

Notes from the Field: Good-bye Mandela - Sorrow and Struggle in South Africa

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On December 5th, 2013, I was in the midst of conducting research in Cape Town, South Africa. Just before midnight, my husband opened the homepage of the *New York Times*; smiling up at him was a photograph of former South African President Nelson Mandela. After a surprised silence my husband said: “He’s gone. Mandela has died.” From that moment, through an official ten days of mourning, tributes to Mandela’s life and legacy dominated the South African media and much of daily life.

In what follows, I juxtapose the experience of witnessing mourning for Mandela with my then-concurrent research alongside residents of informal settlements in Khayelitsha, an area at Cape Town’s edge. Internal migration has fueled massive growth in South African cities during the post-Apartheid era. Significant urban populations now live in informal settlements—shack communities squatting often on public land in urban margins, generally with limited access to water, sanitation, and electricity. My research examines the impact of the post-Apartheid legacy upon daily life and activism, asking how residents engage both the promises and realities of democracy after twenty years. Mandela’s position as a hero of the anti-Apartheid struggle, and as the country’s first post-Apartheid president, is tied up not only in the mythos of the new South Africa but, increasingly, in yet unfulfilled promises of resource redistribution and opportunity.

In my academic work it has been challenging to talk productively about my experience of moving between Cape Town’s physically proximate but radically different social worlds. I utilize these edited excerpts from my fieldnotes¹ in order to take an

1 These are edited versions of my unpublished fieldnotes. For ease of reading I have chosen not to indicate direct use of original notes with quotation marks.

exceptional circumstance—the loss of national hero and global icon—to reflect upon the complexities of post-Apartheid political worlds as well as my position between these spaces.

Friday, December 6th

This morning I call my research assistant to discuss if we should cancel interviews. People might be overwhelmed, and the social movements with which we conduct research may take this opportunity to plan a march. She seems to think not, and calls our interviewees for the day—members of a movement in Khayelitsha—to confirm they are happy to meet.

We arrive mid-morning to their small office, perched at the edge of this community's several hundred shacks. One of the leaders is a younger man, Sandile,² who rarely holds back his feelings about politics. Like many residents, he has lived in a small corrugated iron shack in this community, with no sanitation services or electricity, for over a decade. We begin talking about a new process by which the City of Cape Town is engaging informal areas in local development plans—albeit with few promises for those plans actually coming to fruition. In explaining why services alone are inadequate, Sandile says: "The real democracy and the real freedom for us is land."³ Sandile, and the movement, have been critical of the Democratic Alliance (DA)—the opposition party currently in power in Cape Town—and also of the African National Congress (ANC), Mandela's party of liberation and the ruling party nationally. He says the DA prevents them from accessing services and land in Cape Town, but that, nationally, the ANC also prevents land redistribution, protecting the interests of the rich at the expense of the poor.

We talk about the upcoming national election and if voting is meaningful. This movement previously chose to

2 All names for research participants are pseudonyms.

3 All comments marked with quotations are word-for-word from fieldnotes or recordings.

boycott elections, noting the inability of any party to address remaining inequalities. Recently they've recanted, saying people themselves should choose whether to exercise their right to vote. The rejection of voting was a prominent tenet of this group, and I'm surprised at the change. Their shift suggests that the post-Apartheid political landscape is one that remains in flux.

In the evening, my husband, a friend, and I attend an interfaith memorial service at the City Hall. This is where Mandela gave his first speech upon being released from prison, so the site has powerful significance. The street running between City Hall and the Grand Parade—a paved open space the size of a city block—is cordoned off and contains a stage and two huge screens. The crowd fits into the space between the stage and the sidewalk, and people only walk through the plaza to access the long row of blue portable toilets—the same kind provided as the only form of sanitation in over a hundred informal settlements across the city.



Figure 10. “Public Memorial Service”: Crowd in front of the Cape Town City Hall during an interfaith event honoring Mandela. Cape Town, South Africa. December 2013.

Photo by Shachaf Polakow

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When we arrive nothing is happening on-stage, but at the far side of the Parade music is blaring from speakers and we see people dancing. As we approach we see an ANC van with speakers out front, and many of the group are in ANC's yellow and green. An older white man stands in front, shouting between songs: "Viva ANC, Viva!"

The service begins before long. Speakers include the mayor, preceded by a praise poet and followed by many religious leaders. An Imam I have seen at social justice events speaks, as does a Jewish leader, who intones melancholic songs with a group of men. Then there are Protestant religious leaders, someone from the Bahai faith, as well as a Khoisan representative. The event's MC was here the day Mandela spoke from these steps. He says Mandela had forgotten his glasses and borrowed those of someone else to read his speech.

The speeches begin to run together and we walk to the side of the crowd where a new cluster of people has formed, singing struggle songs and dancing. We run into white South African friends who were very active in the anti-Apartheid struggle. They are moved by the event, one is wearing a struggle shirt from the 1980s, and they all hold Mandela posters. When our friends leave we watch the dancing and chanting. Mostly young, black South Africans are tight in a circle, singing in multiple languages and toyi-toying—protest dancing. I see younger amaXhosa⁴ activists that I know from Khayelitsha in the group. The songs alternate between sorrowful and joyful, insistent and plaintive.

Saturday, December 7th

Today I attend a book fair organized by local activists. At the end of the day an activist associated with one of the groups with which I've been conducting research holds a workshop.

4 The Xhosa people constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in South Africa; amaXhosa references the Xhosa people and isiXhosa denotes the Xhosa language.

I don't know him personally, but I've attended events in his community. Themba is a soft-spoken amaXhosa man, and even sitting in the front of the workshop I strain to hear when he speaks. He begins by reading a short statement about their social movement, saying that they fight for their dignity, for improved access to services like water and electricity, and for their humanity. He states they have no alliance with political parties and that their politics is understood by grandparents and babies alike. When there is only cold water, he said, they know it is because there is no electricity in their community; that is their politics.

Themba opens the floor for questions. The audience is mostly white and middle-class. One of the first questions asks about opposition to this movement, and Themba replies that they fight for the poor but that this doesn't mean they are against everyone else. He says some people support them, but not many. Someone asks how the middle-class can help. Themba says they could use help with computer skills and working with the media. When someone asks what other resources would be helpful, an activist in the audience chides the group for making this into a "pity party." He encourages people to act in solidarity, going to communities and protests, and standing in front of the police when they come to destroy people's shacks. The audience mutters, and responses to this charge arise throughout the remainder of the workshop.

People continue to ask Themba what they should do, if they should vote, and who they should vote for. Themba looks increasingly uncomfortable, and both black and white people in the audience who see themselves as allies begin to speak for him. An older white man standing in the back asks after the movement's mission, and Themba says their mission is to work for human dignity. Not satisfied, the audience member goes on for some time about how the mission needs more detail, and that that he just wants to "help" this group reach white South Africans in a way that would be understandable.

Themba is quiet after this, but someone from the audience says loudly: "They are shackdwellers, what do you think their mission is?" The audience laughs, but the man's insistence on the movement needing to meet his expectations lingers awkwardly. The clock finally strikes 5:00 and Themba looks relieved. A white man and woman approach him, insisting upon knowing how to support the group. He suggests that they come to the community, to be around people. The couple say that they tried this and didn't feel comfortable. They ask about attending community meetings, and persist until Themba gives them a date.

The workshop and subsequent conversation are like a satire about attempts at solidarity. The couple dismiss Themba's ideas and suggestions. They, like the man asking about the mission statement, want a plan of action that is legible to them, something they might come up with themselves. The core of solidarity—listening to those you are in solidarity with—is betrayed over and over again, even in somewhat earnest attempts at connection.

Tuesday, December 10th

Today my husband and I go to the City Hall to watch the live video feed of Mandela's memorial service taking place across the country at a stadium in Soweto. There are nearly 100 foreign leaders present in Soweto, including U.S. Presidents Obama, G.W. Bush, Clinton, and Carter. While the Soweto stadium is packed with tens of thousands of attendees despite rain, the sunny relay viewing site in Cape Town is largely empty, and many present seem to be municipal employees.

We stand in line to walk past a memorial that has sprung up in front of City Hall: piles of flowers, candles, hand-written messages, photos, and other memorial items cluster along a metal barricade. Underneath a photo of a school-age child someone has written that this girl and her mother died in a car accident

in 1989 when going to visit family in exile; they add that mother and daughter are waiting in heaven to welcome Madiba.⁵

I sit in the shade under a small pine which slowly fills with older amaXhosa men overflowing from the next pine. When current South African President Zuma is on screen, one of the men yells: “That’s my president! That’s my president!” This is in sharp relief to the booing Zuma receives in person at the Soweto stadium.



Figure 11. “Watching Obama Speak from the Soweto Memorial”: Crowd in Cape Town watches Mandela memorial service relayed from Soweto. Cape Town, South Africa. December 2013.

Photo by Shachaf Polakow

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There is wild applause for Obama. People clap and shout excitedly whenever he is on screen. Zimbabwe’s President Mugabe also receives loud applause, as do United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Cuba’s Raul Castro. These heavily applauded politicians make for strange compatriots in this international showing of sorrow. The already surreal qual-

⁵ Mandela’s clan name, which is widely used in South Africa to reference him. It can be read as a sign of affection and respect, as well as a reiteration of his tribal affiliation and African identity.

ity of the event is heightened by the later revelation that one of the primary sign language interpreters—a man often shown during the memorial—was making up signs that had no relation to what was being said. With the mish-mash of political power present this creative interpretation of the event’s message seems somehow fitting.

Wednesday, December 11th

We return to Khayelitsha today for interviews with residents of Sandile’s community. Our first interviewee is a woman in her 50s with three children. She has lived here for 19 years and describes it as a “dirty place.” Her education finished at Standard 6 (Grade 8) and she is unemployed. The family shares a public water tap with more than 50 other households and they have no sanitation provided. They walk to a nearby community with flush toilets and pay a family ZAR 50 cents (\$.05) for each use. For someone who survives largely from the state’s ZAR300 (approximately \$30) monthly support per child, even this small cost is significant.

Our second interview is with a woman in her 30s who lives with her husband and two children. They live at the edge of the site and, as they have family in the nearby formal houses, are able to walk only five meters to use a flush toilet for free. She works at a daycare and is paid ZAR1,600 per month (\$160). We talk about how people make employment decisions—if she thinks most people would take a job with very low wages or would wait for something better. Like most of the replies we receive to this question, she says people will work for any amount if they don’t have food.

I keep thinking interviews this week will center on Mandela. While we do discuss the memorial events, people want to talk about their lives now, about the daily struggles to live within the country’s physically and socially marginalized spaces.

Sunday, December 15th

This morning we head to City Hall to see Mandela's funeral screened from his family home in the Eastern Cape. The early time is dictated by Xhosa tradition of burial for those of high standing when the sun is at its highest point. As the funeral would include speeches and performances, in addition to military honors and movement from the massive tent housing the 4,500 mourners to the burial site itself, the program began quite early. As we prepare to leave home, we see on national television Mandela's casket being transported into the funerary tent, pulled behind an all-terrain military vehicle sitting on terribly tall wheels, and preceded by a military marching band. At seeing the casket I feel a wave of sorrow, an empathy for those who feel this loss deeply and personally. The finality of seeing a casket is overwhelming.

Unexpectedly, the marching band on screen begins playing a jaunty tune and I am struck by the conflicting intentions that went into preparing this event. Mandela was a member of a large and multiple family, so his funeral must include both of his last two wives and his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He was also a member of his royal house, and requires burial rites befitting this stature. There are also Christian traditions followed, and, as a prominent leader of the ANC, the party is strongly represented as well. Mandela is also receiving the first state funeral of the post-Apartheid nation, a process clearly still being designed despite the years spent planning for this inevitable event. Most important may be Mandela's emotional position as the struggle hero and father of the rainbow nation, the focus of decades-long international political work, the topic of endless songs and movies, the embodiment of the vision for reconciliation post-Apartheid, and the focus of persistent dreams of equality. These many Mandelas are all here, competing for space in the stories told and the rites performed, and in the eyes of those watching

throughout South Africa and the world.

When we arrive at City Hall there only about 500 people present, clustered near the screens. We walk along the now significantly expanded memorial. What will happen to the ephemera when this again becomes a street? Will the paintings and hand-drawn signs, the cards and children's notes, the teddy bears and old t-shirts find a home in some archive, catalogued and boxed away? Or, will they be tossed unceremoniously into a dumpster behind City Hall?



Figure 12. “Notes and memorabilia for Mandela left in front of Cape Town City Hall.” Cape Town, South Africa. December 2013.

Photo by Shachaf Polakow

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Many speeches are made, largely by leaders of African countries and notable South Africans. For me, the most powerful is given by Ahmed Kathrada, one of the accused in the Rivonia Trial alongside Mandela and many others, and a Robben Island prisoner for 18 years. He speaks of the profound sorrow at losing this close friend and ally, forged through decades of suffering and imprisonment. Kathrada speaks of Mandela's bodily weakness, noting how years and illness wracked his body. He

calls Mandela “brother” and his voice breaks with emotion. This is a reflection not on Mandela as timeless, but as human.

We stay at the City Hall until noon to see the casket moved to the burial site. We see the start of the burial, as the regiment sets his casket above the grave. Military planes fly in formations above the burial site and three helicopters fly past with South African flags beneath. Suddenly the feed cuts out, and we are taken to hosts inside a building at a distance from the grave site. The burial itself is to be left private for the family and ritual elements.

Leaving, we meet a white South African friend. She says that in 1990 she came to City Hall with her mother to hear Mandela speak after he was released from prison. That day they had quickly made an ANC flag from a shawl and flew it out the window as they drove into town. She says it is important to stand here, on this spot, and watch the end of that story, the final laying to rest of the man who signaled an end to the half-century of Apartheid.

The crowd today was very quiet. There were fewer signs, no flag waving, and no shouting or singing as earlier in the week. Everything felt somber, even at a distance.

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