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Exhibition Review: Two Prisons, One Goal: Using Memories to Reconcile the Past

By Bethany Burke

South Africa has undergone multiple forms of governmental control from British segregationism to apartheid, which left numerous people disenfranchised. It was not until 1994 that the country was able to start its reconciliation process. When Nelson Mandela was elected president of South Africa in 1994, the country underwent a drastic change. Not only did it adopt democracy as its main form of government, it also adopted a policy of “remembering.” According to Veronique Riouful, “in the ‘new’ South Africa, taming memories [remembering] means downplaying past divisions and conflicts and appeasing memories of suffering and hardship in order to foster reconciliation and transformation towards a more democratic, peaceful and unified South Africa.”¹ The process of remembering was done via the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The idea of truth and reconciliation was to publicly and overtly shed light on the violations of human rights in the past. The belief was that truth and reconciliation would allow for healing and movement toward a “new” South Africa. In light of this process, many projects have developed to remind people of the past. There are multiple museums, monuments, and other forms of art across the country dedicated to remembering.²

Between the 17th and 20th centuries, South Africa experienced constant power struggles between the Afrikaans, English-speaking, and African populations. Apartheid, which officially lasted from 1948 to 1994, was the period in which the white National Party held political power. Black South Africans and coloured peoples – i.e. people of ‘mixed’ decent – were separated, targeted, further disenfranchised and ultimately imprisoned. The number of human rights violations quickly accumulated, causing black Africans to find different ways to fight

back. In the wake of apartheid, the “new” South Africa has used oral histories in conjunction with public spaces to heal, educate, and remember this sordid history.

This past summer I had the opportunity of a lifetime – to study abroad in South Africa. Having been a student of African history, getting the chance to travel to places I had studied was overwhelmingly exciting. The trip was a total of three weeks long. I spent the first two weeks in Cape Town and the last week in Johannesburg. Prior to the trip, I had taken a class specifically on apartheid, which gave me historical background. However, no amount of classroom education could have prepared me for the experience.

While in Cape Town, I visited many museums³ and historical sites, hiked Table Mountain and immersed myself in the culture. Much of the trip was an eye opening experience that was emotional and quite fulfilling. Similarly, while in Johannesburg, I visited multiple museums,⁴ went on a Safari and went on a tour of the township, Soweto. Of all the places we visited in Cape Town and Johannesburg, there are two that stuck with me – Robben Island and Constitution Hill. Both of these sites have been turned into “remembering” sites that take different approaches to truth and reconciliation.

The first historical prison, Robben Island, is located off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa in Table Bay. Robben Island is one of the notorious prisons in South Africa’s history. In 1488, the Dutch found Robben Island and used it as a docking station for ships to replenish their water and supplies. With a large amount of wildlife living on the island, visitors could hunt and gather the meat they needed in order to continue their travels. In 1652, the Dutch also established a refreshment station on the mainland. This also served as a stop for ships to dock at to replenish their supplies. Not only did the Dutch open a refreshment station, they also built homes and began to farm the land. However, in 1671, the Dutch started to use the island as a place to banish the criminals and undesired people.⁵ In 1812, after Britain took control of the Cape Colony, the island was used as a place to house the mentally ill,

³ District Six Museum, The Slave Lodge, and Robben Island are just a few of the museums I attended.
lepers, the chronically ill, and other undesirables. This continued until 1961, when the “patients” were moved to the mainland, and during World War II, the island was used as a military storage area for guns. Thirty years later, Robben Island opened up as a prison once again, this time housing average criminals and political prisoners. The prison closed in 1991. Then, in January 1997, the Robben Island Museum (RIM) opened.


Welcome sign on Robben Island, Photo by author, 2015.

The goal of the RIM is to recast the negative history of Robben Island into a positive one. Veronique Riouful argues that “the island is now mainly portrayed as a site of resistance to – and victory over – apartheid’s oppression and racism.” Changing the negative images of Robben Island was a large undertaking. In order to do so, it was imperative that the information presented focused on the positive achievements of the prisoners on Robben Island between 1961 to 1991. To achieve such change, the museum downplays the violence and human violations that took place on prison grounds. Instead, it discusses the way political prisoners joined together to help each other survive, keep hope, and grow individually and collectively.

On July 2, 2015, I went to Robben Island with one of the former political prisoners, Lionel Davis. Davis spoke on the tour about his experience working in the limestone quarries on the island. He briefly mentioned the hardship of such manual labor. In fact, his testimony was quite positive. For example, he describes a situation in which the political prisoners and guards were able to “work together.” He says that the guards were not familiar with

6 Ibid.
7 Riouful, ”Behind Telling,” 24.
8 Ibid.
political prisoners when the quarries first opened, and they thought that they could treat them the same way they do the criminal population. They would cite the prisoners for menial things like not working fast enough. However, because many of the prisoners were educated, when they went to the prison court they would win their case. When the prison guards realized that they could not treat the political prisoners in the same fashion as the criminal ones, they started to build a system of understanding. Davis says that the guards’ inability to force labor on the prisoners led them to do less work, hold “class” and talk politics. Yet, if the guards’ supervisors were to come around and see that the political prisoners were not working, the guards would get in trouble. Therefore, to benefit all involved the guards would use a code word when people approached the area and the prisoners would start to work. When the “coast was clear” they would go back to prior activities. Davis believes that during that time political prisoners, like Nelson Mandela, had the opportunity to learn how to work with people of multiple belief systems, races, and backgrounds. While Mandela served eighteen years on Robben Island, the informal education he received allowed him to grow into the leader South Africa needed. At the end of Davis’ testimony, he says, “He [Mandela] called on South Africans to build a ‘new’ South Africa, but we cannot build a ‘new’ South Africa with pain, with bitterness, with hatred.”

This closing statement by Davis is an ideal statement of reconciliation. Former President Mandela saw this hope for a “new” South Africa as a way to move forward. Clifford Shearing and Michael Kempa discuss the use of hope to create the RIM. They argue, that “perhaps, it is appropriate to characterize the Robben Island Museum as an institution...that has worked to transform private and collective hopes into a public hope through drawing on and extending collective memory.” It is clear that the use of memory has played a great part in the reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa. The RIM shows that a negative past can be transformed into a positive building block for a better future.

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9 Lionel Davis (ex-political prisoner) during the tour of Robben Island with CSUSB South Africa study abroad students, July 2, 2015.
Knowing the history of Robben Island and its sordid past, I had been excited to visit the monument. I do not want to say that I was disappointed, but the experience on the island was not the one I expected. I was expecting there to be a haunting feeling or a feeling that eluded to the tragedy that occurred here; this was void, at least for me. I thought that maybe walking through the cells of B-block would be the place for such feelings, yet again nothing. On reflection, I know it was the goal of the RIM to remove those negative, sobering, and haunting feelings from the prisons. The way that the creators of the museums use “remembering” play a large role on the experience of the visitors. I left feeling conflicted, I felt as though the void of true negative experience took something away from the people who were exiled from their lives. You miss the hardships of the prisoners and their families. There is a famous image of Mandela standing at the window of his prison cell in B-block, looking out toward the mainland, with a somber, longing expression on his face. This simple snapshot emotes the true story of Robben Island, for me, more than the actual tour of the prison did. Regardless of my disappointment, the experience was still spectacular, especially getting to have a personal tour from Lionel Davis.

The author with Lionel Davis, Photo by author, 2015.
The second historical prison, Constitution Hill, is located in the greater Johannesburg area. This area is a historical district in Johannesburg that has multiple heritage sites that pay homage to many of the struggles during apartheid. These sites include Constitution Hill, the Apartheid Museums, Kliptown in Soweto, as well as the Hector Pieterson Memorial. Constitutional Hill sits on twenty-four acres, and is comprised of “various constitutional commissions, a public square, commercial and retail rental space, up-market residential apartments, and leisure and entertainment facilities, as well as the significant heritage components of various prison buildings.”  

The area itself is impressive and shows the juxtaposition between the atrocities of “old” South Africa and the hope of “new” South Africa. The Constitutional Court became the new home of the constitutional judges on March 21st, 2004, Human Rights Day. Near the newly built Constitutional Hill is the Old Fort Prison Complex. Currently, the complex includes the Number Four prison and the Women’s Jail.

The Old Fort Prison was founded in 1893 by Paul Kruger, then, the President of the South African Republic (Transvaal) for the purpose of keeping uitlanders (foreigners) in line while they were on mining assignments. When the British raised the fort in 1896, the fort became a military base for the Boers. In May of 1900, the British took control of the fort and used it to imprison the Boer soldiers. Churchill Madikida, Lauren Segal, and Clive van den Berg state that this shift “marked the beginning of the long history of the Old Fort as a place of punishment, confinement, and abuse of prisoners of all political persuasions.”

The Women’s Prison was used to house many women who protested the passbook laws and were in a conspiracy against the apartheid government. The museum of the Women’s Prison is very touching. The use of multimedia exhibits allows the visitor to understand the life of the women in the prison. The treatment of the women was inhumane and humiliating. For example, women were denied undergarments, so when a woman would start her

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menstrual cycle she would have to prove that she was bleeding to the guard. The length of the sentence determined how many pads a prisoner got. The pads were not accompanied by underwear; the women were required to hold them up between their legs, and if the pad fell, they would be hit. If a woman was lucky, she could steal shoelaces from the storeroom and use them to help hold the pad up. While walking around the Women’s Prison you could feel the sorrow and pain of the women who had been housed there. It was haunting and depressing. When you walk in, the feeling in your chest becomes heavy, almost as if you were carrying the burden of the women who once spent time there. Much of the information in the exhibit were testimonies or biographies from prior prisoners. While their words were written down on plexiglass, you could somehow read the pain, the sorrow, the humiliation, and the rawness of their memories. This was the aim of the Women’s Prison. They wanted to embrace the life of the women in these prisons; women like Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and countless others.

After leaving the Women’s Prison we went to the men’s prison -- the Number Four prison. This section of the prison has held many political leaders including Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. When entering the prison there was a sign above one of the doors that read, “It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails.” This statement is so powerful and speaks volumes about the people incarcerated for political reasons.

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14 The Sanitary Pad, (Johannesburg, SA: Woman’s Prison at Constitutional Hill), Museum exhibit label.
15 Ibid.
16 Door Way Quote, (Johannesburg, SA: Number Four Prison at Constitutional Hill), Museum exhibit label.
Like the tour of the Women’s Prison, the men’s prison left a very heavy feeling in my chest. As the tour continued, it became heavier and heavier. There was a haunting feeling as if you were standing among the prisoners. They slept in large crowded rooms, where “gangs” established sleeping patterns and would take blankets away from other prisoners to make themselves as comfortable as possible. We saw the courtyard where prisoners worked, showered, used the restroom, and spent most of their days. Men were humiliated and tormented by the white wardens of the prison. For instance, they were often watched while they used the restroom and showers. As we moved past the courtyard, we came to two rooms. The first was a room that displayed blanket sculptures. The room with these sculptures showed how prisoners could win the favor of the prison guards, even if it was for a short time. On Sundays, the prisoners would manipulate blankets into the shapes of tanks, couches, flowers, and other objects. Then the guards would come in and pick the best sculpture for the week. The prisoner who created that sculpture would win extra food for the week. Directly across from this room, inside, was a tall case with glass windows in it. Each window displayed a different “tool” used for torture. The feeling that you get when you look in the first glass window is heart wrenching. The case displayed items like chains, handcuffs, police batons, and a number of other devices associated with torture. I did not think that this place could emotionally and mentally weigh me down any further, but I was wrong.

The last place we visited in this Number Four prison was a hall entitled Emakhulukhuthu “Deep Dark Hole.” This was a row of small cells with white doors and the smallest of windows on each, and in front of that door was a cell door. This was the place no one wanted to go. These isolation rooms were reserved for only the most extreme cases and for people who needed to be severely punished. A person in isolation would spend 23 hours inside the dark cell and was restricted to a diet of rice water. These rooms were home to prisoners from between a month to over a year.  

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17 “Emakhulukhuthu ‘Deep Dark Hole,’” (Johannesburg, SA: Number Four Prison at Constitutional Hill), Museum exhibit label.
When leaving the prison, we walked less than 100 feet to the doors of the Constitutional Court; the new court for handling cases to deal with human rights. The new court stands tall. The doors to the front are solid wood with the twenty-seven constitutional rights carved into them. Much of the front of the building is open glass window. Above the doors to the left, the words “Constitutional Court” are listed in the eleven official languages of South Africa. This building is meant to remind us that the past can repeat itself if we are not mindful. There is a walkway between the Constitutional Court, to the left, and the Number Four prison, to the right. This walkway was designed and built as a physical, metaphorical, and commutative walk that joins the past with the present. The Great African Steps were completed in 2002. The steps were made out of bricks that came from some of the building of the Old Fort.

Both of these heritage sites use remembering and personal testimony as a way to educate, heal, remind, and move forward from the past, and they do so in different ways. The museum at Robben Island takes the stories of past prisoners and puts their experiences in a positive light. It allows people to see, that even when there is an overwhelming amount of bad going on around you, there are still positive things the can come from it, like Mandela’s hope for a better South Africa. By downplaying the negative and horrible tragedies that happened during lock up, Robben Island almost becomes the symbol of hope for the “new”
South Africa. Hearing testimonies from political prisoners like Lionel Davis, who give tours of the island, show visitors that even places that were often devoid of humanity did not take the humanity away from others. Without the hope of a better future, many of the prisoners on Robben Island may not have left with their humanity.

The heritage site at Constitutional Hill achieved the same remembrance but took a different approach. Both the Women’s Prison and Number Four Prison were very haunting, depressing, disheartening, and heavy. Instead of using survivor testimony to reflect the positivity of the time spent behind these walls, the testimonies told a different story. The stories of the men and women who were housed in these prisons were brave, strong and revolutionaries, and reflected many pillars of political change. They tell stories of humiliation, dehumanization, and the violation of basic human rights. Visitors are able to enter the cells of the Women’s Prison to hear and read the stories of the people who
slept in the cells, locked away. In the men’s prison, visitors are able to go into the isolation rooms, to be in the darkness like those who were imprisoned there. No words can express the feeling of being in a place like the Number Four prison. If you can make it through the tour, visitors are rewarded with the visions of the “new” South Africa. Knowing that the Constitutional Court is housed so close to a place where human rights were violated on an enormous scale gives hope to visitors that the past will not be overlooked. The Great African Steps allow visitors to reflect on the past and hope for the future.

When Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa in 1994, he had big dreams. He hoped that he could rebuild a country that had been built on the disenfranchising of its people. His dream was to reconcile the differences of the South African people, and to do so he had to break the cycle of oppression. Sure, it would have been easy for the black Africans to take over and oppress the Afrikaners. However, Mandela knew that was not the change needed for his country. Truth and reconciliation were the first steps in changing the culture of the country. The key to the reconciliation process would be the stories of those who survived apartheid, places like Robben Island, and the Old Fort prison. The legacy of these brave survivors will live on to build a better future for the peoples of South Africa.

Overall, my time in South Africa was beyond words. This trip let me live and interact with people who experienced the struggles of apartheid first hand. It allowed me to experience the true South Africa, not the “Africa” that is shown in the media (in particular the western media). In the end, it made me want to continue my studying of African history – and gave me the confidence and passion to push forward.
Author Bio

Bethany Burke, a philosophy major at CSUSB, found her way to the history department in 2014 when she took one of Dr. Jones’ African history classes. She had an interest in African history, primarily in the development of HIV/AIDS, when she started. She is currently minoring in history, spending the majority of her time studying African history. Bethany traveled to South Africa in the summer of 2015 and soon realized that she wanted to continue her studies in African-related topics. After graduation, she will be attending UCLA as a graduate student in the African studies program. Her hopes are to travel to East Africa as a graduate student, and to intern with non-governmental agencies that focus in partnering with African countries.