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**Subversive Sisterhood: Female Detainees'  
Resistance in Apartheid's Carceral Spaces**



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## Subversive Sisterhood: Female Detainees' Resistance in Apartheid's Carceral Spaces



Figure 1. *A Woman's Place is in the Struggle, Not Behind Bars!*, Federation of Transvaal Women, 1988 <<https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/image.php?kid=163-577-39>> [accessed 22 January 2024]

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## **Introduction**

*'You have failed as a woman, you have failed to find a husband, you have failed to look after your children...This is why you have joined [the struggle]. You are not a proper woman'.*<sup>1</sup>

These were the words of abuse directed at Thenjiwe Mtintso when she was detained by apartheid security forces in 1976. South African prison authorities persistently framed women's political resistance as unnatural and inappropriate. Mtintso remembered another degrading taunt: 'you are a whore...you have come to service these men'. Everything that Mtintso stood for was turned into the source of her humiliation: this 'consistency of drawing away from your own activism, from your own commitment as an actor, was perhaps worse than torture, worse than the physical assault'.<sup>2</sup> The denial of Mtintso's political identity posed a direct threat to her sense of self. Mtintso highlights the assumption, made by the apartheid security police and since perpetuated by dominant historical narratives, that women were not active agents in the anti-apartheid struggle. Her testimony reveals that apartheid prisons were distinctly gendered spaces.

Apartheid, at its essence, was a series of spatial controls. From the segregation of public spaces to the use of pass laws to restrict freedom of movement, the apartheid state relied upon the manipulation of space to maintain its racial order.<sup>3</sup> Detention was an important spatial weapon in the state's repressive apparatus.<sup>4</sup> Through confining subversive individuals, detention aimed to silence the voices of the liberation struggle. In 1963, the General Laws Amendment Act, No. 37 was passed, allowing up to 90 days detention without trial.<sup>5</sup> Of the 78,000 individuals detained during apartheid, between 10 and 15 per cent are known to have

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<sup>1</sup> Thenjiwe Mtintso, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Human Rights Violations Women's Hearings*, 28 July 1997, Johannesburg, <<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/women/masote.htm>> [accessed 30 January 2024].

<sup>2</sup> Mtintso, TRC.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Robinson, 'Spaces of Democracy: Remapping the Apartheid City', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16(1998), 533-548, p. 533.

<sup>4</sup> Don Foster, Donald Skinner, 'Detention and Violence: Beyond Victimology', in *Political Violence and the Struggle in South Africa*, ed. by N. Chabani Manganyi, André du Toit, (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Max Coleman, *A Crime Against Humanity: Analysing the Repression of the Apartheid State*, (Johannesburg: Human Rights Committee of South Africa, 1998), <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/crime-against-humanity-analysing-repression-apartheid-state-edited-max-coleman>> [accessed 22 December 2023].

been women.<sup>6</sup> This is likely to be a conservative estimate as detainees' gender was not always recorded.<sup>7</sup> This dissertation seeks to challenge androcentric historical understandings of detention under apartheid by uncovering the experiences of female detainees.

This study will conceptualise the apartheid prison as a space in which the identity of every detainee was constantly assaulted, negotiated, constructed and asserted. At the hands of prison authorities, detainees were subjected to the repression of both their sense of self and their solidarity with one another. The prison was a terrain of struggle over individual and collective identity. The femininity of incarcerated women was transformed into a tool of their humiliation, their agency as political activists was denied, and racial divisions were entrenched in order to thwart comradeship.

However, in their first-hand narratives, women refuse to define their detention solely by the suffering they endured. Instead, they take the opportunity to assert, how both individually and collectively, they used the space of the prison against itself. Through forming supportive detainee communities and retaining pride in both their political activism and femininity, women resisted the prison's assault on their identity. Over recent years, a small number of historians have begun to acknowledge how female detainees suffered differently from their male counterparts. This study seeks to enrich this scholarship by arguing that just as the humiliation of female detainees was markedly gendered, so were their expressions of agency and strategies of resistance.

## Literature

This study will address gaps in the historiography on women's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle. Women have suffered institutionalised silencing in narratives of South African liberation, largely assumed to have been a masculine endeavour.<sup>8</sup> In favour of a monolithic representation of the anti-apartheid struggle, post-apartheid history-making denied

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<sup>6</sup> Coleman.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Bridger, *Young Women Against Apartheid: Gender, Youth and South Africa's Liberation Struggle*, (United Kingdom: James Currey, 2021), p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> Mthunzi Zungu, Nozipho Manqele, Calda de Vries, Thato Molefe, Muziwandile Hadebe, 'HERstory: Writing Women into South African History', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 28(2014), 7-17, p. 16.

the agency of South African women.<sup>9</sup> If their involvement in the struggle was recognised, it was reduced to their supporting roles as the wives or mothers of male comrades.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1990s, gender historians have sought to acknowledge women's contributions to the struggle in their own right. Shireen Hassim has illuminated the significance of women's political organisations, while Janet Cherry has shed light on women's involvement in township uprisings.<sup>11</sup> Notably, historians have been slower to pay attention to women's experiences in apartheid's carceral spaces. This can be understood as part of a wider disciplinary issue; research on prison and punishment is dominated by male-centric narratives, neglecting the experience of the female prisoner.<sup>12</sup> This study will challenge the marginalisation of female detainees in scholarship by making women inmates the subjects of its analysis.

Through exploring how female detainees challenged their incarceration, this study seeks to enhance historical understandings of prisoner resistance. In her seminal study, Fran Lisa Buntman identifies that Robben Island (an exclusively male prison), designed as an institution of oppression, was transformed by its political inmates into a site of resistance.<sup>13</sup> Buntman's work was influential in encouraging scholars to problematise the prison as a contested space. Noteworthy works which followed include Crain Soudien's reassessment of Robben Island as a 'university', Neo Lekgotla Laga Ramoupi's study of cultural resistance, and Anthony Suze's first-hand account of how Islanders resisted through sport.<sup>14</sup> These studies made an important historiographical contribution by illuminating prisoners' agency. However, the pre-eminence of Robben Island, in both popular and academic imaginations, has produced an androcentric historiography, overshadowing the experiences of female detainees on the mainland, in places like Kroonstad and Pretoria Central Prison. The

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<sup>9</sup> Annie E. Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, (New York: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Male-centric accounts include the state-sponsored, The South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Volumes 1-7 (Johannesburg: Unisa Press, 2005-2017).

<sup>11</sup> Shireen Hassim, *Women's Organisations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Janet Cherry, "'We were not Afraid': The Role of Women in the 1980s Township Uprising in the Eastern Cape", in *Women in South African History: They remove boulders and cross rivers*, ed. by Nomboniso Gasa, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Jill A. McCorkel, 'Embodied Surveillance and the Gendering of Punishment', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32(2003), 41-76, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Fran Lisa Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Crain Soudien, 'Robben Island University Revisited', in *One Hundred Years of the ANC: Debating Liberation Histories Today*, ed. by Ineke Kessel et al. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012); Neo Lekgotla Laga Ramoupi, 'Cultural Resistance on Robben Island: Songs of Struggle and Liberation in Southern Africa' in *A Companion to African History*, ed. by William H. Worger, Charles Ambler, Nwando Achebe, (United States of America: John Wiley & Sons, 2018); Anthony Suze, 'The Untold Story of Robben Island: Sports and the Anti-Apartheid Movement', *Sport in Society*, 13(2010), 36-42.

silencing of female detainees has perpetuated the security police's denial of women's political identities. Further historical investigation is necessary.

As the historiography on female detainees in South Africa is underdeveloped, this study will draw upon works with alternative geographical parameters. In their studies of Latin America and the Middle East respectively, both Mary Jane Treacy and Marilyn Booth critically highlight the gendered positionality of the female political detainee. She is not only politically transgressive, but also socially transgressive, and therefore 'doubly dangerous' in the eyes of the state.<sup>15</sup> Although Booth and Treacy do not focus on resistance specifically, their findings are crucial for understanding the gendered experiences of South African female detainees.

Over recent years, a handful of historians have begun to rectify the omission of female detainees from South Africa's historical record. In her book, *Women in Solitary*, Shanthini Naidoo uncovers four women's experiences of detention in the late 1960s.<sup>16</sup> Through extended interviews with these women, Naidoo gives voice to the female experience of the anti-apartheid struggle. Naidoo follows these women's lives from their initial politicisation to the present day. This temporal approach means that Naidoo pays little attention to the specific strategies of resistance women adopted during their detention, which is the focus of this study. Emily Bridger also draws predominantly from oral history interviews in her book *Young Women Against Apartheid*, which dedicates a chapter to exploring how young female comrades navigated apartheid's carceral spaces.<sup>17</sup> While her focus is not on resistance specifically, Bridger does detail some of the ways female detainees challenged their detention, such as through withstanding interrogatory questioning or through political education. However, Bridger's sole focus on black women means she does not thoroughly address detention as a racialised experience. Through analysing the testimonies of black, Coloured and white women, this dissertation will build on Bridger's work. This study will mirror both Naidoo's and Bridger's prioritisation of women's voices but aims to take their works further by making resistance the central focus of its analysis.

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Jane Treacy, 'Double Binds: Latin American Women's Prison Memoirs', *Hypatia*, 11:4(1996), 130-145, p. 136; Marilyn Booth, 'Women's Prison Memoirs in Egypt and Elsewhere: Prison, Gender, Praxis', *MERIP Middle East Report*, 1987, 35-41, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Shanthini Naidoo, *Women in Solitary: Inside South Africa's Female Resistance to Apartheid*, (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Bridger, *Young Women*.



Few historians have focussed specifically on South African women's resistance in detention, with the exception of Kalpana Hiralal and Natacha Filippi. Hiralal's research exposes the gendered nature of incarcerated women's physical and psychological humiliation – female detainees were subjected to forced stripping, verbal taunts and sexual torture. While Hiralal importantly identifies that, as well as being a 'site of repression', the prison was also a 'site of resistance', she does little to explore what the latter looked like in practice.<sup>18</sup> Filippi recognises how women prisoners, both political and common-law, resisted through organised protest, such as riots against warders, as well as through more covert strategies, such as smuggling food.<sup>19</sup> This study will refine Filippi's scope to focus solely on female political detainees, in order to explore how women's political identities intersected with their gendered prison experience. Filippi's case-study approach, centred on a singular prison (Pollsmoor) demonstrates that significant gaps in the field are waiting to be filled. This study seeks to address these gaps.

This dissertation will challenge the marginalisation of female political detainees in historical narratives of South Africa's liberation. It will depart from previous literature by focussing exclusively on their resistance. In doing so, this study will reveal that just as female detainees' treatment was distinctly gendered, so were their strategies of resistance. Scholars have failed to acknowledge the latter, limiting their understandings of apartheid's carceral spaces and making this study an important contribution.

## Methodology

Historians of post-1960s anti-apartheid resistance are faced with limited documentary sources – when anti-apartheid organisations were forced underground, they committed very little to paper.<sup>20</sup> The written archive has rendered female detainees particularly invisible. As most of the subjects of this study were never convicted of a crime, unlike the male Robben Islanders,

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<sup>18</sup> Kalpana Hiralal, 'Narratives and testimonies of women detainees in the anti-apartheid struggle', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 29(2015), 34-44, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Natacha Filippi, 'Women's Protests: Gender, Imprisonment and Resistance in South Africa (Pollsmoor Prison, 1970s-90s)', *Review of African Political Economy*, 43(2016), 436-450.

<sup>20</sup> Bridger, p. 15.

the Department of Correctional Services has few records of their experiences.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, female detainees' resistance inside apartheid's prisons received significantly less media and institutional attention than their male counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

This study seeks to disrupt the gendered 'violence' of the archive through unmuting the voices of female detainees.<sup>23</sup> By analysing women's first-hand narratives, it will make visible the ways in which incarcerated women asserted both their sense of self, and their solidarity with one another. The first type of narrative used will be the autobiographical memoirs of Ellen Kuzwayo, Caesarina Kona Makhoere and Emma Mashinini, published in the late 1980s.<sup>24</sup> These memoirs mark these women's pioneering attempts to challenge the male-dominated mainstream narrative of the anti-apartheid struggle. Secondly, the South African History Archive (SAHA) kindly granted me access to their 1981 Detainees Oral History Project, a source base no scholar has used to date. The project consists of interviews conducted between 2002-2003 and is unique in its inclusion of female detainees, many of whom had not previously spoken out about their detention.

The final form of narrative analysed will be women's testimonies given to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 1997. The TRC was intended to 'reveal the truth about political conflicts' so that the 'injustices of the past never occur again'.<sup>25</sup> The TRC predominantly treated women as 'secondary witnesses' – the wives or mothers of men who had been violated.<sup>26</sup> Even after Special Hearings for Women were introduced, scholars such as Fiona Ross have argued that the TRC's preoccupation with sexual violence had the effect of further marginalising women's agency by reinforcing a sense of their total vulnerability.<sup>27</sup> This study argues that between the lines of incarcerated women's accounts of their suffering, are traces of the ways in which they boldly resisted. While the TRC defined women by their

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<sup>21</sup> Naidoo, p. 2

<sup>22</sup> Filippi, p. 437.

<sup>23</sup> This study borrows the term 'violence of the archive' from Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 12(2008), 1-14.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman*, (London: The Women's Press, 1985); Caesarina Kona Makhoere, *No Child's Play: In Prison Under Apartheid*, (London: The Women's Press, 1988); Emma Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life*, (London: The Women's Press, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Belinda Bozzoli, 'Public Ritual and Private Transition: The Truth Commission in Alexandra Township, South Africa 1996', *African Studies*, 57(1998), 167-195, p. 167.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Russell, 'A Self-Defining Universe? Case Studies from the 'Special Hearings: Women' of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *African Studies*, 67(2008), 49-69, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*, (London: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 17.

victimhood, the women themselves rejected such a characterisation. In fact, the act of standing before the commission and telling their story should be seen as the pinnacle of female agency.

These three types of narratives were written or spoken during different decades, under different circumstances. However, each act of testifying embodies a woman's act of resistance. The subjects of this study were all arrested for their anti-apartheid activism, ranging from student protests to African National Congress (ANC) underground work. The prison narrative represents the ultimate political act of asserting one's identity against a repressive system. Paul Gready conceptualises the prison memoir as the quintessential articulation of the oppositional 'power of writing'.<sup>28</sup> To be a political prisoner is to be constantly rewritten by the official 'power of writing' – from the making of a statement to the regulations governing imprisonment.<sup>29</sup> Through the memoir, the former detainee reclaims control of his/her own truth. This study will echo Gready's notion of the narrative's 'oppositional power' but argues that he gives too much authority to the written word. The spoken testimony, whether an oral history or a TRC hearing, holds as much oppositional power. The voice of the female detainee is powerful and symbolic, speaking out against a regime which sought to silence her. Additionally, the female detainee's narrative opposes more than the 'official power' which Gready refers to.<sup>30</sup> As Booth and Treacy identify, female detainees' political activism defied expectations of tolerable female behaviour and disrupted the established social order.<sup>31</sup> Through their narratives, women express pride in their identities as female political actors. Just as female detainees were seen as doubly transgressive, this study conceptualises their narratives as 'doubly defiant'. Not only do their testimonies oppose the state, they also work against the power of gendered social norms.

While historians have often been mindful of oral histories and first-hand narratives for their subjectivity, for this study, the subjective is the methodology's greatest strength. Testimonies provide insight into the personal meaning of history, not only illuminating women's experiences, but also how they see themselves, and how they wish to be seen by others.<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Gready, 'Autobiography and the 'Power of Writing': Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19(1993), 489-523, p. 493.

<sup>29</sup> Gready, 'Autobiography', p. 489.

<sup>30</sup> Gready, 'Autobiography', p. 505.

<sup>31</sup> Booth, p. 35; Treacy, p. 136.

<sup>32</sup> Bridger, p. 17.

their narratives, women refuse to be defined by their vulnerability. Instead, they reveal their agency in resisting the conditions of their incarceration. Their testimonies illuminate the struggle they fought over their identity during detention, and the act of testifying symbolises their ultimate triumph, as they exercise control over their sense of self. Whilst not ignoring women's suffering, through focussing on resistance, this study hopes to do justice to female detainees' self-representations as active, defiant agents.

This study will focus on the decade between 1976 and 1986. In 1976, the Soweto Uprising 'became a spark that ignited the whole country', triggering student protests across South Africa.<sup>33</sup> Caesarina Kona Makhoere was detained in October 1976 after her involvement in a series of student riots in Pretoria.<sup>34</sup> In 1986, the State of Emergency which had been announced the year prior, was extended to the whole country. Arrests were made on an unprecedentedly large scale and restrictions were introduced to stop the media reporting on the security police's activities.<sup>35</sup> Zahrah Narkedien, a uMkhonto we Sizwe cadre, was arrested in 1986.<sup>36</sup> The decade in between was one of high tensions and a high number of detentions, offering suitable temporal parameters for this dissertation.

Studies which have used a case-study approach to analyse a singular prison ignore the fact that female detainees were frequently moved between prisons.<sup>37</sup> The sudden movement of detainees was mobilised to rupture women's experiences and sever the relationships they had formed with others. This study departs from existing literature to explore the network of carceral spaces that women were confined in and forcibly moved between. This methodological approach will provide a more nuanced representation of female detainees' spatial experiences.

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<sup>33</sup> Makhoere, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Makhoere, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Clive Plasket, 'The Eastern Cape Bench, Civil Liberties and the 1985/1986 State of Emergency', *South African Journal on Human Rights*, 2(1986), 142-153, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> Mrs Zahrah Narkedien, *TRC Special Hearings: Prisons*, 21 July 1997, The Fort, Johannesburg, <<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/prison/narkedie.htm>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

<sup>37</sup> Studies limited to one prison: Filippi, 'Women's protests', analyses Pollsmoor Prison; NPZ Mbatha, 'Narratives of Women Detained in the Kroonstad Prison during the Apartheid Era: A Socio-political Exploration, 1960 - 1990', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 43(2018), 91-110.

## Structure

This study adopts a three-chapter structure to highlight the persistence and variety of female detainees' resistance.

### Chapter One – '*We had our own language*': *Forging a Collective Identity*

This chapter will examine how female detainees resisted against the carceral system and protected one another from the brutalities of detention through their collective solidarity.

### Chapter Two – '*I started to sing louder*': *Expressing Individual Identity*

This chapter will explore how women continued to resist, within the spaces of the solitary cell and the interrogation room, when they were separated from the female detainee community.

### Chapter Three – '*Defeating the enemy in their own backyard*': *Negotiating the Identity of Prison Authorities*

This chapter will illuminate how female detainees worked against the carceral system by challenging the identity of prison authorities, alleviating the conditions of their imprisonment in the process.

## **Chapter One – ‘We had our own language’: Forging a Collective Identity** <sup>38</sup>

Detention without trial was designed to incite social and political dislocation.<sup>39</sup> Detainees were isolated from their families, friends and political networks. The security police cruelly targeted women’s relational identities. Female detainees were taunted for being failed mothers and their love for family members was weaponised against them. After enduring extreme physical torture, the only thing that made Zahrah Narkedien ‘break’ was when her interrogators threatened to ‘kidnap [her] four-year-old nephew, Christopher, bring him to the thirteenth floor and drop him out of the window’. At that point, Narkedien cooperated.<sup>40</sup> Interrogators played upon close ties between women and children, presumed to shape the identity of women of all races.<sup>41</sup> When Haanchen Koornhof was detained in 1981, she was forced to leave behind her autistic son, Justin. During her interrogation, Koornhof was told that ‘he was doing very badly...welfare had stepped in, decided I was a terrible mother and put him up for adoption’.<sup>42</sup> Koornhof’s interrogators sought to diminish her self-worth as a woman who could take care of her child.<sup>43</sup> Testifying over two decades after her detention, Koornhof stated that she ‘still feel[s] badly about Justin, terribly’.<sup>44</sup> In apartheid prisons, women’s familial identities were turned into a source of their humiliation. Female detainees’ political activism was made to seem unnatural and a reflection of their failure to be ‘proper’ women. Apartheid prison authorities sought to break down detainees’ political and gendered identities, calling into question each woman’s sense of self.

While Bridger, Hiralal and Filippi, have acknowledged the gendered harassment female detainees suffered, they have failed to account for how women contested such humiliation.<sup>45</sup> This chapter will disrupt this misleading narrative of total female vulnerability. Women’s

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<sup>38</sup> Merle Favis, interviewed by Jonathan Ancer, *Jewish Museum Biography Project*, 27 March 2020 < [https://sajmarchives.com/uploads/r/sajm-jewish-digital-archive-project-jdap/4/d/8/4d8ad4f74a6efcf9a9bc43c80effd21af16cad44222daab20f70fc46c31e78fb/Merle\\_Favis\\_27\\_March\\_2020.pdf](https://sajmarchives.com/uploads/r/sajm-jewish-digital-archive-project-jdap/4/d/8/4d8ad4f74a6efcf9a9bc43c80effd21af16cad44222daab20f70fc46c31e78fb/Merle_Favis_27_March_2020.pdf) > [accessed 03 January 2024].

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Merrett, ‘Detention without Trial in South Africa: The Abuse of Human Rights as State Strategy in the Late 1980s’, *Africa Today*, 37(1990), 53-66, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> Narkedien, TRC.

<sup>41</sup> Ross, p. 67.

<sup>42</sup> Haanchen Koornhof, interviewed by Michelle Friedman, *The 1981 Detainees Oral History Project*, South African History Archive AL2933, October 9 2002, Track 2.

<sup>43</sup> Treacy, p. 137.

<sup>44</sup> Koornhof, Track 2.

<sup>45</sup> Bridger, p. 164; Hiralal, p. 36; Filippi, p. 443.

testimonies are more than accounts of personal suffering. They are a ‘collective enterprise’, narrated by individuals as a testament to their common struggle, both inside and outside the prison.<sup>46</sup> Women consistently point to the centrality of their connections with others to their endurance of incarceration. Forging a collective identity was a means of survival. This study will demonstrate that it was also a particularly gendered means of resistance. Booth describes the female detainee’s ‘struggle for self-realisation...for one’s right to be a political woman’.<sup>47</sup> This chapter argues that detainees asserted themselves as ‘political women’ through their collective solidarity. Women constructed educational networks, through which they shared knowledge. They also cared deeply for one another and forged bonds of sisterhood. The female detainee community was a space in which women could express pride in their simultaneously feminine and political identities, working against the prison authorities’ gendered abuse.

### The denial of communication

Drawing upon their collective ingenuity, female detainees found ways to transcend the walls of the individual cell, which sought to isolate and entrap them. Passing notes between cells was a ‘morale boosting exercise’, which often functioned as an act of political resistance.<sup>48</sup> Merle Favis remembered the creative ways in which detainees communicated from one cell to the next: ‘we used to take little pieces of soap...then I would take the elastic from my underwear and tie a note that was written on toilet paper...and throw that over’.<sup>49</sup> During her detention, Favis took the opportunity to learn Zulu from black detainees next-door to her. This community of detained activists wrote all of their notes to one another in Zulu, working against the grain of the language of the oppressor.<sup>50</sup> They transformed the prison into a space of subversive education, challenging racial divides in the process. Detainees’ notes also served the purpose of sharing important information about their interrogations.<sup>51</sup> Female detainees resisted the secrecy of the dark, locked interrogation room and subverted the

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<sup>46</sup> Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 1987), p. 120.

<sup>47</sup> Booth, p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> Koornhof, SAHA, Track 2.

<sup>49</sup> Merle Favis, interviewed by Michelle Friedman, *The 1981 Detainees Oral History Project*, SAHA AL2933, September 18 2002, Track 2.

<sup>50</sup> Favis, *Jewish Museum*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Favis, SAHA, Track 2.

interrogators' gruelling attempts to turn political inmates against one another. Even when they were confined behind cell walls, detainees sustained the unity of their political struggle.

While sight is restricted by the walls of every cell, other senses can transcend physical barriers. The landscape of the prison necessitates a reordering of the traditional hierarchy of the senses.<sup>52</sup> Paul Gready conceptualises the 'hostile noise regime' of the apartheid prison – of rattling keys, slamming doors, and verbal abuse.<sup>53</sup> Sound was a weapon of control, used to incite fear and maintain order. At the same time, sound was a means through which detainees could orientate themselves through a kind of 'sensory mapping'.<sup>54</sup> Detainees' 'ears could work very fast'.<sup>55</sup> Makhoere described how because her cell was 'sandwiched between two other cells' she could hear footsteps coming and going. When the sounds of footsteps became more distant, 'I would bang on the wall...and the other detainees would respond by banging on their side of the wall. That would excite me so!'. They would then open the small window between their cells and 'talk about anything under the sun'. For Makhoere, talking to her fellow detainees 'kept [her] sane, kept [her] going'. Then, 'when we heard the keys rattling at the main door, we would be silent'.<sup>56</sup> Detainees learned to interpret the sounds around them to safeguard their communication with one another.

Female detainees did more than just work around the sounds of their oppressors, they also created their own sounds through 'talking and laughing and sharing jokes and singing'.<sup>57</sup> Women constructed, what this study coins, a 'rival noise regime'. They filled the hostile space of the prison with the sounds of their friendship. Incarcerated women connected with one another through the sounds of their voices – voices which the apartheid state sought to silence. Favis recalled how 'singing was the most extraordinary experience'.<sup>58</sup> Detainees took it in turns to lead political songs from their cells. In the wider anti-apartheid struggle, liberation music was a communal act of expression and a weapon of resistance.<sup>59</sup> The act of

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Gready, 'South African Life Stories Under Apartheid: Imprisonment, Exile and Homecoming', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1997), p. 138  
<<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161529235.pdf>> [accessed 22 February 2024].

<sup>53</sup> Gready, 'South African', pp. 136-137.

<sup>54</sup> Gready, 'South African', p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> Makhoere, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> Makhoere, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Mtintso, TRC.

<sup>58</sup> Favis, SAHA, Track 2.

<sup>59</sup> Michela E. Vershbow, 'The Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in South Africa's Anti-Apartheid Movement', *Inquiries Journal*, 2(2010).



singing protest music within the very space that sought to suppress political spirit was particularly symbolic. Favis remembered how it ‘sometimes felt that we were shaking...the fifteen floors of that building. It was the most extraordinary, powerful, almost religious experience’. Through song, female detainees transcended the spatial boundaries which separated them and marked the prison with the ‘spirit of [their] solidarity’. <sup>60</sup> Female detainees both subverted and directly challenged the carceral noise regime.

Collectively, female detainees exercised ‘spatial agency’ - the ability of groups to transform and restructure the meaning and use of space through struggle. <sup>61</sup> Women used both written and verbal communication to transcend their spatial confinement in individual cells. They transformed the prison from a site of repression into a space of unity and comradeship, asserting the strength of their collective identity.

### The denial of knowledge

The denial of knowledge was a weapon of the carceral arsenal, mobilised specifically against political detainees to cut them off from the ongoing struggle outside. The female detainee community subverted their political isolation by learning from each other. When Makhoere arrived at Kroonstad, she was greeted by five female comrades: ‘Feel at home. *A luta continua.*’ These words marked the immediate welcoming of Makhoere into Kroonstad’s female community. Makhoere drew particular strength from the prison’s motherly figure, Dorothy Nyembe, who taught her ‘about the women’s struggle in our history’. <sup>62</sup> Symbolically, within the very space that was designed to eliminate political dissent, Makhoere was politicised. Through her political education, Makhoere was able to situate herself within a wider narrative of the struggle of South African women. She remembered how she left Mama Dorothy with the words: ‘we are taking over when you retire’ and she ‘walk[ed] away much stronger’. <sup>63</sup> Makhoere understood herself as continuing the struggle of

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<sup>60</sup> Favis, SAHA, Track 2.

<sup>61</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., ‘Space in Contentious Politics’ in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. by Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone et. al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Makhoere, p. 16.

<sup>63</sup> Makhoere, p. 16.

the woman she admired so much, endowing her incarceration with purpose and her mind with determination.

It was not only young women who learnt from their elders. Ellen Kuzwayo, who was 63 when she was detained in 1977, remembered the ‘young girls of my children’s age’ who ‘really supported me...with their...profound dedication and committed involvement’. Together, they ‘shar[ed] meaningful current events related to the lives of black people as individuals.’<sup>64</sup> The female detainee community moulded the prison into an oppositional space of shared teaching and learning. Kuzwayo described how illicit newspaper reading was a regular engagement: ‘each of us [was] assigned to compile current events on specific topics so that we could all be...up-to-date with the daily happenings.’<sup>65</sup> The accumulation of communal knowledge enabled women to maintain their steadfast commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle, strengthening the political consciousness of the entire detainee community. Collectively, female detainees asserted themselves as political women.

Existing scholarship has not done justice to the variety of relationships female detainees formed. Both Hiralal and Bridger assume the segregation between political and common-law prisoners to have been absolute.<sup>66</sup> Women’s narratives reveal that this was not always the case. This chapter will depart from existing historiography by revealing the inclusivity of the female detainee community. Political detainees connected with common-law prisoners, who often served as conduits for information. Makhoere recalled how any ‘chance we got to communicate with the common-law prisoners was used to the full’. Female common-law prisoners, able to smuggle newspapers, ‘would stand beneath the window and talk as if they were talking to each other loudly...we would know that this was a message meant for us.’ This would leave Makhoere and her comrades ‘with something to talk about’, keeping their minds busy.<sup>67</sup> News connected the prisoner’s struggle with the wider struggle being waged outside, endowing their suffering with meaning.<sup>68</sup> Through forming connections with common-law prisoners, female detainees extended the parameters of their community and subverted their total isolation.

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<sup>64</sup> Kuzwayo, p. 210.

<sup>65</sup> Kuzwayo, p. 211.

<sup>66</sup> Hiralal, ‘Narratives’; Bridger, *Young Women*.

<sup>67</sup> Makhoere, pp. 38-39.

<sup>68</sup> Harlow, p. 130.

Common-law prisoners also helped detainees to communicate with their families. When Deborah Matshoba was moved to Middelburg Prison, the male common-law prisoners in the cells opposite her helped her to work on the wardresses' weaknesses. Knowing that the white wardresses would never touch her 'dirty blankets', the male prisoners used these blankets to smuggle food, birthday cards and even a press cutting of Matshoba's son into her cell.<sup>69</sup> The 'dirty blankets' symbolised the prison's denial of detainees' hygiene. Instead of allowing them to be a tool of her humiliation, Matshoba used the blankets to transcend her confinement. Even though she was entrapped in 'the tiniest cell', Matshoba connected with her family. Matshoba remembered how these 'real criminals who had murdered, who had done robbery...were the warmest people'.<sup>70</sup> Through using her narrative to express her gratitude, Matshoba asserts the triumph of prisoner solidarity over the carceral system. Female detainees extended the boundaries of their communities to include common-law prisoners, enabling them to remain connected to their political and familial lives outside of the prison.

### The denial of dignity

Prison conditions were designed to dehumanise or defeminise women. Female detainees were denied domestic necessities, such as sanitary towels and soap.<sup>71</sup> The carceral system sought to mould the female body into a site of humiliation. Operating against such objectification, female detainees cared deeply for one another. This enabled women 'to maintain their humanity and therefore to triumph, no matter how harsh their circumstances'.<sup>72</sup> When Kuzwayo returned to her cell 'suffer[ing] acutely from abdominal pain' after an operation, her fellow inmate, Mathabo Pharase promised to look after her.<sup>73</sup> In her memoir, Kuzwayo expresses her gratitude for the bonds of sisterhood which sustained her: '[Mathabo], you possess some hidden, rare, treasured talents of love...I am grateful for the opportunity to know you'.<sup>74</sup> Through the 'oppositional power of writing', Kuzwayo asserts the triumph of

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<sup>69</sup> Deborah Matshoba, *TRC Human Rights Violations Women's Hearings*, 29 July 1997, Johannesburg <<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/women/matshoba.htm>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

<sup>70</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>71</sup> Jennifer Davis, Federation of Transvaal Women, 'A Woman's Place Is in the Struggle – Not Behind Bars', *JSTOR Primary Sources* (1988), p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Treacy, p. 134.

<sup>73</sup> Kuzwayo, p. 209.

<sup>74</sup> Kuzwayo, p. 209.

female solidarity over the carceral system's attempt to dehumanise her.<sup>75</sup> When Matshoba was re-detained at the Johannesburg Fort in a 'terrible' state, her fellow comrades took care of her. Matshoba 'had no hair...my hair was just pulling out' so Jubie Mayet made her a special mixture and gently rubbed it on her head. With the support of her friend, Matshoba remembered how she 'drew courage once more'.<sup>76</sup> Apartheid's carceral system rendered the female body an object and aimed to deprive women of their femininity. Through caring for her friend, Mayet restored Matshoba's body into a site of humanity and dignity.

Female detainees were capable of challenging and negotiating the conditions of their incarceration.<sup>77</sup> The spatial landscape of the prison was designed to deny detainees privacy. Women were constantly exposed to the gaze of prison authorities, even when they were washing themselves.<sup>78</sup> When possible, women drew on their collective strength to reclaim the spaces which sought to degrade them. Kuzwayo and her fellow inmates at the Fort were dissatisfied with 'the lack of privacy in the bathroom'. Through collective protest, they 'ultimately won...and got the latch for the bathroom' and 'the broken windowpanes and doors were all repaired'.<sup>79</sup> Prison conditions were not static and unchanging. Rather, they were constantly contested.<sup>80</sup> Female detainees used their collective voice to exercise spatial agency and change the prison bathroom into a space of privacy. Operating against a system which rendered the female body a worthless object, women reclaimed their dignity.

In many ways, each prison was a microcosm of apartheid society. Prison life was defined by racial privileges, aiming to break detainees' spirits and shatter their unity. Clothing was strictly divided along racial lines. White prisoners had stylish clothes, 'they might have been mistaken for...visitors.'<sup>81</sup> In stark contrast, clothing was a means of degrading and defeminising black prisoners. Black women were made to look like 'a uniform insanity', dressed in men's shoes, white aprons, and red and yellow *doeks*.<sup>82</sup> Makhoere remembered how the prison authorities tried to incite division between Aminah Desai, a Coloured political prisoner, and the black female inmates. Desai had a 'Coloured' diet and access to better

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<sup>75</sup> Gready, 'Autobiography', p. 489.

<sup>76</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>77</sup> Hiralal, p. 34.

<sup>78</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>79</sup> Kuzwayo, p. 201.

<sup>80</sup> Gready, 'Autobiography', p. 499.

<sup>81</sup> Makhoere, p. 21.

<sup>82</sup> Makhoere, p. 21.

clothing. However, Makhoere asserts that ‘they did not break our solidarity’. <sup>83</sup> Instead, women displayed their cross-racial unity. They discovered that they ‘could take the elastic from Mama Aminah’s pantie-hose’ and sew them to the inadequate panties they received to make them ‘more comfortable’. <sup>84</sup> Women worked together, across racial divides, to safeguard their dignity. In 1978, Makhoere, Desai and other prisoners at Kroonstad, organised a clothing boycott. They refused to wear their aprons and *doeks* and demanded that they be treated the same as white prisoners. Through their collective protest, they eventually secured access to better clothing. Makhoere remembered ‘feeling good’ when she could finally dress ‘like a lady’. <sup>85</sup> Female prisoners challenged state control over their bodies, and asserted themselves as women, rather than criminals. The prison authorities ‘never expected organised resistance’ from women. <sup>86</sup> Female detainees rejected the passivity expected of them and worked together, across racial divides, to change the carceral landscape. In doing so, they defiantly showcased themselves as political women.

This chapter has demonstrated how female detainees’ collective identity was a symbolic form of resistance, operating against the prison authorities’ gendered denial of women’s political activism. Together, incarcerated women transcended their confinement in individual cells, connected with the struggle outside, and safeguarded their dignity. The female detainee community was a space in which women could take pride in both their femininity and their political commitment. Through emphasising the significance of this community in their narratives, women exercise the ‘doubly defiant’ power of testifying to reclaim their identity as political women.

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<sup>83</sup> Makhoere, p. 24.

<sup>84</sup> Makhoere, p. 21.

<sup>85</sup> Makhoere, pp. 34-36.

<sup>86</sup> Makhoere, p. 42.

## **Chapter 2 – ‘I started to sing louder’: Expressing Individual Identity**<sup>87</sup>

For over 23 hours a day, for six months, Caesarina Kona Makhoere was forced into complete solitude in Silverton Police Station. Her cell had a small window, through which she all could see was a grey wall. Even when she left her cell for the half-hour of daily exercise permitted, other black prisoners ‘were shooed away’, ensuring the totality of her racialised isolation.<sup>88</sup> The only contact she had was with white prison staff. Section 29 of the Internal Security Act legalised indefinite detention in solitary confinement.<sup>89</sup> In her study, Bridger reveals that female detainees experienced isolation more often than men. This can be partly attributed to state infrastructure – prisons were accustomed to holding male prisoners in communal cells, whereas they often did not have such spaces for women.<sup>90</sup> Solitary confinement marks the entrapment of the *internal* space of the body and mind in the *external* space of the prison cell.<sup>91</sup> Through separating the prisoner from the companionship of others, the apartheid carceral system attempted her total mental destruction.<sup>92</sup>

Both Bridger and Hiralal assume solitary confinement to be a space of absolute torture and suffering, in which female detainees’ agency was non-existent.<sup>93</sup> Historians have perpetuated a narrative that women’s capacity for resistance diminished once they were cut off from the female detainee community. While women’s narratives detail the extreme hardships and loneliness of isolation, they also reveal how they continued to express themselves under the harshest of circumstances. This chapter seeks to rectify this historiographical shortcoming through illuminating women’s individualised modalities of resistance, within the spaces of the solitary cell and interrogation room. It will argue that in an environment dedicated to the eradication of any subjectivity, female detainees continued to assert their individual identities.

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<sup>87</sup> Makhoere, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> Makhoere, p. 9.

<sup>89</sup> Hiralal, p. 38.

<sup>90</sup> Bridger, p. 170.

<sup>91</sup> Gready, ‘South African Life Stories’, p. 131.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Scharff Smith, ‘The Effects of Solitary Confinement on Prison Inmates: A Brief History and Review of the Literature’, *Crime and Justice*, 34(2006), 441-528, p. 501

<sup>93</sup> Hiralal, p. 39; Bridger, p. 170.

## External Space: The Cell

Women's narratives from SAHA's Oral History Project reveal that the absoluteness of solitary confinement was often distinctly racialised, a significant reality which existing scholarship has not taken into account. Merle Favis was kept in 'next-door cells' and able to communicate with other detainees during her solitary confinement.<sup>94</sup> Emma Mashinini highlights that 'there was discrimination as well in the whole thing...their cells were close to each other...For me, it wasn't like that.'<sup>95</sup> In apartheid's carceral spaces, the bodies of black and Coloured women were subjected to particularly harsh repression and control. Space was a racialised weapon, mobilised by prison authorities to disempower female activists. At the same time, female detainees found ways to use the prison against itself. They appropriated the cell, designed to destroy their sense of selves, into an oppositional space through which they could express individuality and retain, wherever possible, a sense of sanity.

Historians of South Africa, as well as of Latin America, have demonstrated how repressive carceral systems have historically attempted to defeminise women political prisoners through a denial of hygiene.<sup>96</sup> In their narratives, women frequently describe the revolting conditions they were forced into, such as cells 'swarming with lice, and blankets stinking...of urine'.<sup>97</sup> After six months of solitary confinement in Pretoria, Mashinini was moved to Jeppe Police Station, where she would spend a further five months in isolation. As 'a very tidy person to the point of annoying other people', the dirtiness of her cell at Jeppe Station was particularly difficult. When asked by her interviewer what the filth does to one's sense of self, Mashinini responded: 'It belittled you. And that's what they want to happen...It makes you less human'.<sup>98</sup> The walls of Mashinini's cell, marked with the words: 'I was here for rape', 'I was here for murder', began to torture her. She asked herself: 'why must I be sitting in a cell of rapists?'.<sup>99</sup> Mashinini asserted control over her cell through cleaning the walls: 'all those writings...were not there by the time I left that cell. That cell was clean, which kept me going'.<sup>100</sup> Bridger identifies that women's emphasis on keeping their cells clean suggests that

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<sup>94</sup> Favis, SAHA, Track 2.

<sup>95</sup> Emma Mashinini, interviewed by Michelle Friedman, *The 1981 Detainees Oral History Project*, SAHA AL2933, September 2002, Track 2.

<sup>96</sup> Bridger, p. 169; Treacy, p. 139.

<sup>97</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>98</sup> Mashinini, SAHA, Track 2.

<sup>99</sup> Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed Me*, p. 80.

<sup>100</sup> Mashinini, SAHA, Track 2.

in detention they felt the need to maintain their ‘normative’ femininity.<sup>101</sup> This should be understood as a means through which female detainees resisted the security police’s gendered taunts about their failures to be ‘proper’ women.<sup>102</sup> Female detainees asserted their dignity by ‘emphasising their hygiene and modesty within the filthy conditions of prison life’.<sup>103</sup> However, for Mashinini the act of scrubbing her wall meant more than keeping her cell clean; it meant defying the status of criminality which the state had imposed upon her.

Women projected their individuality onto carceral spaces. Mashinini received fruit juice from her family: ‘I never knew these five-litre boxes would mean so much in one’s life. At times it was apple...at times it was orange’. Mashinini kept the boxes: ‘They were like my furniture and it gave me colour...and a sense of survival’.<sup>104</sup> Through creatively using the materials available to her, Mashinini endowed her cell with feelings of homeliness and comfort – feelings solitary confinement was specifically engineered to suppress. The greyness and mundanity of the cell was disrupted by the bright colours of her juice boxes. Acting as visible reminders of her family, the juice boxes bypassed Mashinini’s total isolation and gave her a sense of hope.

The cell walls, marked by each detainee, become ‘archives of resistance’.<sup>105</sup> Sheila Masote was detained in a ‘filthy’ cell, ‘full of lice’, with walls covered in ‘the graffiti of blood’. In her testimony to the TRC, Masote described how she ‘took a pin and scratched on the wall: there was my family...those are my children’.<sup>106</sup> She remembered how she would ‘make believe’ she was there with them to keep herself alive.<sup>107</sup> Through her drawings, Masote mentally transported herself out of the prison and asserted her identity as a loving mother, daughter and sister. For Mashinini, scrubbing the walls clean served to protect her sense of self. While for Masote, her sanity relied upon marking the walls with images of her family. Female detainees projected their individuality onto the very walls which sought to entrap and debilitate them. In an environment designed to narrow the capacity for the recognition and endurance of a sense of self, female detainees discovered ways to express their identities.

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<sup>101</sup> Bridger, p. 169.

<sup>102</sup> Ross, p. 64.

<sup>103</sup> Treacy, p. 139.

<sup>104</sup> Mashinini, SAHA, Track 2.

<sup>105</sup> Harlow, p. 128.

<sup>106</sup> Sheila Masote, *TRC Human Rights Violations Women’s Hearings*, 28 July 1997, Johannesburg, <<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/women/masote.htm>> [accessed 30 January 2024].

<sup>107</sup> Masote, TRC.



### Internal Space: The Body and Mind

Just as the external space of the cell was a tool of detainees' repression, so was the internal space of the body. The physical body of the female detainee was entrapped within the oppressive body politic of the apartheid state.<sup>108</sup> Prison authorities ruthlessly targeted women's femininity and sexuality. The most common form of sexual torture was forced stripping, often in the interrogation room.<sup>109</sup> Narkedien recounted how she used to say to her interrogators: 'never, I'm not going to take my panties off for you, you do all the searching and when you're finished, I'll pull them down quickly'. She had to do this every single day for two and a half months.<sup>110</sup> In the most hostile of circumstances, Narkedien used her voice to limit the exposure of her body to the predatory gaze of her interrogators. Similarly, when Makhoere was ordered to strip: "I felt insulted and asked, 'What for? Why should I take off my panties?' I refused. They did not insist".<sup>111</sup> Through exercising their voices to assert themselves as human beings, both Narkedien and Makhoere resisted the total loss of their dignity. Detainees fought to safeguard a degree of individual autonomy over their bodies.

The apartheid carceral system not only aimed to strike the prisoner's body, but also his or her soul.<sup>112</sup> Detention physically removed political activists from the nexus of their organisations, but it was also designed to stifle political spirit. Solitary confinement renders the detainee's mind an object and dramatizes the pain of imprisonment.<sup>113</sup> Without the support of their fellow detainees, in solitary confinement women had to rely on their own courage to sustain their sense of selves.<sup>114</sup>

Political identity was a means through which women expressed themselves in isolation and endowed their incarceration with meaning. One female detainee highlighted that 'it's not easy

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<sup>108</sup> Gready, 'South African', pp. 110, 131.

<sup>109</sup> Bridger, p. 173.

<sup>110</sup> Narkedien, TRC.

<sup>111</sup> Makhoere, p. 13.

<sup>112</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (United Kingdom: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 16.

<sup>113</sup> Han Toch, *Mosaics of Despair: Human Breakdowns in Prison*, (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1992), pp. 48-54.

<sup>114</sup> Ross, p. 71.

to humiliate a political prisoner...you're proud of what you've done'.<sup>115</sup> Fiona Ross describes this pride as 'an inward movement towards reliance on the self'.<sup>116</sup> Personal pride in one's political commitment protected the detainee from the state's attempt to 'deactivate the activist'.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, political pride relied upon situating oneself in a wider narrative. Matshoba testified how during her solitary confinement she always tried to draw courage by telling herself: 'I am in the struggle and we are in the struggle' and reminding herself of her friends 'under similar circumstances'.<sup>118</sup> Here, the collective and individual are intrinsically linked. Even in complete solitude, women drew upon their female detainee community to safeguard their individual political identity.

Women demonstrated their commitment to the struggle through withstanding interrogatory questioning.<sup>119</sup> Barbara Hogan described her elation when, while she was in solitary, she managed to catch a glimpse of the *Rand Daily Mail* and saw that her fellow comrade, Gavin, had been released: 'It was a big moment for me because I had said nothing about Gavin, I had protected him...I remember...going to my cell that night and dancing with sheer joy'.<sup>120</sup> Through resisting the abuse of her interrogators, Hogan asserted herself as a serious political actor, indispensable to the struggle.<sup>121</sup> But most importantly, she succeeded in protecting her friend. Her feeling of 'sheer joy' disrupted the inhumanity of detention and endowed her suffering with a purpose. Political pride was a particularly significant form of resistance for female detainees. It functioned as a bulwark against the security police's gendered denial of their genuine political conviction and agency.

This chapter has demonstrated how women continued to resist in apartheid's carceral spaces, even when they were isolated from the female detainee community. Incarcerated women changed the meaning of the prison cell from a site of humiliation to a site of individual expression. They asserted their femininity, whether through maintaining hygiene or constructing visible markers of their familial identities. Through asserting pride in their

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<sup>115</sup> Mrs Jean Middleton, *TRC Special Hearings: Prisons*, 21 July 1997, Johannesburg <<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/prison/middleto.htm>> [accessed 31 January 2024].

<sup>116</sup> Ross, p. 71.

<sup>117</sup> Sorcha Gunne, *Space, Place, and Gendered Violence in South African Writing*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 46.

<sup>118</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>119</sup> Bridger, p. 178.

<sup>120</sup> Barbara Hogan, interviewed by Michelle Friedman, *The 1981 Detainees Oral History Project*, SAHA AL2933, 10 August 2003, Track 3.

<sup>121</sup> Bridger, p. 178.

political commitment, female detainees safeguarded their sense of selves from the torture of solitary confinement.

### **Chapter Three – ‘Defeating the enemy in their own backyard’: Negotiating the Identity of Prison Authorities** <sup>122</sup>

In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela declares: ‘the most important person in any prisoner’s life...is the warder in one’s section’. <sup>123</sup> Often, the only human contact female detainees had was with their wardresses and interrogators. These individuals shaped women’s experiences of detention and feature frequently in their narratives. It is therefore surprising that existing histories of women’s detention have failed to substantially explore the relationships between detainees and prison authorities. Both Hiralal and Bridger merely gloss over the abuse and suffering prison staff directed at detainees. <sup>124</sup> They present the power dynamics between prisoner and wardress as dichotomous, neglecting the ways in which detainees negotiated the identity of prison authorities. This chapter will rectify this historiographical shortcoming. Analysing how female detainees interacted with prison staff is crucial to understanding how women navigated apartheid’s carceral spaces.

Racial discrimination was not exclusive to detainees. Prison staff were subject to a stringent hierarchy based on racial classification. <sup>125</sup> On Robben Island, all Coloured warders were removed by 1962 and replaced with an all-white prison department. Through creating a total racial divide between black prisoners and white warders, the state sought to prevent sympathetic ‘non-white’ warders from mitigating the hardships of prison life. <sup>126</sup> In the mainland prisons, where female political detainees were incarcerated, such a racial divide was not absolute. There were both white prisoners, and black warders. The historiographical pre-eminence of Robben Island speaks to the neglect, in studies of female detainees, of the possibility for racial solidarity across the prisoner-warder divide. This chapter seeks to shed light on these overshadowed histories.

Prison authorities were agents of the oppressive apartheid state, responsible for the humiliation and harassment of female detainees. In their narratives, women often name those

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<sup>122</sup> Favis, SAHA, Track 4.

<sup>123</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, (Boston and New York: Little Brown and Company, 1994), p. 365.

<sup>124</sup> Hiralal, ‘Narratives’; Bridger, *Young Women*.

<sup>125</sup> Filippi, p. 442.

<sup>126</sup> Buntman, p. 35.

who were particularly cruel to them. Mashinini identified her worst torturer, ‘Whitehead’, while Hogan referred to a ‘mad man’ called ‘Prince’ who was responsible for her most ‘aggressive interrogation[s]’.<sup>127</sup> The purpose of interrogation was to visibly ‘deconstruct the detainee’s voice’, through depriving her of control over her mind and body.<sup>128</sup> Through naming their torturers, Mashinini and Hogan reassert control over their own truths. They exercise the ‘oppositional power’ of testifying to reclaim the agency which they were deprived of in the interrogation room.<sup>129</sup> Yet, women do not only use their narratives to expose their worst abusers. They also take the opportunity to name those prison staff who, against all odds, treated them with kindness. Matshoba expressed her gratitude to a policeman: ‘I will never forget his name, Taljaard...he smuggled an asthma spray and tablets for me’.<sup>130</sup> Through bringing these relations to light, women highlight their agency in forging bonds with those designed by the state to be their enemies.

The presence of black prison staff was often a source of comfort to black female detainees. In Pretoria Central Prison, Mashinini commented that ‘there seemed to be whites only’. When she was moved to Jeppe Police Station, she ‘was so glad to see a black person, even a black police person...because when you are black you have a need for persons of your own colour.’<sup>131</sup> Mashinini’s contact with black police mitigated the racial isolation she had suffered previously. Makhoere remembered how the black and Coloured wardresses would give her courage by saying ‘One day we shall overcome, sister’.<sup>132</sup> These women transgressed the prisoner-wardress divide to forge a collective ‘we’, in opposition to the apartheid regime. Through these connections, female detainees strengthened their struggle, and wardresses resisted the cruelty expected of them. Their ability to form friendships with one another points to the triumph of their racial sisterhood over the oppressive carceral system.

Under apartheid, black wardresses were referred to as ‘*Vakashe*’, the Zulu word for ‘visitor’, while their white counterparts were addressed as ‘*Nona*’, the respectful way black farm labourers addressed the Afrikaner farmer’s daughter.<sup>133</sup> Even in their own country, in their own occupation, black wardresses were labelled as outsiders. Matshoba described how she

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<sup>127</sup> Mashinini, SAHA, Track 1; Hogan, SAHA, Track 3.

<sup>128</sup> Gready, ‘Autobiography’, p. 494.

<sup>129</sup> Gready, ‘Autobiography’, p. 489.

<sup>130</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>131</sup> Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed*, p. 73.

<sup>132</sup> Makhoere, p. 10.

<sup>133</sup> Kuzwayo, p. 200.

and her fellow inmates at the Fort used this degradation to appease black wardresses: ‘you need self-respect...you cannot be a *Vakashe* in your own country. Why do you accept to be called *Vakashe*?’.<sup>134</sup> Female detainees negotiated the identity of black prison staff, transforming them into ‘our friends’. Matshoba referred to one wardress called Eunice, who would braid the hair of all the female detainees.<sup>135</sup> This intimate, humanising interaction transformed the detainee body from a site of humiliation into a site of dignity. Female detainees extended racial and female solidarity across the prisoner-warder divide, subverting the order of the carceral system.

Forming friendships with prison workers was also an indispensable means of facilitating communication. During her detention, Mashinini befriended a black policeman and policewoman, who regularly delivered her the *Rand Daily Mail*, concealed in their clothing. One day, Mashinini received a newspaper cutting with a photo of her husband standing as a lone demonstrator in front of the Supreme Court, demanding her release. This photo gave Mashinini ‘a lot of pride’ and ‘great joy’.<sup>136</sup> Mashinini was able to strengthen her struggle inside the prison by connecting with her husband’s struggle outside. Through forming relationships with black police, Mashinini bypassed the deprivation of information that the prison imposed onto her.

In their interviews for SAHA, white women shed light on the security police’s disbelief at their political activism. Haanchen Koornhof remembered how ‘the warders were absolutely gobsmacked that there was a white woman...They kept on ask[ing]...how did it happen? Don’t I feel ashamed?’.<sup>137</sup> Not only did white female detainees transgress expected female behaviour, the white security police ‘hated that white people should work for justice for black people’.<sup>138</sup> White women played on the system’s denial of their political identities, using such gendered assumptions to their own advantage. During her interrogation, Joanne Yawitch ‘played dumb...like a little girl who’d just ended up with all these people and didn’t know what was happening’.<sup>139</sup> As a result, Yawitch was released after 14 days and managed to withhold valuable information, protecting herself and her fellow comrades. Similarly, Favis

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<sup>134</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>135</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>136</sup> Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>137</sup> Koornhof, SAHA, Track 4.

<sup>138</sup> Mashinini, *Strikes Have Followed*, p. 81.

<sup>139</sup> Joanne Yawitch, interviewed by Michelle Friedman, *The 1981 Detainees Oral History Project*, SAHA AL2933, 28 May 2003, Track 4.

‘created a sense of young naivety’ and conciliated her white interrogators through initiating ‘conversation about the weather... [or] cricket’. <sup>140</sup> Through acting ‘dumb’ and ‘naive’, female detainees appeased their interrogators by conforming to the femininity expected of them. Without the prison authorities even knowing, white women asserted their political identities through refusing to elicit information. These previously unstudied narratives reveal how white female detainees played on the security police’s gendered denial of their political agency and transformed this disbelief into a powerful tool of resistance.

Connections between prisoners and wardresses did not always occur along racial lines. In Bethal Prison, Matshoba overheard an Afrikaner wardress ‘screaming and crying’ when her boyfriend came to say goodbye to her before leaving for the army. When she saw the wardress later, Matshoba said: ‘why are you crying? ...I am not going back into the cell until you talk to me’. The wardress ‘melted, and...listened’. <sup>141</sup> She asked Matshoba if she had a family of her own, to which Matshoba replied ‘I have a son, I have a husband and I come from a respectable family... You are in the same position as I am’. <sup>142</sup> In the most unlikely of circumstances, the two women forged a connection over their separation from their loved ones. The wardress ‘changed her attitude’ and started to treat Matshoba with more respect. Matshoba reshaped the way she was seen in the eyes of prison staff from a ‘terrorist’ to a ‘mother’. <sup>143</sup> Through extending her compassion to a white wardress, Matshoba reclaimed her gendered identity, which had been denied to her by apartheid’s carceral system.

While this chapter has highlighted moments of solidarity between detainees and prison staff, it is important not to lose sight of the physical and psychological pain female detainees endured at the hands of most interrogators and wardresses. It is notable, however, that so many female former detainees choose to mention the prison staff they formed positive relationships with, in their narratives. Women exercise the ‘oppositional power’ of testifying to reveal how they worked against the carceral system to form connections with prison authorities. <sup>144</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Favis, SAHA, Track 3.

<sup>141</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>142</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>143</sup> Matshoba, TRC.

<sup>144</sup> Gready, ‘Autobiography’, p. 493.

## **Conclusion**

Using first-hand testimonies, this dissertation has recovered female detainees' resistance from the shadows of androcentric historical narratives, enriching understandings of the apartheid carceral system. Apartheid prisons were distinctly gendered spaces. Women's femininity was turned into a source of shame. Their political activism was discredited, they were denied dignity, and their love for their children was weaponised against them. In opposition to such degradation, female detainees created a supportive prisoner community, through which they could express their collective identity as political women. They continued this resistance in solitary confinement, through retaining pride in their political identity and safeguarding a degree of autonomy over their femininity. The act of testifying is itself an act of resistance and a means of empowerment. This study has demonstrated that women's narratives should be understood as the ultimate assertion of the female detainee's sense of self.

Understanding prison conditions to be fluid and contested, rather than static and immutable, this study has highlighted how female detainees used the space of the prison against itself. Chapter One revealed how women transcended the spatial boundaries of individual cells. They filled the prison with the sounds of their singing and discussion. Through this 'rival noise regime', female detainees transformed the prison into a space of collective identity. Chapter Two demonstrated, how even in solitary confinement, female detainees appropriated the space around them. They projected their individual identity onto the cell walls, creating an oppositional space in which they could sustain and express their sense of self. Chapter Three showed how female detainees challenged the power dynamics between prisoner and wardress, shifting the carceral landscape in the process.

Female detainees, both collectively and individually, changed the meaning of carceral spaces. The apartheid prison was intended to be a site of repression and suffering. This dissertation has illuminated how female detainees transformed the prison into a space of compassion, solidarity, political culture and pride. In doing so, this study has enhanced historical understandings of how women activists experienced and shaped the anti-apartheid struggle.

The apartheid prison was, at its essence, an assault on the identity of its detainees. This study has demonstrated that women's continued expressions of identity should be understood as a



symbolic form of resistance. This battle over identity – its repression, its preservation and its ultimate re-assertion – is not limited to the carceral space. In fact, it is central to all political struggles between an oppressive regime and the agents resisting that regime. The anti-apartheid movement was an embodiment of a collective political identity. But its agents were not a monolithic mass. Gendered, racial and generational identities intersected with activists' political convictions, shaping their experiences, as well as their resistance, in carceral, domestic, public and political spaces. This study paves the way for further historical investigation into how South African women asserted their identity in other spaces, and in doing so, ultimately altered their meaning.

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