



Reclaiming Memory, Challenging White Supremacy: The Case for
Memorialising John Vorster Square in Addressing the Legacy of Violence in
Post-Apartheid South Africa

By

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“Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting.”

— *Bell Hooks*

This thesis is dedicated to all the comrades who were tortured and or died in detention and all those who continue to resist in the margin.

Abstract

This thesis argues that the memorialisation of John Vorster Square (JVS) as a Site of Conscience through a transitional justice (TJ) framework holds the potential to confront the past and initiate critical conversations around challenging persistent structures of inequality. The study examines the history of JVS, detailing the documented accounts of torture and deaths of anti-apartheid activists. It explores the broader implications of preserving and recontextualising this site within the national memory landscape. Drawing inspiration from transformative Sites of Conscience, such as Constitution Hill and Argentina's ex-ESMA, this thesis adopts a transnational approach to memorialisation. It also examines the challenges and criticisms associated with symbolic reparations, including the non-systemic nature of change and the unpredictable outcomes. The thesis concludes by advocating for the memorialisation of JVS as a Site of Conscience, arguing that it can serve as a space for civic engagement, where citizens actively confront the history of atrocities and reflect on their enduring societal implications. This is in line with the notion that "It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself. Walk through the streets of [South Africa] and see what we, this nation, have become."¹

¹ Baldwin, J. (1960) 'Fifth Avenue, uptown,' *Esquire*, July. <https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a3638/fifth-avenue-uptown/>.

Introduction

'...the iconic institution of the apartheid years, of the years of torture, of the reign of the security police, of the reign of the mad forces...'²

John Vorster Square (JVS), now Johannesburg Central Police Station, stands as a symbol of apartheid's brutal machinery. Located at 1 Commissioner Street, this edifice served as the headquarters of the apartheid Security Branch (SB) in the former Transvaal province (now Gauteng, North West, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga).³ The SB functioned as the enforcers of apartheid, implementing racist policies and brutalising those who resisted. Derived from the Afrikaans word for "apartness", apartheid was a system of institutionalised racial segregation and oppression in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. Officially sanctioned and codified by the National Party (NP), apartheid became the cornerstone of the NP's agenda following its narrow electoral victory, achieved with the support of a predominantly white electorate.⁴ Composed primarily of Afrikaners—descendants of Dutch colonisers—the party believed in a God-given mission to establish white governance in Africa.⁵

Upon taking power, the NP rapidly passed laws designed to solidify longstanding practices of segregation, racial oppression, and white supremacy, which sprang from South Africa's colonial past under Dutch and British domination.⁶ Apartheid established a system where white people monopolised power and resources, promoting a pervasive ideology of white superiority and entitlement. This system of dominance and subordination was embedded in everyday life, permeating institutions and social interactions.⁷ South Africans were categorised into four racial groups: "white/European," "native/black," "coloured," and "Indian/Asian." This categorisation governed every aspect of life for black South Africans in particular, imposing severe restrictions on their mobility, residence, education, employment, and fundamental human rights.⁸ Apartheid's system of white minority rule was condemned by the United

² Kennedy, C., and South African History Archive (SAHA) (2007) *Detention without trial in John Vorster Square - Google Arts & Culture*. <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/detention-without-trial-in-john-vorster-square-south-african-history-archive/8AXhQ-3oNAMA8A?hl=en>.

³ *Indians Can't Fly* (2015). EMS Productions.

⁴ McRae, M. (2019) *The Sharpeville Massacre*. <https://humanrights.ca/story/sharpeville-massacre>.

⁵ (McRae, 2019)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Graham, K.M. (2012) *Beyond redistribution: White Supremacy and Racial Justice*. Lexington Books. Pg. 17

⁸ (McRae, 2019)

Nations (UN) General Assembly as a crime against humanity and a violation of the UN Charter.⁹ The condemnation led to the adoption of the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid by the General Assembly (Resolution 3068) on 30 November 1973.¹⁰

“...Apartheid is a crime against humanity and that inhuman acts resulting from the policies and practices of apartheid and similar policies and practices of race segregation and discrimination, as defined in Article II of the Convention, are crimes violating principles of the Charter of the United Nations and constituting a serious threat to international peace and security.”¹¹

Ironically, the JVS building, named after Balthazar Johannes Vorster, was described as the “last word in security”.¹² Vorster, an Afrikaner nationalist and former member of the far-right Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging (AWB), served as South Africa’s Prime Minister from 1966 to 1978, having previously been Minister of Justice from 1961 to 1966.¹³ Under Vorster, South Africa’s security apparatus gained “formidable powers”, with the SB of the South African Police (SAP) expanding its capacity for surveillance, detention, and torture in response to anti-apartheid resistance.¹⁴

Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first democratically elected and black president (1994), described Vorster as a “a man unsentimental in the extreme. For him, the iron fist was the best and only answer to subversion.”¹⁵ This uncompromising approach to governance was reflected in the operations of JVS, which became synonymous with state-sanctioned violence and repression in service of what Bell Hooks refers to as “imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy”—a potent descriptor highlighting the interconnected systems of oppression that apartheid sought to uphold.¹⁶

⁹Human Rights Committee of South Africa (1998) *A crime against humanity: Analysing the Repression of the Apartheid State*. Edited by M. Coleman. Cape Town, South Africa: David Philip Publishers. Pg. 2

¹⁰ (Human Rights Committee of South Africa, 1998:2)

¹¹ International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, G.A. res. 3068 (XXVIII), 28 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 30) at 75, U.N. Doc. A/9030 (1974), 1015 U.N.T.S. 243, entered into force July 18, 1976

¹² Swart, M. (2020) 'Death on the 10th floor: The search for truth in South Africa,' *Al Jazeera*, 20 April. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/4/20/death-on-the-10th-floor-the-search-for-truth-in-south-africa>.

¹³ South African History Online (2011b) *B J Vorster [John Vorster]*. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/b-j-vorster-john-vorster>.

¹⁴ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

¹⁵ Mandela, N. (2002) *Long walk to freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela. 1918-1962*. Time Warner Books UK. Pg. 53

¹⁶ Hooks, B. (2003) *The Will to Change: Men, masculinity, and love*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA82254092>. Pg. 25

JVS became a symbol of this oppressive system, eternally marked by the suffering of anti-apartheid activists like: Amina Desai, Barbara Hogan, Cedric Mayson, Dr Dilshad Jhetam, Dr Kantilal Naik, Dr Mohammed Salim Essop, Gerald Sizani, Hassen Jooma, Jabu Ngwenya, Jaki Seroke, Joyce Dipale, Keith Coleman, Molefe Pheto, Penelope ‘Baby’ Twaya, Peter Magubane, Tsankie Modiakgotla, and Zwelinzima Sizane. JVS also became a site of tragic loss, where Ahmed Timol, Dr Neil Aggett, Elmon Malele, Ernest Dipale, Matthews Mabelane, Stanza Bopape, and Wellington Tshazibane died. The final chapter of JVS’s history of brutality was written on the 30th of January 1990, just 12 days before Mandela’s release from Robben Island, with the death of Clayton Sizwe Sithole —the last such death recorded at JVS and the final known death in detention under apartheid.¹⁷

It has been documented that sites of detention like JVS, along with the Sanlam Buildings in Gqeberha, were notorious for the systematic use of torture and assault by the apartheid security apparatus.¹⁸ Initially, my research proposal included an examination of both JVS and the Sanlam Buildings. However, I concluded that a comparative analysis of this scope would necessitate a doctoral-level thesis, prompting me to narrow my focus to JVS alone. However, although this research focuses on JVS, there is hope that this case for transforming a former detention centre into a memorialised site can be imagined for other former sites of violence.

JVS has been under scrutiny, especially regarding Ahmed Timol. Books such as *Timol: A Quest for Justice* by Imtiaz Cajee, nephew of Timol, detail the circumstances surrounding his death at JVS.¹⁹ And films like *Indians Can’t Fly* and *Someone to Blame: The Ahmed Timol Inquest* by Enver Samuel offer visual explorations of this case.²⁰ The South African History Archive (SAHA) and Sunday Times Heritage Project (2006-2007) provide further documentation with the inclusion of the experiences of surviving detainees and details surrounding deaths in detention.²¹ In addition, Kagiso Pat Mautloa’s sculpture stands as a tribute to those who died at JVS. The artwork, titled “Simakade” (Zulu for “forever standing”), features a large rock encased in wire, mounted on a concrete plinth, created to symbolise resilience.²² Moreover, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) testimonies offer first-hand

¹⁷ Clayton Sithole, the last political activist to die in Apartheid police detention | South African History Online (no date). <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/clayton-sithole-last-political-activist-die-apartheid-police-detention>.

¹⁸ (Human Rights Committee of South Africa, 1998:55)

¹⁹ Cajee, I. (2005) *Timol: A Quest for Justice*. Real African Publishers.

²⁰ Documentaries (2024). <https://emsproductions.co.za/work/> (Accessed: May 28, 2024).

²¹ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

²² Pau Mautloa, K. (2012). *Death in Detention: Downtown at Death Central*. https://sthp.saha.org.za/memorial/death_in_detention.htm (Accessed: July 10, 2024).

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accounts of the suffering endured at JVS. Derived from the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995*, the TRC was established to foster a national memory grounded in truth, acknowledgement, and reconciliation.²³ Although the TRC did not explicitly prescribe a singular or monolithic “national memory,” it sought to create an inclusive platform where diverse narratives and lived experiences could be articulated and recognised.²⁴ By amplifying these voices, it endeavoured to facilitate a collective reckoning with the past, contributing to the emergence of a shared, albeit multifaceted, understanding of South Africa’s history. Memorialising JVS offers an opportunity to amplify the voices of those who suffered within its walls, contributing to the multidimensional knowledge of South Africa’s history that the TRC envisioned. By acknowledging the specific experiences of victims at JVS, a memorial can become a vital part of the collective contribution to keeping stories of resistance alive and interrogating the influence of apartheid in contemporary human rights issues.



“Simakade” by Kagiso Pat Mautloa.²⁵

²³ *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995*

²⁴ Marschall, S. (2010) *Landscape of memory*. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004178564.i-410>. Pg. 7

²⁵ *Simakade: Memorial to Deaths in Detention* (2023). <https://arts-culture-heritage.joburg/public-art-inventory/simakade-memorial-to-deaths-in-detention/>.

Although the TRC testimonials, memoirs, poetry, and documentaries articulate experiences at JVS, the question of memorialising the site itself has received comparatively little attention. This thesis addresses this oversight by exploring the potential of transforming JVS into a Site of Conscience.

John Vorster Square as a Site of Conscience

Sites of Conscience are sites of memory dedicated to helping communities confront the past to establish more just and equitable futures. They focus on preserving narratives related to histories of oppression and resistance, ensuring that historically marginalised stories are preserved and shared.²⁶ Furthermore, they stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues and promote humanitarian and democratic values, a primary function of these sites. Transforming JVS into such a site offers a powerful opportunity to address the ongoing legacies of apartheid.

“The need to remember often competes with the equally strong pressure to forget. Even with the best of intentions – such as [promoting] reconciliation after trauma by “turning the page” – erasing the past can prevent new generations from learning critical lessons and destroy opportunities to establish peace now and well into the future. A Site of Conscience is a place of memory – such as a historic site, place-based museum or memorial – that prevents this erasure from happening [to] foster more just and humane societies today. Not only do Sites of Conscience provide safe spaces to remember and preserve even the most traumatic memories, but they enable their visitors to make connections between the past and related contemporary human rights issues.”²⁷

Transitional Justice Framework and Memorialisation

Sites of Conscience can be understood as transitional justice tools. Transitional justice (TJ) is a concept that constitutes “dealing with the legacy of the past.”²⁸ Emerging in the 1990s, it refers to the processes and mechanisms that address past abuses during periods of transition from violence to peaceful coexistence, as in South Africa in 1991 through the Convention for

²⁶ International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (2024) *Annual Report: 2024, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience*. International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/395278321/>. Pg. 9

²⁷ Sites of Conscience (2024a) *About us - sites of conscience*. <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/about-us/about-us-2/>.

²⁸ Buckley-Zistel, S. and Schäfer, S. (2014) *Memorials in times of transition*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781780685717>. Pg. 1

a Democratic South Africa (CODESA).²⁹ CODESA involved a series of political negotiations aimed at dismantling the legal and political frameworks of apartheid and establishing a new political order. CODESA emerged from the recognition that neither a military victory for the apartheid regime nor a revolutionary overthrow by liberation movements was feasible, compelling both sides to seek a negotiated settlement.³⁰

Then-president of the NP, F.W. de Klerk, announced the “abandonment of the policy of apartheid” and communicated the regime’s intent to enter negotiations with the ANC.³¹ De Klerk’s willingness to engage in negotiations did not stem from a sudden moral awakening or a recognition of the humanity of black South Africans. Rather, it was driven by pragmatic concerns, as articulated in this statement:

“The prospects of our economy were disastrous. We were locked into an accelerating downward spiral of revolutionary uprisings and states of emergency.”³² Furthermore, “The South African regime had effectively lost all legitimacy and control within the country. Growing nationwide resistance was met with massive state brutality and violence, which in turn resulted in creating a revolutionary threat to the survival of the state. The police, security and military forces were over-stretched, and the regime had no real prospect of regaining effective control. It had lost all authority and could not impose law and order, despite its resort to renewing states of emergency.”³³

The TRC followed these negotiations, which Rosemary Nagy correctly identifies as South Africa’s primary mechanism of transitional justice.³⁴ Consequently, this thesis discusses the potential to memorialise JVS within a TJ framework. As defined by the UN, TJ rests on four pillars: truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.³⁵ Given that TJ operates in

²⁹ Mamdani, M. (2016) 'Beyond Nuremberg: The historical significance of the Post-Apartheid transition in South Africa,' in *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, pp. 329–360.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139942263.011>. Pg. 335

³⁰ (Mamdani, 2016:330)

³¹ Minty, A. (1993) 'South Africa: From Apartheid to Democracy,' *Security Dialogue*, 24(1), pp. 69–84.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44471436.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Ad4750b23458fe90d89fa7e57c46ff266&ab_segments=&initiator=recommender&acceptTC=1.
Pg. 69

³² (Minty, 1993:70)

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Nagy, R. (2004) 'After the TRC: citizenship, memory, and reconciliation,' *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 38(3), pp. 638–653.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2004.10751301>. Pg. 638

³⁵ *Transitional Justice - TRIAL International* (2021). <https://trialinternational.org/topics-post/transitional-justice/>.

societies burdened by systemic injustices that impair social life and institutional functioning, it necessitates tailored approaches to redress these challenges.³⁶ These approaches usually take the form of truth commissions, tribunals, lustration, and reparations, including symbolic reparations such as memory work to confront historical injustices.³⁷ Memorialisation emerges as a central tool of symbolic reparations, forming a focal point of this thesis.

Memorialisation is the act of preserving memories of significant historical or cultural events through commemorative practices and is utilised as a means to “prevent reoccurrence, through changing institutions, elites or ideologies.”³⁸ Drawing on Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Stefanie Schäfer, memorials within the framework of TJ can be conceptualised as symbolic reparations aimed at restoring the dignity of victims of injustice and affirming their recognition as valued and legitimate members of society.³⁹ Transforming JVS into a Site of Conscience would not only honour and commemorate JVS detainees who survived and those who died but would also serve as a space for civic engagement. Where citizens actively confront the history of atrocities and reflect on their enduring societal implications, spanning contemporary cases of police violence such as the Marikana Massacre to violence in the form of economic and social inequalities.⁴⁰

“The scars of Apartheid run deep, leaving a legacy of segregation, discrimination and inequality. The stark economic disparities in the country evidence this. A 2022 World Bank report on inequality in southern Africa gave South Africa the unfortunate distinction of being the most unequal country in the world. The report [said] 80 per cent of the country’s wealth was in the hands of 10 per cent of the population. And it is the Black population who factor the most into the poorest category. The report places blame for the income disparities directly on race. “The legacy of colonialism and Apartheid rooted in racial and spatial segregation continues to reinforce inequality” ... The evil genius of Apartheid encouraged the idea that different groups needed to compete for basic human rights, dignity and economic opportunities.”⁴¹

³⁶ Elcheroth, G. and De Mel, N. (2021) *In the Shadow of Transitional Justice*, Routledge eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003167280>. Pg. 1

³⁷ (Buckley-Zistel and Schäfer, 2014:2)

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* Pg. 10

⁴⁰ 34 miners were shot and killed at a peace protest by the South African Police Service in 2012.

⁴¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2024) *30 years on, South Africa still dismantling racism and apartheid’s legacy*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/04/30-years-south-africa-still-dismantling-racism-and-apartheids-legacy>.

Rationale of Study

This study argues that the memorialisation of JVS as a Site of Conscience holds the potential to confront the past and initiate critical conversations around challenging persistent structures of inequality. Oppressive systems manifest in various forms of violence, from physical harm to economic deprivation. This thesis holds that any structure that undermines human dignity is inherently violent, making capitalist societies like South Africa prone to such violence. Through the lens of JVS, this research seeks to recover the lived experiences of detention and discusses the broader implications of preserving and recontextualising this site within the national memory landscape. Additionally, this thesis works to situate the events at JVS—ranging from documented accounts of torture to the deaths mentioned above—not as isolated or exceptional occurrences but as the culmination of a broader spectrum of systemic violence against anti-apartheid activists and the black majority. The atrocities committed within detention centres were not anomalies; they were not the sole manifestations of human rights violations, but rather, they are the most visible and extreme examples of a deeply rooted culture of white supremacist violence—a culture that continues to haunt us.

This approach aligns with the fundamental purpose of a Site of Conscience, which seeks to articulate historical injustices while fostering connections to present-day struggles. Consequently, this study can be understood as a theoretical articulation of the potential functions of a materialised JVS Site of Conscience: to memorialise crimes against humanity, honour the victims, promote critical reflection, encourage dialogue and inspire action to address contemporary issues related to inequality and injustice.⁴²

In addition, this thesis works to build upon the memorialisation efforts of the TRC and archival initiatives, contending that building upon existing works of memory can be instrumental in the contribution of reclaiming and revitalising the memories of past atrocities to combat the sanitisation, denial, or minimisation of a dark past. Drawing inspiration from transformative Sites of Conscience such as Constitution Hill (formerly the Old Fort, Women's Jail, and Number Four) and Argentina's Ex-Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ex-ESMA), this study adopts a transnational approach.

⁴² (Sites of Conscience, 2024a)



South Africans are “deeply wounded... Apartheid has affected us at a very deep level, more than we ever suspected.”⁴³ This resonates when observing the continuation of racism and violence in South Africa today. During my second year of study at the University of Cape Town (UCT), Dr Gregory Maxaulane demonstrated the notion of the African ‘other’ and the differential systems that arose within the framework of post-enlightenment epistemology. His teachings highlighted how European features, languages, ideologies, and beliefs have become globally normative, positioning the European (man) as the epitome of humanity. Consequently, the dehumanisation of human beings who embodied thoughts, languages, skin tones, attires, cuisines and religions outside of Eurocentrism was inevitable when colonisers set foot on their lands. My tutor, Precious Bikitsha, encouraged my peers and me to imagine ourselves outside the ‘white’ gaze, reading us Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Chinua Achebe and Aimé Césaire.

This intellectual framework has significantly influenced my research interests and broader worldview, fostering a continuous pursuit of a more equitable world. In a thesis on loss, hope and repair, Afrah Mayet illustrates what it means to live out the condition of decoloniality, encouraging readers who have “inherited a world built on systems of oppression that hinder

⁴³ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998c:22)

our ability to live balanced and harmonious lives” to “think and enact decoloniality.”⁴⁴ This thesis is an attempt at ‘thinking and enacting decoloniality’ because when I imagine a more liberated South Africa, it entails more compassion, more humanity and an absence of physical, economic, social, and sexual violence. Mayet reminds us, “If we are to model out alternative ways of being, thinking and doing, it is important to understand the systems of contemporary society, how they are built and why.”⁴⁵ Thus, understanding why JVS was built and what happened there is critical.

The manifestations of South Africa’s past with a systematic racist rule reverberate in the present through “persistent poverty, deepening inequality and levels of violence” with poverty remaining “strongly racialised.”⁴⁶ Colin Bundy writes of how present the past is:

The evidence of how our history haunts our present is overwhelming. And if one moves from the brute material legacy of the past and confronts what has been inherited in the realms of culture, behaviour and experience, the picture is no more comforting, the ghosts no less real. Arguably, the single most intractable, most toxic presence of the past is how profoundly racialised South African society remains. The discriminatory divisions and hierarchies of apartheid translated into everyday experience and impacted the psyche of all South Africans...The new South Africa has developed and dithered in the shadow of the old South Africa. A great novelist writing about another segregated society famously said, ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’⁴⁷

History does not simply repeat itself; it evolves, adapts, and perpetuates injustices in new forms. This thesis examines how memorialising JVS as a Site of Conscience can contribute to addressing these evolving injustices.

Research Questions

This thesis questions why JVS should be memorialised as a Site of Conscience. It critically examines the importance of remembering the atrocities that occurred, detailing them and reflecting on the absence of the site’s memorialisation post-1994 when more robust state-led memorialisation efforts were underway. This inquiry leads to further questions: What forms of

⁴⁴ Mayet, A. (2022) *On Loss, Hope and Repair: Living Out the Condition of Decoloniality*. MA Contemporary Art Theory. Goldsmiths, University of London. Pg. 2

⁴⁵ (Mayet, 2022:4)

⁴⁶ Bundy, C. (2014) *Short-Changed?: South Africa since Apartheid*. Jacana Media. Pg. 51

⁴⁷ (Bundy, 2014:51)

memorialisation has South Africa engaged in? Whose history is more readily commemorated – the history of the oppressed or their oppressors? Why should JVS be memorialised when there are already existing sites of memory? How would memorialising JVS deter apartheid amnesia or the sanitisation of the past? Lastly, it borrows from victims of JVS and their families on how best JVS could be transformed.

Methodology

To address these questions, this research draws extensively on the TRC hearing reports, which included public “victim hearings,” where individuals and families shared their experiences of human rights violations under apartheid, and “amnesty hearings,” where perpetrators of apartheid-era crimes could confess their actions in exchange for potential amnesty.⁴⁸ Complementing these sources, the study incorporates a wide range of materials, including testimonies documented by SAHA and the Sunday Times Heritage Project, as well as other archival records. It also features interviews with Enver Samuel⁴⁹, Fatima Swartz⁵⁰, and Yasmin Sooka.⁵¹ Furthermore, the research engages with academic literature on memorialisation, transitional justice, and memory sites, alongside documentary films, to critically analyse the history of JVS. Through this multidisciplinary approach, the study aims to explore the potential for transforming JVS into a Site of Conscience, fostering meaningful dialogue and reflection on its historical significance and its relevance to contemporary struggles for justice, memory and challenging white supremacy.

Limitations

This research has two main limitations. Firstly, while I outline conceptual ideas for a Site of Conscience at JVS, I do not delve deeply into practical aspects such as funding, logistics, or stakeholder collaboration, which are crucial for implementation. However, I incorporate perspectives from family members, adding a personal and emotional layer to the discussion. Secondly, the thesis focuses on advocating for JVS's memorialisation rather than examining why it hasn't been memorialised. Although I acknowledge this question's importance, I offer only speculative insights, leaving significant room for further research into the historical, political, and social reasons behind this absence.

⁴⁸ (Nagy, 2004:639)

⁴⁹ Award winning filmmaker behind *Indians Can't Fly* and *Someone to Blame – The Ahmed Timol Inquest*.

⁵⁰ Representative for the Institute for Healing of Memories in Cape Town, South Africa.

⁵¹ Former TRC Commissioner.

John Vorster Square, Memory, Memorialisation, and the Heritage Landscape

Memorialisation encompasses constructed sites like museums and monuments, found sites such as gravesites and torture centres, and activities including anniversaries, vigils, and public demonstrations. These forms often converge to create a comprehensive approach to remembering the past.⁵² JVS, as a memory site, is classified as a ‘found site’ due to its historical role as a former site of torture. This designation underscores its existing physical and historical framework, which carries inherent significance as a space where past atrocities occurred.⁵³ As a ‘found site’, JVS retains traces of its traumatic history, making it a potent location for memory work and commemoration.⁵⁴ As a Site of Conscience, it could spotlight what took place there and drive dialogue on the systemic nature of the apartheid regime’s violence and its remnants in present-day South Africa.

Memorialisation as a TJ tool relates to other TJ activities, such as reparations, prosecutions, and institutional reform.⁵⁵ It can complement these mechanisms by addressing gaps they may not fully cover, as in the cases of deaths at JVS, where no former SAP members have been held accountable for the murders due to the suppression of apartheid-era cases and political interference within the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA). Additionally, the aforementioned delays have resulted in the deaths of persons of interest before facing legal consequences for their alleged criminal actions.⁵⁶ It follows that the memorialisation of JVS as a Site of Conscience could address the shortcomings of formal transitional justice mechanisms, such as prosecutions, by providing a space for mourning, remembering past atrocities, and fostering healing.⁵⁷

This raises questions of why JVS was never memorialised and, most importantly, why such memorialisation should be envisioned. To address the first question, Elcheroth and de Mel

⁵² Barsalou, J. (2020) ‘Reflecting the Fractured Past: Memorialisation, Transitional Justice and the Role of Outsiders,’ in *Memorials in Times of Transition*. Intersentia, pp. 47–68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781780685717>. Pg. 48

⁵³(Barsalou, 2020:48-49)

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 49

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Historical context of Cases – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (no date). <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/historical-context-of-cases/>.

⁵⁷ (Barsalou, 2020:48)

examine memorialisation practices across diverse post-conflict contexts, critically engaging with transformative TJ mechanisms, paying particular attention to the role of “meaningful silences” in shaping collective memory and the deliberate omissions in national narratives of remembrance.⁵⁸ National remembrance refers to the collective process by which nations recall and commemorate significant historical events, figures, or periods that have shaped their identity. This process often involves official ceremonies, public holidays, and educational programs designed to instil a shared sense of history and values among citizens.⁵⁹ This framework provides a lens through which to interrogate the absence of government-led memorialisation efforts at JVS, prompting reflection on the implications of such silences and the potential for this site to embody a space of contested memory within South Africa’s TJ discourse.

The authors also emphasise the concept of memory as a social practice, positioning memorialisation as an ongoing and dynamic process in TJ. Therefore, memory is not merely a static preservation of the past; rather, it is a social act involving the sharing and transformation of recollections.⁶⁰ This dynamic process is central to social change, as the re-elaboration of memories through their transmission can either enrich or diminish their significance. However, in transitional contexts, the selection of which experiences are memorialised, and which are relegated to oblivion is inherently political. Therefore, in considering the imperative to memorialise JVS, it is worthwhile to reflect on the potential political motivations for its continued lack of transformation into a dedicated site of memory.

In her seminal work, *Landscape of Memory*, Sabine Marschall conceptualises memorialisation as a public acknowledgement of suffering and loss, fulfilling society’s critical social and psychological functions. She contends that memorialisation is inherently rooted in recognising and commemorating the experiences of individuals and communities who have endured profound loss, thereby serving as a collective societal acknowledgement of these experiences. This process facilitates communal mourning and remembrance, fostering a shared space for reflection and solidarity.⁶¹ She further argues that memorialisation plays a restorative role, aiming to reaffirm the personal dignity of those who have suffered. By institutionalising the

⁵⁸ (Elcherroth and De Mel, 2021:2)

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Pg. 7

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 9

⁶¹ (Marschall, 2010:171)

commemoration of their experiences, memorials not only validate the pain and sacrifices endured but also contribute to broader processes of healing and reconciliation, thereby embedding these narratives within the collective memory of society.⁶² Collective memory refers to the shared pool of knowledge and information in the memories of two or more members of a social group. It is a concept that encompasses how groups remember their past, which in turn influences their identity and actions in the present.⁶³

“For communities, a dignified public memorial constitutes a way of honouring those in their midst who made sacrifices for their ideals and a better life for all. Political organisations in whose name the victims fought and lost their lives use memorials to pay tribute to the dead and emphasise the purpose and ultimate societal benefit of the sacrifice. For those in society who are not directly bereaved, notably later generations, the memorial serves as a transmitter of memories and associated value systems, while for outsiders, including tourists, memorials are meant to evoke empathy and instil a sense of respect – both for the victims of the past and by extension for all members of the present society, as descendants of the heroes of the past. For those who initiate it, a memorial to a departed leader or a select group of victims establishes and publicly advertises a lasting, visible link with the dead they have chosen to honour. In times of political transition, the public commemoration, especially through public monuments and memorials, of deceased heroes, victims or fallen comrades can be a strategic move to legitimise the emergence of a new socio-political order.”⁶⁴

This excerpt underscores the profound societal role that memorials can fulfil, particularly in the context of the JVS building. The memorialisation of this site could serve as a poignant tribute to those who were tortured and killed in their shared pursuit of a liberated South Africa, thereby revitalising, and preserving their legacy within the nation’s collective memory. Moreover, the majority ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC)— if involved— could utilise this space to commemorate the contributions of countless ordinary South Africans who participated in the liberation struggle rather than exceptionalising the movement by focusing solely on individual figures such as Nelson Mandela. This approach would democratise the narrative of resistance, acknowledging the collective effort that underpinned the anti-apartheid struggle.

⁶² *Ibid.* Pg. 171

⁶³ *Ibid.* Pg. 2

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 171

Marschall's excerpt further highlights the critical role of memorials in educating future generations. She observes that many young South Africans lack a tangible understanding of the atrocities perpetrated by the apartheid regime, a gap that could be addressed through purposeful memorialisation. Despite the existence of numerous memorials in South Africa, the majority commemorate the history of the white minority, while post-apartheid memorials remain disproportionately scarce. This disparity underscores the need for a more inclusive and representative approach to memorialisation, one that reflects the diverse experiences and sacrifices of all South Africans in the struggle for freedom and justice.

The TRC as the Foundation for Memory Work

As noted in the introduction, South Africa's primary mechanism for TJ and memory work was the TRC. Memory work involves activities and projects that aim to preserve, interpret, and engage with the past, particularly focusing on personal and collective experiences of trauma, conflict, or significant historical events.⁶⁵ It serves as a means to facilitate healing, raise awareness, and promote advocacy for justice and reparations.⁶⁶ That is what the TRC intended to do through truth-seeking. The TRC provided a platform for victims to share their experiences and for perpetrators to confess their crimes in exchange for amnesty. This approach was intended to foster healing and forgiveness rather than retribution. The TRC's work was seen as a way to acknowledge the suffering of victims and to create a historical record of the injustices committed during apartheid.⁶⁷

The TRC's mandate was to investigate "the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights committed during the period from 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994."⁶⁸ Moreover, the TRC defined victims of apartheid as individuals who suffered gross human rights violations "through acts of killing, torture, abduction and severe ill-treatment."⁶⁹ However, there was an understanding of the fact that "the system itself was evil, inhumane and degrading for the many millions who became its second and third class citizens. Amongst its many crimes, perhaps the greatest was its power to humiliate, to denigrate and to remove the self-confidence, self-esteem

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Naidu, E. (2014a) *Mayibuye! Let Us Reclaim! Assessing the Role of Memorialization in Post-Conflict Rebuilding*. Doctor of Philosophy. The City University of New York. Pg. 2

⁶⁷ (Elcheroth and De Mel, 2021:3)

⁶⁸ *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No 34 of 1995.*

⁶⁹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998c) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume One*. Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>. Pg. 29

and dignity of its millions of victims.”⁷⁰ Thus, in an effort to extend its work to cater to individuals and groups that weren’t defined as victims or never unburdened themselves at the TRC but had been undoubtedly dehumanised by the apartheid system, the following symbolic reparation measures were recommended in Volume 6, Section 2 of the TRC Report.⁷¹

“Symbolic reparation encompasses measures that facilitate the communal process of remembering and commemorating the pain and victories of the past. Such measures aim to restore the dignity of victims and survivors. Commemorative aspects include exhumations, tombstones, memorials or monuments, and the renaming of streets or public facilities. Legal and administrative measures include matters such as the issuing of death certificates or declarations of death in the case of people who have disappeared, expunging criminal records where people were sentenced for politically related offences, and expediting outstanding legal matters.”⁷²

In an interview with Yasmin Sooka, one of the TRC’s fifteen commissioners and a prominent human rights lawyer, she highlighted that the Reparations Committee was initially tasked with addressing the issue of memorialisation.⁷³ Despite its recommendations, it became heavily preoccupied with determining the nature and implementation of monetary reparations, leaving little room for a focused discussion on memorialisation within the TRC’s proceedings. However, towards the conclusion of their work, they did emphasise the importance of remembrance and the need to provide communities and families with the opportunity to engage in processes of memorialisation.⁷⁴ Sooka conceded that “there was an acceptance that memorialisation is an important aspect of reparations, [but] it never really got the same attention that it should possibly have.”⁷⁵ She then critiqued the approach to memorialisation in South Africa, noting that it has often taken the path of least resistance—renaming roads and buildings—rather than undertaking the more challenging task of creating a meaningful, victim-centred catalogue of memorials that goes beyond rhetoric to reflect tangible, lived

⁷⁰ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998c:62)

⁷¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998d) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume Six*. Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>.

⁷² (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998d:95)

⁷³ 'Interview with Yasmin Sooka' (2024), 3 June.

⁷⁴ ('Interview with Yasmin Sooka,' 2024)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

experiences.⁷⁶ Furthermore, she underscored the importance of financial and institutional resources in achieving this vision.⁷⁷

Given the TRC's mandate, time limit and lack of resources, I contend its work should have been complemented by more robust memorialisation efforts from relevant stakeholders, mainly through the transformation of former detention sites. While existing memorials have made significant contributions to preserving memory, the potential of other sites—like JVS—remains largely untapped.

The TRC has been criticised for concentrating on the most egregious crimes committed by individual perpetrators. Thus, overlooking the systemic and structural features of apartheid leads to an “organised forgetting” of the everyday violence perpetuated by apartheid policies and practices.⁷⁸ Andrea Durbach comments on the brutality of apartheid as not only manifesting “in the conduct of apartheid’s executioners (police, army, security forces) but in its systemic and structural foundations which exacted cheap supplies of labour and controlled the movement and day-to-day lives of the majority of citizens.”⁷⁹ Elcheroth and de Mel support this assertion, writing of how the TRC was revered as “an exemplary demonstration of what a truth and reconciliation process can achieve” but has now become the target of criticisms from TJ practitioners such as Matthew Evans, Paul Gready and Mahmood Mamdani. Critics who argue that despite the TRC, “segregation and racial inequality remain as an enduring social reality in urban landscapes and in the daily experiences of South Africans.”⁸⁰ However, this thesis works to show that challenging oppressive institutions entrenched through South Africa’s history of colonialism and apartheid needs to be seen as an ongoing, albeit incredibly slow, process, offering the memorialisation of JVS as a transformative tool for change.

The TRC’s commitment to recovering suppressed narratives is exemplified by its documentation of human rights violations through the testimonies of victims. Judge Albert ‘Albie’ Sachs, a prominent anti-apartheid activist and former judge of the Constitutional Court, reflected on how victims’ ability to share their experiences was liberating: “When the victims

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Murray, M.J. (2013) *Commemorating and forgetting*.
<https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816682997.001.0001>. Pg. 15

⁷⁹ Durbach, A. (2018) 'Toward Reparative Transformation: Revisiting the impact of violence against women in a Post-TRC South Africa,' in *Cambridge University Press eBooks*, pp. 174–198. Pg.175

⁸⁰ (Elcheroth and De Mel, 2021:3)

testified, they did so not to get a conviction or to receive compensation or as a part of a campaign of political denunciation, but simply as a means of breaking the silence in which they had been trapped for so long.”⁸¹ As articulated in Volume 1 of the TRC Report, the collection of transcripts, statements, and related materials constitutes “an invaluable record which...will form a part of the national memory for generations yet to come.”⁸² This emphasises the TRC’s deliberate effort to construct a more inclusive and representative national memory—one that not only preserves the truth of past injustices but also ensures their acknowledgement as a foundational element of South Africa’s collective historical consciousness. Without the TRC many of the human rights violations that occurred at JVS might have remained obscured. While the TRC was a significant force in uncovering these abuses, its work remains incomplete, necessitating continued engagement with its findings and recommendations on symbolic reparations.

This thesis is written with an understanding that systems that perpetuate economic, social, and spatial racialised disparities are not reflections of a broken system but rather the functioning of systems intended to privilege white South Africans over their black, coloured, and Indian counterparts.⁸³ The creation of additional spaces to engage with the past and critically examine its enduring legacies in the present through memorialisation is not only necessary but imperative. Such spaces facilitate a deeper understanding of historical injustices and their ongoing implications, fostering a more informed and reflective society.

This perspective is taken further by Marschall, who offers a nuanced exploration of memory, memorialisation, and heritage in the post-apartheid South African context. Central to her analysis is examining the official processes through which selected individuals and historically significant events are represented, commemorated, and memorialised, thereby shaping collective memory and identity. Her work critically engages with the politics of memory and the mechanisms by which certain narratives are privileged in the construction of heritage — a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses various elements of culture, identity, and history.⁸⁴ Marschall posits that heritage encompasses the legacy of physical artefacts, cultural practices, and traditions inherited from preceding generations. This definition extends to both

⁸¹ Sachs, A. (1990) *The soft vengeance of a freedom fighter*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA59844594>. Pg. 213

⁸² Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume One*. Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>. Pg. 113

⁸³ (Graham, 2012:12)

⁸⁴ (Marschall, 2010:1)

tangible manifestations, such as architectural structures, monuments, and landscapes.⁸⁵ Thus, as a part of South Africa's national landscape, JVS qualifies as a tangible manifestation of our past. On the national memory landscape, whose legacy does JVS belong to?

Origins and Function of John Vorster Square

John Vorster officially inaugurated JVS, a ten-storey building with a distinctive blue façade, on 23 August 1968, strategically located in central Johannesburg.⁸⁶ JVS housed holding cells, administrative offices, and interrogation rooms. Promoted as a "state-of-the-art" facility and lauded as the largest police station in Africa at the time, JVS became a central hub for the apartheid regime's security apparatus.⁸⁷ The building's architecture, including its spatial design, was instrumentalised to facilitate torture and abuse, thereby reinforcing apartheid laws.⁸⁸ Despite attributing many deaths in detention to suicide, the structure was equipped with high-security features to prevent detainees from taking their own lives. These features included unique steel grilles at entrances, soundproof rooms with folding steel grilles across windows, thick steel bank vault doors, and special burglar guards.

Architectural elements such as doors, windows, corridors, and staircases were implicated in the torture and deaths of anti-apartheid activists. This served to obfuscate accountability for SB officers and obscure evidence.⁸⁹ This instrumentalisation of architecture allowed the state to anthropomorphise the building, effectively using it as an alibi.⁹⁰ The dehumanising conditions of detention at JVS were exacerbated by the building's design, with features such as the absence of toilets in holding cells contributing to the psychological and physical torment of detainees.⁹¹

"When John Vorster Square was originally conceived, it was designed with the specific intention of having the 10th floor serve as a separate and tightly secured space of interrogation and torture. Physically isolated from the rest of the building, the 10th floor was, for example,

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Patel, Y. (2022) '8. The role of architecture in South African detention cases during the apartheid era,' in *Boydell and Brewer eBooks*, pp. 151–170. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800105638-013>. Pg. 156

⁸⁷(Patel, 2022:156)

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹*Ibid.*

accessible only by foot, and the building's elevator only went as high as the 9th floor [to] restrict access and minimise the possibility of escape."⁹²

The SB within JVS played a crucial role in suppressing political dissent through coercive measures. Situated on the 9th and 10th floors, the SB enjoyed top-secret status and privileges beyond those afforded to other officers.⁹³ The building's design, with lifts terminating at the 9th floor, facilitated restricted access to the notorious 10th floor, the levels notorious for torture and death.⁹⁴ The SB's operations were considered essential for maintaining "South African national security," with torture and assault of detainees effectively sanctioned.⁹⁵ Their actions were legitimised by draconian legislation designed to stifle political expression.⁹⁶ Consequently, JVS functioned as a primary site of detention, interrogation, and imprisonment in the former Transvaal region.

At the opening ceremony of JVS, Vorster declared, "...the breakdown of law and order in South Africa will not be tolerated under any circumstances whatsoever."⁹⁷ This statement foreshadowed the brutal suppression of opposition to the racially discriminatory laws designed to maintain the apartheid regime. The oppressive conditions and stringent detention regulations implemented within JVS directly contributed to the deaths of eight detainees between 1971 and 1990: Ahmed Timol, Dr Neil Aggett, Elmon Malele, Ernest Dipale, Matthews Mabelane, Stanza Bopape, Wellington Tshazibane and Clayton Sizwe Sithole.

At first glance, one might argue that JVS primarily belongs to the white Afrikaner minority's heritage, considering it is named after John Vorster. Marschall notes that the white minority's relationship with heritage is often marked by anxieties over the potential erosion of their societal power and status. This manifests in a strong emotional attachment to contested elements of their heritage, even when they no longer align with the specific symbolic values they represent.⁹⁸ For instance, many white South Africans retain a deep connection to

⁹² Miller, K. (2018b) "'The Walls Are So Silent': Spaces of confinement and gendered meanings of incarceration in South African commemorative art," *De Arte*, 53(2–3), pp. 122–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043389.2018.1481916>. Pg. 129

⁹³(Patel, 2022:151)

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998e) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume Three*. Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>. Pg. 37

⁹⁶ Mattera, D. (1987) *Memory is the weapon*. <http://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/531231>. Pg. 6

⁹⁷ SABC (2012) *Opening of John Vorster Square*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcanGkGY87E>.

⁹⁸ (Marschall, 2010:1)

monuments commemorating historical figures and events, which serve as markers of cultural heritage despite the potential disavowal of the ideologies they embody, such as white supremacy. Examples include statues of white leaders, war memorials honouring white combatants, and public monuments celebrating colonial achievements.⁹⁹ In contrast, black South Africans' heritage is often perceived as a means of empowerment, "the valorisation and preservation of their cultural beliefs and values; the honouring of their heroes and contributions; the authentication of their neglected stories and memories; the official acknowledgement of their suffering and sacrifices."¹⁰⁰

Considering these insights, this paper argues that JVS belongs to the broader national landscape, including both black history and white history. Although the name has changed to Johannesburg Central Police Station, the site is still a symbol of the apartheid regime's expression of power through the SB, whilst stories of resistance by freedom fighters illustrate the courage and resilience of former detainees like Jaki Seroke:

"The only thing that makes you survive is because we were on high moral ground. We were fighting for freedom, democracy, and it was a good cause, and then you say to yourself, 'Whatever happens to me, at least it was a good cause.'"¹⁰¹

The inclusive yet contradictory nature of JVS's heritage warrants its memorialisation efforts similar to that of the Old Fort, now known as a Site of Conscience called Constitution Hill.¹⁰² "John Vorster Police Station and The Old Fort are two examples of opposing treatments of apartheid spaces, the one being developed to celebrate the liberators of justice and the other choosing to ignore the difficulties of its past."¹⁰³ Constitution Hill was a part of South Africa's National Legacy Project, whereas JVS wasn't — pointing towards what Elcheroth and de Mel describe as "meaningful silences" in shaping collective memory.¹⁰⁴ Meaningful silences refer to the deliberate omission or absence of certain narratives, events, or details in commemorative

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

¹⁰² Sites of Conscience (2022a) *Constitution Hill - South Africa - Sites of conscience*. <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/membership/constitution-hill-south-africa/>.

¹⁰³ Patel, Y., and The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (2023) *Complicit Architecture: Sites of apartheid-era incarceration - Anti Apartheid Legacy*. <https://antiapartheidlegacy.org.uk/complicit-architecture-sites-of-apartheid-era-incarceration/>.

¹⁰⁴ (Elcheroth and De Mel, 2021:7)

practices such as the failure to memorialise JVS.¹⁰⁵ The authors suggest that these silences are closely linked to the idea of selective forgetting. In South Africa, the memory of JVS was forgotten through its absence in the National Legacy Project.

The National Legacy Project

The National Legacy Project was a government-led initiative established to commemorate and acknowledge significant facets of South Africa's historical and cultural heritage.¹⁰⁶ This project was formally adopted by Cabinet in 1997 and subsequently developed by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science, and Technology (DACST) in collaboration with social historian Luli Callinicos.¹⁰⁷ The project emerged in response to requests from individuals and grassroots organisations expressing concerns about heritage matters, particularly in the context of South Africa's first democratic general election in 1994. These requests underscored a widespread public demand for the recognition and commemoration of historical events and figures, highlighting the societal imperative to address and memorialise the nation's complex past.¹⁰⁸

"The Presidency and the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology were reportedly flooded with thousands of letters by individuals and organisations concerned about matters of heritage. They expressed a request for official forms of tribute to those who had made sacrifices for the fight against apartheid and encouraged the acknowledgement of significant sites and events reflecting the history and experiences of previously marginalised communities."¹⁰⁹

This excerpt articulates an explicit demand for the recognition of historically significant sites that reflect the nation's past, prompting critical reflection on why JVS was deemed insufficiently consequential to warrant memorialisation. Marschall examines the processes employed to determine which aspects of South Africa's history were selected for memorialisation. Her findings reveal that nations construct a collective identity by selectively commemorating specific historical events and narratives, a practice that serves to reinforce and legitimise the prevailing social order.¹¹⁰ The notion of memorialisation efforts being largely influenced by a desire to "legitimate a present social order"¹¹¹ is supported by international law

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ (Marschall, 2010:171)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 169

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 171

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

and transitional justice practitioner Ruti G. Teitel, who asserts that within the framework of TJ, revisiting the past is not an act of mere retrospection but a necessary precondition for envisioning and constructing a more equitable future.¹¹² This approach is grounded in the idea of progressive history, whereby the confrontation of historical injustices becomes imperative for meaningful societal transformation. Transitional periods, characterised by rupture and discontinuity, present a critical moment of choice among competing historical narratives. These moments open the possibility for counter-histories to emerge, challenging hegemonic accounts of past conflicts—particularly those marked by defeat or systemic oppression—and redefining their social and political meanings. Through this process, TJ seeks to reconfigure the present and future implications of these events, positioning memory as an active, transformative force in the pursuit of accountability and the reimagining of collective identity.¹¹³ This construction of presenting a shared social order was imagined through the National Legacy Project's nine high-profile initiatives, which were selected based on their potential to symbolise the new national identity and collective memory:

“1. the commemoration of the Zulu warriors at the battlefield of Blood River/Ncome near Dundee in KZN; 2. the Monument for the Women of South Africa at the Union Buildings in Pretoria; 3. the inclusive commemoration of the Centenary of the South African Anglo-Boer War; 4. Constitution Hill (the site of the Old Fort and the new Constitutional Court in Johannesburg); 5. the commemoration of Nelson Mandela's home and sites associated with his youth through the Qunu Museum in the Eastern Cape; 6. a memorial to former Mozambican president Samora Machel on the rural site where his plane crashed near the border town of Mbuzini; 7. The Albert Luthuli project focused on the restoration of his home in Groutville, KZN; 8. a Khoe/San heritage route situated mostly in the Western Cape; and 9. the ambitious Freedom Park outside Pretoria”¹¹⁴

The DACST's approach was characterised by a highly institutionalised form of commemoration, where the government directed the narrative and focus of the memorials. This meant that the project was not truly a reflection of public sentiment but rather aligned with the government's political objectives and values regarding national identity.¹¹⁵ Let us consider Constitution Hill.

¹¹²Teitel, R.G. (2003) 'Transitional Justice genealogy,' *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 16, pp. 69–94. <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/hrj/wp-content/uploads/sites/83/2020/06/16HHRJ69-Teitel.pdf>. Pg. 87

¹¹³(Teitel, 2017:87)

¹¹⁴(Marschall, 2010:169)

¹¹⁵*Ibid.* Pg. 192

Constitution Hill

Constitution Hill, a site of memory in Johannesburg, South Africa, embodies the multifaceted narrative of the nation's struggle against apartheid and its transition to democracy. Referred to as the "Robben Island of Joburg," it holds significant historical importance.¹¹⁶ The site encompasses the Old Fort, established in 1893 as a military defence post and later repurposed as a prison. The site also encompassed the former Women's Jail, Number Four and Five.¹¹⁷ Over time, it housed countless prisoners, many of whom were incarcerated for defying apartheid laws. Notable figures like Joe Slovo, Albertina Sisulu, Robert Sobukwe and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela were imprisoned there, reinforcing its role in the fight against racial oppression.¹¹⁸ The site's exhibitions acknowledge the harsh conditions within these prisons, including overcrowding, disease, gang violence, and racial discrimination in food rations.¹¹⁹

The disturbing story of activist Phila Portia Ndwandwe, who was tortured, kept naked, and eventually assassinated, is also remembered at the precinct.¹²⁰ Ndwandwe's act of fashioning underwear from a scrap of blue plastic in an attempt to retain dignity is commemorated as an artistic symbol.¹²¹ The sexual nature of Ndwandwe's story is hauntingly reminiscent of Joyce Dipale's accounts of having electric shocks administered to sensitive areas of the body at JVS—specifically her breasts, buttocks, and genitals.¹²² While Dipale recounted becoming desensitised to the physical pain, she emphasised, "never the humiliation."¹²³ Dipale and Ndwandwe's experiences bring forward the specific forms of sexualised torture deployed against women.¹²⁴ While acknowledging the brutality experienced by men under apartheid, it is crucial to recognise the intersectional nature of oppression faced by women. They carried a disproportionate burden of economic hardship and social restrictions, further compounded by societal norms that objectified them and normalised male violence.

¹¹⁶ (Marschall, 2010:171)

¹¹⁷ Constitution Hill (2025) *Constitution Hill*. <https://www.constitutionhill.org.za/home>.

¹¹⁸ (Constitution Hill, 2025)

¹¹⁹ Naidoo, S. (2021) *Women surviving apartheid's prisons*. Pg. 33

¹²⁰ (Naidoo, 2021:34)

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Goldblatt, B. and Meintjes, S. (1996) *Gender and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission A submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/submit/gender.htm>.

¹²³ (Goldblatt and Meintjes, 1996)

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

This context of systemic sexism, both within the broader apartheid structure and, potentially, within liberation movements themselves, created an environment where women's sexual integrity was violated and their dignity degraded.¹²⁵ These instances highlight this 'double oppression,' a phenomenon that persists in various forms even in contemporary society. However, Dipale's story of 500 days of solitary confinement, being handcuffed to a pole, being rotated until rendered unconscious and sexual torture at JVS between 1976 and 1977 remain unaccounted for. A stark contrast to the public dialogues and exhibitions addressing sexual and gender violence and gender rights at the memorialised Constitution Hill.¹²⁶ This topic is especially pertinent considering South Africa's grim statistics on violence against women, which include "among the highest rape incidences in the world."¹²⁷

A memorialised JVS could connect violations in detention to broader societal abuses, contributing meaningfully to the Sites of Conscience landscape. Visitors could learn about Joyce Dipale's activism in her youth, inspiring people to be more active in their engagement with human rights issues. Furthermore, the memorialised JVS could foster critical reflection on the persistent racial and gender stereotypes rooted in South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. This exemplifies how reclaiming memory and challenging white supremacy at the JVS can contribute to addressing the legacy of violence in South Africa.

The architectural elements of Constitution Hill integrate structural remnants and materials from demolished prison buildings to symbolically reinforce the 'triumph' of freedom over oppression.¹²⁸ This deliberate architectural fusion echoes the site's intention to rise from the remnants of colonialism and apartheid as a symbol of a new, democratic South Africa.¹²⁹ The guided tour at Constitution Hill begins with narratives of suffering and hardship within the restored Old Fort and prison facilities, culminating in a celebratory spirit inside the Constitutional Court.¹³⁰ The court's design and artistic adornment, created by artists and crafters nationwide, express inclusiveness, shared humanity, and a uniquely South African

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ (Naidu, 2014a:143)

¹²⁷ Spooner, M. and Leshilo, T. (2023) *South African women: violence, health, and money issues among 5 biggest obstacles that stand in their way*. <https://theconversation.com/south-african-women-violence-health-and-money-issues-among-5-biggest-obstacles-that-stand-in-their-way-211140#:~:text=South%20Africa%20has%20notoriously%20high,rape%20incidences%20in%20the%20world.>

¹²⁸ Ashcroft, B. (2015) 'Constitution Hill: Memory, ideology and utopia,' *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 51(2), pp. 94–113. <https://doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v51i2.8>. Pg. 111

¹²⁹ (Marschall, 2010:177)

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 178

identity.¹³¹ Furthermore, the complex houses a centre for creative expression, art, dialogue, and inclusion, and a museum and events space, hosting cultural events like Afropunk.¹³²

Commissioned by President Paul Kruger of the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek, the Old Fort served as Johannesburg's first prison and military stronghold.¹³³ Originally known as Johannesburg Jail, it was renamed the Old Fort in 1948.¹³⁴ Designated a national monument in November 1964, the Old Fort was recognised as the most significant surviving structure from the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek in Johannesburg, comparable to Cape Town's Castle of Good Hope.¹³⁵ Between 1948 and 1983, five deaths were recorded at the Old Fort.¹³⁶ Constitution Hill's historical value has been attributed to its role in imprisoning political activists during the apartheid era and has been memorialised to foster public dialogue on the site's history and "forging links between the past, the present and the future."¹³⁷ Marketed as both a tourist attraction and a centre for social transformation for young people, Constitution Hill uses former detainee narratives, art, workshops, human rights festivals, exhibitions, and public programmes to raise awareness among visitors about human rights and how human dignity can be realised for all.¹³⁸

Ereshnee Naidu argues that Constitution Hill is a significant memorial site that addresses the country's culture of violence and human rights violations during the apartheid era, contending that it serves as a symbolic bridge between South Africa's dark past and its envisioned future grounded in freedom, human rights, and justice.¹³⁹ She positions this site as a "living space of memory," working to promote human rights and address structural and social justice issues.¹⁴⁰ Emphasising how this Site of Conscience seeks to move beyond merely recognising survivors to actively engaging with the changing social and political needs of society. She supports this argument by discussing the 'Marikana Hill to Constitution Hill' exhibition in 2013.¹⁴¹ On 16 August 2012, a tragic and deeply unsettling event unfolded at the Lonmin Platinum Mine in

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² (Constitution Hill, 2025)

¹³³ Office 24/7 Architecture (2024) 'For the Meeting and Event Project at the Old Fort, Constitutional Hill, Johannesburg,' *Application to do interior renovation to the west wing of the Old Fort Warder*.

¹³⁴ (Office 24/7 Architecture, 2024:4)

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 5

¹³⁶ (Patel and The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning, 2023)

¹³⁷ (Constitution Hill, 2025)

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ (Naidu, 2014a:143)

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Marikana, wherein 34 mineworkers demonstrating for a livable wage were fatally shot by members of the South African Police Service (SAPS) at a peaceful protest.¹⁴² This act of violence, emblematic of apartheid's systemic brutality, resulted in the loss of innocent lives, which may be interpreted as a grim sacrifice to the unrelenting forces of continued capitalist exploitation of black bodies.¹⁴³

“The Marikana massacre was the single most traumatic event of the post-apartheid era, evoking images, and memories of police brutality at Sharpeville in 1960 and the Soweto Uprising in 1976. Along with the corpses, hopeful visions of a new South Africa lay shattered on the killing fields of Marikana.”¹⁴⁴

The exhibition at Constitution Hill aimed to humanise the miners and raise empathy among visitors. It also addressed themes of bystander witnessing and the responsibility of citizens to protect human rights.¹⁴⁵ This is in line with what Dr Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela refers to as ‘reparative humanism.’¹⁴⁶ She describes ‘reparative humanism’ as a societal shift in how victims and perpetrators see each other post-violence that allows “an ethics of care for the sake of a transformed society.”¹⁴⁷ She roots this term in the unfortunate truth that:

“Culpability for crimes against humanity does not rest only with the individual perpetrators who committed the crimes in question. Rather, the question of complicity turns the spotlight on the broader public - those whose votes and other kinds of active or silent support contributed to the flourishing of oppressive regimes. It focuses attention on the broader framework of the political-ideological context that fostered an environment in which dehumanisation and gross human rights violations thrived.”¹⁴⁸

At a site where humans are confronted with violations against another group, they might think, “How could they do this?”, forgetting that they pretend not to see an unhoused person at a traffic light, forgetting that they swipe past videos of Palestinian children crying for their families who have been killed by the occupying apartheid state of Israel on social media or forgetting that they too are complicit in the ‘micro’ violences of a capitalist and patriarchal society. We need more Sites of Conscience, so why not JVS?

¹⁴²(*Miners Shot Down*, 2014)

¹⁴³*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Hart, G. (2014) *Rethinking the South African Crisis: Nationalism, Populism, Hegemony*. Available at: <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB15931098>. Pg. 20

¹⁴⁵ (Naidu, 2014a:144)

¹⁴⁶ Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2016) 'What does it mean to be human in the aftermath of mass trauma and violence?: Toward the horizon of an ethics of care,' *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 36(2), pp. 43-61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sce.2016.0030>. Pg. 44

¹⁴⁷ (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2016:43)

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 44

Sites of conscience have the potential to make individuals more compassionate. This sentiment is supported by authors like Brandon Hamber, Liz Ševčenko, Ereshnee Naidu¹⁴⁹ and Elif M. Gokcigdem.¹⁵⁰ Hamber, Ševčenko and Naidu hold that experiential learning—learning through experience¹⁵¹—at authentic sites evokes strong emotions, fostering empathy for victims and creating a lasting impression as “a Site of Conscience provides a visceral connection to the past.”¹⁵² This visceral reaction might be one of the most powerful aspects of sites of conscience as it speaks to one’s humanity. Gokcigdem, the editor of *Fostering Empathy Through Museums*, has compellingly argued for the role of museums in fostering empathy in the world, and I wholeheartedly concur with her perspective.¹⁵³

Gokcigdem, states that empathy is our innate capacity to understand and share the feelings and thoughts of others.¹⁵⁴ It enables us to connect with people who may seem dissimilar, highlighting our shared humanity. When we cultivate empathy, we are more inclined to act with compassion and altruism to alleviate the suffering of others. Moreover, by fostering empathy for the environment and fellow human beings, we are more likely to make choices that protect it for future generations.¹⁵⁵ She comments on how modern-day society conditions us to abandon our innate nature of caring about others and the planet through capitalism and its socio-political, psychological, and economic manifestations. However, we can ‘come back’ to ourselves at museums.¹⁵⁶ This assertion is predicated on a belief in human goodness, a perspective shared by philosophers like Rousseau, Confucius, Mencius, Rogers, and Kant.¹⁵⁷ However, it is essential to acknowledge that this view is not universally accepted and remains a topic of philosophical inquiry. Sites of Conscience are a form of storytelling, an indigenous

¹⁴⁹ Hamber, B., Ševčenko, L. and Naidu, E. (2010) 'Utopian dreams or practical possibilities? The challenges of evaluating the impact of memorialization in societies in Transition,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 4(3), pp. 397–420. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijq018>.

¹⁵⁰ Gokcigdem, E.M. (2017) *Five ways museums can Increase empathy in the world*. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/five_ways_museums_can_increase_empathy_in_the_world.

¹⁵¹ Institute for Experiential Learning (2023) *What is experiential learning?* - *Institute for Experiential Learning*. <https://experientiallearninginstitute.org/what-is-experiential-learning/>.

¹⁵² (Hamber, Ševčenko and Naidu, 2010:405)

¹⁵³ (Gokcigdem, 2017)

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Chandra, A. (2025) *Virtue Beyond Religion and Belief: The Essence of Human Goodness*. <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/virtue-beyond-religion-and-belief-the-essence-of-human-goodness-kpkn/>.

form of preserving culture, transferring knowledge, and keeping history alive. Thus, because of this element, sites of conscience encapsulate resistance to hegemonic narratives.

Constitution Hill stands as a powerful case study for advocating for the memorialisation of JVS. Alongside transmitting the experiences of former detainees and those who lost their lives at JVS, these reclaimed memories could be actualised to draw attention to social justice issues. Take, for example, the case of Neil Aggett's death at JVS: Aggett, a physician and union organiser, was deeply affected by his experiences working in segregated black hospitals. Witnessing first-hand the degrading living conditions of black South Africans, he believed that medical treatment alone was insufficient, advocating for broader social change.¹⁵⁸ Aggett recognised that poor economic conditions are directly linked to social isolation and mental health issues.¹⁵⁹

This is an issue that continues to plague South Africa today.¹⁶⁰ Katusha de Villiers argues that the legacy of apartheid has left South Africa racially and economically segregated, which continues to affect health outcomes. The inequitable quality of healthcare service provision is a direct result of this segregation, affecting the health of marginalised communities.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, the lack of access to clean water, nutrition, sanitation, and education are critical social determinants that affect health outcomes. These deficiencies are prevalent in South Africa, where over half of the population lives in poverty, exacerbating health issues and limiting access to healthcare services.¹⁶² Aggett's involvement in initiatives like establishing medical centres in townships and his concern for the health impacts of economic deprivation could be discussed at a memorialised JVS.¹⁶³ Development organisations could host seminars, and the garden outside the building could serve as a community garden where produce is cultivated and grown for low-income communities. Conversations around these interconnected struggles could be explored in memory of Aggett. Additionally, the indigent would be humanised and capitalist narratives of poverty being an individual failure would be exposed and challenged. Ultimately, memorialising JVS could significantly contribute to the memorial work done by Constitution Hill. JVS could also serve as an additional Site of Conscience,

¹⁵⁸ Naidoo, B. (2012). *Death of an idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett*. Jonathan Ball Publishers. Pg. 103

¹⁵⁹ (Naidoo, 2012: 156)

¹⁶⁰ De Villiers, K. (2021) 'Bridging the health inequality gap: an examination of South Africa's social innovation in health landscape,' *Infectious Diseases of Poverty*, pp. 1–7.

¹⁶¹ (De Villiers, 2021:6)

¹⁶² *Ibid.* Pg. 4

¹⁶³ (Naidoo, 2012: 103)

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demonstrating how the burden of addressing whether memorialisation can contribute to promoting compassion and humanity in “a society where violence pervades.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ (Naidu, 2014a:143)

“In Detention”

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He slipped from the ninth-floor
He hung from the ninth floor
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing.

- Chris van Wyk, 1979

John Vorster Square and Apartheid Repression

The TRC reports provide extensive evidence of systematic torture in detention, including JVS.¹⁶⁵ Volume 3 Chapter 6 gives an overview of human rights violations with one of the sections reading: “Evidence before the Commission showed that the introduction of detention without trial in 1963 created the context for the systematic use of torture. Most reports of torture for this period emanated from the Johannesburg and Pretoria areas,”¹⁶⁶ where the security police headquarters and the JVS police station were situated.

The poem ‘In Detention’ by Chris van Wyk, which opens this chapter, reflects the absurd justifications used by law enforcement authorities regarding deaths in detention, highlighting how their trivialisation of detainees manifested in the implausibility of their explanations. These accounts serve as a reflection of the systemic dehumanisation of individuals who opposed the apartheid regime. The perpetrators—primarily agents of the racist state—engaged in acts of torture and extrajudicial killings, demonstrating a blatant disregard for accountability or the value of those who did not participate in upholding white supremacist values. Their paramount concern remained the preservation and protection of the apartheid state, underscoring the entrenched institutional violence that characterised this period. In *A Crime Against Humanity: Analysing the Repression of the Apartheid State*, a 1998 publication of the Human Rights Committee of South Africa edited by Max Coleman, it is shown that “abuse [was] widespread and systematic, not just the work of a handful of sadists. The pattern of torture was much the same in Port Elizabeth, Durban, Soweto, John Vorster Square or Jeffreys Bay.”¹⁶⁷

This section explores documented accounts of torture and deaths at JVS chronologically, mapping the timeline of atrocities over nearly two decades.¹⁶⁸ The testimonies and evidence presented here are primarily drawn from the TRC, the collaborative SAHA and Google Arts and Culture online museum, and Imtiaz Cajee’s book *Timol: A Quest for Justice*. Additionally, Enver Samuel’s documentaries on Ahmed Timol and Matthews Mabelane provide critical insights into specific cases of state violence and its legacy on younger generations. While these sources substantiate many known cases, it is important to acknowledge that numerous survivors

¹⁶⁵Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998b) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume Four*. Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>.

¹⁶⁶ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:532)

¹⁶⁷(Human Rights Committee of South Africa, 1998:53)

¹⁶⁸ Disparities in the length and detail of testimonies reflect variations in available information, not the relative importance of individual experiences.

and victims of JVS remain absent from these records. Memorialising the site would play a role in paying tribute to those whose experiences at JVS have faded into oblivion or have never been acknowledged.

Fatima Swartz explained the complexities of memory work, noting that memory is not always reliable. Drawing from her experience at the Institute for the Healing of Memories, she described how trauma survivors often downplay their experiences as a coping mechanism, as remembering can be too painful.¹⁶⁹ Conversely, perpetrators of violence usually struggle to reconcile their roles as agents of brutality. Swartz emphasises the importance of grounding memory in factual truth. This collection of verified human rights violations serves as a powerful tool, ensuring that these accounts cannot be denied, diminished, or erased. By anchoring memory in empirical evidence, we confront the past with clarity and integrity.¹⁷⁰

Curating these narratives has posed a significant challenge: conveying the scale of these accounts without perpetuating the dehumanisation endured by individuals, thereby replicating the very violence this thesis aims to expose. The goal is to foreground their experiences, honour their resilience, and emphasise the urgent need for JVS to transform into a materialised testimony to the human rights violations committed by the apartheid regime.¹⁷¹ Owing to the violent nature of JVS, this chapter contains descriptions that are inherently distressing and may be unsettling to read but must be remembered.

¹⁶⁹ 'Interview with Fatima Swartz' (2024), 30 May.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ (Sites of Conscience, 2024a)

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Cell block at Johannesburg Central Police Station (former John Vorster Square) by Craig Matthews.¹⁷²

As readers engage with the horrific accounts of torture detailed within this thesis, an empathetic imagination is required. Consider these testimonies as echoes resonating within the very walls of JVS. Envision the building's imposing blue façade, a stark symbol of state power. Imagine stepping inside, roaming the corridors of the 9th and 10th floors, and standing within the prison cells themselves. Peer out the windows, contemplating the deadly drop and the terror that must have gripped those who were forced to their deaths within this structure.



Tilted view from JVS ' 10th floor.¹⁷³

¹⁷² (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

¹⁷³ *Truth Be Told: Room 1008* (2024). EMS Productions.

And then, ask yourself: can we, as beneficiaries of the sacrifices made by these individuals, genuinely claim to be satisfied with the present state of South Africa? This question gains resonance when considering the experiences of young black South Africans like Chumani Maxwele,¹⁷⁴ who sparked the #RhodesMustFallMovement (RMF)—originating in March 2015 at the UCT, RMF merged as a protest against entrenched institutional racism and a demand for decolonisation, epitomised by the campaign to challenge white supremacy and remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the university grounds.¹⁷⁵

Maxwele articulated that his experience working in an upmarket grocery store evoked a sense of generational déjà vu, mirroring the service roles occupied by his ancestors.¹⁷⁶ “The vast majority of the Woolworths customers were white, and he was standing on his feet, attending to the needs of white people. It was not really so different from what his father had done in the mines or what the mothers of his friends had done when they toiled in white people’s homes as [domestic workers]. Freedom, it seemed to him, was an illusion, a promise heard but not truly experienced – fresh new clothes that concealed the dogged persistence of humiliations from the past.”¹⁷⁷

Kgotsi Chikane, another UCT student, shared, “Our experience of racism is worse. It’s subliminal. The form of racism that makes you ignorant about your subjugation,” while perhaps not reflecting a quantitatively “worse” experience than the brutality of the apartheid era, he correctly identifies the insidious nature of contemporary racism.¹⁷⁸ While the overt legislative and political violence of apartheid is absent, the systemic inequalities that persist create a different, yet equally damaging, form of oppression. A memorialised JVS could serve as a vital educational tool, bridging the gap between historical atrocities and the more subtle yet pervasive forms of social and economic violence that continue to plague South Africa. Concerning Chikane’s assertion, a memorialised JVS could serve as a powerful counter-narrative to the idea that contemporary racism is somehow “worse” than the systemic violence

¹⁷⁴Fairbanks, E. (2015) 'The birth of Rhodes Must Fall,' *The Guardian*, 18 November. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/nov/18/why-south-african-students-have-turned-on-their-parents-generation>.

¹⁷⁵ Van Der Wal, E. (2018) 'Killing Rhodes: decolonization and memorial practices in post-apartheid South Africa,' *Folk Life*, 56(2), pp. 130–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2018.1502408>.

¹⁷⁶ (Fairbanks, 2015)

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

of apartheid — or even worse, that apartheid ‘wasn’t that bad.’ By illustrating the dehumanisation inherent in the apartheid regime, it could challenge any sanitisation of the past and underscore the very real, tangible violence that black South Africans and anti-apartheid comrades of all backgrounds experienced. In doing so, it could foster a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of racism and violences in South Africa, acknowledging both the overt violence of the past and the more insidious yet persistent forms of discrimination that continue to shape the present.

Confronting the atrocities of JVS necessitates acknowledging the ongoing struggles for social and economic justice in South Africa. The sacrifices made by those who endured torture in the fight against apartheid demand more than remembrance; they necessitate a renewed commitment to realising the full promise of a genuinely equitable South Africa, one that can be realised through a Site of Conscience.

This chapter serves a dual analytical function within the thesis. First, it contributes to the historical record by collating, in a single narrative space, the fragmented and often marginalised testimonies of those detained, tortured, and killed at John Vorster Square. Second, it forms the evidentiary foundation for my argument that JVS must be memorialised as a Site of Conscience. These stories are therefore not presented merely as historical description but as analytical material that demonstrates the systemic nature of apartheid violence, the mechanisms of state repression, and the unfinished work of the TRC. In doing so, this chapter positions the lived experiences of detainees as central to the rationale for memorialisation and to the broader project of confronting persistent structures of inequality in democratic South Africa

Preventing Erasure and Reclaiming Memory

1971

Ahmed Essop Timol



Timol smiling.¹⁷⁹

“I saw Ahmed as one of the gentlest persons I ever met...how could this have happened to him? It was so unfair that someone who had never hurt anybody at all, neither mentally or physically or even with his words, could be the victim of such brutal and horrendous treatment.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ Gallery - Ahmed Timol (2022). <https://www.ahmedtimol.co.za/gallery/>.

¹⁸⁰ (Cajee, 2005:20)

Five days later, on 27 October 1971, Timol died in police custody, with the official cause declared as suicide.¹⁸³ Despite the state pathologist noting that Timol's body was beaten and bruised before his death.¹⁸⁴ The fatal fall from a 10th-floor window of the SB office marked the twenty-second such incident since the introduction of detention without trial and the first documented case at JVS.¹⁸⁵ Timol died at 29.¹⁸⁶ The indignity inflicted upon this anti-apartheid activist extended beyond his death. His demise was met with derision, with SB officers reportedly quipping, "Indians can't fly", and mockingly referring to the 10th-floor fall as "Timol Heights."¹⁸⁷ This callous display of inhumanity epitomised the pervasive culture of brutality that characterised the actions of the security police at JVS for two further decades.

Timol's death occurred under suspicious circumstances, casting doubt on the official narrative of suicide. An eyewitness, Mohamed Ali, who was at a petrol station across from JVS at the time of Timol's alleged suicide, reported hearing no screaming or shouting. He noted that police surrounded the area where Timol landed less than a minute later, suggesting they were waiting for the body.¹⁸⁸ This observation, along with other evidence, led to widespread belief that Timol's death was not self-inflicted. This was affirmed by the TRC, which found that an inquest into Timol's death in 1972 was inconsequential in providing justice, perpetuating the impunity of the SB.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸¹ (*Indians Can't Fly*, 2015)

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ (Cajee, 2005:168)

¹⁸⁴ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

¹⁸⁵ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:542)

¹⁸⁶ *Ahmed Timol* (no date). <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/ahmed-timol/> (Accessed: August 18, 2024).

¹⁸⁷ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

¹⁸⁸ (Cajee, 2005:167)

¹⁸⁹ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:542)

In 2003, it was revealed that key figures involved in Timol's case were still alive when Cajee requested an investigation by the NPA. These individuals included the lead interrogators and an investigating officer who were implicated in covering up the murder. Despite the opportunity to hold them accountable, a conspiracy to suppress the TRC cases allowed them to evade justice.¹⁹⁰ They were all deceased by 2012. The NPA had nearly nine years to investigate before the last interrogator died but chose not to do so.¹⁹¹ A subsequent inquest, reopened in 2017 due to new evidence and pressure from the Timol family, contradicted the findings of the initial inquest. This inquest found that Timol had been severely tortured and would not have been in a physical condition to jump out of the window.¹⁹² Judge Mothle's judgment also revealed that crucial pages were missing from the 1972 inquest records, including witness statements and the police officers' accounts of Timol's fall.¹⁹³ On 12 October 2017, the Pretoria High Court made a landmark ruling, declaring that Timol had been brutally tortured and murdered by the SB, who pushed him out of the window of room 1026 or the rooftop of JVS.¹⁹⁴ Joao Rodrigues, who placed himself at the scene of Timol's death, was found to be complicit in the cover-up of the torture and murder. In 2018, he was charged with Timol's murder and defeating the ends of justice.¹⁹⁵ Unfortunately, he died before ever paying for his crime in 2021.¹⁹⁶

Ahmed Timol's family expressed their desire for respectful remembrance and accountability for his death. They highlighted the importance of acknowledging Timol's pain and ensuring that such injustices are not forgotten.¹⁹⁷ Timol's father, Harron Timol, said, "As a family, what we would like to have, and I am sure many, many South Africans would like to have, is that their loved ones should never, ever be forgotten...in Ahmed's case a school in his name would be appropriate. But at the end of the day, I believe that South Africans in future generations should never, ever forget those that were killed in the name of apartheid."¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁰ *Press Release: The death of Ahmed Timol Murder accused, Joao Rodrigues* (2021). <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/3063-2/>.

¹⁹¹ (*Press Release: The death of Ahmed Timol Murder accused, Joao Rodrigues*, 2021)

¹⁹² (*Indians Can't Fly*, 2015)

¹⁹³ (*Ahmed Timol*, no date)

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ (*Press Release: The death of Ahmed Timol Murder accused, Joao Rodrigues*, 2021)

¹⁹⁷ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:542)

¹⁹⁸ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998c:116)

Timol's death has been remembered through documentaries such as *Indians Can't Fly* and *Someone to Blame – The Ahmed Timol Inquest* and through published works, including his family's tireless pursuit of justice, meticulously chronicled on www.ahmedtimol.co.za. The 1999 renaming of Roodepoort secondary school in his honour further underscores his enduring significance.¹⁹⁹ Timol's narrative arguably stands as one of the most prominent accounts of state brutality emanating from JVS. As Timol's nephew, Imtiaz Cajee, observes, "Ahmed Timol is one of the most celebrated official murder victims of apartheid South Africa."²⁰⁰ This thesis posits that Timol's memory deserves further commemoration at JVS, particularly in the context of ensuring that "future generations never forget those who were killed in the name of apartheid." This assertion is supported by Cajee, who recommended for the 10th floor to be memorialised.²⁰¹ A direct call by Timol's family for the site to be memorialised in his and his comrades' honour. The importance of this cannot be overstated and indicates the importance of this discussion.

At the renaming of a school in honour of Timol in 1999, Mandela suggested that Timol would have rejoiced on the eve of the nation's second democratic elections.²⁰² However, one must question whether Timol's hypothetical joy would extend to the persistent racialised inequalities that plague South Africa thirty-one years after the 'end' of apartheid, given Timol's profound empathy for the oppressed.²⁰³ The current state of the nation arguably falls short of the ideals for which he gave his life, considering "the convictions that led to his death were clearly rooted in concern for his fellow human beings."²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 13

²⁰¹ Mothle, J. (2017) *The Re-Opened Inquest into the Death of Ahmed Essop Timol Judgement*.
<https://www.ahmedtimol.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Judgment-THE-RE-OPENED-INQUEST-INTO-THE-DEATH-OF-AHMED-ESSOP-TIMOL.pdf>.

²⁰² (Cajee, 2005: 188)

²⁰³ (*Indians Can't Fly*, 2015)

²⁰⁴ (Cajee, 2005: 132)

Dr Mohammed Salim Essop



Dr Essop in his youth and in 2017.²⁰⁵

Arrested along with Timol on the 22nd of October 1971, Essop endured severe torture and interrogation at the hands of the SB at JVS. The intensity of the torture was such that Essop contemplated suicide if given the opportunity, indicating the extreme physical and psychological duress he faced.²⁰⁶ He was forcibly placed on a chair, and electric shocks were applied to his body. Essop recounts the experience:

“You are not in control of your body movements. They increase and decrease the voltage levels, and you are screaming away in excruciating pain at the slightest touch of your body. Your mind and body no longer associate with each other, and you feel as if your mind is floating. While the shock treatment is applied to you, heavy-handed slaps are felt on your face. At this point, you simply collapse.”²⁰⁷

Essop continued:

“Lying on the ground and regaining consciousness, I felt that I was wet. I saw these cops standing around me with their penises exposed to me. They had urinated on me and were having a good laugh. I could see that they were enjoying themselves.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Du Plessis, A. (2017) *Salim Essop takes centre stage during first day of Ahmed Timol inquest*. <https://vocfm.co.za/salim-essop-takes-centre-stage-first-day-ahmed-timol-inquest/>.

²⁰⁶ (Cajee, 2005: 132)

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Another standard method of torture involved suffocation:

“A plastic bag would be put over your head and tied with a rope around your neck. As you breathed and the oxygen became less, you would start to suffocate. You would be gasping to breathe...and they then pull the bag off your head. At this point, you think that you are dead.”²⁰⁹

Essop’s account highlights the extremity of the dehumanisation:

“Ahmed and I knew the dangers involved in doing underground work. We expected to be tortured but did not know how to prepare for this. I did not have knowledge of the different types of torture they were using. They would dip your head in a bucket of water. I heard of people dying in detention. I now know that they were killed.”²¹⁰

The SB officers further utilised psychological manipulation to break Essop’s spirit and extract information:

“At one stage, I was taken to the stairwell on the 10th floor, close to the room where I was held. Two police officers held me first by my body and then by my legs and put me down. They then threatened to drop me if I was not forthcoming with the information they were looking for. At this stage, after going through so much pain and torture, I felt it was better if they dropped me and relieved me of the pain I was going through. You are literally surviving on fleeting consciousness and trying to make sense of your life.”²¹¹

Despite the severe torture, Mohammed survived, which he described as a miracle. He was eventually taken to a hospital on 26 October 1971, where medical staff noted that he had been severely assaulted and was suffering from clinical hysteria.²¹²

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 133

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid* Pg. 157

Amina Desai



Amina Desai and Nelson Mandela.²¹³

“Amina Desai was committed to leaving a legacy that was bigger than herself. She wanted to have an impact on the world that would not better her own life but her children’s lives and the ones they affected. She stated in 1996, “We should really live as simple a type of life and try and - the important thing is really to educate our children. The most important thing here, I think, is to teach people, to make people aware of humanity...we are here, not merely for ourselves, but to try and make the world a better place.”²¹⁴

Apprehended on 23 October 1971 for assisting Timol by lending him her vehicle, Desai was transported to JVS, where she endured a ruthless interrogation, including being forced to stand for 52 consecutive hours without sleep.²¹⁵ Desai also recounted the sounds of distress emanating from adjacent interrogation rooms, recalling, “I heard a terrible commotion...I heard furniture, whatever it was, being pushed around. I heard people scampering around, and I heard screams. I think [that day was the] most terrible moment of my life because, at that particular

²¹³ (South African History Online, 2011)

²¹⁴ Deal, C. (2020) *Biography of Amina Desai by Cole Deal*. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/biography-amina-desai-cole-deal>. Pg. 9

²¹⁵ (Cajee, 2005: 118)

instant, I felt as if my heart was ...jumping out of my chest.”²¹⁶ Following this ordeal, Desai was held in solitary confinement for five months. Subsequently, she was sentenced to five years imprisonment for “furthering the aims of the ANC and the SACP in 1972”, through her association with Timol and sent to Barberton and Kroonstad Prisons, respectively.²¹⁷ A five-year banning order followed her release. Desai is recognised as the longest-incarcerated female Indian political prisoner of the apartheid era.²¹⁸

²¹⁶*Ibid.*

²¹⁷(Deal, 2020:6)

²¹⁸*Ibid. Pg. 1*

Dr Dilshad Jhetam



Newspaper clipping detailing Dr Jhetam's university peers protesting her arbitrary arrest.²¹⁹

On 23 October 1971, Dilshad Jhetam, who would later distinguish herself as the first Muslim physician in the then-Transvaal and the first female cardiologist in South Africa²²⁰, was

²¹⁹ Ahmed Timol: Truth Prevails (2017) *Protest by students on arrest*, Ahmed Timol: Truth Prevails. <https://www.ahmedtimol.co.za/downloads/archive/articles/Undatedarticles/Protestbystudentsonarrests.pdf>.

²²⁰ Seeth, A. (2017) 'I heard Ahmed Timol's screams. And then they stopped' – Jhetam. <https://www.news24.com/citypress/News/i-heard-ahmed-timols-screams-and-then-they-stopped-jhetam-20170630>.

returning home from the library when she was apprehended by security police and transported to JVS.²²¹ Jhetam was taken to the 10th floor and accused of communist affiliations and of aiding Timol and Essop in furthering the aims of the SACP. Dilshad's incredulity at these accusations, given her perception of Timol and Essop's apolitical nature, was met with harsh treatment.

“They forced me to stand for long periods and forced me to consume bottles of water. When I requested to go to the toilet, they refused. There were 8 to 10 white policemen standing in front of me and laughing as I was forced to urinate in my clothes. This process continued as they forced me to continue drinking bottles of water. I was told that I was not nappy trained and continuously slapped across my face. At regular intervals, I passed out.”²²²

As the concluding witness in the initial proceedings of the 2017 inquest, Jhetam recounted the humiliation she endured at JVS. “They brought water in a jug and a glass tumbler. I was standing in a puddle of my own urine. Somewhere along the line, they brought a bucket because they said I was messing the floor too much”, she testified.²²³ Following this degradation, she was subjected to electrocution.²²⁴ In her closing statement, Jhetam remarked, “Ahmed Timol is not here. He has paid with his life. I honestly hope and pray that this country of ours never reverts to such barbarous means or methods to suppress opposition, in any form whatsoever, now or in the future.”²²⁵ This message could be powerfully conveyed within a memorialised space at JVS where “communities can examine their past with transparency, develop more inclusive understandings of others, and promote values and systems that support a more just and humane world.”²²⁶

²²¹ (Cajee, 2005:119)

²²² *Ibid.* Pg. 120

²²³ (Seeth, 2017)

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ Nelson, A. (2024) *Museums strengthen democracy*. <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/2024/11/strengthen-museum-and-heritage-sites-in-ukraine/>.

Dr Kantilal Chaganlal Naik



Image Dr Naik Craig Matthew.²²⁷

Also arrested the day after Timol, Naik recounted his experience of being suspended from a beam by his arms, a torture technique known as the “helicopter method,” which resulted in temporary paralysis.²²⁸ His testimony before the TRC, describing the “seesaw” of punches inflicted by two policemen, illustrates the casual brutality employed at JVS.²²⁹

“My wrists were tied tightly with a cloth and were then slipped over my knees. A broomstick was then placed between my knees and the ankles. I was then lifted with the stick and suspended between two chairs with the broomstick. I was left hanging in mid-air for a long time, the policemen rotating me around the broomstick. With both centripetal and centrifugal forces acting on my elbow, my muscles in the arms collapsed totally, leaving the arms limp for almost three and a half months. The pain was excruciating and unendurable. I was not able to use the hands for either dressing or eating. This was, unfortunately, traumatic, and I was depressed and cried about the fact that I was not going to be able to use my arms in the future at all! My handwriting being immaculate and also being able to play Indian musical instruments seemed

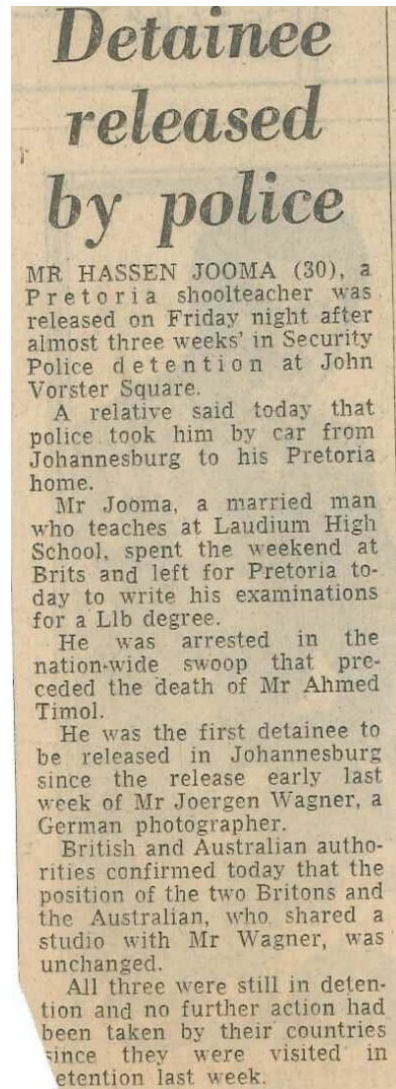
²²⁷ Matthew, C. (2007) *Photograph of Dr Kantilal Naik*, South African History Archive (SAHA). <https://www.saha.org.za/collections/AL3282/d7211.htm>.

²²⁸(Cajee, 2005:119)

²²⁹(Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:543)

no longer a possibility. I was saddened to know that my arms were totally immobilised and that I was not going to be able to use them at all.”²³⁰

Hassen Jooma



Newspaper clipping detailing Jooma's release from JVS.²³¹

Hassen Jooma, detained on 23 October 1971, recounts a particularly dehumanising experience upon his arrival at JVS. He recalls being “lifted up and angrily called a racial slur — “*Jou koelie kommunist* (You coolie communist).”²³² The officers claimed to “know everything about him” before demanding that he document his entire life history, including his college years and his affiliation with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).²³³ Jooma then

²³⁰ (Cajee, 2005:119)

²³¹ Ahmed Timol: Truth Prevails (2017a) *Muller to see report on detainee, Ahmed Timol: Truth Prevails*. <https://www.ahmedtimol.co.za/downloads/archive/articles/Undatedarticles/Mullertoseereportondetainee.pdf>.

²³² (Cajee, 2005:127)

²³³ *Ibid.*

encountered Lieutenant Smit, who escorted him to a room bearing chilling evidence of previous violence:

“Hassen recalled Ahmed’s long hair and realised that it was Ahmed’s hair and blood he had seen. Hassen was told that he was not to mention to anybody what he had seen and that he had better tell the police what they wanted to know, or he, too, would be dealt with in similar fashion.”²³⁴

Jooma was handed a bucket and broom and instructed to “*Maak skoon* (Clean it up).”²³⁵ This incident highlights the SB’s calculated use of intimidation and psychological manipulation to break the spirit of detainees at JVS. Jooma was instructed to stand inside a drawn circle on the floor.²³⁶ When the officer left him alone, Jooma’s “psychologically vital defiance” led him to leave the circle deliberately.²³⁷ He walked to the room next door, where he was shocked to see a torture machine which looked like a grader used in the renovation of roads.²³⁸ He promptly returned to the circle and remained there throughout Saturday evening and for the whole of Sunday and Monday morning until a policeman entered and told Jooma that he was going to be taken to the police cells. The SB members then took turns in sessions of approximately two hours without interruption to barrage Jooma about his dealings with Ahmed and his political views. Jooma had not eaten or slept for over 52 hours.²³⁹

“Sleep deprivation was a common method of torture applied to detainees who were forced to stand for long durations and repeatedly asked to make statements. If the security police were unhappy with the statements made, the papers were thrown in the bins, and the detainees were asked to rewrite their statements. A common strategy applied by the police was “to play one detainee against the other”. This would implicate a detainee and create great concern and distrust in the mind of the other detainee. What is evident up to this day is that the manipulative policemen [who] manufactured evidence against detainees succeeded in creating mistrust and animosity amongst them. The suffering and torture in detention still affects the health and well-being of those who were detained, up to this day.”²⁴⁰

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ *Ibid.* Pg. 138

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 131

Four days after Timol's arrest, Jooma was again brought from his cell to the 10th floor of JVS for interrogation. During this interrogation, Jooma overheard a chilling sound stemming from the next room: a "pained and low-sounding gasping or sighing sound ('Aaaaaahhhhhh')," confirming his suspicion that Timol was being tortured nearby.²⁴¹ After three weeks in solitary confinement, an SB officer issued a stern warning to Jooma: any legal action against the police within a year would cause "serious trouble."²⁴² Jooma was also explicitly forbidden from speaking to the press. This threat served as a potent reminder of the pervasive power of the SB and the risks associated with challenging their authority.²⁴³

Notably, upon his arrest outside a mosque by two white policemen, Jooma remarked, "*My gewete pla my nie* (My conscience is not bothering me)." One officer retorted, "*Dis goed dat jou gewete nie vir jou pla nie, ons gaan vir jou pla.* (It is good that your conscience is not bothering you, as we are going to bother you)."²⁴⁴ This exchange highlights the stark contrast between the detainee's clear conscience and the policemen's intention to inflict physical and psychological torment, thereby "bothering" his conscience.²⁴⁵ The use of the word conscience aligns perfectly with this thesis — SB members perpetrated egregious acts on people at JVS, leaving lasting scars on the victims' psyches and the nation's moral conscience. By transforming this site into a space of memory and reflection, we can engage in a collective act of conscience cleansing. Through confronting the past, we further activate our capacity to move forward and act in ways that uphold human dignity and resist injustice, thereby honouring the experiences of those who suffered at the hands of the apartheid regime.

²⁴¹*Ibid.* Pg. 138

²⁴²*Ibid.* Pg. 129

²⁴³*Ibid.*

²⁴⁴*Ibid.* Pg. 121

²⁴⁵*Ibid.*

1975

Molefe Pheto



Pheto by George Hallet.²⁴⁶

*"I have suffered since I was born in South Africa. Every Black man there has. My own particular circumstances are a mirror of the sufferings of others before me and—I hope not for long—after me. Too many Blacks have died for their beliefs, some of them mere teenagers who had just cut their teeth. Life is rich and has much to offer, particularly to those who have not enjoyed it before. I want to live. In freedom. All Black people want to live, throw off their chains in South Africa NOW."*²⁴⁷

In an interview with Tymon Smith at JVS, MDALI (Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute) founding member, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) and Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) activist, Pheto described the building's ominous reputation

²⁴⁶ Hallett, G. (1979) *Molefi Pheto*, London 1979, UCT Works of Art Database. <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/woac/item/30634#lg=1&slide=0>.

²⁴⁷ Pheto, M. (1985) *And night fell: memoirs of a political prisoner in South Africa*, Heinemann eBooks. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA11439112?l=en>. Pg. 7

amongst anti-apartheid activists. “It was bad news.” Pheto explained, noting that activists “knew that within the framework we could be taken up and taken into detention, you would [rather] choose to go somewhere else than John Vorster Square.”²⁴⁸ This fear was driven by the numerous deaths that had occurred at JVS during detention and interrogation. Pheto recounted that the police response to accusations of torture and murder was so callous that detainees felt they had no chance of survival if taken to JVS.²⁴⁹ Describing his time in detention, Pheto reflected on the standing torture method, “You don’t sit down, nothing! They bring food; you eat standing. And then, in my case, it took 2 days and 3 nights, or 3 nights and 2 days; I can’t remember which was the sequence: standing, no sleep, not a break to sit down...My legs were swollen; they were thick...There were things like needles.”²⁵⁰

In one instance, Pheto was subjected to a mock execution: “One of them just cocked his gun and shot just behind my ear.” This terrifying experience, intended to break him down psychologically, left Pheto uncertain whether the gun had been loaded with a blank or a live round.²⁵¹ He also revealed how black policemen were used to manipulate detainees, playing “good cop” to their white counterparts as “bad cop.” They would urge detainees to confess, warning them that “there are others who are coming who are cruel, and they won’t waste your time.”²⁵² This tactic highlights the insidious nature of the apartheid system, which co-opted individuals of all races to maintain its oppressive regime—highlighting how, no matter the race of the officers, they all worked to protect white power. Pheto described the SB “beasts,” recalling their relentless beatings and the lasting injuries he sustained:

“Well trained, well developed. You can see their necks, their muscles... they don’t waste time with you. There was Visser, who was one of the worst animals I have ever come across; he just [seemed] to enjoy beating people up, myself included. And then there was another one, Fourie, I think, though he was not as well built as Visser, but he could injure you, that one because he was just totally unmethodical. He was just a street fighter...but you don’t fight him back. You can’t fight back [or] they will just kill you. So Visser and Fourie and another one called Petou. They would team up like that, but these two, Visser and Fourie, ...were the real beasts. They

²⁴⁸ SAHA, Sunday Times Heritage Project, DOXA (2007) 'Transcript of an interview with Pheto Molefe conducted as part of the SAHA/Sunday Times Heritage Project in 2007.' SAHA Collection.

²⁴⁹ (SAHA, Sunday Times Heritage Project, DOXA, 2007:2)

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 3

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *Ibid.* Pg. 5

really did a lot of beating [on] me without [stopping]... I came worse out of that because...now this ear is injured forever, [and] can never be fixed.”²⁵³

These extracts offer a glimpse into Pheto’s excruciating experience at JVS. He describes the security police as possessing a “cruel calmness of people with no souls.”²⁵⁴ The sensory details of his detention remain etched in his memory: the distinctive blue colour of the building, the “shining, grey floors in the corridor,” the “clanging of those gates,” and the ever-present “ringing keys” that instilled fear and uncertainty as one “would wonder, which cell are they going to open or are they coming to my cell?”²⁵⁵

Despite the physical and psychological torment, Pheto’s memoir reveals an enduring hope for freedom. “I want to live as large as life. To see myself and others in similar situations free in every respect. Free from fear, poverty, from lack of education and opportunity. To be a man in my country and in the world at large. As long as I lack these basics, I shall never cease to be restless, wherever I may be. Nor will the man who denies me these freedoms ever live in peace. I hold firmly to the belief that each fighter will see the dawn. His dawn.”²⁵⁶

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

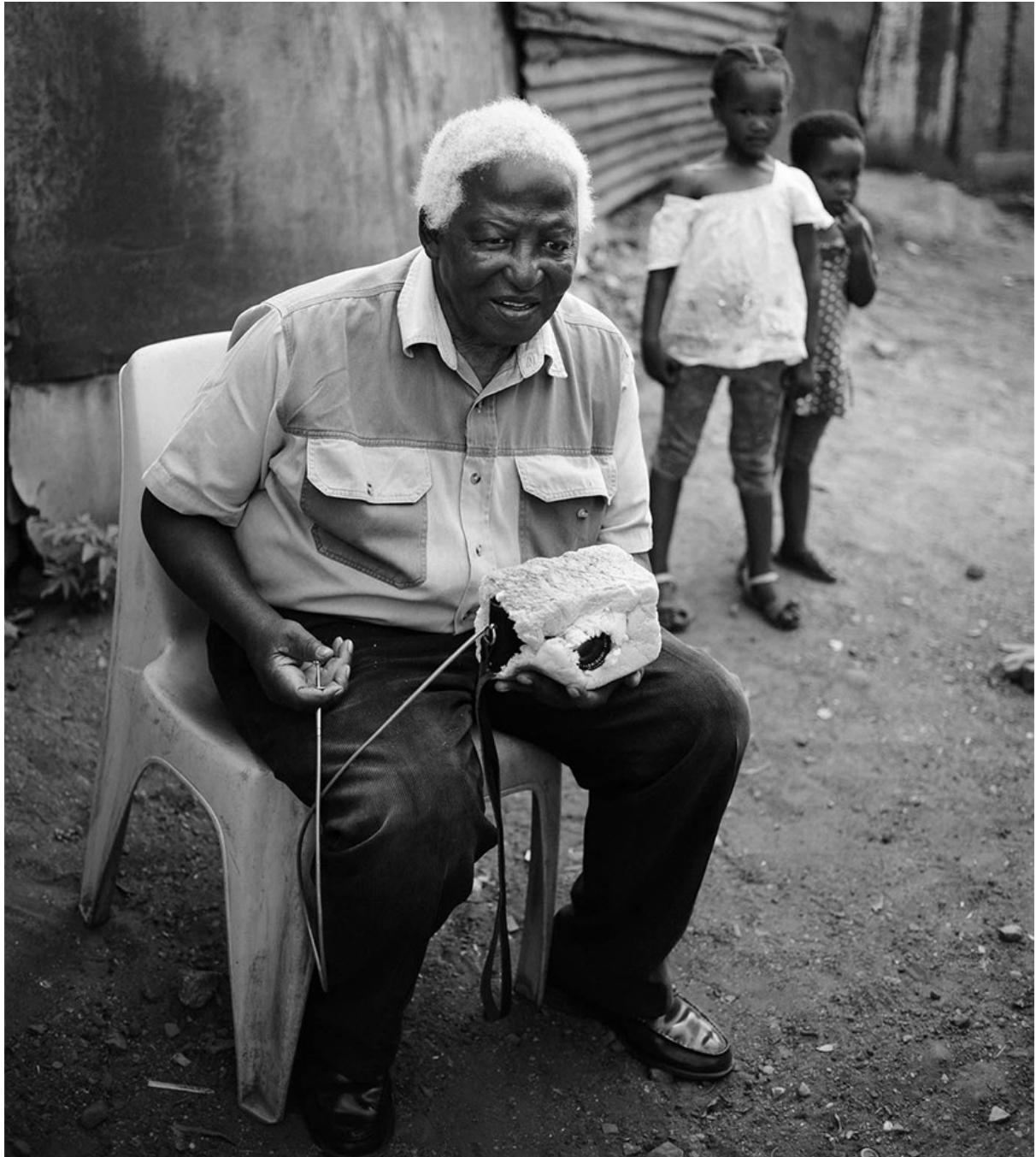
²⁵⁴ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ (Pheto, 1985:2)

1976

Peter Magubane



Magubane recreating hiding his camera in a loaf of bread.²⁵⁷

*"I wanted the world to see what is going on in South Africa. The only way to show the world was through pictures."*²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ 21 Icons South Africa (2018) *PETER MAGUBANE* | *21 Icons*. <https://21icons.com/peter-magubane/>.

²⁵⁸ (21 Icons South Africa, 2018)

An interesting detail in Hassen Jooma's recollections is the inquiry from a high-ranking officer, Colonel Greyling, about a "beautiful woman" drawn on the cell walls.²⁵⁹ Jooma, believing it to be the work of a previous inmate, later learned that it was the work of the renowned photographer Peter Magubane.²⁶⁰ While the exact details of Magubane's detention at JVS remain unclear, records indicate that he endured "beatings and 586 consecutive days in solitary confinement"²⁶¹ and two years of imprisonment "with an additional six months in ordinary confinement."²⁶² His alleged crime was taking pictures at a demonstration.²⁶³ This suggests that Magubane, like countless others, suffered dehumanisation at JVS for his defiance of the apartheid regime, wielding his camera as a weapon against white supremacist oppression.²⁶⁴ Magubane's powerful words during a TRC hearing encapsulate the spirit of resistance and the yearning for a just society that fuelled the Soweto Uprising:

"I know that there are people [who] have paid a price for what they believe in. And I know that there are people in other countries [who] have worse lives than some of us in this country, but apartheid, to have lived under apartheid, was worse than to live any other type of life that is led by people who are free. We have tried not to use any violence. Our children have been told that they are not supposed to study above standard 2, for there will be no need for them to know mathematics, to know history and geography, for they will not be going to Europe. The only language that they will understand is the master/servant relationship language. And our children refused and said, yes, you may have done it to our parents, but we are not prepared to take it. You can come with the might of your guns; we will fight with our stones. Our children did not use any guns then; all they used were stones, fighting guns with stones."²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ (Cajee, 2005:130)

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Cowell, A. (2024) *Peter Magubane, 91, Who Fought Apartheid with His Camera, Is Dead*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/01/world/africa/peter-magubane-dead.html>.

²⁶² (Cowell, 2024)

²⁶³ Fraser, G. (1978) *A Black Photojournalist Depicts Apartheid Life*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1978/05/14/archives/a-black-photojournalist-depicts-apartheid-life-arrested-in-1969.html>.

²⁶⁴ The Guardian (2024) *'To fight with my camera, to kill apartheid': Peter Magubane – a life in pictures*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2024/jan/12/to-fight-with-my-camera-to-kill-apartheid-peter-magubane-south-african-photographer>.

²⁶⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Peter Magubane (1996) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Human Rights Violations Submissions - Questions and Answers*.
<https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/soweto/magubane.htm>.

The Soweto Youth Uprising

The Youth Uprising of 16 June 1976 in Soweto was a significant protest led by black schoolchildren against the enforced use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in their schools, a policy entrenched within the Bantu Education system.²⁶⁶ The term “Bantu”, within this educational framework, was imbued with politically charged and profoundly derogatory implications, epitomising the systemic dehumanisation of Black South Africans under the apartheid regime. In the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, the South African apartheid government enacted the *Internal Security Amendment Act*, a legislative measure that significantly expanded the powers of the security apparatus. This amendment permitted the indefinite detention of individuals without judicial oversight, effectively removing legal safeguards against arbitrary imprisonment.²⁶⁷

The Bantu Education system was a deliberate policy designed to perpetuate white supremacy by systematically marginalising black South Africans and restricting their social and economic mobility. As part of a broader framework of oppressive measures, including the establishment of “homelands,” urban restrictions, pass laws, and job reservation laws, this system aimed to confine black individuals to subordinate roles as labourers, domestic workers, and servants. By curtailing educational opportunities and aspirations, the policy sought to entrench racial hierarchies and ensure the perpetuation of a socio-economic order dominated by the white minority.²⁶⁸ Verwoerd made the objectives of the *Bantu Education Act* clear when he stated:

“There is no place for [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. It is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim, absorption in the European community.”²⁶⁹

“The school must equip the Bantu to meet the demands which the economic life will impose on him ... What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? ... Education must train and teach people in accordance with their opportunities in life ...”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶South African History Online (2013) *The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising*.

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>.

²⁶⁷ Pohlandt-McCormick, H. (2000) “I saw a Nightmare . . .”: Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976),’ *History and Theory*, 39(4), pp. 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00144>.

Pg.33

²⁶⁸(South African History Online, 2013)

²⁶⁹*Ibid.*

²⁷⁰(Truth and Reconciliation Commission *et al.*, 1998a:62)

This policy exemplified the violent dehumanisation central to apartheid, highlighting the denial of black South Africans' dignity, potential, and humanity.²⁷¹ On the 6th of June 1976, an estimated 3,000 to 10,000 students, mobilised by the Action Committee of the South African Students Movement and supported by the BCM, organised a peaceful march to protest the apartheid government's directive mandating Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools.²⁷²

This march, a significant act of collective resistance, was intended to culminate in a rally at Orlando Stadium in Soweto, where students sought to voice their rejection of the oppressive educational policies and broader systemic injustices of apartheid.²⁷³ However, their peaceful demonstration was met with a merciless response from heavily armed police. Along their route, the authorities attempted to disperse the gathering by deploying tear gas, escalating soon after using live ammunition.²⁷⁴ Police used revolvers, pistols, automatic rifles, tear gas grenades, and riot batons against the students. They also deployed heavy armoured vehicles and patrol cars with police dogs.²⁷⁵ The police indiscriminately fired into crowds, which were mostly made up of children and innocent bystanders, displaying a blatant disregard for human life — particularly young black lives. In a calculated effort to evade accountability for their violent actions, the apartheid government sought to obscure the scale of the atrocities.²⁷⁶

²⁷¹(South African History Online, 2013)

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵(Pohlandt-McCormick, 2000:26)

²⁷⁶*Ibid.* Pg. 29



School girls at the Soweto Uprising before police opened fire.²⁷⁷

On June 17, 1976, the apartheid government announced the establishment of a one-person Commission of Inquiry, headed by Justice Cillie, to investigate the causes of the protests that had erupted the previous day. The Cillie Commission's findings revealed that 575 individuals had been killed and 2,389 were injured during the unrest. It concluded that while Bantu Education was not the direct cause of the riots, it had contributed to widespread dissatisfaction, which was exploited by those who were intent on inciting unrest. The commission attributed the prolonged nature of the disturbances primarily to the actions of the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC). Furthermore, it exonerated the police force, asserting that they had performed their duties effectively and found no evidence of deliberate or excessive use of force, including indiscriminate firearm use, against protesters.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁷ Magubane, P. (1976) *Schoolgirls protesting during the Soweto uprising*, *The Gaurdian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2024/jan/12/to-fight-with-my-camera-to-kill-apartheid-peter-magubane-south-african-photographer>.

²⁷⁸ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:569)

Reclaiming Memory, Challenging White Supremacy: The Case for Memorialising John Vorster Square in Addressing the Legacy of Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa



A police officer aiming his firearm at two unarmed youths.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁹ Hamman, J. (1976) 1976 Soweto Uprising, *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Murphy Morobe



The Deputy Head of The Soweto Students' Representative Council SSRC in 1976, Murphy Morobe, is on the far left. Alongside United Democratic Front (UDF) leaders Archie Gumede, Willies Mchunu, and Jay Naidoo.²⁸⁰

Testifying before the TRC, Morobe contended that the Cillie Commission's establishment served to legitimise police actions in the Soweto and township shootings. Furthermore, he alleged collusion between the police and the Cillie Commission, arguing that evidence was manipulated to attribute responsibility for the sustained protests after June 16th to the SSRC. Morobe posited that the Cillie Commission's findings subsequently provided the basis for sedition charges brought against several leaders of the June 16th protest in 1978, including himself.

"They interrogated us at John Vorster Square; they tortured us to get statements from us, statements that would implicate other people and statements that would suggest ... "students could not have planned this... There was clearly someone else other than you chaps who were

²⁸⁰ Pithouse, R. (2023) *Meeting by meeting, listening, building trust, popular power is not passe*. <https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/2023-08-19-meeting-by-meeting-listening-building-trust-popular-power-is-not-passe/>.

involved in this.” ... So, they used the Cillie Commission to try to find a place to put the blame. And they pulled us out of our detention cells at John Vorster Square, they took those same statements that were extracted from us under torture, and they forced us to read them before that Cillie Commission.”²⁸¹

On 18 June, Prime Minister John Vorster addressed Parliament, asserting, “The government will not be intimidated. Orders have been given to maintain order at all costs.” Following the *Riotous Assemblies Act*, all outdoor public gatherings were subsequently prohibited. Captain ‘Rooi Rus’ Swanepoel, who had instructed the crowds of Sowetan schoolchildren to disperse on 16 June and commanded the Riot Unit during its deployment in Soweto, later stated that he had implemented a ‘shoot-to-kill’ policy to suppress the Soweto protests. He further contended that the police had made a mistake by not employing greater force against the school children.²⁸² Andries Johannes van Heerden served as a member of the terrorist detection unit at JVS from January 1977 to June 1978. During this period, he participated in the interrogation and physical abuse of individuals associated with the Soweto unrest. Detainees were subjected to acts of violence, including kicking, slapping, and suffocation, with the use of a wet tyre tube. He is also known to have engaged in acts of physical assault and the administration of electric shocks.²⁸³

The TRC received 1500 statements alleging human rights violations for the period 1976-1982, with over 400 stemming from 1976 alone. Instances of severe ill-treatment increased two and a half times compared to the preceding period. Demographic data for victims of both killings and severe human rights violations during this period indicated a disproportionately high number of males aged 13-24.²⁸⁴

Gerald Sizani

Gerald Sizani, barely a teenager, was arrested in June 1976 for participating in the Soweto Uprising. Sizani was subjected to the “Timol Heights” threat, dangled from the 10th-floor window, a reminder of the ever-present threat of death. “I was held by my feet and dangled outside the window. I closed my eyes, sure that I was dead. They would then pull me up again. This happened in broad daylight.”²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 570

²⁸² (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:555)

²⁸³ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998f:215)

²⁸⁴ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:556)

²⁸⁵ (Cajee, 2005:13)

Reclaiming Memory, Challenging White Supremacy: The Case for Memorialising John Vorster Square in Addressing the Legacy of Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Zwelinzima Sizane



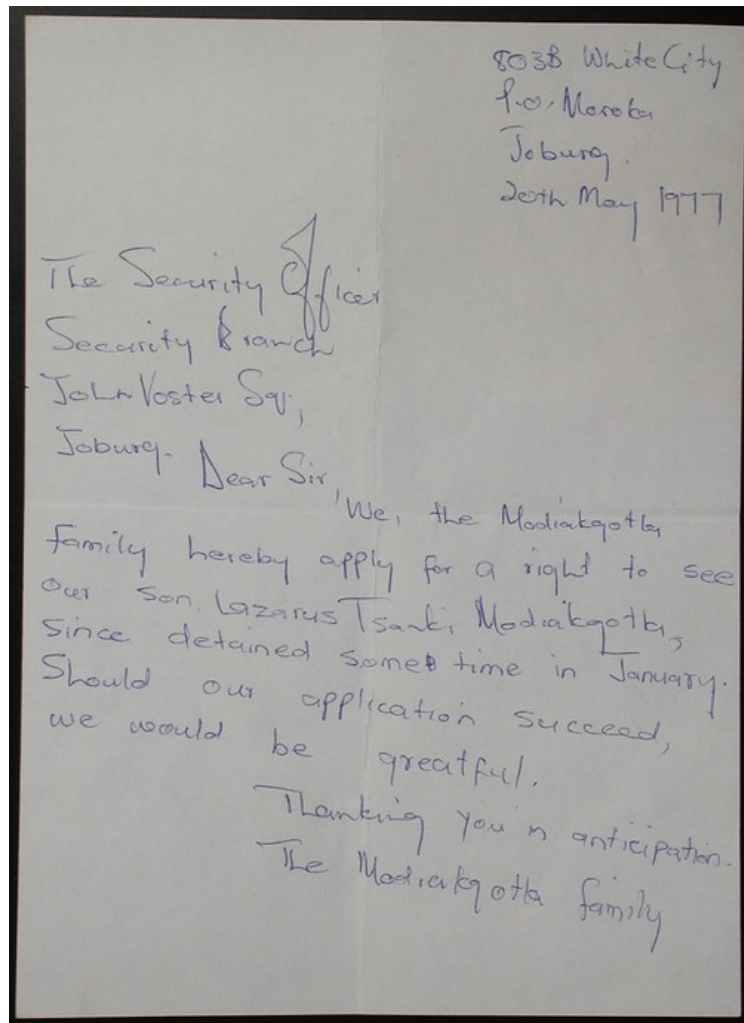
Sizane at Johannesburg Central Police Station²⁸⁶

When apprehending Gerald, the police were looking for Zwelinzima Sizane. Sizane shared an account of being beaten with chair frames until he spat back blood at his torturers, “They brought in an electric generator and told me to strip, and I told them I’m not going to assist them to torture me.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶(Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

²⁸⁷*Ibid.*

Lazarus Tsankie Modiakgotla



8038 White City
P.O. Maseba
Joburg.
20th May 1977

The Security Officer
Security Branch
John Vorster Sq.,
Joburg.

Dear Sir,

We, the Modiakgotla family hereby apply for a right to see our son Lazarus Tsankie Modiakgotla, since detained some time in January. Should our application succeed, we would be grateful.

Thanking you in anticipation.
The Modiakgotla family

A letter dated May 20, 1977, from Modiakgotla's family requesting permission to visit him at JVS.²⁸⁸

Modiakgotla shared, “I was taken for thirty days, upstairs, and I stood there for twenty-five days, day and night. After twenty-eight days, they released me, and they kept me in my cell. So, you can imagine, if I [must] revisit this place, it reminds me of those bitter nights that I spent with the police raining blows down on me.”²⁸⁹ Modiakgotla’s testimony highlights a critical concern associated with memorialisation: the risk of re-traumatisation for individuals who suffered violence in such spaces. This underscores the complex ethical and psychological challenges inherent in preserving sites of historical trauma. However, a memorialised JVS could transform the memory of traumatic events, create new meanings and reconcile them

²⁸⁸ ‘I saw a nightmare...’ *Image Archive* (1977). <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/pohlandt-mccormick/archive/detail/DSCN2754.jpg.html>.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

with present circumstances. This process is not about erasing the trauma but integrating it into a narrative that promotes healing and growth.²⁹⁰

Sites of Conscience are constructed to be places that can enable safety and encourage memory recall and mourning.²⁹¹ They foster reconnection with others and the world, making the aspects of trauma recovery more plausible. This environment helps in processing trauma on both individual and societal levels, reducing the risk of re-traumatisation.²⁹² For this to be achieved, remembering must be done consciously, this involves a deliberate and mindful engagement with memories of trauma. This process requires individuals to actively attend to both personal traumas and the broader contextual losses associated with traumatic events.²⁹³ Lastly, conscious remembering is not just about recalling past events but also about directing memory toward justice.²⁹⁴ This means using the memory of traumatic events to foster understanding, healing, and transformation, ensuring that the lessons learned contribute to a more just and empathetic society, which is exactly what this thesis advocates for in the case of memorialising JVS. “Remembering well and together at historic sites that commemorate trauma combats the risk of forgetting; to forget the trauma, as Herman asserts, is the wish of the perpetrator.”²⁹⁵

Wellington Mlungisi Tshazibane

*“At Oxford, he became known to many. He was quiet, not at all flamboyant, and very friendly... He used to tell me that his ambition was to be the first fully qualified engineer in South Africa.”*²⁹⁶

Tshazibane was arrested at JVS for his alleged involvement in the Carlton Centre explosion.²⁹⁷ The Sowetan Fort Hare University alums and Oxford University design engineering graduate was found hanging in cell 311 on the 11th of December, 1976.²⁹⁸ Tshazibane was 30 at the time of his alleged suicide.²⁹⁹ Magistrate W.P Dormehl found Tshazibane’s death to be

²⁹⁰ Arel, S. (2018) 'The power of place: Trauma recovery and memorialization,' *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a01>. Pg. 18

²⁹¹ (Arel, 2018:18)

²⁹² *Ibid.* Pg. 30

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 31

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ AKM Docrat Collection (1977) 'Wellington M. Tshazibane,' *Terrorism Act: Death in Detention*. UKZN. <https://disa.ukzn.ac.za/sites/default/files/DC%20Metadata%20Files/Gandhi-Luthuli%20Documentation%20Centre/DOC%2022-4-77/DOC%2022-4-77.pdf>. Pg. 3

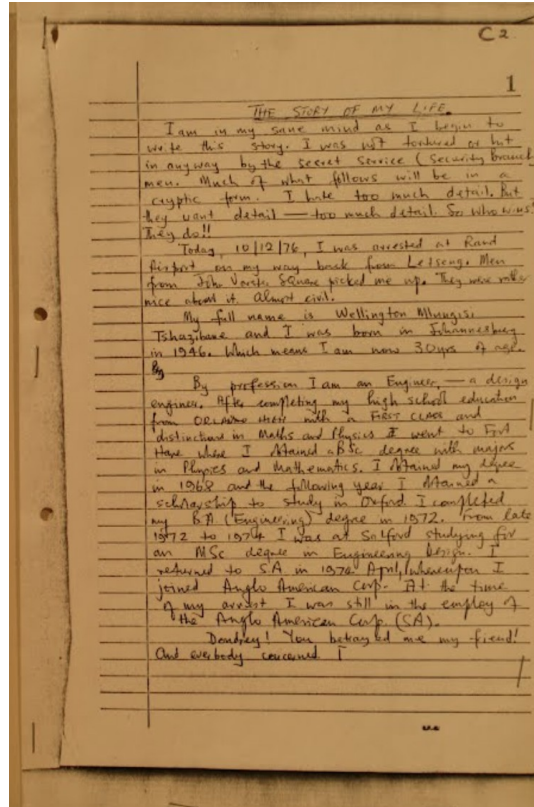
²⁹⁷ In November 1977, a bomb detonated at the Carlton Centre in Johannesburg as part of an Umkhonto weSizwe operation.

²⁹⁸ (AKM Docrat Collection, 1977:2)

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

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consistent with hanging, noting that, “he hanged himself with a piece of blanket tied to the bars of a cell at John Vorster Square”.³⁰⁰ It was also claimed by police that a note explicitly stating that he was not tortured was found in his cell.³⁰¹ His alleged letter titled “The Story of My Life” read, “I am in my sane mind as I begin to write this story. I was not tortured or hit in any way by the secret service (Security Branch) men... Today, 10/12/76... Men from John Vorster Square picked me up. They were rather nice about it. Almost civil...”³⁰² A very convenient note absolving the SB of his death.



This note was said to have been written and left behind by Tshazibane.³⁰³

State pathologist, Dr Joshua Taljaard, conducted a post-mortem examination and determined that Tshazibane had died by hanging. Tshazibane’s family asked for a post-mortem to be performed by a private pathologist, Dr Jonathan Gluckman, as there were obvious suspicions and allegations of foul play, given the context of political detentions during this period.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 6

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

³⁰³ Tshazibane, W. (1976) 'The story of my life,' SAHA Collection. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-story-of-my-life/9QG6k1fYa36NPQ?hl=en>.

³⁰⁴ Burns, J.F. (1976) *South African Black Dies While in Detention*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1976/12/14/archives/south-african-black-dies-while-in-prison-mining-engineer-reportedly.html>.

Tshazibane was the seventh death in detention in 1976.³⁰⁵ “A former headmaster of [Tshazibane] said of detainee deaths...: “The African community resents them tremendously. They doubt they are suicides.”³⁰⁶ Taljaard’s post-mortem results showed “that apart from bruise marks around his neck, the only other injuries were laceration marks on both wrists which were caused by a broken bottle of cologne found in his cell.”³⁰⁷ Unfortunately, the results of Gluckman’s independent autopsy are unavailable.

Cedric Radcliffe Mayson



Reverend Mayson.³⁰⁸

“I think it is important to tell his story...because frankly, when I look around today, I see we don’t have many Cedric’s among us. I don’t know why, but we don’t. Perhaps what we should do...is to tell this story about Cedric so that we can at least try to reproduce him. Reproduce younger Cedric’s, who are going to have to respond to the challenges that we are facing. To respond to them with the same inventiveness, the same sense of an actual practical understanding of our reality. But respond to them

³⁰⁵ (Burns, 1976)

³⁰⁶ (AKM Docrat Collection, 1977:7)

³⁰⁷ *Wellington Mlungisi Tshazibane* | *South African History Online* (2012).
<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/wellington-mlungisi-tshazibane>.

³⁰⁸ *Cedric Mayson* (2015). <https://cedricmayson.wordpress.com/>.

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also, with the kind of vision which Cedric had and with the same kind of selflessness because I fear if we don't have them – the younger Cedric's – then our future is very bleak indeed.

*In the end, change (yes, we have support; change will come) must come from our own efforts. I do hope that we will all respond to this invitation to tell the story of Cedric, which will help us produce the kind of South Africa that Cedric wanted.*³⁰⁹

About his time at JVS, Reverend Mayson shared that he was interrogated nonstop for three days.³¹⁰ However, his faith kept him sane:

“.. those moments of real spiritual perception One of the few that had happened to me in my lifetime was here after I came round after that first interrogation, and I was all alone in that cell. The walls were green, and I remember walking around that thing and being absolutely convinced that we were going to win. There was no question they might kill me; they might do anything to me, but we were going to win the struggle. It was a tremendous experience of faith which buoyed me up tremendously all the way through...”³¹¹

Mayson's experience at JVS provides a compelling example of the individual's capacity to find strength and hope even in detention. This contributes significantly to the broader narrative of resistance against apartheid, which could inspire others to act against injustice if Mayson's memory were kept alive at a memorialised JVS.

1977

Elmon Malele

Following his arrest on January 10, 1977, Malele died of a brain haemorrhage on January 20th at the Princess Nursing Home in Johannesburg. It is alleged that at JVS, he was subjected to standing torture, lost his balance, and hit his head on a table, resulting in the injury that led to his death.³¹² Malele's death, attributed to hypertension and a spontaneous haemorrhage, became the subject of a July inquest.³¹³ Police said he collapsed after a six-hour standing

³⁰⁹(Cedric Mayson, 2015)

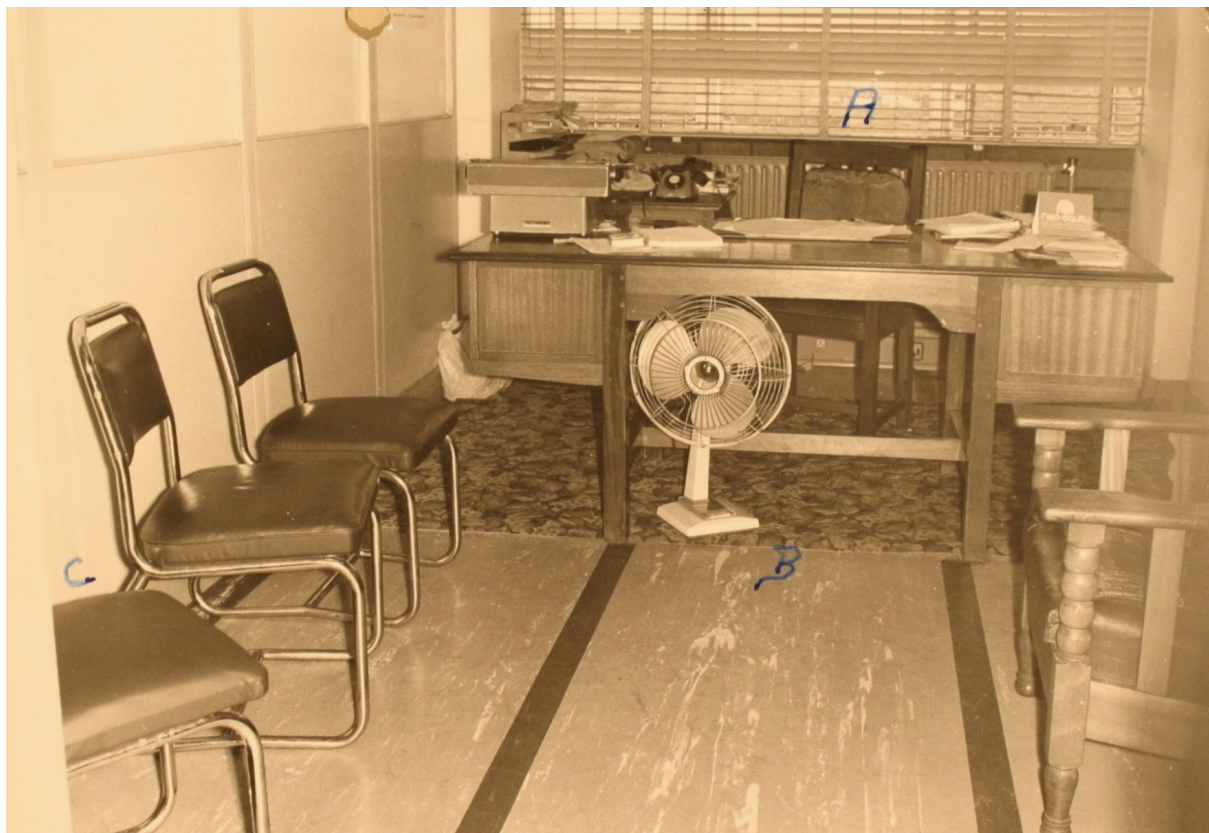
³¹⁰(*Between life and death: stories from John Vorster Square - DVD and Educators' guide*, 2007)

³¹¹(Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

³¹²*Ibid.*

³¹³*Ibid.*

interrogation on January 12th.³¹⁴ A state pathologist corroborated the lack of trauma. However, conflicting medical opinions emerged. Dr D.E. Rosenberg, the neurosurgeon, found scalp wounds, estimating them to be a few days old. A second pathologist, T.J. Taljaard suggested they could be older. Despite this disagreement, the magistrate ruled the death was not due to any external factors.³¹⁵ He died with no one being held accountable for his death. There is a park named in his honour in Soweto.³¹⁶ I propose extending his memorialisation at a JVS Site of Conscience, where engagement with his life and activism is more tangible through “creative programs and productive conversations that foster understanding, compassion and mutual respect, and to celebrate our shared humanity.”³¹⁷



Security police photograph of the office where Malele supposedly lost his balance.³¹⁸

³¹⁴ Elmon Malele | *South African History Online* (2011). <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/elmon-malele>.

³¹⁵ (Elmon Malele | *South African History Online*, 2011)

³¹⁶ Prothro, J. (2017) *Elmon Malele*. https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive_files/892337489-Malele.pdf.

³¹⁷ (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, 2024)

³¹⁸ South African Police Service (SAPS) (1977) *Security police photograph of the office where Elmon Malele allegedly lost his balance, SAHA Collection*. <https://www.saha.org.za/collections/AL3282/d7332.htm>.

Matthews “Mojo” Mabelane

Mabelane’s death at JVS is examined through an episode of Enver Samuel’s documentary series, *Truth be Told*. This series tells the stories of fallen activists through the eyes of their loved ones, bringing to light narratives that have faded from national memory.



Mabelane’s I.D Pictured in *Truth be Told* by Enver Samuel.³¹⁹

“He used to love life, and he used to wear very nice clothing... we used to be so close...he used to laugh so much, he was a funny chap.”³²⁰

On 15 February 1977, Reverend Phillip Mabelane and his wife were listening to the 11 o’clock news when they heard that a detainee had “fallen and died” at JVS.³²¹ Mrs Mabelane immediately suspected it was their son, Matthews. Her fears were confirmed when armed police officers arrived at their home, telling them, “Your son was naughty.”³²² Reverend Mabelane was escorted to JVS, where he was taken to the 10th floor. There, he was told that

³¹⁹ *Truth Be Told: Room 1008* (2024). EMS Productions.

³²⁰ (*Truth Be Told: Room 1008*, 2024)

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² *Ibid.*

his son had been under interrogation when he “jumped out of the window” of room 1008.³²³ Reverend Mabelane asked the SB how his son could have escaped their watch. Their dismissive response was that they “were not sure”.³²⁴ Matthews Mabelane’s partner, Nondyejebo Taki, learned of his death from the newspaper.



Newspaper cutting heading regarding Mabelane’s death.³²⁵

Mabelane’s loved ones are haunted by unanswered questions. Taki expressed her anguish: “I felt so lost... Did he fight? Did he scream? Did he surrender? Was he pushed? Did he jump through that window? What happened?”³²⁶ This is the central question surrounding the death of the history fanatic, jazz lover, and elegantly dressed activist committed to resisting apartheid.

Returning from exile in Botswana, Matthews and his friend and comrade, Matthews Lebuso, were arrested at the South African border and taken to JVS in January 1977.³²⁷ Whilst in detention, Mabelane managed to write a note inside the pockets of his trousers to his brother Lasch Mabelane that read, “The policemen are going to throw me out the window; please tell Mom and Dad that I’m building them goodbye and farewell.”³²⁸ Lebuso recalls passing

³²³*Ibid.*

³²⁴*Ibid.*

³²⁵*Ibid.*

³²⁶*Ibid.*

³²⁷*Ibid.*

³²⁸*Ibid.*

Mabelane on the way to an interrogation room, noting he was badly bruised.³²⁹ Remarking that “sometimes the memories ‘come’ as if it happened yesterday”.³³⁰ He found out about his friend’s death through the SB tauntingly threatening him with, “Matthews’ ghost will take you away.”³³¹ Not only did Mabelane and Timol plunge to their deaths from the 10th floor, but both their deaths became jokes among the SB.

There is a scene in this documentary whereby the Mabelane family is goes to room 1008 for the very first time since their relatives’ passing. Mabelane’s brother, Steve, says, “My family and I would like to see the room where he is said to have [fallen] from.”³³² This emotional request illustrates an additional need from the family following truth recovery, a desire to be at the physical site that held Matthews’ last moments alive. The family was taken to room 1008 by a SAPS officer who shared that there have been stories of spiritual activity in this section of the building.

Room 1008 now functions as a storage room, with burglars now forking the narrow alley that Matthews is said to have jumped from. When Mabelane’s niece, Boitumelo, peeked out the window and saw the drop, she immediately burst into tears and said that being at JVS felt like a form of closure and “felt like a step closer to the truth.”³³³ After the visit, her father went home, went to his bedroom and cried, but exuded a feeling of relief, leaving viewers with, “They say, death is a heartache that no one can heal, but memory is a keepsake that no one can steal.”³³⁴

Enver Samuel’s experience in room 1008 with the Mabelane family powerfully illustrates the enduring nature of transgenerational trauma. He described the palpable weight of this inherited pain, evident in the visceral reactions of the family, particularly Boitumelo’s deep, gut-wrenching sobs that “emanated from the pit of her stomach.”³³⁵ This scene resonates with Gobodo-Madikizela’s observation that trauma is often “unspeakable,” highlighting the role of non-verbal expression in conveying such profound suffering.³³⁶ Her concept of “triadic

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ ('Interview with Enver Samuel,' 2024)

³³⁶ Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2023) 'The afterlife of apartheid: a triadic temporality of trauma,' *Social Dynamics*, 49(1), pp. 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2023.2180215>. Pg. 70

memory” further illustrates this dynamic, moving beyond a simple linear transmission of trauma to encompass a multidirectional flow of memory across past, present, and future. This framework captures the lived repetition of past experiences, a phenomenon often missed by conventional understandings of transgenerational trauma.³³⁷ Samuel’s encounter with the Mabelane family and their ongoing grief precisely demonstrates this “lived repetition.” It underscores Gobodo-Madikizela’s broader argument that terms like “postcolonial” or “post-apartheid” are misleading if they suggest a clean break from the past.³³⁸ The continued suffering of the Mabelane family exemplifies how the legacies of historical oppression continue to shape the present, impacting even younger generations who did not directly experience the initial trauma. This thesis, through the Mabelane family’s story, provides a concrete example of how the past remains vividly present. Supporting the motion to memorialise JVS to address this continuum of trauma.

While the visit to the 10th floor of JVS produced powerful emotions, Samuel noted the family’s pain being somewhat eased, describing it as almost spiritual.³³⁹ This underscores the healing potential that former sites of violence can have on relatives of martyred activists, even before they are memorialised. This suggests that a memorialised JVS could offer considerable additional solace.

This potential for solace, however, also highlights a gap in knowledge. Samuel’s work has reached and taught younger generations of activists like Mabelane. He shared that the youth’s feedback is “How did we not know about this?” and “Where and how can we learn more?”. This speaks to the younger generations’ desire to know more about the past. A memorialised JVS could contribute to the accessibility of information that Samuel’s work produces for younger people like UCT student Kgotsi Chikane, who remain disillusioned with South Africa’s democracy.

³³⁷ (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2023:81)

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ (‘Interview with Enver Samuel,’ 2024)



Matthews and friends.³⁴⁰

The 2017 reopening and subsequent outcome of the Timol inquest has offered the Mabelane family a renewed sense of hope that they, too, may finally learn the truth surrounding Matthews's fall from the 10th floor of JVS.³⁴¹ While the Foundation for Human Rights (FHR) has indicated some progress, they also cautioned that investigations could be protracted, citing ongoing political interference in similar cases.³⁴² My hope is that the Mabelane family's quest for answers will be fulfilled, perhaps through the testimony of the one surviving police officer who can shed light on the events of 1977. Furthermore, I propose that room 1008, currently a repository for discarded police equipment, be memorialised. This space, where the brutality of the apartheid regime tragically claimed the life of Matthews Mabelane, deserves recognition as a site of historical significance, not just a plaque at the reception of the Johannesburg Central Police Station.

³⁴⁰ (*Truth Be Told: Room 1008*, 2024)

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² *Ibid.*

Penelope 'Baby' Twaya



Twaya being interviewed at the former JVS.³⁴³

Twaya recounted being part of a large group of young girls held at JVS on the eve of the Soweto Uprising anniversary.³⁴⁴ She described being taken to the 9th floor, where interrogations were conducted. She recalled the severe restrictions imposed on her and fellow detainees: they were forbidden from speaking to one another but found loopholes through singing or screaming. Twaya also detailed the degrading conditions of her detention, including washing her underwear in the toilet and being entirely cut off from the outside world.³⁴⁵ Her account provides some insight into how a 17-year-old girl endured months in detention at JVS.³⁴⁶ Reflecting on her experience, Twaya said, “They were going to intimidate us, they were going to torture us, they were going to interrogate us. We were going to tell them the truth. We were going to tell them who was inciting us, who was giving us instructions. We were going to tell them who in the ANC was giving us guidance to do this. If we refused, we were going to be beaten up and threatened.”³⁴⁷

³⁴³SAHistoryArchive (2012b) *Interview with former detainee, Penelope 'Baby' Twaya*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoW-Vlnl5UY>.

³⁴⁴(SAHistoryArchive, 2012b)

³⁴⁵*Ibid.*

³⁴⁶(*Between life and death: stories from John Vorster Square - DVD and Educators' guide*, 2007)

³⁴⁷(Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

1981

Barbara Anne Hogan



ANC Member, Political Prisoner, MP, and Cabinet Minister.³⁴⁸

Barbara Hogan described JVS as a place where “dreadful things happened to people... a place of evil... a place where torture was carried out, and it was the centre for the Security Police. It was a place where there was no mercy... a place where... psychopaths hung out.”³⁴⁹ Hogan was arrested following the SB intercepting a confidential report she had transmitted to the headquarters of the ANC.³⁵⁰

Colonel Roelof Venter sought amnesty for his involvement in interrogating political detainees. The interrogation techniques employed under his authority included physical assault, electric shocks, prolonged questioning designed to induce mental exhaustion, and acts of verbal abuse, humiliation, and degradation. In his application, Venter referenced his role in the interrogations of Barbara Hogan. These actions were reportedly carried out with permission from his commander.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ South African History Online (2011c) *Barbara Anne Hogan*. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/barbara-anne-hogan>.

³⁴⁹ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

³⁵⁰ South African History Archive (2016) *Records of imprisonment - the Barbara Hogan story*. https://www.saha.org.za/news/2016/January/records_of_imprisonment.htm.

³⁵¹ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998f) Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report: Volume Two. Department of Justice*. <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>. Pg. 217

Jabu Ngwenya



Ngwenya pictured by Craig Matthew.³⁵²

Working underground for the ANC, Ngwenya was arrested and tortured on JVS 10th floor.³⁵³ His testimony details a range of abuses, including being forced to stand naked and squat against a wall for extended periods.³⁵⁴ He also recounts being doused with buckets of ice water while naked, a fan positioned nearby, and the administration of electric shocks.³⁵⁵ Ngwenya's account suggests the primal nature of the torture, noting that he perceived a genuine intent to kill in the eyes of his abusers.³⁵⁶ His description of the psychological impact is particularly striking: "You felt at times as if you're mad. You will think until no more... And then the smell, you become part of the smell..."³⁵⁷ This statement conveys not only the extreme physical duress but also the profound disorientation and dehumanisation experienced by those subjected to such treatment.

³⁵² (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

³⁵³ SAHistoryArchive (2012a) *Interview with former detainee Jabu Ngwenya*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWmzaXsXoq4>.

³⁵⁴ (SAHistoryArchive, 2012a)

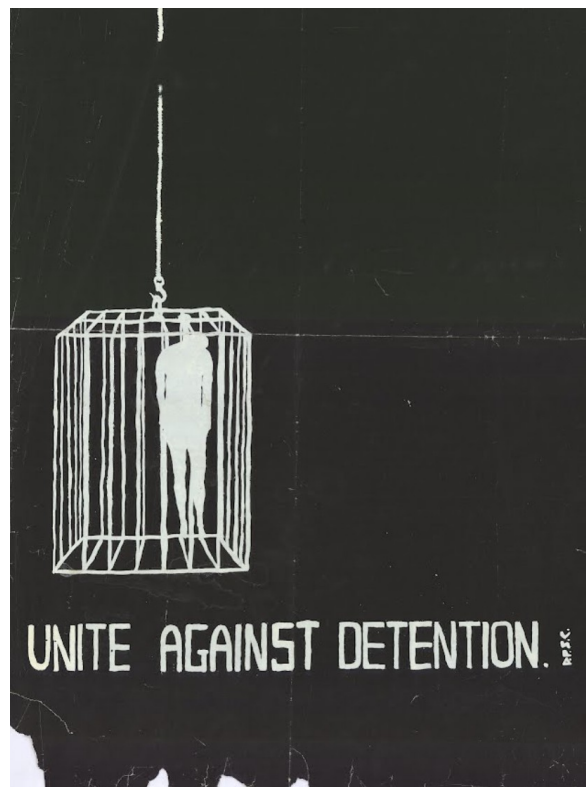
³⁵⁵ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

³⁵⁶ (SAHistoryArchive, 2012a)

³⁵⁷ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

Keith Coleman

Coleman's parents, Max and Audrey, established the Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC) following his arrest at JVS.³⁵⁸ The DPSC documented a systematic pattern of abuse targeting youth. Their reports detailed instances of children being seized from the streets by soldiers and detained for extended periods. These reports showed a significant increase post-the Soweto Uprising.³⁵⁹ Children were subjected to severe physical violence, including beatings with fists and rifle butts, electric shock torture, and, in some cases, the practice of pouring petrol over them and threatening them with open flames.³⁶⁰ The DPSC's documentation of this abuse of children played a crucial role in bringing these atrocities to light. "The brutalisation of children in prisons and on the streets of the townships is a mark of shame against the apartheid regime that should be remembered in time to come."³⁶¹ A memorialised JVS would be a symbolic site to remember this disgrace, considering the documentation of violations against children was a product of a JVS arrest.



UNITE AGAINST DETENTION Poster by Detainees Parents Support Committee (DPSC)³⁶²

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ SAHA - South African History Archive - Children in detention (no date).
https://www.saha.org.za/youth/children_in_detention.htm.

³⁶⁰ (SAHA - South African History Archive - Children in detention, no date)

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

1982

Dr Neil Hudson Aggett



Aggett in 1981.³⁶³

“A person of great integrity, little ego and very committed.”³⁶⁴

Aggett’s anti-apartheid activism led to his arrest on November 27, 1981.³⁶⁵ He was subjected to repeated interrogation and torture—standing for long periods and electric shocks— at JVS by the SB.³⁶⁶ Seventy days later, on February 5, 1982, the 28-year-old was found dead in his

³⁶³ UCT Special Collections (1981) *Neil, at Crown Mines, around 1981.*

³⁶⁴ (Swart, 2020)

³⁶⁵ (Naidoo, 2012:265)

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 368

cell. Authorities claimed he had hanged himself with a kikoi scarf, a traditional African cloth.³⁶⁷ He was the first white person to die in detention.³⁶⁸ The inquest into Aggett's death was a significant event, drawing national and international attention.³⁶⁹ It highlighted the brutal practices of the apartheid regime's security forces and the lack of accountability for the deaths of detainees in custody.³⁷⁰ Prompting public protests owing to the impunity enjoyed by the security apparatus. This public response was heightened by Stephen Bantu Biko's recent death in September 1977.³⁷¹ Biko was a famous activist and Black Consciousness leader who died in detention at 30 years of age at the Sanlam Buildings in Gqeberha.³⁷²

In December 1982, Aggett's post-mortem revealed a catalogue of torture: handcuff marks, electrocution, and signs of severe physical abuse at an inquest requested by his family.³⁷³ Furthermore, it was shown that he had been interrogated non-stop for 62 hours before he died. Multiple detainees testified to witnessing his torture at the hands of police. Yet, despite this compelling evidence, no one was held accountable.³⁷⁴ His death was declared a suicide by the magistrate, who, astonishingly, also seemed to blame a fellow inmate for not preventing it.³⁷⁵ The inquest was reopened in 2019 due to Aggett's family's continued quest for truth and justice. On the 21st of January 2020, those involved in the case were allowed to visit "the 9th and 10th floors, where political detainees were interrogated. A smaller group also took part in inspecting cells on the 2nd floor, where political detainees were kept. It was on the 2nd floor that Aggett had allegedly hung himself. A simulation was undertaken to establish the likelihood of Aggett being able to hang himself using a kikoi scarf."³⁷⁶ This visit and simulation at JVS includes what I imagine would take place if this site was memorialised. Where visitors gain a deeper understanding of detention at JVS and are socialised to care more about the past and its influence on today's issues because "there is no motivator like memory. As long as an injustice is remembered, it can begin to be righted."³⁷⁷

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ (Swart, 2020)

³⁶⁹ His race undoubtedly played a significant role in the prominence of his case.

³⁷⁰ (Naidoo, 2012:369)

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.* Pg. 371

³⁷³ Neil Aggett – *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2020). <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/neil-aggett/#INQUEST-520>.

³⁷⁴ (Neil Aggett – *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 2020)

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ (International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, 2024:9)

The second inquest found that Aggett was killed by SB members at JVS.³⁷⁸ In the closing remarks, the family called for Aggett's legacy to be memorialised, "As a young doctor, Neil Aggett worked in hospitals in Kuruman, Umtata, Thembisa and Soweto. Jill Burger, Neil's sister, together with the Aggett family, suggest that naming a hospital after him would be a fitting memorial. We are aware that such a recommendation is beyond the remit of this Court, but we nonetheless place the proposal on the record".³⁷⁹

They further stated:

"Neil would have known why he was in John Vorster Square. He would have known that his unassuming and quiet resistance to racial domination and his methodical building of a trade union movement posed the greatest threat to his tormentors. He would have known that others would pick up where he left off, and they would not stop until the pernicious system of Apartheid was swept aside."³⁸⁰

Having Aggett's sacrifice memorialised at a JVS Site of Conscience would allow visitors to draw the connections he made between socio-economic health and physical health. This would inspire onlookers to 'pick up where he' and all the comrades mentioned in this section 'left off' in the struggle for a liberated South Africa for all.

³⁷⁸ Feltham, L. (2022) *Security Branch killed Neil Aggett, judge finds*. <https://mg.co.za/news/2022-03-04-security-branch-killed-neil-aggett-judge-finds/>.

³⁷⁹ Aggett Family (2021) *The Reopened Inquest into the Death of Neil Hudson Aggett: Final Written Closing Arguments on Behalf of the Aggett Family, High Court of South Africa: Gauteng Local Division*. 1982/139. Pg. 158

³⁸⁰ (Aggett Family, 2021)

Ernest Moabi Dipale



SABC News picture of Dipale.³⁸¹

Ernest Dipale, the 21-year-old brother of Joyce Dipale, was arrested by security police on 5 August 1982. Three days later, in the early hours of 8 August 1982, he was found dead in his cell at JVS.³⁸² A post-mortem examination conducted by Professor NJ Scheepers in September 1982 concluded that the cause of death was hanging.³⁸³ The subsequent inquest ruled that no one could be held criminally responsible for his death.

In 2021, a reopened inquest revealed that on 4 August 1982, SB members, including double agent Joe Mamasela and another officer, targeted Dipale and a friend, Koapeng. Dipale and Koapeng were arrested and detained at JVS the following day. Koapeng was later released, but Dipale never left custody, having been interrogated by Nicholas Johannes Deetlefs, who was also allegedly implicated in the assault and murder of Dr Neil Aggett.³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ Admin_Ahmed (2023) *Re-Opened Ernest Moabi Dipale Inquest - Ahmed Timol*. <https://www.ahmedtimol.co.za/re-opened-ernest-moabi-dipale-inquest/>.

³⁸² (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998f:209)

³⁸³ *Press release: Security Branch of the South African Police responsible for the Death of Ernest Moabi Dipale at the John Vorster Square Police Station in 1982* (2023). <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/press-release-security-branch-of-the-south-african-police-responsible-for-the-death-of-ernest-moabi-dipale-at-the-john-vorster-square-police-station-in-1982/>.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

In 2023, it was finally ruled that Dipale's death was not suicide but that he had been killed by the SB.³⁸⁵

“The evidence by the blanket manufacturer, which Dipale had allegedly used to hang himself, points to the fact that Dipale would not have been able to tear the blankets with his bare hands since the blankets were very heavy, and if one had [torn], it will show frayed or threads. There were no sharp objects found in the cell. In addition, as a result of his height, Dipale would have had to use a chair or a stool to tie the blanket at the uppermost portion of the window grill. However, the toilet seat was too far from the window and therefore, it could not have been used by Dipale to reach the grill. There was no other chair or stool in the cell. Dr Jacobus, whom Deetlefs met on 8 August 1982 at the time of Dipale's death, told him that “Dipale had been hanged”, which could only mean that someone else was implicated.”³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Reclaiming Memory, Challenging White Supremacy: The Case for Memorialising John Vorster Square in Addressing the Legacy of Violence in Post-Apartheid South Africa

1988

Stanza Bopape

focus on Stanza Bopape

When Stanza Bopape completed his law degree at the University of the North (Tarlton) near Pietersburg, his parents were thankful that their son had finally reached the stage where he would ease their financial burdens.

They had to. Stanza's parents channelled the bulk of their meagre funds into his education.

According to African tradition, the eldest child is expected to play his part in helping those coming after him to succeed in life as well. In Stanza's case there were five others.

On June 9 1989 a group of policemen stormed into Stanza's backyard room in Mamelodi. They confiscated pamphlets and T-shirts with political slogans on them and took Stanza, then the 28-year-old general secretary of the Mamelodi Civic Association, away.

Three weeks after Stanza's detention, police informed the young activist's lawyers about his 'escape' from their custody.

Ironically, police claimed Stanza escaped here days after they had arrested him, on the night of June 11-12.

"Ludicrous," cried Jan van Eick, an independent MP who conducted a solo campaign in Parliament demanding that former Law and Order Minister Adriaan Vlok reveal details of Stanza's alleged escape.

But Vlok steadfastly maintained:

Stanza disappeared while on his way to visiting out certain spots in connection with acts of terror in which he was allegedly involved.

Vlok has unwaveringly refused to name the three policemen in whose custody Stanza was then he disappeared. "They were repairing a punctured tyre at the time of incident," he said, but how is it possible that the supposedly well-aided trio failed to notice that Stanza, in the back of the car, was up to mischief?

Police, with Vlok as mouthpiece, have maintained that Stanza, who was handcuffed and had his legs in chains, managed to take keys from an officer's jacket and free himself.

Vlok went on to say that his men were "tired" then Stanza escaped.

He says his men only recognised the escapee when Stanza was already far from them, before disappearing into the bushes.

"They fired two shots at him but they missed," Vlok said.

Stanza's father, Matome, held a meeting with the Minister and later described Vlok's version of the disappearance of his son as "cooked-up lies." He still does.

He told Sowetan at the weekend: "I mistook him (Vlok) for a father, a parent who knows that it is like to go to bed wondering what has happened to your son."

When Stanza's father walked out of the meeting with Vlok he described the talks as "useless".

On June 9 1989 a group of policemen stormed into a backyard room in Mamelodi and took away newly qualified lawyer Stanza Bopape, who has since disappeared.

Abbey Makoe reports:

Stanza Bopape

Adriaan Vlok

Vlok has unwaveringly refused to name the three policemen in whose custody Stanza was when he disappeared

He asked the Minister, in what he called a man-to-man talk, for the body of his son so he could bury him and bring to an end the nightmare of suspense and uncertainty.

Vlok responded by firing another broadside: "Someone has given information under oath, saying he had seen Stanza in the company of a man and a woman after his escape."

Vlok said Stanza was seen in the vicinity of another attack "in which people died".

For a man of Stanza's stature, with a host of political and social friends, to fail to contact anyone about his whereabouts would be a ludicrous action.

But Vlok and his cohorts, particularly Law and Ministry spokesman Brigadier Leon Mallet, share one sentiment: "We reject sharp accusations and dismiss them as scandalous propaganda from radical left-wing circles."

Even if Johnny Mokaleng, as reported on Pages 1 and 2, did not reveal his knowledge about the graveyard in Rustenburg, the public, and most of all the black community led by Stanza's parents, want to know the end of their loved ones.

It would be interesting, apart from Stanza's case, to see what Vlok's reaction would be should he be forced to account for other skeletons found at places Mokaleng knows about.

The veil of secrecy under which the police force has operated, coupled with its twin - unaccountability - has gone down history.

"One wonders when these leaders really dream about at night," whispered my colleague and friend Pat Sekoko. "They have developed a tendency of just saying out loud screaming," he added. "I don't see any head that he walked away."

Sekoko's feelings I think do represent those of the majority. What then do they really dream about at night?

Stand by, Vlok, it seems the hour has finally come.

Newspaper clipping of Stanza Bopape's 'disappearance'.³⁸⁷

At 27, Bopape, a prominent Mamelodi activist, disappeared under suspicious circumstances.³⁸⁸ His family conducted an extensive search, only to be told by police that he had been detained at JVS but had allegedly escaped.³⁸⁹ According to Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, the official account was "Bopape escaped when three policemen with whom he was travelling got out of the car to change a punctured tyre. Bopape allegedly found the keys to unlock his handcuffs and fled."³⁹⁰ However, testimonies presented during the TRC amnesty hearings revealed that Bopape died on 12 June 1988 at JVS, with police attributing his death to a heart attack triggered by electric shocks.³⁹¹ The timing of his death is particularly notable, as it

³⁸⁷ Makoe, A. (1993) *Focus on Stanza Bopape*, SAHA Collection AL3282.

https://www.saha.org.za/collections/AL3282/d73715_19930125sow.htm.

³⁸⁸ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998e:621)

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Pg. 27

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Pg. 621

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

occurred just four days before the 10th anniversary of the Soweto Uprising. To prevent potential public unrest, the police sought to conceal the circumstances of his death, fabricating the escape narrative to obscure state culpability in yet another instance of politically motivated brutality.³⁹²

“Mr Engelbrecht pushed these cords against his body and moved it over Mr Bopape’s body ... It didn’t take very long, maybe two to four minutes. The device was turned, then it was stopped, then someone asked him whether he wanted to say something and if there was no reaction to that, then the machine was turned again, and this must have happened around three times. By the third time, Mr Bopape’s head fell forward, and I realised there was something wrong. We immediately untied him, placed him on the floor, and Sergeant du Preez gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It seemed that he was dead already, and I think all of us standing there ... all thought that he was dead.”³⁹³

Mokgaetji Francina Bopape, Bopape’s mother, made a heartfelt plea, urging the officers responsible for her son’s death to reveal the location of his remains: “Come here and tell us where the bones are.”³⁹⁴ It was later disclosed that Captain van Loggerenberg had disposed of Bopape’s body by rolling it into a crocodile-infested river, stating, “the body, the corpse sunk away into the water. I cannot tell you that it immediately disappeared, but I did not stay to look.”³⁹⁵ Bopape’s killers were granted amnesty in 2000.³⁹⁶

In honour of his legacy, a community development centre bearing his name operates as a non-profit organisation in Mamelodi East, Pretoria, dedicated to addressing poverty and social deprivation.³⁹⁷ However, to further interrogate the enduring legacies of apartheid violence, the centre could engage in workshops and commemorative dialogues at a memorialised JVS. Such an initiative would critically examine the continuities between the repressive regime responsible for Bopape’s death and the persistent structural inequalities that continue to shape South African society. With his body having been discarded in the Nkomati River, a memorial at JVS would provide a symbolic space to honour his life and struggle, marking the site where

³⁹² *Ibid.* Pg. 598

³⁹³ *Ibid.* Pg. 622

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Pg. 621

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 623

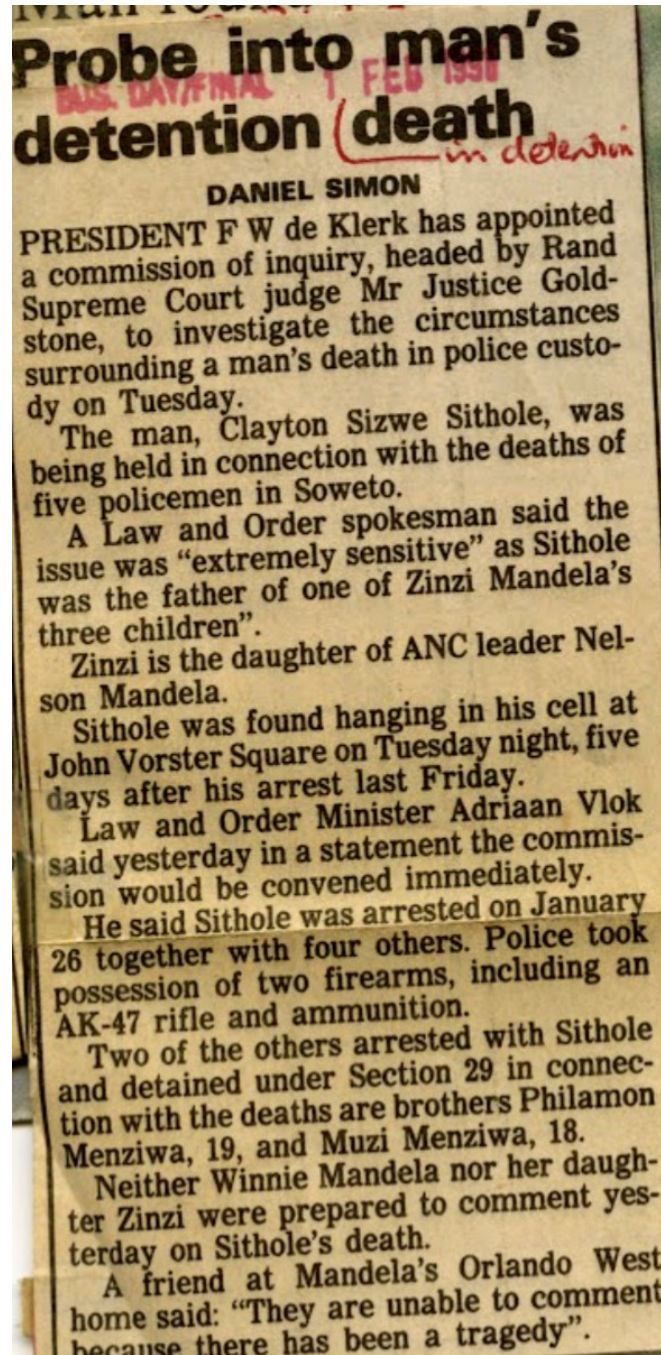
³⁹⁶ Miller, S. and Ngcobo, S. (2000) *Amnesty Decisions*.
<https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/hearing.php?id=59082&t=&tab=hearings>.

³⁹⁷ Stanza Bopape Development Centre (2013) 'Facebook Page,' *Stanza Bopape Development Centre*.
<https://www.facebook.com/STANZADEV>.

he took his final breath—reclaiming that traumatic memory, humanising Bopape and using his memory to catalyse meaningful change.³⁹⁸

1990

Clayton Sizwe Sithole



Newspaper clipping regarding Sithole's passing.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁸ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Just days before Mandela's release, Clayton Sithole, Zindzi Mandela's partner and father of their three-month-old son, died in detention at JVS.⁴⁰⁰ His death, attributed to suicide by hanging (reportedly using either a shower pipe or his belt), is considered the last death in detention under apartheid.⁴⁰¹ The circumstances surrounding his death remain murky. While police claimed Sithole, age 20, hanged himself, archival evidence suggests he was tortured, subjected to brutal assaults, and deprived of sleep.⁴⁰² Reports vary as to the location of his body, some saying he was found in the exercise courtyard, others in his cell. Sithole's death prompted de Klerk to order a special Commission of Inquiry headed by Richard Goldstone.⁴⁰³

This swift action was seen by some as reflecting de Klerk's sensitivity to Sithole's connection to the Mandela family, particularly as Mandela's release was imminent. Civil rights lawyers at the time noted this connection.⁴⁰⁴ The Goldstone Commission ultimately concluded that Sithole had died by suicide, a finding accepted by the family's legal team, reportedly due to incriminating evidence Sithole possessed regarding Winnie and Zindzi Mandela's political activities.⁴⁰⁵ However, during his detention, Sithole was allegedly interrogated by Arthur Benoni Cartwright, a known racist officer at JVS nicknamed "Little Hitler".⁴⁰⁶ Speculation persists that Sithole's association with the Mandelas may have been a factor in his death. Despite the suicide ruling, Justice Goldstone described the conditions under which Sithole was detained as "drastic", infringing on basic rights.⁴⁰⁷

A year after Sithole's death, the SB was disbanded, merging with the Criminal Investigation Division to form Crime Combating and Investigation".⁴⁰⁸ In 1995, the SAPS was launched.⁴⁰⁹ JVS was renamed Johannesburg Central Police Station in 1997, and a plaque in honour of all

⁴⁰⁰Goldstone, R. (2000). *For humanity: Reflections of a War Crimes Investigator*.
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/g/goldstone-humanity.html>.

⁴⁰¹ (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1998f:210)

⁴⁰² Khumalo, T. (2021) *The Life of Clayton 'Sizwe' Sithole*. <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/the-star-south-africa-late-edition/20210128/282016149997136?srsId=AfmBOooxzIZ7fVft536EmLIVVJEYfD-SbKI9KyZm3WgPS4IrYosR6wvu>.

⁴⁰³Sparks, A. (1990) 'INQUIRY ORDERED INTO DEATH OF MAN WITH TIES TO MANDELA,' *Washington Post*, 31 January. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/02/01/inquiry-ordered-into-death-of-man-with-ties-to-mandela/92777bbd-a685-4ba6-8d9d-149c999119d3/>.

⁴⁰⁴ (Sparks, 1990)

⁴⁰⁵ (Goldstone, 2000)

⁴⁰⁶ (Khumalo, 2021)

⁴⁰⁷ Amnesty International Secretariat (1991) *Oral Statement by Amnesty International to the 47th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International*. London, United Kingdom of Great Britain, and Northern Ireland: Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/afr530051991en.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁸ (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

⁴⁰⁹*Ibid*.

deaths in detention was put on the wall.⁴¹⁰ Lastly, a bronze statue of John Vorster was removed from the site. Yet, “the bleak interior and dank smell remain the same. The ghosts of its former occupants are far from banished.”⁴¹¹



John Vorster bronze bust.⁴¹²

As I composed this section, my thoughts continually returned to Octavia Butler’s words in *Parable of the Sower*: “But if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?”⁴¹³ This reflection echoes deeply when confronted with the testimonies, newspaper clippings, and photographs of individuals; their smiles immortalised, their ambitions brimming with humanity and hope. Could anyone engage with such narratives and remain unmoved? Would you not, upon encountering these fragments of lives so tragically curtailed, feel compelled to act with greater love and compassion towards your fellow human beings?

⁴¹⁰ (*Truth Be Told: Room 1008*, 2024)

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² (Kennedy and South African History Archive (SAHA), 2007)

⁴¹³ Butler, O.E. (1993) *Parable of the sower*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB15997733>.

Would you not sense the weight of the pain and loss enshrined within the walls of JVS and find yourself inspired to embody even a fraction of the courage demonstrated by the activists commemorated here? I believe you would. Such would be the transformative power of a JVS Site of Conscience, a place where history's echoes compel us to reflect, to feel, and to act.

Taken together, these accounts illuminate the systemic, patterned, and racialised nature of state violence at JVS. They also reveal the extent to which survivors and families have carried the burden of remembrance in the absence of formal memorialisation. This narrative archive therefore forms the backbone of the case advanced in the subsequent chapters: that JVS must be transformed into a Site of Conscience precisely because these stories, rooted in trauma, courage, and resistance, remain insufficiently acknowledged within South Africa's national memory landscape.

Victim and Survivor Calls for Memorialisation

“Human life is founded on memory, on the ability to evaluate and interpret what is being experienced...it is crucial then, to allow memory to be called back, to draw attention to the injury, to elicit hope for repair.”⁴¹⁴

As discussed, memorialisation functions as a form of symbolic reparation, playing a critical role in preserving the memory of victims and formally acknowledging their suffering. This process is essential for affirming the dignity of victims and ensuring their experiences and losses are recognised within the public sphere.⁴¹⁵ The families of those who suffered at JVS articulated this imperative for public acknowledgement. As mentioned, Timol’s father asked for his son’s sacrifice never to be forgotten, and his nephew asked for the memorialisation of the south wing of the 10th floor at JVS.⁴¹⁶

“This could be in [the] form of a museum or educational centre, open to the public, which tracks the history of security detention and its abuses. In particular, Room 1026 and the other interrogation rooms should be faithfully restored to how they were in 1971.”⁴¹⁷

As previously noted, Aggett’s sister, Jill Burger, asked for a hospital to be named in his honour. I have found no record of a hospital, but I have noted the existence of the Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit (NALSU) at Rhodes University.⁴¹⁸ Burger’s yearning for her brother to be remembered could take further form at a memorialised JVS where the links between contemporary health issues and social and economic ills are connected, just as Aggett deduced in his lifetime.

⁴¹⁴ (Mayet, 2022:9)

⁴¹⁵ Delgado, A.C. (2013) *Memory and Truth in Human Rights: The Argentina Case. The Issue of Truth and Memory in the Aftermath of Gross Human Rights Violations in Argentina*. Master of Arts. University of South Florida. <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5502&context=etd>. Pg. 25

⁴¹⁶ (Mothle, 2017:80)

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁸ *Neil Aggett Labour Studies Unit welcomes inquest into death of Aggett* (2020).

<https://www.ru.ac.za/latestnews/archives/2020/neilaggettlabourstudiesunitwelcomesinquestintodeathofaggett.html>.

According to Judy Barsalou, family members play a crucial role in memorialisation efforts because of their role in serving as symbolic sites for mourning and remembering loved ones.⁴¹⁹ Memorialisation encourages civic participation by involving families and the wider community in dialogue about the past, encouraging necessary discussions for a peaceful, coexistent future. As primary stakeholders, family members contribute personal narratives and insights, enriching the process and ensuring it reflects the community's collective memory.⁴²⁰ Furthermore, family members, along with other local actors, can influence the direction and nature of memorial initiatives.⁴²¹

Thus, following the suggestion from Cajee, memorialising JVS as a Site of Conscience could involve the transformation of the 9th and 10th floors, where interrogations took place and activists were thrown from windows. In addition, the ground where their bodies landed could be made into a memorial garden where all officers going to work or visitors accessing the memorialised sections of the site could be reminded of the atrocities that took place at JVS. This would serve as a constant call to conscience, urging one to never repeat such acts or those similar to them, from what happened to Stanza Bopape to the Marikana massacre. This need is especially urgent for the sake of healing, particularly given the frequent failure to bring SB members or those who orchestrated deaths in detention to justice, as in the case of Timol's murderer, João Rodrigues, going "to his grave with his secrets about what happened that day in room 1026 at John Vorster Square."⁴²² Timol's nephew reflected:

"Part of me died when I heard that apartheid security policeman Joao Rodrigues died this week, bringing my 25-year quest for justice for my murdered uncle Ahmed Timol to an end. Rodrigues' daughter called to inform me, and I went cold for a moment — not out of shock or grief, but a sense of loss. My first thought was that those who made it their business to prevent the prosecution of apartheid killers had ultimately won, and we had lost."⁴²³

⁴¹⁹ (Barsalou, 2020:50)

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ *Ibid.* Pg. 63

⁴²² Venter, Z. (2021) *Former apartheid policeman João Rodrigues dies with secrets about Ahmed Timol's death.* <https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/news/former-apartheid-policeman-joao-rodrigues-dies-with-secrets-about-ahmed-timols-death-0df5148d-a00a-4f88-9efa-f7e8aacd405a>.

⁴²³ Cajee, I. (2021) *The death of Joao Rodrigues: Now we will never know the truth about the death in detention of my uncle Ahmed Timol.* <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-09-the-death-of-joao-rodrigues-now-we-will-never-know-the-truth-about-the-death-in-detention-of-my-uncle-ahmed-timol/>.

For former detainees like Zwelinzima Sizane, renaming JVS to Johannesburg Central Police Station provided a sense of relief, “It might look the same, but conservative whites in South Africa must realise that name changes play a role in healing past experiences... People died here and lies were told about them—that they flew out, that they slipped on bars of soap. That’s the reality.”⁴²⁴ For Steve Mabelane, the name change didn’t mean anything because “the structure is still the same.”⁴²⁵ This thesis holds that if Sizane felt slightly remedied by the name change, the memorialisation of the site could provide further healing and allow for Mabelane’s loved ones’ ideals of a physically transformed JVS to be considered, too.

On 25 January 2025, the FHR held a press conference addressing a landmark constitutional damages case in which 25 families, including that of Matthews Mabelane, and survivors of apartheid-era crimes have joined forces.⁴²⁶ These families and survivors have filed an application in the Pretoria High Court against President Cyril Ramaphosa and the South African government, seeking redress for the state’s gross failure to adequately investigate and prosecute apartheid-era political crimes despite the findings and recommendations of the TRC to prosecute amnesty applications that were denied.⁴²⁷ This legal action highlights the enduring struggle for accountability and justice, underscoring the necessity of memorialising sites such as the former JVS, which stand as powerful symbols of the atrocities committed during apartheid.

Odette Geldenhuys, the lead legal representative in this case, remarked, “Our children don’t know what apartheid was; what happened during apartheid and who died for [our] liberation.”⁴²⁸ There is a struggle to remember, and it needs to be countered head-on. Geldenhuys further stated that the funds being requested as a part of this case would put in a fund for victims of apartheid atrocities and explicitly stated that some of the funds would be used for the memorialisation of these victims. This illustrates a collective aim that extends beyond seeking a commission of inquiry into the political interference with the NPA investigations but an additional aim to memorialise those who suffered under apartheid.

⁴²⁴ ‘Transcript of the interview with Zwelinzima Sizane’ (2007) *The South African History Archive (SAHA)*, *Sunday Times*, DOXA. The South African History Archive (SAHA). https://www.saha.org.za/collections/AL3282/d612_2.htm.

⁴²⁵ (*Truth Be Told: Room 1008*, 2024)

⁴²⁶ Foundation for Human Rights (2025) ‘Press Conference on Constitutional Damages Case,’ *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWWMH1DS1i4>.

⁴²⁷ Foundation for Human Rights (2025) *Press Release: Survivors and families of anti-apartheid activists sue the government for constitutional damages*. <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/press-release-survivors-and-families-of-anti-apartheid-activists-sue-the-government-for-constitutional-damages/>.

⁴²⁸ (Foundation for Human Rights, 2025)

“Post-1994 South Africa has a theatrical crisis of selective amnesia and partisan rememberings of history. History telling, whether at school, university, in the media or public celebrations and commemorative events, is biased towards a singular political trajectory and one particular school of thought that is portrayed as the sole agent of the socioeconomic and political transformations that have apparently occurred in the past [31] years. In democratic South Africa, there is neither democracy nor justice when it comes to narrating critical historical events and moments. There is rather a subtle, consistent perpetuation of particular memories as less or more valuable and significant than others. South African historiography after 1994 marginalises particular voices while structuring others as monolithic.”⁴²⁹

This call for memorialisation was further reiterated by Lukhanyo Calata, the son of Fort Calata, one of the members of the Cradock Four (a collective term referring to Fort Calata, Matthew Goniwe, Sicelo Mhlauli, and Sparrow Mkonto, who were arrested at an SB roadblock, brutally assaulted, and murdered in 1985)⁴³⁰. Calata emphasised the need for his father’s sacrifice to be seen, respected, and given the honour it deserves. He remarked, “Justice is now about the truth. [F.W.] de Klerk died dismissing us because he was never held accountable... white people call us the k-word because they’ve never seen black lives being honoured or valued.”⁴³¹

Challenging Apartheid Amnesia, Denialism and the Sanitisation of the Past

Calata’s remarks point to de Klerk, audaciously declaring that he did not agree with the UN’s designation of apartheid as a Crime Against Humanity in an interview on the 2nd of February 2020.⁴³² The De Klerk Foundation doubled down on this view in a statement that read, “Deplorable as it is, we cannot, from a legal point of view, accept that apartheid can in this

⁴²⁹ Sipuye, T. (2018) *Op-Ed: Remembering Nyakane Tsolo – The True History of Sharpeville Must be told*. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-03-09-op-ed-remembering-nyakane-tsolo-the-true-history-of-sharpeville-must-be-told/>.

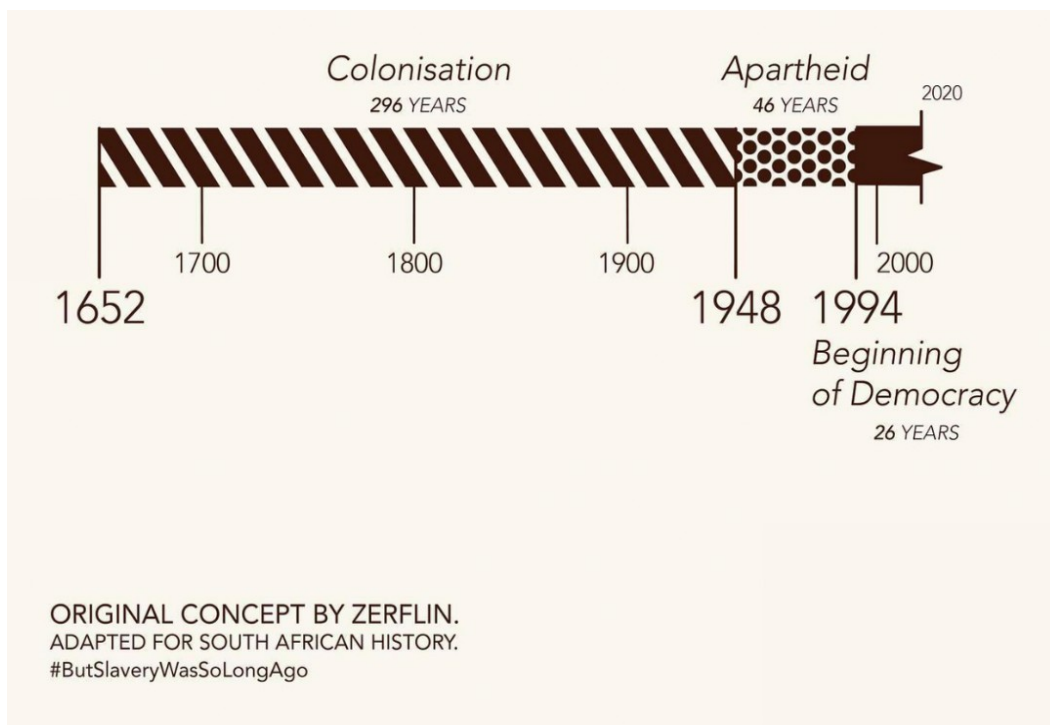
⁴³⁰ *The Cradock Four – The Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (no date). <https://unfinishedtrc.co.za/the-cradock-four/>.

⁴³¹ (Foundation for Human Rights *et al.*, 2025)

⁴³² (Swart, 2020)

manner be made a crime against humanity.”⁴³³ De Klerk and his foundation later retracted this statement, but the incident highlighted how the suffering of Africans during the apartheid government’s tenure had been minimised. Calata refuted, “[The comments] reinforced our belief that de Klerk has never really seen us as human beings. He’s never assigned any human value to our family.”⁴³⁴

Additionally, one of South Africa’s opposition political parties, the Economic Freedom Fighters, rightly expressed that de Klerk was an “apartheid apologist.”⁴³⁵ He was and is not the only one. The CEO of AfriForum, an Afrikaner nationalist organisation, Carl Kriel, argued that apartheid could not have been a crime against humanity because there weren’t enough deaths to make it so.⁴³⁶ It has been shown that apartheid was a crime against humanity; it is not a disputable fact, yet some too many white people align with this watered-down version of the past as a means to distance themselves from the brutal system.



#ButApartheidWasSoLongAgo. This is an adaptation of Zerflin’s #ButSlaveryWasSoLongAgo by Micaela Beaumont.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁶ De Vos, P. (2018) *AfriForum will never forgive Black people for apartheid.*

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2018-05-16-afriforum-will-never-forgive-black-people-for-apartheid/>.

⁴³⁷ Beaumont, M. (2020) *But Apartheid Was So Long Ago.*

Pierre de Vos believes that when “people like Kriel deny that apartheid was a crime against humanity, they are – so to speak – blaming black people for apartheid. Or put differently, their denial reflects their anger at black people for reminding them that our parents (and sometimes, if we are old enough, us too) were (and sometimes still are) monsters who oppressed (or sometimes continue to use our economic and social power to oppress) black people and that those of us whose parents did the oppressing are still benefiting from the effects of that oppression.”⁴³⁸ This exemplifies the ongoing tensions between remembering and forgetting in South Africa. Memorialising a site such as the JVS would confront those who would rather avoid the harrowing details of state repression during apartheid. For such individuals, the act of preserving and presenting this history might challenge their desire to distance themselves from uncomfortable truths, compelling a reckoning with the violent legacy that continues to shape the nation’s present. De Klerk and Kriel and all the countless racists in South Africa need more reminders of the brutality of the apartheid regime, JVS would serve as a powerful mirror to those who sanitise the past and force them to look within.

Verne Harris reflects on how the apartheid regime used tools of forgetfulness and state-imposed amnesia as a means of exercising power. This involved generating vast amounts of information and then keeping it hidden from public view, and systematically destroying public records to maintain secrecy over certain processes, as was the case in torture and death in detention.⁴³⁹ The destruction of records was particularly significant in the years leading up to the transition to a democratic government. This was a deliberate effort to sanitise the state’s memory resources, ensuring that sensitive information would not be accessible to the incoming democratic government.⁴⁴⁰ This systematic destruction of records had a profound impact on social memory, particularly affecting the work of the TRC.⁴⁴¹ The failure to memorialise JVS could be seen as an extension of the NP’s state-imposed amnesia, making the memorialisation of this site a powerful resistance to the sanitisation of the past.

“Under apartheid, the terrain of social memory, as with all social space, was a site of struggle. In the crudest sense, this was a struggle of remembering against forgetting, of oppositional memory fighting a life-and-death struggle against a systematic forgetting engineered by the

⁴³⁸(De Vos, 2018)

⁴³⁹Harris, V. (2002) 'They should have destroyed more': The Destruction of Public Records by the South African. State in the Final Years of Apartheid, 1990-1994,' in *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society*. <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/81eaedf-2eb5-4c58-813d-49131630b145/content>.

⁴⁴⁰(Harris, 2002)

⁴⁴¹*Ibid.* Pg. 2

state. The realities, of course, were a little more complex. Forgetting, for instance, was an important element in the struggles against apartheid - forgetting the half-truths, the distorted interpretations, the lies, of the apartheid regime.”⁴⁴²

Andrea Dworkin asserts that “many women... resist feminism because it is an agony to be fully conscious of the brutal misogyny that permeates culture, society, and all personal relationships.”⁴⁴³ I would like to draw a parallel with South Africans who resist acknowledging the full extent of the apartheid regime’s brutality, particularly within the white community, where it may be painful to confront the fact that they are part of an entity that ignored, aided, upheld and invented an evil and unjust system.⁴⁴⁴ While the African community is primarily aware of the suffering inflicted by apartheid, the deep-seated trauma it has left on our society, our minds, and our spirits may hinder our ability to process its impact fully. Conversely, while there may be little resistance to acknowledging the cruelty of the apartheid regime, there may also be a degree of ignorance about the specific horrors endured by those who fought for liberation. Borrowing from Angela Davis, it is essential to acknowledge that this ignorance is not a coincidence because “we live in a society of an imposed forgetfulness, a society that depends on public amnesia.”⁴⁴⁵ Again, a memorialised JVS would challenge this public amnesia and encourage individuals to face the facts of the past.



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For those claiming legacy of colonialism was ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water etc.

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South African politician implying that there were merits to colonialism.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴² *Ibid.* Pg. 1

⁴⁴³ Dworkin, A. (1976) *Our Blood: prophecies and discourses on sexual politics*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA70775906>.

⁴⁴⁴ Battersby, J. (1997) 'Admitting White Guilt,' *The World Today*, 53(1), pp. 23–25. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40475906>.

⁴⁴⁵ *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975: A documentary in 9 chapters* (2011). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0bWTh74m6c>.

⁴⁴⁶ Reporter, G.S. (2017) 'South African politician investigated for tweet about benefits of colonialism,' *The Guardian*, 3 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/03/south-african-mp-under-investigation-after-tweeting-about-the-benefits-of-colonialism>.

“South Africa’s history is a story of entitlement and preference for one group at the expense of another”, and this has not changed.⁴⁴⁷ In 2024, black students were subjected to a ‘mock’ slave auction at Pinelands High School. Coloured students were recorded ‘bidding’ for the black students.⁴⁴⁸ In 2022, three adult white men assaulted black teenage boys at a swimming pool at a resort in the Free State, “claiming that the pool was reserved for white people.”⁴⁴⁹ South African police are estimated to kill three times more people per capita than their American counterparts.⁴⁵⁰ Violence against women remains prevalent.⁴⁵¹ The pervasive nature of violence has become so ingrained in South African society that it is often internalised and normalised. This normalisation makes it difficult to address and combat the violence effectively, as it becomes almost invisible in everyday life.⁴⁵² A memorialised JVS can act as a tool to “connect past struggles to today’s movements for human rights” and turn “memory into action.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁴⁷(Elcheroth and De Mel, 2021:22)

⁴⁴⁸ Isilow, H. (2024) *School ‘slave auction’ puts racism back in the spotlight in South Africa.*

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/school-slave-auction-puts-racism-back-in-the-spotlight-in-south-africa/3303931>

⁴⁴⁹ Magome, M. (2022) *3 men in South Africa charged for racist attack at swim pool* | AP News.

<https://apnews.com/article/racism-south-africa-crime-teens-0ae67acd89afb368823304e5d05ea18d>.

⁴⁵⁰ *Police killings: how does South Africa compare?* (2021). <https://africasacountry.com/2021/03/police-killings-how-does-south-africa-compare#:~:text=Taken%20over%20the%20total%20population,people%2C%20according%20to%20MPV's%20dataset>.

⁴⁵¹ Masiko-Mpaka, N. (2024) 'Confronting South Africa's crisis of Gender-Based violence,' *Human Rights Watch*, 25 November. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/25/confronting-south-africas-crisis-gender-based-violence>.

⁴⁵²(Durbach, 2018:370)

⁴⁵³(Sites of Conscience, 2022)

“Remember”

Remember to call at my grave
When freedom finally
Walks the land
So that I may rise
To tread familiar paths
To see broken chains
Fallen prejudice
Forgotten injury
Pardoned pains.

And when my eyes have filled their sight
Do not run away for fright
If I crumble to dust again

It will only be the bliss
Of a long-awaited dream
That bids me rest
When freedom finally walks the land...

— Don Mattera

Memorialisation as a Transformative Tool

In her brilliant book titled *War Talk*, Arundhati Roy writes,

“Our strategy should be not only to confront Empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe.”⁴⁵⁴

In this excerpt, Roy is speaking of the American Empire, which can be likened to the breeding ground for “imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy.”⁴⁵⁵ Extrapolating this concept to the South African context, it is apparent that apartheid, with its deeply entrenched colonial roots, has laid the groundwork for many of the social ills we grapple with today. This is true despite our political transition to democracy. Yet, as Roy reminds us, “another world is not only possible, she’s on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”⁴⁵⁶ Memorialisation is a transformative tool that can be harnessed to greet this new world. Each memory site, through its unique narrative and representation, provokes visitors to listen, learn, and represent responsibly. The sites expect visitors to engage with the history respectfully and to carry forward the lessons learned into their own contexts, promoting a sense of responsibility and activism.⁴⁵⁷ Consider the (Ex-Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ex-ESMA)).

Ex-ESMA, Argentina

Ex-ESMA, also known as the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics), was one of the most infamous clandestine detention, torture, and extermination centres during Argentina’s last dictatorship (1976–1983).⁴⁵⁸ Nearly 5,000 individuals—political and social activists, workers, professionals, artists, and clergy—were detained and disappeared as victims of state terrorism, which included kidnapping, torture, and murder. Once a site of horror, ESMA has since undergone a profound transformation into a space dedicated to memory,

⁴⁵⁴Roy, A. (2003) *War talk*. South End Press. Pg. 112

⁴⁵⁵Hooks, B. (2003) *The Will to Change: Men, masculinity, and love*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA82254092>.

⁴⁵⁶(Roy, 2003:75)

⁴⁵⁷ Hite, K. (2014) 'Empathic unsettlement and the outsider within Argentine spaces of memory,' *Memory Studies*, 8(1), pp. 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698014552407>.

⁴⁵⁸ Naftal, A. (2022) 'Constant consensus building: art and conflict in the ESMA museum and site of memory,' *Heritage Memory and Conflict*, 2, pp. 7–18. <https://doi.org/10.3897/ijhmc.2.72349>. Pg. 7

testimony, and the promotion of human rights. In 2004, it was formally designated as a space for memory and justice, ensuring that Argentina's traumatic past remains part of the collective consciousness.⁴⁵⁹ This transformation offers a compelling model for the memorialisation of JVS. Like ESMA, JVS was a site of severe human rights violations under apartheid, where political detainees were tortured and, in some cases, killed. ESMA's evolution into a museum and memory site demonstrates how former centres of repression can become spaces of learning, dialogue, and social responsibility, an approach that could be adapted to JVS.

One of ESMA's most powerful aspects is its use of artistic expression, through performances, installations, and visual arts, to engage the public in critical reflection. Works such as Araceli Arreche's *the Voices of the River* challenge visitors to reconsider how the past continues to shape the present.⁴⁶⁰ The museum's narrative was shaped through an inclusive and participatory process involving survivors, victims' families, human rights organisations, and the broader public.⁴⁶¹ This model of collective engagement could be instrumental in shaping a memorialised JVS, ensuring that multiple perspectives and lived experiences are honoured.⁴⁶²

Designed to reach diverse audiences, ESMA actively challenges visitors to confront the painful realities of the past. The museum's goal is to create a space where, as its guiding philosophy states, "those who are comfortable feel uncomfortable, and those who are uncomfortable feel comfortable."⁴⁶³ This principle could be particularly relevant for JVS, where the legacy of apartheid continues to shape contemporary struggles for justice. Importantly, ESMA serves not only as an educational institution but also as a repository of evidence for ongoing human rights trials, an aspect that holds significant relevance for families like the Mabelane's, who continue to seek legal justice.⁴⁶⁴ Memorialising JVS would not only support these legal efforts but also provide symbolic justice by acknowledging the site's history and ensuring it remains a focal point for memory and accountability.

The significance of ESMA's transformation was further solidified on September 19, 2023, when it became the first World Heritage Site recognised for its universal value as a place

⁴⁵⁹(Delgado, 2013)

⁴⁶⁰*Ibid.* Pg. 14

⁴⁶¹(Naftal, 2022:3)

⁴⁶²*Ibid.*

⁴⁶³*Ibid.* Pg. 8

⁴⁶⁴*Ibid.* Pg. 23

associated with memories of recent conflicts and difficult histories.⁴⁶⁵ ESMA has reimagined one of Argentina's most notorious detention and extermination centres into a space for remembrance, education, and human rights advocacy. As Argentina's Human Rights Secretary Horacio Pietragalla Corti emphasised, "This international recognition constitutes a strong response to those who deny or seek to downplay state terrorism and the crimes of the last civil-military dictatorship."⁴⁶⁶ This achievement underscores the global importance of preserving sites of past atrocities, not as relics of suffering but as active spaces for justice and education.

By drawing from ESMA's model, a memorialised JVS could serve as both a site of historical reckoning and a platform for ongoing social justice efforts in South Africa. Just as ESMA challenges denialism and promotes a culture of accountability, JVS could stand as a powerful reminder of the struggles waged against apartheid and the enduring pursuit of truth, justice, and human rights.

Harnessing the Power of Art at JVS

Art in memorials and museums has the power to transform static spaces into dynamic venues for democratic engagement. When dealing with individual human experiences, art fosters dialogue, encourages civic participation, and makes interaction an end in itself. This approach plays a crucial role in conflict prevention by promoting peaceful forms of engagement.⁴⁶⁷ A compelling example is the District Six Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, which actively involves the community by inviting former residents to share their memories. This participatory approach turns the museum into a space for encounter, dialogue, and social services, illustrating art's capacity for community building and social justice.⁴⁶⁸ Similarly, in the JVS context, art could serve as a bridge between history and activism. Samuel's documentaries could be screened, Magubane's images displayed, Pheto's poems recited, and Mabelane's favourite jazz soundtracks played, each element weaving together the stories and legacies of anti-apartheid activists. This convergence of art and activism, known as artivism, transforms creative expression into a force for social change. Anti-apartheid activist Kumi Naidoo reflects on his

⁴⁶⁵ Yanzaguano, C. (2023) *Tribute to Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA*.
<https://www.sitesofconscience.org/2023/10/tribute-to-museo-sitio-de-memoria-esma/#:~:text=Museo%20Sitio%20de%20Memoria%20ESMA%20was%20created%20in%202019%20from,American%20countries%20experienced%20civil%2Dmilitary.>

⁴⁶⁶ (Yanzaguano, 2023)

⁴⁶⁷ (Barsalou and Baxter, 2007:14)

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Pg. 4

decades of advocacy, emphasising that as the struggle to save humanity enters a critical decade, it is essential to appeal to both hearts and minds. This underscores a holistic approach to activism, one that moves beyond traditional methods by integrating artistic and cultural elements. Activism, therefore, serves as a powerful call to action, making activism more accessible and impactful. By harnessing this potential, a memorialised JVS could become a vibrant space for artistic resistance and collective memory.⁴⁶⁹

Memorialising JVS can be used to ‘think and enact decoloniality’ or imagine the new world Roy speaks of. It can be a tool for humanising the dehumanised and radicalising the public, operating from a place of love and compassion for others. It can also imagine a better South Africa that reflects Desai’s ideals, the Soweto Youth’s courage, Tshazibane’s ambitions, and Dipale’s activism.

Memorialisation as Decolonisation

The accounts of torture and death documented in the “Preventing Erasure and Reclaiming Memory” section are profoundly disturbing and demand reclamation within our collective memory. Employing JVS as the locus for this recovery is pivotal in cultivating empathy and activating a visceral response among those who learn of these experiences at the very site where they transpired. That section sought to re-humanise the dehumanised by sharing personal anecdotes—detailing how individuals were cherished by friends or colleagues—and by presenting photographs, excerpts of art, and records of resistance. Should these archives be concretised within a designated JVS Site of Conscience, a process of “re-membling”, a quest for wholeness through art and storytelling, would be set in motion.⁴⁷⁰ This approach positions memorialisation as a decolonial practice, echoing Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s notion of “re-membling” as a quest for wholeness, a central theme in African struggles against colonialism.⁴⁷¹ It involves reclaiming and reconstructing African identity and memory, long fragmented by colonial powers, with memorialisation serving as a vital instrument in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity with the past.

⁴⁶⁹ Naidoo, K. (2022) *Letters to My Mother: The Making of a Troublemaker*. Jacana Media.

⁴⁷⁰ Makhanya, M.S. (2021) ‘Memorialisation as a Force for Radical Transformation: The Case of Freedom Park in South Africa,’ in *Social Memory as a Force for Social and Economic Transformation*. Routledge, pp. 11–20.

⁴⁷¹ (Makhanya, 2021:12)

In 2023, I wrote a report on public monuments and memorials in the Western Cape for the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. The study found that most memorials commemorate British and Dutch colonial histories. These include the Drostdy Museum, constructed by the Dutch East India Company in 1747⁴⁷²; the Wellington Museum, which honours French Huguenots⁴⁷³; Groot Constantia Manor House (1685)⁴⁷⁴; Rust en Vreugd⁴⁷⁵ (1777–1778)⁴⁷⁶; and the Bartolomeu Dias Museum Complex, commemorating the Portuguese navigator who reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1488.⁴⁷⁷ Monuments such as the Jan van Riebeeck statue—erected by the imperialist Cecil John Rhodes⁴⁷⁸ in 1899 to mark the 1652 Dutch settlement⁴⁷⁹—and the Maria van Riebeeck statue, which pays tribute to van Riebeeck’s wife, further exemplifies this trend.⁴⁸⁰ There is also a statue of Queen Victoria at the Company Gardens, alongside depictions of Jan Smuts⁴⁸¹ and Cecil Rhodes, symbolising British colonial dominance during the 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁸² Additionally, the statue of Louis Botha, the first Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa, stands at the entrance to the South African Parliament, emblematic of white minority rule under British imperialism. These findings underscore the persistent prominence of colonial commemoration within the region’s memorial landscape.

This situation raises a critical question: what does it signify when a democratic state, one that proclaims itself both post-colonial and post-apartheid, continues to maintain symbolic celebrations of figures who were instrumental in establishing and perpetuating systems of racial oppression in South Africa? It can be argued that balancing existing colonial heritage with new commemorative markers is essential. The juxtaposition of new monuments alongside extant

⁴⁷² *Drostdy Museum* (no date). <https://www.drostdymuseum.co.za/>.

⁴⁷³ Groot Constantia (2023) *Groot Constantia’s rich history*. <https://grootconstantia.co.za/groot-constantia-rich-history/>.

⁴⁷⁴ Groot Constantia (2023) *Groot Constantia’s rich history*. <https://grootconstantia.co.za/groot-constantia-rich-history/>.

⁴⁷⁵ Rust en Vreugd, a former residential site constructed between 1777 and 1778, for Willem Cornelius Boers, a prominent VOC official.

⁴⁷⁶ *Rust en Vreugd – Iziko Museums* (no date). <https://www.iziko.org.za/museums/rust-en-vreugd/>.

⁴⁷⁷ *Bartolomeu Dias* (2011). <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/bartolomeu-dias>.

⁴⁷⁸ Rhodes epitomised the ideals of imperialism, fervently believing in the supremacy of the British Empire and the inherent superiority of English culture and governance.

⁴⁷⁹ *Jan van Riebeeck’s statue, presented by Cecil John Rhodes, is unveiled in Cape Town* (2019).

<https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/jan-van-riebeecks-statue-presented-cecil-john-rhodes-unveiled-cape-town-2>.

⁴⁸⁰ Kiewit, L. (2020) *Pressure to remove colonial relics grows*. <https://mg.co.za/news/2020-06-18-pressure-to-remove-colonial-relics-grows/>.

⁴⁸¹ A politician and soldier who firmly believed that political power should remain exclusively in the hands of the White population, denying Black people any share in governance.

⁴⁸² David (2016) *Company’s Gardens — the good garden*. <https://www.thegoodgarden.com/new-blog/2016/1/9/company-garden-cape-town-historic-garden>.

ones may offer a means to critically engage with the nation's history.⁴⁸³ Preservationists contend that retaining colonial monuments is crucial for preserving historical memory for future generations, as these structures serve as tangible links to the past and provide valuable educational insights into historical events and figures.⁴⁸⁴

Conversely, those advocating for their removal regard such action as an indispensable component of the decolonisation process. For these proponents, the removal of these symbols is integral to reclaiming public spaces from colonial influences and addressing historical injustices and oppression.⁴⁸⁵ Their stance is that such acts of destruction can challenge the philosophical and historical underpinnings of colonialism, disempowering the colonial narrative and advancing a post-imperial vision.⁴⁸⁶ These debates illustrate the complexity and often contentious nature of how societies should engage with their colonial pasts. This thesis contends that the persistence of these monuments reflects an unresolved tension between the nation's colonial legacy and its democratic present, a tension that is central to the challenges of renegotiating collective memory and identity in a society still grappling with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, as epitomised by the RMF movement. As Heidi Grunebaum-Ralph articulates:

“How are certain narratives of place and emplaced narratives constituted as objects of historical enquiry while others are naturalised as part of the daily lived environment and life-worlds that constitute our present and, as such, are made invisible to the history-making project?”⁴⁸⁷

There is a pressing need for deeper reflection on the role of public memory in shaping national narratives and on how these symbols correspond with the values of justice, reconciliation, and inclusivity that underpin South Africa's post-apartheid constitutional democracy. It is thus argued that enhanced memorialisation efforts are required—efforts that function as part of an ongoing continuum and that capture more recent historical events, such as the atrocities committed at JVS. Thirty-one years is a relatively brief span in the context of memorials and monuments that, in this instance, commemorate histories dating back to 1652 or even 1448. Such efforts also constitute a form of resistance against attempts to sanitise the apartheid regime

⁴⁸³ (Marschall, 2010:60)

⁴⁸⁴ (Sanni and Phiri, 2024:85)

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Pg. 70

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁷ Grunebaum-Ralph, H. (2001) 'Re-Placing Pasts, Forgetting Presents: Narrative, Place, and Memory in the Time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,' *Research in African Literatures*, 32(3), pp. 198–212. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3820432.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3Aa683257d4982d6be0bff98404bf51739&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1. Pg. 198

or to diminish its impact by relegating it to ‘something of the past’. This perspective is particularly pertinent as society continues to confront the nation’s ongoing struggle with inequalities, unequal access to education, unequal pay, segregated communities, and vast economic disparities, issues that are perpetuated by long-standing institutional and attitudinal legacies.⁴⁸⁸

Another perspective suggests that rethinking and transforming sites emblematic of colonial and apartheid ideologies constitutes an act of decolonial memorialisation.⁴⁸⁹ This process involves reclaiming spaces and revitalising narratives that honour liberation figures such as Amina Desai, Joyce Dipale, and Matthews Mabelane. Their stories, when integrated into these spaces, contribute to an epistemological revolution by fostering a community of survivors who come to identify as survivors of colonialism and apartheid. This approach entails a deliberate distancing from an imperial heritage that has long been uncritically accepted as evidence of ‘civilisation and progress’, thereby challenging white supremacist narratives of superiority.⁴⁹⁰ Mandla Makhanya contends that memorialisation can be a crucial element of the decolonial agenda aimed at restoring the dignity and humanity of those historically marginalised and dehumanised.⁴⁹¹

Another form of memorialisation, often proposed as a decolonial strategy, is the renaming of cities, roads, and airports.⁴⁹² Mia Swart argues, “Since memory is closely connected to the identity symbolised by a name, those who cannot be named cannot be remembered. To retrieve a name is to rescue a person from oblivion.”⁴⁹³ However, renaming JVS to Johannesburg Central Police Station arguably falls short of achieving this decolonial aim. Such an alteration does little to restore the dignity of apartheid-era victims of JVS or to enhance their recognition. Moreover, renaming the site after individual victims, such as Timol or Dipale, risks individualising what is fundamentally a collective resistance against a racist regime.

While renaming may serve as a valid decolonial strategy in some contexts, its efficacy here is questionable. Accordingly, this paper deliberately retains the name JVS. This choice

⁴⁸⁸ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2024) *30 years on, South Africa still dismantling racism and apartheid's legacy*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/04/30-years-south-africa-still-dismantling-racism-and-apartheids-legacy>.

⁴⁸⁹ (Sanni and Phiri, 2024:70)

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹¹ (Makhanya, 2021:11)

⁴⁹² Swart, M. (2008) 'Name Changes as Symbolic Reparation after Transition: The Examples of Germany and South Africa,' *German Law Journal*, 9(2), pp. 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s2071832200006337>.

⁴⁹³ (Swart, 2008:105)

underscores the argument that the site's association with the name under which these atrocities occurred is vital for maintaining historical accuracy and for highlighting its intrinsic connection to the white supremacist government. Retaining the original name acts as a constant reminder of the specific historical context in which these human rights violations took place, thereby preventing the erasure of this difficult past. For the memorialisation of JVS, I propose the renaming of certain sections of the 9th and 10th floors—which currently serve as administrative offices—and perhaps the roads leading to the site could be renamed in honour of its victims like Tshazibane and Bopape, incorporating them “into spheres of social life which seem to be completely detached from political contexts or communal obligations... into intimate realms of human interactions and activities.”⁴⁹⁴

Furthermore, my envisioned memorial for JVS transcends both its historical name and its current designation as Johannesburg Central Police Station. A more fitting designation might be “Johannesburg Site of Conscience”, reflecting its potential to serve as a place of reflection and remembrance. In this model, at least part of the building, if not its entirety, would be dedicated to exploring the human stories associated with the site, stories of suffering and resilience alike.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid*, Pg. 112

Challenges and Criticisms

Systemic Change

The failure to dismantle all abusive systems in South Africa remains one of our greatest tragedies. Audre Lorde famously asserted that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁴⁹⁵ This sentiment resonates when examining the origins of TJ, which emerged in the post-World War II era as a predominantly Western construct. One cannot help but question the efficacy of applying these frameworks to address the legacies of imperialism and colonialism in the Global South. However, it has been noted that memorialisation can be used as a decolonial tool as it is a more indigenous-centred tool of TJ, with storytelling and arts making it less of the ‘master’s tools.’

As Lorde poignantly asked, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.”⁴⁹⁶ Similarly, the authors of *In the Shadow of Transitional Justice* highlight that “the crux of current discontent within an important part of the transitional justice community of scholars and practitioners lies with the recurrently observed failure of key mechanisms to trigger systemic change, to deliver on social justice or to tackle deep sources of violence, suffering and conflict rooted in economic structures.”⁴⁹⁷ Prompting one to ask, what is the true efficacy of memorialising a former detention centre when it remains embedded within the very socio-political structures that facilitated its existence?

My response would be that such an initiative could create a vital space for the interrogation of these very questions. The next revolutionary might find inspiration in the harrowing ordeal of Dr Dilshad Jhetam, the unyielding resilience of Cedric Radcliffe Mayson, or the defiant spirit of a teenage Penelope ‘Baby’ Twaya. The fusion of activist narratives and artistic expression possesses a transformative power, capable of radicalising minds much as my own was during my time at UCT, a colonial institution steeped in paradox. Memorialisation, in this context,

⁴⁹⁵ Lorde, A. (2000) ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,’ in *Oxford University Press eBooks*, pp. 89–92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782360.003.0009>.

⁴⁹⁶ (Lorde, 2000:2)

⁴⁹⁷ (Elchereth and De Mel, 2021:2)

becomes an act of resistance from the margins,⁴⁹⁸ a means of restoring the truth of past injustices where legal redress has failed. It serves not only as a safeguard against the repetition of historical atrocities but also as a clarion call to confront contemporary abuses.

Unpredictable Outcomes

The unpredictable nature of these outcomes is also highlighted by the differing perspectives on the role of memorials. Some regard them as a waste of resources that could be better spent on improving living conditions, while others see them as essential for acknowledging the struggles and sacrifices of those who fought for liberation.⁴⁹⁹ Furthermore, assessing the impact of memorialisation is inherently challenging due to the dynamic nature of memory. Interpretations of memorials can change over time, making it difficult to predict long-term outcomes. This complexity is compounded by the fact that memory is not static and is reinterpreted by successive generations.⁵⁰⁰ This challenge could be addressed similarly to ESMA, where continuous evolution and adaptation ensure a deep understanding of the site's survivors' needs, priorities, and interests while also fostering meaningful public engagement with the transmitted memories. Engaging them and local communities in the planning and evaluation process could ensure that a memorialised JVS is meaningful and relevant to those it is intended to serve. This engagement can also help mitigate the risk of memorials generating hostility or raising unrealistic expectations.⁵⁰¹

Resources

As I engage in the intellectual and practical work of decoloniality, reimagining a JVS Site of Conscience, I am wary of succumbing to the weight of logistical challenges and resource constraints that such a project inevitably entails.⁵⁰² Yet, these practicalities, though daunting, are secondary to the vision itself. If this project is to be driven by victims and grassroots organisations, given the government's inaction, how might it be brought to fruition? Such deliberations, I concede, are best left to the pages of a future PhD thesis. For now, let us focus on the audacity of the idea itself and the hope it carries for a more just and remembered future.

⁴⁹⁸ Hooks, B. (2020) 'Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness,' in *Routledge eBooks*, pp. 80–85. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355363-17>. Pg. 83

⁴⁹⁹ (Hlongwane and Ndlovu, 2019:78)

⁵⁰⁰ (Barsalou, 2020:62)

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰² ('Interview with Yasmin Sooka,' 2024)

“Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”

“I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance — as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which is difficult, challenging, hard and we know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfils desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.”

— **Bell Hooks, 1989**

Conclusion

The concluding remarks of this thesis, situated in the margin, are a final call for the memorialisation of John Vorster Square. While acknowledging the contributions of initiatives like the TRC and the National Legacy Project, this research highlights that their efforts need to be complemented with more memory work. Confronting the legacy of violence in South Africa necessitates a more nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of past struggles with contemporary movements for human rights. It advocates for a radical approach to memorialisation, one that reclaims the experiences of the activists mentioned throughout this research at the site where they were dehumanised as a means of restoring their dignity and acknowledging their resilience and sacrifices in reckoning with South Africa's contemporary human rights issues.

Borrowing from Constitution Hill and Ex-ESMA, this thesis has argued that the memorialisation of JVS as a Site of Conscience holds the potential to serve as a catalyst for transformative and empathetic civic action, whereby visitors will be moved to be more compassionate in understanding the people of the past and the present through the convergence of learning of anti-apartheid activism and art. By reclaiming this space—once synonymous with state-sanctioned violence and repression—and reimagining it as a site of memory, healing, learning and critical reflection, we can challenge the persistent structures of inequality that continue to shape South African society. And we can imagine the new world that Arundhati Roy alludes to through “our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories.”⁵⁰³

This research recognises that “capitalism is the air we breathe – if we were to resist every aspect of it, we’d suffocate. In trying to get by, we all make compromises with the system; this is true even for the most driven revolutionary.”⁵⁰⁴ As a symbolic reparation, the memorialisation of John Vorster Square will not single-handedly dismantle abusive institutions borne out of white supremacist histories, but in the spirit of Bell Hooks’ notion of choosing the margin as a space of radical openness, this thesis calls for the memorialisation of JVS as a site of resistance, a site

⁵⁰³ (Roy, 2003:112)

⁵⁰⁴ Rosa, S.K. (2024) 'How do I escape the corporate nightmare I've created for myself?', *Novara Media*, 18 December. <https://novaramedia.com/2024/12/18/how-do-i-escape-the-corporate-nightmare-ive-created-for-myself/>.

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of reclaiming memory and challenging white supremacy by ‘thinking and enacting decoloniality.’

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