

What's in a name? : Street names and the fine line between silencing and predicating history

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Street Names and the Fine Line between Silencing and Predicating History

Text and Photographs: *Isolde de Villiers, Rita Kesselring*

The women's march in 1956 to the Union Buildings in Pretoria ended with thirty minutes of complete silence, as part of the protest against the extension of the Apartheid pass laws to women. Lilian Ngoyi initiated this muted half hour. It was a quest for meditating on what kind of society South Africans aspire to live in.

Muted signs, such as a minute's (or 30 minutes') silence, but also the removal of a monument, or the silences in the testimonies of victims and perpetrators before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid-1990s, are signifiers for many unresolved societal issues. On the other hand, though, many have tried to give expression to the horrors of the Apartheid past: new monuments have been erected (e.g. the Freedom Park and the Apartheid museum) and many have bravely given words to their experiences under Apartheid rule. Both silence and predication can be the basis for a societal discussion of the past, the present and the future. This article looks at one specific attempt to deal with the past that combines both: silence and predication.

In 2012, the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Council (the Municipal area includes Pretoria, Centurion, Winterveld and Temba) set out to implement another corrective project and ordered the change of 28 street names. Sixty years after the women's march to the Union Buildings, we find Lilian Ngoyi's name on a street sign in the Central Business District of Pretoria. It is a project that silences some parts of history and, by the same token, allows articulation for other parts.

These name changes raise several political questions: what is the effect of silencing names by removing them and replacing them by others; what is the significance of the silence on

other contentious and problematic names that were not replaced; and what are the motives behind attempts to challenge the project of name changes either through vandalism or more formally through court orders?

As will become clear, the photographs in this essay document a process of re-writing history *in the making* (see also **photo 9**). This raises a more general question about photographic documentation: How can we capture the formation of the re-interpretation of the past? Are photographs not simply cementing meaning by way of their static materiality? How much do photographs speak despite their ostensible silence? As scholars of law and social anthropology, we believe in context just as Lilian Ngoyi's minute's silence could only be effective within a specific context. Telling the ongoing story of the renaming of streets in the city of Pretoria, we critically reflect on the efficacy and limits of words, and we place our hopes in muted moments to give expression to the experience of the unspeakable.

Silence as lines

It is important to emphasize the complexity of the relationship between silence and predication as we intend to use it here. From the photographs, taken in July 2012, it is clear that new names were installed alongside, almost juxtaposed, to the old names, through which red lines were drawn. This is a common practice in name changes that have taken place in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. In the photographs we present here, the old names are not entirely removed, they remain present, albeit they are not allowed to «speak» anymore, being prohibited to do so by the red diagonal line. In May 2013, the



















Metropolitan Council removed all the old struck-out names/signs. This was followed by an application from the right-wing group AfriForum to re-install the old names. The North Gauteng High Court ordered the Metropolitan Council to re-install the dual name signage¹, but the Metropolitan Council lodged an appeal against the order in July 2013. At the time of printing, the appeal case is still to be heard.

In this essay, we – visually – focus on the year when both the old and the new names were visible. Being confronted with these red lines we want to join South African scholar Carrol Clarkson in asking: «What is in a line?» She engages with the notion of drawing lines with specific reference to the artworks of contemporary South African artist Willem Boshoff, whose work is often concerned with themes of tension and «defies ready categorization» (Clarkson 2008: 269). She explores the ethical implications of the redrawing of lines of the landscape that used to be Apartheid South Africa. What are the ethical implications of the redrawing of the street names? Clarkson refers specifically to Boshoff because he uses language, i.e. predication, as his medium and labels these language-artworks as «three-dimensional dictionaries: sequences of words in wood, sand or stone» (Clarkson 2008: 274). The street names with the combination of letters and red diagonal lines should be deemed artworks in a post-Apartheid South Africa attempting to redraw lines. Could these street names be sequences of words in metal, dust and crowds? They should be interpreted to constitute, as Boshoff's artworks, the merging of two lines of force: «the force of law and the force of art» (Clarkson 2008: 279).

Lines as change

Lilian Ngoyi gave the instruction for silence to the thousands of women who attended the march against the provisions of the Urban Areas Act, as the President of the Federation for South African Women. She was working as a seamstress at the time of being elected to this position. She headed the march along with Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, Albertina Sisulu and Sophie Williams. At first glance at the corner of what used to be Prinsloo and Church streets (see **photo 1**), one can almost imagine Helen and Albertina standing side by side again singing

«Wathint Abafazi Wathint' imbokodo!» (You touched the women, you struck a rock) as they did during the march. However, according to a notice on the Metropolitan Council's official website entitled «These are the new street names that represent all racial groups»² Prinsloo Street, initially named after the early settler and property owner Joachim Prinsloo, was not changed to Albertina Sisulu, but to her husband Walter Sisulu. Walter Sisulu was one of the accused at the Rivonia trial, alongside Nelson Mandela, who was arrested at Liliesleaf farm in July 1963 during a police raid where police confiscated documents on Operation Mayibuye. He fulfilled an important role in Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the ANC. His movement through the ANC leadership ranks started with Secretary General in 1949 and ended with Deputy President in 1994.

Returning to **photo 1**, the three blocks of offices behind the signs are advertised as to let. These office blocks, when without tenants for an extended period, are classically inhabited by city dwellers in a city with a lack of accommodation. Since the buildings were not designed for residential purposes, living conditions are poor and the risk of fires always looms large. This situation is of course historically contingent, and is the result of spatial lines drawn during Apartheid through a series of legislation, of which the Urban Areas Act and the pass law system formed part, that regulated and demarcated urban and rural spaces. Helen Joseph Street is one of the four new names for the former Church Street. One of the arguments of AfriForum is that the name Church did not present any colonial or racial connotation and should not have been changed. The other new names for Church Street are WF Nkomo, Elias Motswaledi and Stanza Bopape (see **photo 2**). **Photo 2** illustrates the complex nature of the changes and the inertia of companies and businesses. Mc Carthy Volkswagen still directs you to 470 Church Street. During the time of the changes, there were also many advertisements for the printing of new business cards. Arguably it would be expensive and cumbersome for Mc Carthy to change the sign completely, but perhaps they could have followed the same route as the Council and drawn a line through their old address with 470 Stanza Bopape underneath. As in other matters, the post-Apartheid state has shown limited will and has had limited power to bring private entities to comply with its (often non-binding) call to help redressing the past (Kesselring 2012).

¹The court ordered the re-instatement of the old names on the ground that there was a pending application for a review of the new names altogether. This review application was brought by AfriForum in April 2012 after the Metropolitan council started to change the names. The North Gauteng High Court, on 30 April 2012 in the case of AfriForum v City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality under case number 21681 / 2012, dismissed the urgency of AfriForum's interdict and the Metropolitan council undertook to keep the old street names for a period of six months.

²<http://www.tshwane.gov.za/AboutTshwane/MapsandGIS/Street%20Maps%20Documents/These%20are%20the%20new%20street%20names%20that%20represent%20all%20racial%20groups.pdf>, accessed January 7, 2014.

Stanza Bopape was an ANC activist and a very active civic leader in Mamelodi (on the eastern outskirts of Pretoria). His life of mobilisation, activism and running from the police came sadly and brutally to an end in July 1988 when he was tortured to death by police of the Apartheid regime and thrown in the Komatiriver – left for the crocodiles patrolling this border between South Africa and Mozambique. The Mc Carthy corner of former Church and Beatrix now invokes two similar stories with the names of Bopape and Steve Biko. Steve Biko, the leader of the black consciousness movement, also died in police custody in 1977 in Pretoria Central Prison. The new street names mainly represent former or current ANC members and leaders, but Biko did not agree with or support the ANC and this was especially evident during the 1970s. The Council justifies this name change as follows: «Despite friction between the African National Congress and Biko throughout the 1970s, the ANC has included Biko in the pantheon of struggle heroes»³. This tension is ironically captured in **photo 3** where an ANC centenary celebration poster proclaims «Hundred years of selfless struggle» with Steve Biko in the foreground and Beatrix in the middle. The name Beatrix is, contrary to the objections to the name changes raised by the Dutch political party De Partij voor de Vrijheid during the consultation process, not a reference to Queen Beatrix but rather to Beatrix Dorey Meintjies born in 1885. She was the granddaughter of Stephanus Jacobus Meintjies, an advocate who owned Trevenna estate from which Sunnyside (a suburb close to the Pretoria city center) was developed. Further south, Beatrix Street used to be known as Mears Street (after the property owner who went on an extended European honeymoon with his second wife only to return bankrupt) and towards the north it runs into what was called Voortrekkers (the boer pioneers who trekked from the Cape Colony to the Transvaal, leaving a trail of war and death amongst the indigenous inhabitants) Street. These three street names are now all renamed into Steve Biko. Other opponents to the ANC, markedly the names of Lucas and Leah Mangope in Ga-Rankuwa, a township at the outskirts of Pretoria, were however removed as evident in **photo 4**.

Robert Sobukwe, like Biko, also had his disagreements with the congress. He joined the ANC Youth League as a student and was later secretary of the ANC Standerton branch, but when he became the editor of *The African* he began criticising the ANC for liberal left multi-racialism. Based on his support for non-racialism rather than multi-racialism he was a key fig-

ure in the creation of the breakaway Pan African Congress and was elected as its first president. His name is connected to what is colloquially referred to as «The Sobukwe Clause». He was charged and sentenced for incitement in relation to the protest which led to the Sharpeville massacre, where police simply opened fire on the crowd of demonstrators and killed around 70 people. In May 1963, after he served his three year prison sentence, the parliament passed a provision in the General Law Amendment Act that enabled the Minister of Justice to extend any prison sentence indefinitely. The clause was never applied to anybody else apart from Sobukwe and ensured that he was moved to Robben Island for another six years. His name is now in the place of Esselen's (see **photo 5**). Ewald Esselen was a lawyer, advocate, member of the Legislature and a supporter of the notorious Afrikaner Bond.

Between the lines

Both Pretorius Street and Paul Kruger Street were on the initial list of proposed names to change, but they were not changed in the end. Their racial, colonial and problematic connotation cannot be overlooked and they were definitely not kept because of their non-contentious nature. It was not simply a matter of these names slipping through the cracks, in fact, a lot can be read between the lines of the decision to keep these names as they are. We can only guess that it was part of a settlement or another compromise to ensure that the «racial harmony and cohesion»⁴ envisioned by the name change project was not sabotaged by a right-wing reaction. At the time of photographing, many signs were vandalised, notably Nico Smith Street in Rietondale and the January Masilela Street sign in **photo 6**. The Masilela sign is situated in a wealthy suburb in Pretoria East (as is evidenced by the rather pretentious Beethoven Street crossing it). General Louis Botha was the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa (created in 1910) and Masilela was a former Secretary of Defence who was allegedly assassinated in 2008 because he «knew too much about the murky world of arms deals» (Potgieter 2013). It is clear from these vandalised signs that the retention of Pretorius and Kruger did not satisfy all those disgruntled with the changes.

Pretorius refers to both voortrekker leader Andries Pretorius and his eldest son Marthinus Pretorius who, after buying portions of the farms Daspoort and Elandsport, established

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

Pretoria. Although Andries Street has been changed, the name change of Pretorius Street would probably have signaled the final word on the looming change of the name of the city itself. Chair of the Political Sciences department at UNISA, Pieter Labuschagne, explains that «Pretoria may be named after voortrekker leader Andries Pretorius, but its strongest association has been with only one man: Paulus Stephanus Johannes Kruger» (Labuschagne 2011: 151). Arguments around the retention of these names based purely on their historical importance should be approached with caution as they are easily presented as detached from the politics behind them, as illustrated by Labuschagne's article. He insists on the historical value of the statue of Paul Kruger that currently still stands in church square. Labuschagne laments the «present volatile political climate, fuelled as it is by political opportunism and historical ignorance» and argues for the statue to remain in the square (Labuschagne 2011: 153). Paul Kruger's name has been removed in other parts of the country and the world because of his connection with racism and projects of racial segregation⁵. The silence around Paul Kruger, his statue and his name, raises many questions.

Lines of flight

Between the time when the photographs were taken and the time of publishing this piece, Nelson Mandela has sadly passed on (December 5, 2013). The center of Pretoria already had Nelson Mandela Drive, which was changed during an earlier set of name changes. In **photo 7**, a crowd is crossing Madiba Street with a Beares shop in the background. The slogan of the furniture shop Beares is: «Beares really cares about you». It is however not known for its care, but notorious for its exploitation of lower income groups with credit agreements and lay-byes. If you follow Madiba Street to the west you will find first the North Gauteng High Court and then the set of high-rise apartment blocks, Schubart Park, which has recently been the topic of extensive Constitutional adjudication on the right of the Council to have evacuated the inhabitants. These apartment blocks are on the corner of Madiba Street and Sophie de Bruyn Street (see **photo 8**). Sophie de Bruyn is the only person represented by the new names who is still alive. Walking to the east in Madiba Street, you will find the crossing with Nelson Mandela Drive; where the names and clan name of the former president intersect.

In light of these images of the spirits of those whose names are now specters in the city of Pretoria, we return to Clarkson who does not assert that the lines of force and signification are fixed. On the contrary, her conclusion states that these lines of force «are contingent, kinetic, and not necessarily coterminous with *objectively* discrete objects in the world» (Clarkson 2008: 281). In her view, the art of reconciliation contains a decision of where and when to draw lines. Perhaps these lines across the street names in Pretoria fall within the class of «lines of flight», as developed by Gilles Deleuze and used in his work with Félix Guattari (2004). These lines should be lines that reconfigure the margin. This would mean that the lines of law (even in the form of administrative Municipal laws such as the regulation of street names) and of art contain the possibility of rupture. What used to be Van der Walt Street, after Andries Van der Walt, an early settler and owner of a portion of the farm Elandspoort on which Pretoria was built, is now Lilian Ngoyi. She was the first woman to be elected to the executive committee of the ANC. She was the one who, holding petitions in her one hand, knocked with her other hand on the door of Prime Minister Hans Strijdom, whose name used to be seen in the east of Pretoria and has been replaced by Solomon Mahlangu. These old and new names connected through lines of flight present us with the opportunity to «remember the future and imagine the past» (Le Roux & Van Marle 2007: 13).

Last lines

What's in a name? Due to its materiality and force of signification, renaming street names goes two ways: silencing one part of history while creating another. People's names signify before and after, good and evil – as it is seen today. The ruling party, the African National Congress, has interpreted the past by removing specific names and replacing them with even more politically specific personas. The party could not resist the predication of its own understanding of history. In contrast, Lilian Ngoyi, when she called for a minute's silence, invited her contemporaries to silently meditate on the state of society. Predication, she knew very well, is dangerous as it cements what should be publicly negotiated. The Urban Areas Act, against which the Federation for South African Women, but also, and more importantly, so many *unnamed* women fought on an everyday basis, later succeeded in doing exactly that: legitimizing the implementation of rigid and brutal lines on the basis of a legal text.

⁵ In the city of St.Gallen, Switzerland, for instance, the Swiss Anti Apartheid Movement pushed for the renaming of its «Krügerstrasse» as early as the 1980s. The street was eventually renamed into Dürrenmattstrasse in 2009. Replacing the Apartheid engineer's with a poet's name left those dissatisfied who would have liked to see a memorial for Apartheid-era victims and an apology from the local government for its support of the Apartheid regime. Others, among them community members and politicians, had fiercely opposed the replacement.

How to redress without creating new lines of division, though? Art often resists language precisely because it prefers to work with red diagonal lines rather than categorization. The law, in contrast, must categorize and put in the predicative realm what are, for many, silent experiences. Whereas the act of silence invites dialogue, the act of silencing ends the conversation.

Dealing with the past remains a potentially violent process. Whether the attempts at reconciliation and transformation manifest as silence or as predication, or through processes that encompass both, as we illustrated in this essay, it is a complex journey.

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