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Meghan Healy-Clancy

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Nomzamo: Teaching Complexity through the Life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

Meghan Healy-Clancy

When Winnie Madikizela-Mandela passed away in early April 2018, I was teaching my seminar on Apartheid and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. I have been studying apartheid for well over a decade, but I am always surprised by the excitement and challenge of teaching about it. Before my class, students have rarely learned much about the racist regime that ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994, or about the global human rights movement that tenaciously fought to transform South Africa into an inclusive democracy. But students often come into my class convinced of one thing: apartheid ended primarily because of the heroic actions of one man, Nelson Mandela.

I aim for students to leave my class grasping the complexity of anti-apartheid activism—both in and far beyond the campaigns to which Mandela was central. The anti-apartheid movement drew upon Christianity and communism; it enlisted families in boycott campaigns and militants in bombing campaigns. It rallied ordinary people—especially young people—from Soweto to university campuses in Massachusetts; it eventually captured the moral imagination of the world. And it culminated in a democratic transition that no one expected: a transition at once remarkably peaceful in Pretoria's corridors of power, and filled with enduring violence and tension in communities across South Africa. I teach this complexity by bringing an array of voices to class, through primary sources ranging from manifestos to songs. My students encounter many famous and unheralded South Africans, who reveal that apartheid ended through decades of struggle, shaped by many forms of both heroism and villainy. This April, we talked more than ever about the late Madikizela-Mandela.

For no one emblematized the complexity of anti-apartheid activism more than the woman known before her marriage as Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela: her isiXhosa first name can aptly be interpreted as "mother of struggle." It is not only that she embodied the difficulties of commitment to the anti-apartheid movement, which South Africans call "The Struggle," and served as "mother of the nation." It is also that seeing the liberation movement through her perspective is itself a struggle, causing students to grapple with core questions of social history that transcend South Africa. How do we understand political transformations differently when we examine them not only through the lives of "great men," but also through the lives of women? How does change look different when viewed "from above"—from the vantage point of high politics—and "from below"—through people's everyday experiences? Ultimately, what are the personal costs of participating in a world-historic revolution?

Winnie Mandela *(Photo in Public Domain).*

No one challenged the great man narrative of South African history centered on Nelson Mandela more than his former wife. "Mandela was extricated from the masses," Madikizela-Mandela told *London Review of Books* journalist Stephen Smith in 2013, in an interview featured in Smith's "Mandela: Death of a Politician" (2014). "He was made an idol, almost Jesus Christ! This is nonsense, a lot of nonsense. The freedom of this country was attained by the masses of this country… It was attained by women who were left to fend for their families… We are the ones who fought the enemy physically, who went out to face their bullets. The leaders were cushioned behind bars. They don't know. They never engaged the enemy on the battlefield."

Students initially tend to find her critique shocking. Her claim that "leaders were cushioned" on Robben Island, the prison off the coast of Cape Town where Mandela spent most of his

27 years of confinement, is offensive. Mandela nearly went blind from the glare of the sun during forced labor in the prison's limestone quarry. He and other prisoners endured violence and periods of solitary confinement, and many never expected to leave, as Mandela detailed in his 1994 memoir *Long Walk to Freedom*. Her suggestion that her ex-husband and other political prisoners had "never engaged the enemy on the battlefield" is absurd. Mandela was imprisoned for leading the sabotage campaign of Umkhonto we Sizwe ("Spear of the People," or MK), a militant organization founded by the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party, key members of which spent decades in prison beside him.

Stencil graffiti of Winnie Mandela, Barcelona, Spain (Photo Credit: Guy Moberly/Alamy Stock Photo).

Yet, as students reflect more fully on the anti-apartheid movement, they begin to understand her perspective. Robben Island was a political prison, but resilient prisoners turned it into "Robben Island University." They played soccer and discussed Shakespeare. Activists without formal schooling—including future president Jacob Zuma—were tutored by university-educated prisoners like Mandela. And above all, they talked politics and organized to protest prison policies. Loyalties forged in prison were enduring, with time on Robben Island later serving as a badge of honor for political candidates: in both popular culture and scholarship, Robben Island has frequently figured as a cradle of democracy. As Mandela famously said, with dark humor, "In my country we go to prison first and then become president." The 1994 collection *Voices from Robben Island* illuminates the prison experiences of Mandela and other men who would lead democratic South Africa.

Women were absent from Robben Island, which was reserved for black men. But women were far from absent from the democratic struggle. Women led early fights against "pass laws," the despised documents that black South Africans were forced to carry to prove that they were employed by white South Africans, or otherwise authorized to be in cities deemed "white areas." My class studies photographs of 20,000 women marching on the prime minister's offices to protest pass laws, in the famous protest on a day in 1956 now commemorated as Women's Day. We read their eloquent words decrying how apartheid was destroying homes and dividing families. We listen to the "struggle songs" they sang—paying close attention to their lyric, "When you strike a woman, you strike a rock."

Winnie Mandela in exile in Brandfort, South Africa, in 1977 (Photo Credit: Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo).

Women were the core of resistance. They suffered arrests and detention in the Women's Jail in Johannesburg and Pretoria Central Prison. Leading women activists, like their male counterparts, were "banned," meaning that it was illegal for them to speak in public or attend meetings. They were confined to house arrest and exiled—forced to leave the country, or forcibly removed to remote rural areas. Examining women's activism brings into clearer focus apartheid's violence toward families: as my research explores, women tended to root their political commitment in their commitments as mothers and wives.

Madikizela-Mandela's political coming-of-age epitomized how anti-apartheid activism was a family project. She was initially politicized by her family, Mpondo royalty who had fought against colonial expropriation of their family lands long before apartheid. With the support of her schoolteacher parents, she launched a career devoted to black families: in 1956, in her early twenties, she became the first black social worker at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, the vast black township outside of Johannesburg. Black women teachers and health professionals were highly respected, their work celebrated in African nationalist publications as a contribution to the struggle; to activist men, a pioneering social worker was a catch. Soon after she began work, her nurse roommate married ANC activist Oliver Tambo, partner in South Africa's first black-run law firm, Mandela and Tambo. In 1957, Winnie began dating Nelson. This was not an easy match: nearly forty years old, Mandela was going through both a divorce and a trial for treason, due to his leadership of the ANC's recent campaigns of non-violent mass resistance. But the politically-engaged young Winnie quickly became engaged to Nelson, and they married soon after his divorce was final, their bridal car covered in ANC regalia.
As the treason trials of Mandela and other ANC leaders stretched on, Madikizela-Mandela became a more serious activist, as journalist Emma Gilbey described in her 1994 biography, *The Lady: Life and Times of Winnie Mandela*. In 1958, five months pregnant, she was jailed at an anti-pass law protest, losing her job at the hospital. Despite this repression, the Mandelas built a home in Soweto. Mandela was acquitted of treason, as the state could not prove that the ANC was plotting violence.

In the 1960s, everything changed. In April 1960, the government banned the ANC and other liberation movements, after a massive new wave of protests and unprecedented police violence. Leading activists either went into exile, or went underground: law partners Tambo and Mandela exemplified these strategies, as Tambo moved to London to lead the ANC's global campaigns and Mandela traveled the country undercover, disguised as a chauffeur for a white communist comrade. In December 1961, the ANC—previously committed to non-violence—launched the armed wing MK, which began to bomb power plants and government buildings. Mandela, a key architect of MK, again faced trial, and now he was convicted of plotting revolution. In 1964, he went to Robben Island. He would not be released from prison until 1990.

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During Mandela's long imprisonment, his words and image were banned in South Africa. His wife, and in time their two daughters, spoke for him, demanding the liberation of political prisoners and the end of apartheid. Their home in Soweto became a cell

for MK recruitment. In return, officials repressed the Mandela family mercilessly. In 1965, Madikizela-Mandela was issued the first of several banning orders: she was restricted to her neighborhood, barred from activism. In 1969, police descended on her home in a 2 a.m. raid, arresting her on charges of terrorism. She spent 491 days in detention at Pretoria Central Prison, enduring months of solitary confinement and torture, and worrying ceaselessly about her daughters, as she detailed in prison diaries published in 2013 as *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69*. Upon her release in 1970, she returned to her children and home, but was placed under house arrest and prohibited from having visitors. She furtively continued to work for the ANC and MK, resulting in another six-month prison term from 1974 to 1975. After her release, she founded the Black Women's Federation, which aimed to "re-direct the status of motherhood" to include supporting Soweto's student activists, as its archives at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, detail.

When Soweto exploded in unrest after student protests in 1976, officials found Madikizela-Mandela's presence in the community dangerous. She was banished in 1977 to the remote village of Brandfort, where she knew no one and did not speak the local language. Police surveilled her and her family constantly. But both her social service and political defiance continued: she opened a clinic serving local families, recruited for MK, and spoke to visiting journalists in spite of her ban. She shaped the ANC's global campaign for the release of political prisoners by speaking on behalf of her husband, to whom she had limited but singular access. And increasingly, she snuck away. In February 1985, when her daughter Zindzi read a statement from Mandela to an ecstatic crowd in a Soweto stadium, Madikizela-Mandela was there, disguised as a domestic worker,

[Winnie Mandela] embodied the personal costs of participating in a revolution: she was imprisoned, tortured, and separated from her family.

Nelson Mandela, leader of the ANC, released from prison in 1990, salutes the crowd with his wife Winnie Mandela (Photo Credit: Trinity Mirror/Mirrorpix/Alamy Stock Photo).

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as described in Pascale Lamche's 2017 documentary *Winnie*. Enraged by her influence, security police burned down her Brandfort house in August 1985.

She then returned to Soweto, in brazen defiance of her ban. Her home became a center for young activists, who called her "Mama Winnie." They joined a soccer team under her patronage—the Mandela United Football Club—and served as her bodyguards. It is here that her story—already exemplifying apartheid's violence—becomes even more painful to teach. Examining South Africa's turbulent era between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s from her home in Soweto reveals the gulf between how the end of apartheid looked from above and below. From the perspective of high politics, the negotiated transition seemed miraculously smooth. But in communities like Soweto, the transition was anything but peaceful. Between the time of Madikizela-Mandela's return to Soweto and South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994, some 20,000 South Africans were killed in political violence—many at the hands of their neighbors. On New Year's Day in 1989, fourteen-year-old Stompie Seipei thus lost his life—at the hands of members of the Mandela United Football Club, and reportedly at the orders of "Mama." He was accused of being a spy, informing police about activities at Madikizela-Mandela's home. When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) investigated this and other murders linked to Madikizela-Mandela, she would say only "things went horribly wrong." Her testimony aired in 1997 on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's *Truth Commission Special Report*—sparking a national conversation about the violence of the "mother of the nation" in the name of the anti-apartheid movement. (Political scientist Shireen Hassim explores this ongoing conversation in the next issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.)

When students watch Madikizela-Mandela's TRC hearing, they are horrified to see how much more harrowing South Africa's democratic transition was than the image of an elated Nelson Mandela, hand and hand with Winnie after his release from prison, would suggest. "She seems so repulsive at the TRC," one student said in April, visibly stunned after having admired Madikizela-Mandela's courage in Brandfort during a previous class discussion. We then discuss how she got there. As Madikizela-Mandela herself maintained, her experiences of intense state violence hardened her. She embodied the personal costs of participating in a revolution: she was

Winnie Mandela's coffin *(Photo Credit: SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Stock Photo).*

London UK 28th April 2018. Pictures of Winnie Mandela are projected on to the windows at South Africa house following her death (Photo Credit: amer ghazzal/Alamy Stock Photo).

imprisoned, tortured, and separated from her family. The revolution—and especially the security police's extensive counterrevolution—also made her paranoid. After the Soweto protests in 1976, the South African police and military infiltrated the liberation movement with a network of spies. Often these spies were former revolutionaries, "turned" through torture. Others had their own political or personal reasons for informing on activists, including police paychecks. The spy program was not publicly known until the TRC and subsequent investigations—and in fact it remains a challenging subject to research, as historian Jacob Dlamini shows in his 2015 *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*. But the presence of informers led accusations and counter-accusations of spying to proliferate, with Madikizela-Mandela stalwart in her calls for ANC loyalists to root out spies.

At the end of our discussions about Madikizela-Mandela, it is impossible for students to see the anti-apartheid movement as a straightforward story of heroism. It looks more like an epic of complexity—a very human struggle, that historians continue to struggle to understand, using the tools of social history.

Meghan Healy-Clancy is Assistant Professor in the Department of History.