Rastafarianism was "a religion of the oppressed" but was nonviolent (*The Argus* 3 April 1985). In light of the scanty evidence, the Commission's findings in this matter seem determined to endorse the "official" police version.

There is still another story of the events that led up to the order to open fire. According to survivors, the first shot was fired at a boy on a bicycle who had ridden into the gap separating the Casspirs from the crowd. He had apparently given a raised-fist salute. This boy, Kwanele Moses Bucwa, survived the shooting and gave detailed evidence to the Commission that did indeed place him in the area between the crowd and the Casspirs. Some witnesses believed that his salute had been the spark that touched off the firing. Pentz had already admitted that he had been insulted by the Rastafarian's gesture to him, and he or others may have interpreted the boy's raised fist as "cheeky." In any case, this would suggest that the boy on the bicycle might have been, as the witnesses in the crowd alleged, the first person to have been shot. As he raised his fist and proceeded toward the Casspirs he was hit in the back of the head and fell. Kannemeyer felt that Bucwa "gave his evidence well":

His evidence that he gave a black power salute close to the Casspirs has a ring of truth. It is the kind of provocative action one could expect from a fifteen-year-old who, according to his evidence, is conscious of black solidarity. His evidence about the salute is supported by others. [Kannemeyer 1985:67]

The various accounts of who was shot first, and by whom, contradict one another, and the facts of the matter cannot now be established. The significant figures who seem to have attracted the attention of the officers in command of the Casspirs and the witnesses, however, included the boy on the bicycle, a "coloured woman with bare breasts," and the "Rastafarian."

When the firing stopped, at least 20 people lay dead on the pavement. Five were women, nine were 16 years of age or younger, and one was only 11 years old. At least 15 of the dead had been shot in the back. Several Coloured and White officers made extremely callous remarks about the dead and dying to the effect that "This would make them listen" (Kannemeyer 1985:137). As one of the seriously wounded writhed in spasms on the pavement, another officer joked that he was "breakdancing" (Kannemeyer 1985:137). The Rastafarian whom Pentz and Fouché believed to have been the leader of the crowd was dead, as was the woman who had supposedly thrown the first stone. Justice Kannemeyer describes the report that this woman was bare-breasted as "sufficiently bizarre" to be believed, but no mention of a bare-breasted woman being among the dead or wounded is made in newspapers or in the Commission's report. The boy on the bicycle was seriously wounded by a glancing shot in the back of the head, but survived. The report mentions that 35 of the official total of 47 dead and wounded were shot "broadly speaking . . . from the rear"; only five were shot from the front (Kannemeyer 1985:88–89). At least 27 people were taken to hospital with serious injuries. Although many more were apparently injured, they either went to private clinics or recuperated at home, so there is no reliable record of how many were injured in all (Kannemeyer 1985:87).

### **violence, conflict and social structure**

Theoretical discussions of violence usually attribute its outbreak to innate "aggression" or the existence of "conflict."<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, violence is said to be a consequence of structures of inequality that generate conflict or stimulate aggression. In almost all cases, violence is considered to be caused by either innate aggression or social conflict. Nevertheless, it is rarely demonstrated that clear causal mechanisms exist that would link abstract sociological structures of conflict to concrete violent behavior of individuals or that would show how "innate" aggression causes violence that is understood to be political. Most writers also assume that violence is nonnormative, that it is *not* the "expected" or "socially accepted" behavior.<sup>13</sup> Violence, viewed as aggression, is contrasted with (normative) cooperation and sociability, while violence as conflict (or as the consequence of conflict) is contrasted with (normative) consensus and solidarity.

But violence may also be conceptualized as a "form" of social life. Violence in warfare is one example of violence as social form; the torture inflicted on individual political opponents of the state in some countries is another, a kind of ritual of punishment without redemption. Violence in warfare is only "conflict" at the very general level of explicit political goals, goals that frequently conceal complex interests unrelated to the ostensible conflict. Similarly, torture of political opponents exemplifies conflict, but again not at the level of individual behavior. What causes soldiers to fight and torturers to torture has more to do with their personal claims to status, wealth, identity, and prestige in their separate organizations than it does with anything we might call aggression or conflict. The commander who leads his men to battle could be said to be more nearly the real (proximate) cause of violence than is the "conflict" that has brought him and his men to such a pass. The commander relies on the likelihood that he and his men will fulfill the rationalized, meaningful, and habitual roles of "commander" and "soldier." Once the killing starts, however, no such account can be given for the actual combatants who, perforce, have never seen each other in lives made briefer by their lethal encounters on the battlefield.

In the case of warfare, however, violence is considered to be "justified" or "legitimate" and thus to be violence of a "special" kind. The separation of "legitimate" forms of violence from

"illegitimate" ones, while telling us much about the nature of law and belief, tells us little about violence itself—except that almost everyone considers violence to come in "types" (Smith 1975:334–336). A typology of legitimate or illegitimate violence, however, neglects the obvious question of perspective—"legitimate from whose point of view?" But more than this it introduces a serious conceptual confusion between moral evaluation, description, and interpretation. There can be no doubt about the moral evil of the shooting at Uitenhage, but the multiple perspectives from which the event was described, the modes of its representations, and the attempts to interpret it must still perplex us once we have evaluated its moral status. Once it becomes a political symbol, the various descriptions of the event—"what happened"—are also not enough; these alternative accounts must themselves be understood as symbols that provision the political process and as narratives that provide the mind with meaningful order. Far from being mere chaos, violence can and often does provide in itself a significant social form. Anyone who has watched a horror movie, read a murder mystery, played cops and robbers (or Boers and Zulus, freedom fighters and soldiers of the state, cowboys and Indians) understands this intuitively. Power in these contexts is less the ability to cause violence by means of one's will or authority than it is the ability to impose one interpretation—that is, meaning—among competing interpretations after the occurrence of a particular incident of violence. Social scientists, for the most part, pretend not to understand this and seek to understand violence as the result of antecedent behaviors.<sup>14</sup> This functional or causal approach appeals to us by its simplicity and its accordance with everyday storytelling and narrative structures of plot and sequence. The real problem of the meaning of violence, however, emerges only after it has happened.

In more general terms, the problem with normative approaches to violence, or with approaches that attempt to sort legitimate and justified types of violence from those that are illegitimate and/or unjustified, is that all such approaches make just such simplistic (usually causal or functionalist) assumptions (for example, Coady 1986:3–4; Townshend 1987:314; Wolff 1969). This is fully explicit in the South African government's rationales and explanations and in much popular discourse, especially in South Africa, which calls violence "unrest," implicitly comparing it to an imagined state of "rest" and harmony in which life runs smoothly, without friction. These and similar approaches assume that there is some "ground" of normal, nonconflictual interaction against which violence can be seen—and thus judged—as not normal, not consensual, not right.

Indeed, events in contemporary South Africa lead us to question whether one can assess whether any society is in fact "running smoothly." Unless such an assessment can be made, if not by the participants at least by some objective outside observers who see through "ideology" to "reality," then the normal-science versions of theories of conflict do not serve us very well. The problem in this situation is that it is not clear what we should mean by the term "society"—the state's version, the Rastafarian's version, the boy on the bicycle's version, or the bystander's version. Furthermore, in the abnormal situation of spatial segregation, of mutually unintelligible languages and of incommensurate modes of communication (loud-hailers, newspapers, gestures, street signs, taunts, and so forth), how are we to know what a "functioning" society looks like in order to compare it with a nonnormative society pervaded by violence?

In the immediate event of the Uitenhage shooting, there is another perplexing problem with the idea of social conflict as a direct cause of violence rather than merely one of the conditions of the context in which violence is likely to occur: the actual individual participants in this event were not directly in conflict with each other. There was no material interest directly pursued by one at the expense of the other that was deliberately or immediately threatening. The "conflict" model can be applied only if we imagine the actors to be merely instances of their "types." The social types and the goals that define them can then be understood as being "in conflict" and the event explained more or less mechanically as a necessary consequence of the conflict believed to exist between different "types" of individuals. If the "types" are defined

as “races” this model is equivalent to racism; if the types are defined as “classes” the model is equivalent to orthodox Marxism, and so on. But this theoretical move fails to address the fact that individuals in situations of distress may not conceptualize themselves as instances of abstract types, but rather more directly as individuals under threat of pain or death. In the present case, the shooting was probably triggered by a police officer’s (mis)interpretation of the gesture of a boy on a bicycle who intended only to escape the situation. The problem remains, however, because we wrongly persist in attempting to understand the acts of individuals in terms of either the typologies of sociology or the reductions of psychology.

Given these problems with the “conflict model” of violence—that is, with the idea that violence is caused by conflict—I believe it may be more enlightening to try to understand violence like that in Uitenhage as a problem in cultural form that expresses identities and creates tokens of social meaning. N. Z. Davis, for instance, presents an account of Catholic and Protestant (Huguenot) violence in mid-16th-century France in these terms.<sup>15</sup> She argues that in the religious violence of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572, among other similar incidents, the crowd did not act as official or formal agents of political and ecclesiastical authority. Her reanalysis of economic data suggests that the notion of “class conflict” is not helpful, for the participants, both murderers and victims, varied widely in social status and occupation (Davis 1976:176–177). Significantly, she found that “the religious riot [was] timed to ritual, and the violence seem[ed] often a curious continuation of the rite” (Davis 1976:170). Instead of showing correlations between political trends and structures, various intrigues at the court in Paris, or economic and other factors, as many other social historians dealing with these same problems have done, Davis demonstrates that the form and details of this violence were more closely related to beliefs about the sacredness of the Bible as opposed to statues of saints, to rituals of religious observance, and to the customs of daily life than to anything else. She concludes that although the form and severity of violence may vary from context to context,

religious violence is intense because it connects intimately with the fundamental values and self-definition of a community. The violence is explained not in terms of how crazy, hungry or sexually frustrated the violent people are (though they may sometimes have such characteristics), but in terms of the goals of their actions and in terms of the roles and patterns of behavior allowed by their culture. Religious violence is related here less to the pathological than to the normal. [Davis 1976:186]

The violence at Uitenhage was not explicitly religious, although the fundamental human values relating to respect for the dead connect it with religious concerns. We can extend the notion of ritual, however, as Davis has implicitly done in her discussion of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and similar incidents, to that of secular ritual (Davis 1976:187; Moore and Myerhoff 1977:19; Smith 1975:336).

Gregory and Timmerman, for instance, argue that in certain situations and under certain conditions, torture in contemporary political struggles may be best understood as a kind of secular ritual that is “constitutive of . . . the cultural meaning of the totalization of society by the State” (1986:63). They explicitly compare torture to rites of passage and the secular rituals of military states in order to show that the “sense” of torture can best be understood as a ritual expression of the cosmic pretensions of military rulers who believe that they have transcended normal political discourse. If torture can be seen as an extreme form of social ritual—as a modern ritual of the state—then massacres like that at Uitenhage can be similarly understood. Nevertheless, because of the dispositions, expectations, and cultural frameworks for violence in South Africa, the normal social structural approaches to understanding violence are strained to their limits.

### **interpretation of the shooting**

The events of 21 March 1985 on Maduna Road in the Eastern Cape resonate with symbolic potential and at the same time are thuddingly banal. Testimony collected by the Kannemeyer Commission was contradictory and much of it was inconclusive. Reports of the timing of var-

ious events and of the locations of the various actors (except for those in the Casspirs) were inconsistent with one another. Lt. Fouché and Warrant Officer Pentz obviously failed to impress the Commission with their honesty or their ability to give evidence. Only the boy on the bicycle and Sgt. Lekuba, the commander of the Casspirs that were not involved, were praised by Judge Kannemeyer for their ability and willingness to give testimony to the Commission. Nevertheless, the Commission concluded that Fouché and Pentz were justified in their fears, if not in their actions. Moreover, testimony collected by independent observers and the fact that the government eventually did agree to pay compensation to the victims' families for wrongful death suggest that few of the police were reliable witnesses. In fact, the evidence makes clear that they were incompetent and inconsistent in the exercise of their duty as well. For all practical purposes, the police were untrained, ill-equipped, and unprepared for "riot" situations, despite the fact that their superiors, at least, knew that this is what they were being sent out to handle. During the incident, some members of the Casspir crews seem to have felt abject terror, while others, in sharp contrast, joked callously and at least one apparently tried to incite the crowd by shouting at them to "throw, throw."

But if the facts of the matter are banal and the factual reports and findings remain inconclusive, their significance presents an intriguing pattern. The shooting almost immediately acquired some political significance. It is worthwhile asking, first of all, why this particular incident stands out clearly against a background of violence not significantly different in degree. Except locally, it did not achieve the distinctive notoriety of the events in Sharpeville in 1961 or in Soweto in 1976, nor did it assume the historical significance of the Rivonia Trial in 1964 and its associated events. The second question, then, must be: why did Uitenhage not achieve the same status as political symbol that Sharpeville, Soweto, and Rivonia did?

There are a number of facile answers to the last question. Partly, no doubt, because the Uitenhage shooting took place on "Sharpeville Day," the earlier event continued to capture more attention. Uitenhage happened, too, against a background of similar incidents all over South Africa in which many more people were killed. The Commission heard evidence that, during the eight months preceding the incident, 273 buildings and 604 vehicles had been destroyed or damaged, with a total estimated loss of over 2.7 million rand. During the previous year in the immediate area of Uitenhage/Langa, six Black people had been killed during 20 incidents of arson and 18 of stone-throwing (Kannemeyer 1985:11–12). During the calendar year of 1985 there were damages estimated at a total of 138 million rand, while the reported death toll from political violence alone stood at 879 throughout South Africa (South African Institute of Race Relations 1985).

But if we accept these answers to the second question (that is, why did the Uitenhage shooting not become more of a political symbol?), we are merely brought back to the first question. If it was so much part and parcel of an endemic violence, why did the shooting stand out so starkly and with such implicit significance? It cannot be merely because it was violent, since violence was endemic. The "structural" inequalities had not changed; there were no new individuals, no new gospels, no new messiahs. It stood out against this background of endemic violence because it displayed so clearly the tacit knowledge of patterns of and for violence shared by almost all South Africans. This episode was immediately recognized as an exemplar of a characteristically South African form of social violence.

### **the moral form of violence**

It was not violence itself, therefore, but the specific pattern of that violence on that day and in that place that made it especially amenable to moral and political appropriation as a symbol to be deployed in the continuing political process. Although the event itself can be understood functionally as a local response to political and social conditions, or can be understood instru-

mentally as acts either of coercion or of resistance, these understandings alone would lead us to miss its significance as a genuinely new instance of a recognizable social form. Events like the shooting at Sharpeville and the shooting at Uitenhage have a salience that sets them apart as symbols, as landmarks of form and meaning that stand out from a background of otherwise “formless,” and therefore meaningless, violence. Their salience as symbols then contributes to an image of a characteristic form of violence that can be said to express a cultural model of violence or to provide a cultural model for its development.<sup>16</sup>

In the vocabulary of the South African state, violence is “chaos” or “unrest,” and it is seen by the state—in concert with most observers—as the epitome of social formlessness and social or moral disintegration. But the events of the type that I examine here stand out precisely because they are exemplars of violence as moral and social form. It is the degree of form that they display, and their relationship to a morally-figured universe of global values and archetypes of struggle, that make certain episodes of violence available for appropriation as moral or political symbol and thence part of a “tradition” or discourse of violence that shapes subsequent violence. The violence at Uitenhage can best be understood as violence of this type. Subsequent to its unfolding and to its interpretive elaboration, the shooting has been integrated into the political process, but only with considerable difficulty. Under conditions that foster violence as moral and social form, the formal schema of violence acquires a dynamic and resilience of its own that may—or may not—be harnessed to other structural imperatives or political goals. We cannot assume, however, that the pattern of violence that actually exists is necessarily a part of political structure. In situations of endemic violence, a great deal of political effort is required to harness episodes of violence to specific and articulated political goals.

Politically, the events at Uitenhage constituted a direct and violent interaction between the coercive forces of government and a group of local people. Socially, both parties to the confrontation were “mixed”—in the South African sense of this term—in that the crowd consisted of people classified as “African” and “Coloured,” while the police consisted of people classified as “White” (with mainly Afrikaans surnames) and “Black.” The event occurred on a border, and at a crossroads, a locale fraught with meaning in this instance because it was the official cordon sanitaire between the “White” residential area of Uitenhage and the “Black” residential area of Langa. Indeed, any crossroads—by definition both boundary and index of multiple possibilities—is fraught with meaning. The crossroads itself symbolizes the turning point, the significant arrival, the transition, the passage. Oedipus, father of Antigone, unknowingly killed his own father at a crossroads; tragedy was prefigured by the fateful meeting of their paths. Maduna Square, moreover, was freighted with the past. Its significance in the implementation of apartheid policies is obvious from the scars of bulldozed housing; foundations of houses, garden walls, and paths are etched beneath the shrouding grass. The shape and history of the place itself were redolent of power and tragedy. Most of all, the place exemplified boundaries, the maintenance of which the architects of government policy equate with “rest” as opposed to “unrest,” “order” as opposed to “violence,” “law” as opposed to “chaos.” These symbolic oppositions are by now tacitly accepted by most South Africans. The crossroads at Maduna Square exemplified and symbolized social difference as quasi-cosmic principle and as political program.

Anthropologists have long been aware of the symbolic potential of boundaries and crossroads, but the practical potential of such places is also worth noting: the strip of road on which the people were killed permitted room to maneuver a crowd and two large armored police vehicles into positions unconstrained by buildings or other obstacles. People and vehicles were deployed and could act without physical constraint and, thus, could arrange themselves into patterns dictated by the spatial intuitions of the actors rather than by the positions of obstacles insignificant to the event. In this sense, the spatial dimensions of the confrontation were rather more like a classic sea battle, or warfare on the open field, than like the urban street fighting and violence common in contemporary South Africa. Most “political” deaths, injuries, and

damages occur in the constraining context of a physical environment that carries no significance itself. In the relatively open space of the crossroads in the vacant boundary area, the spatial disposition of the crowd and the police could follow the tacit understandings of the actors about how such violent confrontations should be enacted—that is, it was possible for them to deploy themselves according to what might be called a “spatial template” or model for violent confrontation.

Such templates are not only “available” to all South Africans as models for particular kinds of social action but in fact are celebrated as special marks of South African identity. Examples include the famous battle ranks of Shaka Zulu’s *impis* (regiments), the “laagers” or defensive circles into which the wagons of the participants in the Afrikaners’ much-mythologized “Great Trek” were drawn, the strict linear order of British colonial troops (and the towns in which they settled), and, of course, the geographical demarcation of boundaries between White and Black “group areas” under the policy of apartheid. The “boundary area” in which the event took place was, in fact, itself one of those spaces created by the pervasive politicization of residential space under the group areas policy. Perhaps of most significance, however, is the spatial schema of the “Battle of Bloodriver,” a battle in which a small contingent of Afrikaners successfully defended themselves against the onslaught of the Dingane’s Zulu army. The spatial features of conflict, most prominent and most celebrated perhaps among the Afrikaners and the Zulus, have, during the course of this century, acquired a sacred significance for South Africans. They figure prominently in the historical development of the political and cultural identities of the Afrikaner *volk* (Van Jaarsveld 1979) and the Zulu “tribe” (Buthelezi 1981). These spatial schemata of (and for) violent confrontation are conscientiously commemorated each year in, for instance, Ulundi (the capital of Kwa Zulu) and Pretoria, commemorated in named battle sites throughout South Africa that have been designated “National Monuments,” retold in school history texts, and celebrated as national holidays. Different aspects of the spatial plan of interethnic violence are enshrined and reenacted in the secular temples of political identity, educational syllabi, landscapes, and calendrical performances during “national holidays.”

The incident is clearly marked, too, by the fact that it occurred on Sharpeville Day and was in some respects like the shooting at Sharpeville. When examined in more detail, however, the resemblances appear to be largely superficial. Large numbers (20 at Uitenhage by official count [Kannemeyer 1985:80], 69 at Sharpeville) were killed in both confrontations, and the confrontations had a similar spatial form, namely, that of a crowd of Blacks confronting a phalanx of police who fired into the crowd. The differences, however, seem to me to be more significant.

Unlike those at Sharpeville and some other apparently similar incidents before Langa/Uitenhage, the participants (both police and victims) at Uitenhage were not self-consciously engaged in political acts of protest or in coercive repression of protest. The police in the vehicles acted without immediate reference to higher police authority, and all indications suggest that even though it was Sharpeville Day, their patrol was routine. The motives of the people in the crowd were varied. Some, indeed, were simply walking to work because bus service had been interrupted. Others were clearly on their way to a funeral they thought was to be held, but had made no plans for political action. The incident was unintentionally triggered by a boy on a bicycle who was not involved with either group.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the people who were killed in the Sharpeville shooting of 1961 were consciously and deliberately engaged in political protest, as were the people who were shot as they converged on a police patrol in Soweto on 16 June 1976.

The comparison with Sharpeville raises several theoretical issues. It is clear that the intentions of the Uitenhage actors were not known to each other or to those opposing them in the confrontation, and that neither side intended the outcome to be what it in fact was. The police in the two armored vehicles that confronted the crowd were neither prepared for “riot control” nor, apparently, aware of the wider consequences of their actions after the event. The victims—those who were not killed—were severely shocked by the events, but it is also clear from court

records that the police were terrified as well. One of them, at least, was too terrified to participate and “cowered” on the floor of the vehicle while the shooting took place. It is clear too that the officer in command, Lt. Fouché, was not in direct communication with any of his commanding officers, and, in any case, had not had any orders covering violence of this kind. The superior officers who were supposed to have been in charge of the situation, Major Bignaut of the South African Police and Captain Goosen, were not able to explain to the Commission why the police had not been properly prepared, nor why the weapons provided to that patrol had been so completely inappropriate to the occasion (Kannemeyer 1985:91–93). There is evidence, furthermore, that at least one of the radios in the armored vehicles at the scene was not functioning and that Lt. Fouché and perhaps others may have been drunk.

In short, there is no evidence of any plan at any level for the violence, and no evidence that there was any functional chain of command that could have been responsible. The violence cannot easily be explained by reference to prior political agendas, conspiracies, or deliberate design. It could be argued that the police on the ground had deliberately been left unprepared to deal with the situations that they were likely to encounter because some superior officers or politicians desired to inflict serious harm on the populace without being directly blamed for it. If such conspiracies did exist, it is not likely that they would have come to light under the conditions of near-complete indemnity subsequently granted to the police under emergency regulations. While such high-level secret conspiracies among the upper echelons of the South African Police certainly exist, this possibility does not affect the fact that when the event took place there was no prior strategy in the minds of the police in the Casspirs. It is clear, too, that the people in the crowd had no prior plan; in fact, they had many separate agendas that day. This fact is accepted by the Kannemeyer Commission and attested to by virtually all of the evidence.

Nevertheless, the event had the shape of other “classic” confrontations in South African history and was therefore eminently available to be exploited as a symbol. The social situation on Maduna Road developed toward a pattern of violence with which everyone was familiar; that is, it developed in ways that were consistent with the structure of other events as these have been represented in texts and popular histories. But it did not develop in ways that would have been predicted from the actors’ stated intentions. The rituals memorializing violence that punctuate the South African calendar—Bloodriver, Sharpeville, and Soweto, among many others—provided templates. The barren, bulldozed landscape of the no-man’s-land between Langa and Uitenhage provided the stage and scenery for tragedy. But there was no script. At that moment, then, when shooting erupted, the political system as system was involved only at the level of representations held by the actors, not as identifiable chains of command that would have provided an instrumental mechanism for the direct exercise of political power. The event developed out of the tacit knowledge of a social form, an unspoken but characteristic “tradition of violence.”

Causal explanations couched in terms of “political systems,” “structures of inequality,” or “power” are inadequate to the attempt to understand such events in South Africa. The normative account of violence as disorder breaks down because the violence at Uitenhage constituted a form of social order. Violence was not the consequence of conflict or caused by the direct intervention of political or administrative power. Violence was the very form of the social interaction itself. Violence of this kind, like violence in religious sacrifice, literature, dreams, sexual relationships, and friendship, must be understood in relation to the representations of community, self, and identity with which it is linked in the daily habits of mind and body.

### **narratives of violence**

It is not possible to know precisely what actually happened on Maduna Road, and for the purposes of interpreting the event the actual incidents are less important than the narratives

into which they were cast and their resonance with the moral and social patterns that we have mentioned. These patterns of meaning, rather than of cause—strictly speaking—enlighten us.

The story of the boy on the bicycle, for example, shows how fundamental misunderstandings and tacit knowledge, rather than plans, structures, and intentions, drove the event toward its tragic conclusion. According to the boy, Kwanele Bucwa, he had been attempting to get to work in Uitenhage when he saw the crowd forming. He tried to ride around it but found his way blocked, and was eventually forced to proceed with the crowd up Maduna Road. As he walked, he was able to work his way to the front of the procession, intending to ride into Uitenhage after he had escaped from the mass of marchers. As he reached the front of the crowd, it came to a halt, confronted by two Casspirs blocking the path. He did not want to lose his job because he had worked hard to get it and needed the money. Seeing that his only option was to leave the front of the procession and ride around the Casspirs, he mounted his bicycle and attempted to ride around them. Midway, he realized that his action might be seen by some in the crowd as treacherous abandonment of the crowd and collaboration with the police in the Casspirs. Here, his individual interpretations of the social situation intersected with potent political symbolisms. In order to assert his solidarity with the crowd, Bucwa held up his fist in an “Amandla” or “Black Power” salute. His gesture was intended for the crowd, not the Casspirs. The gesture, whose meaning was self-evident to Bucwa, had a different sense to others. It seems to have been interpreted by someone in the police vehicles as a gesture of defiance. Thus, the meaning was clear—Amandla, “Power”—but it was taken in a different sense by the men in the Casspir. Judge Kannemeyer clearly believed it to have been just such an insult, even though Bucwa explained his intentions. The judge, sitting as a government commissioner in the cool dispassion of the Uitenhage magistrate’s court, agreed with the frightened, ignorant policemen who had been acting in the heat of the moment. Justice Kannemeyer wanted to present an authoritative discourse on the topic, and in trying to do so he used his power to exclude the variant narratives of people like Bucwa, even though Justice Kannemeyer himself acknowledged that the truth was more likely to lie in Bucwa’s telling. Here, Justice Kannemeyer seems to have been concerned less with “truth” than with authorizing or privileging one discourse over another.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the fuller narrative of the events, as this example shows, can be told as a series of such misunderstandings, misunderstandings heightened by the multiplicity of languages, the rhythm of chanted songs, the “toi-toi” dancing,<sup>19</sup> and the participants’ lack of any clear understandings of one another’s social and political idioms. Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, and Xhosa all seem to have been used at various times and by various participants. Police testified to having heard several different songs. Some were familiar to Black members of the police units, but those members seem to have interpreted their significance rather broadly to the White officers in charge. Only the refrain “Hai, Hai” is mentioned in the Commission report, in a context that leads one to believe that this meant “Kill, Kill” or some such thing.<sup>20</sup> It means in fact “No, No,” and is the popular refrain to a common antiphonal toi-toi song that lists the things and people the singers emphatically reject with their chant “No, No.” It appears that the Kannemeyer Commission, like the police, was unable to grasp the meaning of the singers’ message. The White officers in charge represented this chant as “shrieking” and the accompanying movements as savage dancing largely because they had no notion of what they might mean. It seems that it was the singing and chanting that were primarily responsible for the state of terror in which the police found themselves.

In this, the incident resonates with themes and symbols transcending the particularities of this case. The shooting, for instance, recalls powerfully the famous scene in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* when “Mistah Kurtz” is finally “rescued” from the jungle savages with whom he has found a home. Conrad evokes the kind of situation in which violence can become social form, a sort of “composing” orderliness that is nonetheless tragic:

The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive. . . . [A]nd then the usual sense of commonplace, deadly danger, the possibility of a sudden onslaught and massacre, or something of the kind, which I saw impending, was positively welcome and composing. It pacified me. [Conrad 1971 [1899]:65]

Conrad's description of the sense of terror induced by the incomprehensible chants and the rhythm accords well with what the occupants of the *Casspirs* say they felt in their uneasy isolation from genuine human contact or genuine knowledge. Their interpretations of their situation and their response become comprehensible when the men are seen not as soldiers obeying orders—there were no orders to obey other than the one to fire, which seems in any case to have been issued after firing had already begun—but rather as individuals denied genuine knowledge of the real situation with which they were expected to deal. They were compelled by the rhythms and patterns of the situation into which they had fallen. They fell through the floor of civil behavior, already rotted by pervasive abuse and violence.

At this level of the human condition, certain universal themes and symbols seem to emerge, and they typically figure in the narratives recounting the event at Uitenhage. The reports of the bare-breasted woman apparently tempting the police to shoot make sense in this way. Again, remembering a scene from Conrad can contribute to our sense of historical and psychological recognition. In Conrad's story, after Mistah Kurtz has been forcibly removed from the jungle and placed aboard the steamer on the river, the natives line the banks, watching. Among them is the woman whom Kurtz had taken as his lover. Marlow, the captain and narrator of the story, relates:

I pulled the string of the whistle, and I did this because I saw the pilgrims [that is, the White officials] on deck getting out their rifles with an air of anticipating a jolly lark. At the sudden screech there was a movement of abject terror through that wedged mass of bodies. "Don't, Don't, you frighten them away," cried someone on deck disconsolately. I pulled the string time after time. They broke and ran. . . . Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river.

And then that imbecile crowd down on the deck started their little fun, and I could see nothing more for smoke. [Conrad 1971 [1899]:69]

In factual terms, the "coloured woman with bare breasts" whom Fouché claimed to have seen was almost certainly a product of fantasy or deceit. But understood as a typical element in a universal narrative, Fouché's image tells us much about his understanding of the situation. It translates the sense of danger that he certainly felt—a danger represented as political danger in the authoritative discourse of the Commission's report—into language and imagery of social and sexual dread. Fouché's image of a bare-breasted woman tempting him to shoot indicates the presence of powerful but tacit myth-like motifs, as opposed to manifest political motives, that figure and prefigure the social event. In any case, his mention of it seems to have justified his action in his own mind: shooting a woman so barbarous as to be bare-breasted was, for him, apparently defensible.

The black-cloaked figure who held up a bottle of "reddish liquid" and a black book also appears to be part of an apocalyptic narrative. The Kannemeyer Commission accepted as true that this was the "Rastafarian" whom several of the police believed to be the leader. At one point, Fouché reported that he had had the black-coated Rastafarian "in his sights" but the man had "disappeared" before the firing began. (In other testimony, Fouché claimed that he had been firing a warning shot at the leader, who had been wearing a white track suit!) It does seem clear, however, that a Rastafarian man did die and that he had been in possession of (at least) a bottleneck with paper in it and a black notebook.

Here, again, different cultural discourses and individual narratives intersect without genuinely engaging each other, the result of political misunderstandings and ignorance of multiple cultural details. It seems unlikely, in this case, that the two bottlenecks with paper in them could have been petrol bombs, since they were not ignited and no other pieces of bottle-glass were

found. Although Moorcroft, who holds a B.A. degree in anthropology, had testified to the Commission about the general outlines of Rastafarian belief, the record does not mention the obligatory use of marijuana in the Rastafarian cult. The usual way to smoke marijuana in this part of the world is to stuff paper into the broken neck of a bottle and fill the broken end with marijuana. The bottleneck is used as a pipe, with the paper acting as a filter to prevent inhalation of the herb. Under the circumstances, it seems probable that these items were marijuana pipes carried by the Rastafarian and at least one of his friends in the crowd; it is unlikely that they were bombs. Indeed, since one of the Commission's findings is precisely that no plans to commit violent acts had been formulated before or during the march and that none had occurred, the Commission's findings are self-contradictory. More important, the Commission's report perpetuates the misunderstandings and ignorance that drove the shooting itself.

Finally, there is the moral drama inherent in the mischievous bannings of funerals so as to make it impossible to bury the dead. These orders, although politically motivated, trespassed on the realm of universal and ultimate human concerns. Whether or not they made violence a near certainty, they imbued the threat of violence with transcendent meaning and contributed to the tragic form of the event. Kannemeyer himself concluded:

It would seem that Capt. Goosen used section 46 of the Act for a devious purpose. Having obtained a prohibition against holding a funeral on, inter alia, a Sunday because a funeral held on a Sunday would be likely seriously to endanger the public peace, he proceeded to obtain an order that the funeral could only be held on a Sunday because, if held on a weekday, work would be boycotted, leading to disruption of sources and industry which is not a ground for a section 46 order. [Kannemeyer 1985:161]

Although the reality of the event was complex, the various narrative representations of it and the simultaneous and contradictory bannings bear some resemblance to Sophocles' *Antigone*. In that drama, the children of the incestuous union between Oedipus and his mother, Jocasta, quarrel after the truth about their parents' unwitting incest is made known to them. Oedipus blinds himself and leaves Thebes, guided by his daughters Antigone and Ismene. His sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, quarrel over the throne. Creon, Jocasta's brother, engineers the installation of Eteocles as king, while Polyneices leaves and then returns to attack the city. The brothers kill each other on the battlefield. Creon, who has meanwhile declared himself king, gives Eteocles an elaborate burial, but he decrees that the treasonous Polyneices must not be buried. Antigone, however, returns to Thebes after her brothers' deaths to fulfill her moral duty to bury them. If she does bury Polyneices, she will have to defy Creon and be killed by him; if she does not, she will have defied the gods and the principles of moral conduct. She decides to bury her brother in defiance of Creon and is then imprisoned for doing so. In prison, she hangs herself.

The conflict between Creon's decree against burying Polyneices and Antigone's attempt to do so has been understood by most readers as a struggle between civil order and moral principle. Hegel, for instance, chose *Antigone* rather than *Oedipus* as the central or core tragedy of the Ancient Greek corpus because it is built around the dialectical opposition of moral principle and civil order. The Hegelian dialectical interpretation of *Antigone* suggests one way in which the Uitenhage case could be culturally appropriated into a system of political meanings. Sophocles himself seems to have envisioned his plays as representations of cosmic struggles in which suffering is at once transcended and given meaning by death. It was this aspect of tragedy, established in the Greek mystery religions, that informed early Christianity and contributed to that religion's doctrine of transcending sin through the death of Christ. The Uitenhage shooting can be interpreted in these terms, too. This tragic narrative of moral conflict between personal and civic duty or between the coercive solidarity of the crowd and the coercive power of the state remains potent even though the shooting was never fully appropriated and projected as a political symbol of the struggle against the state.

The deaths of those for whom the funeral was to be celebrated had already acquired political meaning, and to forbid their burial added moral significance to the event, since it entailed both a contradiction between two mutually contradictory duties and a coerced inability to react

normally to either duty. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson called such contradictions “double binds” (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland 1956; Bateson 1979). Double binds frequently act to focus attention on the event that is “doubly bound” and in so doing heighten its socio-logical and psychological significance. In psychological contexts, double binds are frequently connected with severe emotional distress or schizophrenia. In a political context such as Langa and Uitenhage, the double bind clearly created confusion and added to the other factors already focusing attention on the funerals and providing a “framework” of knowledge and expectation within which social events, including violent ones, could be enacted.

The shooting at Uitenhage was, therefore, laden with potential significances that made multiple interpretations possible. This richness of meaning, coupled with the fact of violent death, blood, and the event’s fateful conjuncture with historical processes, a meaningful landscape, and mythlike images, made it an exemplar of violence. The fact that it took place in a boundary region, near a crossroads that was at once historically evocative of forced removals and symbolic of the enforced ideology of racial differences, further contributed to its significance. These complex features highlighted the shooting at Uitenhage against a background of many other incidents of violence that did not possess these characteristics of evocative form. The process leading up to it, the event itself, and the quasi-judicial proceedings that followed it all heightened its cultural and political significance. The fact that it was related to a funeral and involved mutually contradictory duties imbued it with a transcendent moral significance. All of this contributed to its symbolic potential. To realize an event as a potent symbol, however, requires a considerable effort of cultural appropriation. Politically, morally, mythically, the shootings at Sharpeville and Soweto were much simpler, much clearer, much more easily appropriated as symbols. The shooting at Uitenhage remains powerful yet troubling for all those who know its stories.

#### Epitaph

*Antigone*: I did not think your edicts strong enough  
To overrule the unwritten unalterable laws  
Of God and heaven, you being only a man.  
...  
I knew that I should have to die, of course,  
With or without your order. If it be soon,  
So much the better. Living in daily torment  
As I do, who would not be glad to die?  
The punishment will not be any pain.  
Only if I had let my mother’s son  
Lie there unburied, then I could not have borne it.  
This I can bear. Does that seem foolish to you?  
Or is it you that are foolish to judge me so?

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

#### notes

*Acknowledgments.* Some of the ideas in this article were first presented to my senior undergraduate class in theory of culture at the University of Cape Town in June 1985, shortly after the incidents discussed here had happened and during the peak of a widespread revolt of which they were a part. Discussion, some of it heated and passionate, in that class and subsequent ones has helped me clarify my thoughts. The essay was first presented in 1988 at a seminar on “Violence in South Africa” convened by Chabani Manganyi, Centre for African Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, and André Du Toit, Political Studies, University of Cape Town. My colleagues Mamphele Ramphele, Peter Skalnik, and Martin West at the University of Cape Town, Johann Degenaar of the University of Stellenbosch, and Michael Whisson and Chris De Wet of Rhodes University have all offered valuable criticism and advice for which I am grateful. Assistance during writing and research was received from the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa and from the MacArthur Foundation through the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.

<sup>1</sup>Funerals, especially of those who have been killed in the course of political struggle, have acquired in South Africa a special cultural importance and range of meanings which depend on, but also considerably extend and transform, the “traditional” Christian and autochthonous meanings they previously had. I know

of no in-depth study of this except Harriet Ngubane's unpublished "The Politics of Death in Soweto" (Ngubane 1978). The meanings and political significance of funerals in the eastern Cape would be an important element of a more exhaustive account of the area's culture and politics, but are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Residents of Langa and Kwa Nobuhle townships claimed that 43 had been killed. The memorial marker erected in Kwa Nobuhle lists 29 dead; see "Kinikini's Crude Revenge: Kwa Nobuhle, January 4, 1987" (Foundation for Human Rights 1987). Contemporary reports in the press ranged from 19 to 43 dead. The investigative commission appointed by the government, however, reported no more than 20 dead.

<sup>3</sup>I use "tragedy" not in the everyday sense of "a shocking or sad event" but rather in the literary, historical, or technical sense of a specific narrative schema in which a violent or destructive event is portrayed as being determined by external forces beyond the immediate actors' control. Hayden White (1973), for instance, uses it in this tropological way in discussing historians' narratives, while I am also concerned with the narratives of participants, journalists, and jurors. My invocation of *Antigone* signals this usage as well.

<sup>4</sup>I was not able to travel to the eastern Cape at the time of the shootings, but I have talked with many of those who were involved in the several "fact-finding" missions, with politicians and jurors who were involved, and with my students and colleagues. Unfortunately, I have not interviewed people in Langa. Immediately after the establishment of the Commission, such matters were popularly regarded as being sub judice (although legally and technically they were not), and interviews would not have been possible. I have walked around the site of the shooting and its environs, and I observed normal daily behavior there during an afternoon in September 1988. Readers of this article will note, I am sure, that there is much more research that could and should be done.

<sup>5</sup>The best-known example of an incident that could have resulted in violence but did not is the nonviolent march against the Pass Laws in Cape Town on 30 March 1961, nine days after the notorious shooting at Sharpeville in the Transvaal. In that episode, Philip Kgosana, a young student from the University of Cape Town who lived in Langa, led a group of between 15,000 and 30,000 people from Langa into central Cape Town. There he negotiated with the police commander, a Major Swanepoel, who promised him that he would be able to meet with the Minister of Justice if he would lead the marchers peacefully back to the townships. Kgosana agreed, the march ended peacefully, and Kgosana was treacherously arrested later that afternoon. A state of emergency was imposed that evening. Kgosana later went into exile, and Swanepoel was denied promotion for the remainder of his career in the South African Police. The events are described in detail and from Kgosana's point of view in Lelyveld (1985:317–326, 342–347).

<sup>6</sup>Because of this, information about other similar events is not available in as much detail as it is for Uitenhage. The Commissioner's report and the testimony that was collected under the auspices of the Commission, together with the considerable volume of reporting in the daily newspapers and newsmagazines and the interest generated among members of the Parliamentary opposition parties, have all contributed to the relative wealth of information on which this inquiry is based. In addition, I have interviewed several people in the Uitenhage area who helped to compile alternative accounts in order to challenge the official government findings.

<sup>7</sup>Twelve shotguns and four R1 rifles were issued, with 240 rounds of SSG ammunition for the shotguns and 80 rounds of R1 ammunition. In addition, all police personnel carried 9mm. automatic pistols as side-arms (Kannemeyer 1985:72).

<sup>8</sup>The Progressive Federal Party was the official opposition in Parliament at the time, and it moved quickly to collect testimony independent of the police and the Kannemeyer Commission.

<sup>9</sup>The South African Broadcasting Corporation is a parastatal corporation that has been given the monopoly on radio and television broadcasting services. During this period it was subject to direct control by the Prime Minister of South Africa, P. W. Botha, and possibly other members of the Cabinet.

<sup>10</sup>What exactly was said in Xhosa is not clear from the evidence before the Kannemeyer Commission (Kannemeyer 1985:30).

<sup>11</sup>The "R1" is the standard assault rifle used by the South African Defence Force and other security personnel.

<sup>12</sup>On aggression as a cause of violence see, for example, the American Anthropological Association's endorsement of the Seville Statement on Violence (a statement drafted by the Spanish National Committee of UNESCO) (American Anthropological Association 1987). One *locus classicus* for the view that conflict is a sociological cause of violence is Georg Simmel's "Conflict" (Simmel 1971). Summaries of research on conflict and aggression as causes of violence are provided by Estellie Smith (1975) and Paula Brown and I. Schuster (1987); while accepting the general premise, Ross (1987) provides a partial critique by arguing that there are "limits" to the psychological-causal account.

<sup>13</sup>In other words, "nonnormative" in both the statistical or hypothetical-deductive sense ("not expected") and the communal or moral sense ("not socially accepted"). The extent to which this view is true of the English-speaking public is shown by David Riches (1986:1–7). The confusion among different senses of the word "normative," however, does not affect my argument here.

<sup>14</sup>In particular, what social science usually misses is the temporal contingency of violence: the bullet that misses is not violence but remains intention, that is, not a social but a "psychological" fact. Those failing to appreciate the importance of this subtlety subsume violence, albeit wrongly, under other categories of intentional behavior or purposive social action in which cause-and-effect reasoning is perhaps more sound.

<sup>15</sup>It is perhaps worth mentioning that these episodes of violence in France are related, historically and socially, to those I am describing here since some of these Huguenots emigrated to South Africa generations ago, and their descendants are now among the police who did the shooting and quite possibly, by more distant and unacknowledged descent, among the victims of this and other episodes of violence.

<sup>16</sup>David Riches (1986:11–15) gives a detailed account of how violence may be “appropriate both for practical (instrumental) and for symbolic (expressive) purposes.” D. Apter (1987:40–41) argues similarly that violence “generates its own dynamism” and “retrieves” earlier episodes from memory and “projects” these into future situations. The phrases “model of” and “model for” come from C. Geertz (1976).

<sup>17</sup>My interpretation here differs considerably from the “official” one in the Kannemeyer Commission report.

<sup>18</sup>This accords well with Asad’s notion of “authoritative discourse,” in that the judge “authorises neither ‘Reality’ nor ‘Experience’ but other discourse—texts, speech, visual images, etc., which are being structured in terms of given (imposed) concepts, and reproduced in terms of essential meanings” (Asad 1979:621).

<sup>19</sup>The “toi-toi” dance is a kind of rhythmic march or circle-dance often used in contemporary South African public protests (and in nonpolitical situations, such as football matches, as well). It is performed to an antiphonal style of extemporaneous song in which episodes or persons are named and vilified or complaints are stated. I do not know the origin of the word.

<sup>20</sup>The accepted spelling of the Xhosa word cited in the Kannemeyer Commission report is *hayi*. Here it is quoted as it was misspelled in the report. Kannemeyer, and whatever editors of the report there may have been, appear to have been ignorant of Xhosa.

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