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“We Are Worried Mothers:” A Panel of 'Ordinary South Africans' on US Capitol Hill

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Abstract:

In 1986, a “panel of ordinary South Africans” addressed the United States Congress. Their visit did not command as much attention as that of future president Nelson Mandela in 1990 or of past prime minister Jan Smuts in 1930. Yet, for an increasing number of Americans watching closely, it represented a momentous public rebuttal to apartheid. The visit responded to ongoing celebrity protests and built public support for sanctions. While many Americans instigating ‘Designer Arrests’ believed they spoke *for* South Africans, in 1986, physicians, activists, and children who had faced detention spoke *for* themselves on foreign soil. Examination of the Southern Africa Project’s and Congressional records reveals that, while the embassy protests were catalytic, this panel of ‘ordinary South Africans’ on the Hill and, subsequently, on national and international television, provided public faces for anti-apartheid movements in ways that celebrities certainly could not. As such, it is necessary to examine the factors leading to the panel, its impact on US anti-apartheid politics, and places of connection with youth activism and celebrity protest generally.

Keywords: Apartheid; US Congress; South Africa; Protest; Celebrity; Media; Social Change; Civil Rights

In 1986, a group of “ordinary” South Africans gained celebrity status on US Capitol Hill. Significantly, the appearance contributed to a shift in how Americans viewed African representation. Within the context of the visit’s lead-up and its impact on US politics, the South Africans described as “ordinary” became extraordinary members of celebrity culture in their own right.

US concern toward South Africa had manifested itself in decades prior to the 1980s. Calls for sanctions began as early as the 1930s, and these continued in earnest after apartheid's 1948 implementation. The 1980s, however, became the decade in which apartheid most widely entered public conversations as a cause célèbre. Apartheid's celebrity moment arrived due to a particular set of circumstances. These included a search for ways to continue the US civil rights movement that had reached its apex two decades earlier. It also included Congressional ranks growing their number of African-American politicians, as well as white politicians who had become interested in African affairs through their participation in programs such as the Peace Corps or Fulbright. It harnessed television and widespread use of long-range photography. Finally, while it built atop a long-standing American interest in celebrity, it depended upon the rise of Americans of color into that sphere. This impacted the degree to which the country's white population became willing to look at South Africans not as helpless charity cases but as actors with agency. Thus, the forces that contributed to the popularity of anti-apartheid politics also remade international social movements. The "ordinary" South Africans on the Hill became harbingers for later twentieth- and early twenty-first century activism, which has continued to evolve into a space where the voices of people facing oppression can at times be elevated against those wielding power and prestige. More than their role in changing policy toward South Africa, the hearings influenced the ways in which a variety of Americans viewed their role in anti-apartheid work.

Growing Concerns

Though the press for international sanctions against South Africa had been active for decades, it reached its apex in the 1980s. In part, this reflected the influence of groups such as the Congressional Black Caucus, as African-American legislators grew in both numbers and profile at state and national levels. Additionally, through programs such as Fulbright or Peace Corps, white Americans had increasingly spent time in or studied Africa and become interested in the continent's affairs. The 1980s marked a pronounced departure from five decades earlier, when former South African prime minister Jan Smuts visited the United States and received a standing ovation on the House floor and subsequent recess in his honor (Edgar and Houser, 2017). The faces in the room had changed, and so to some degree had the propensity to hear a multitude of constituent voices. American legislators grew concerned about their country's connections with

southern Africa. Michigan Congressman Howard Wolpe, for instance, became a leading proponent of economic sanctions, filing several early 1980s requests for hearings to examine US reliance on nuclear materials, such as uranium, emanating from southern Africa.¹

After 1981, however, the Ronald Reagan administration also made steps toward further engagement with Africa. Many of these ran counter to the recommendations of Americans with expertise in and experience with the continent. The most infamous of them became ‘constructive engagement,’ or continued trade with South Africa under the premise that building a healthy relationship with the country would enable Americans to influence South African leaders’ racial policies. Opponents to constructive engagement pointed to the US blockade against Cuba, implemented when the revolutionary country’s politico-economic policies ran counter to its own. They also pointed to the American hunger for uranium in a Cold War context, as well as a long-time interest in gold and diamonds and, of course, the cheap labor that undergirded many American companies’ business models and that apartheid enabled. Reagan’s Secretary of State George P. Schultz told a Boston group that Americans needed to change their backward stereotypes, particularly given the fact that “eleven percent of America’s population traces its roots to Africa.” He went on to announce a \$90 billion food aid package for the continent and intone that:

We are not the gendarmes of Africa. But to stand by and do nothing when friendly states are threatened by our own adversaries would only erode our credibility as a bulwark against aggression not only in Africa, but elsewhere. Therefore, we have been ready, together with others, to provide training and arms to help our friends defend themselves our policy of promoting peaceful solutions to regional conflicts applies, as a priority, to southern Africa (Schultz 1984).

Schultz’s rhetoric framed the US as a “bulwark” of defense against communist aggression. He denied the presence of US military bases in Africa and emphasized the need to encourage “positive change in the apartheid policy” in order to bring about Namibia’s independence. He also portrayed liberation movements as violent and inhumane. Unsurprisingly, Schultz continued

¹ Like many Americans interested in South Africa, Wolpe had a personal connection to the country. The Michigan congressman trained as a political scientist, with an interest in Africa’s Great Lakes Region. He chaired the House Subcommittee on Africa.

to defend constructive engagement in the face of calls for American divestment from South Africa. The movie-star-president's public emissaries painted anti-apartheid agitators as faceless communists, anonymous aggressors (McDougall 1984).

Within South Africa and from exile, African National Congress and other leaders had long fought this perception, especially after they worked with the South African Communist Party to establish armed opposition to apartheid. In a Cold War context, it mattered little that SACP itself was often at odds with Soviet communist leaders. The problem of convincing international audiences that South Africans were people living under oppression, rather than Moscow's pawns, remained. By the early 1980s, movements such as the ANC had honed their methods in doing this through presenting the faces of "ordinary" South Africans—such as those at the hearing and through carefully curated interviews and published memoirs.

Picketing the Embassy

At the same time, US activists and NGO leaders seized upon opportunities to involve Americans in direct action. Across the country, citizens had already begun public protests against corporate involvement with South Africa, but activists hoped to raise the national profile of grassroots organizations. These took advantage of the attention that celebrities conferred upon the movement to draw into public consciousness the "ordinary" South Africans.

The Free South Africa Movement (FSAM) comprised activists, legislators, celebrities, and a variety of Americans generally concerned about the flow of US-based corporate monies into South Africa. It utilized mass movement protest to reinforce interest in combatting apartheid and pressure legislative bodies to enact sanctions. FSAM Organizers initially disagreed about how protests should occur, with TransAfrica calling for a black-led effort and other groups hoping for a multiracial coalition. The latter voices won out, tapping in to the sentiments of a wide variety of Americans, particularly those with channels to socio-political power (Minter, Hovey, and Cobb 2008, 155). Initial coalition building ran less than smoothly. Several activists accused TransAfrica Director Randall Robinson of speaking out too often individually at the expense of cultivating a pluralistic voice. Organizers repeatedly faced accusations of anti-Semitism, following their decision to halt protests on Christmas Day, despite receiving an offer from several DC-based rabbis to station the pickets while Christians celebrated their holy days

(McGrory 1982, A2). Nonetheless, it gave many Americans a means to connect with a struggle that had often previously seemed very distant (Minter, Hovey, and Cobb 2008, 161).

During the week before Thanksgiving in 1984, US Commission on Civil Rights Chair Mary Frances Berry; District of Columbia Delegate Walter Fauntroy; Robinson, and Georgetown Law Professor Eleanor Holmes Norton joined a crowd in front of the South African embassy in Washington, DC, protesting the detention of fourteen South African trade union leaders. At day's end, they approached the building and requested an audience with the ambassador, threatening a sit-in over the holiday if he did not acquiesce. They were allowed in and met with South African Ambassador Brand Fourie, asking him to call Prime Minister PW Botha and demand the release of the unionists. They pledged to remain until he did.

Instead, all but Norton, who had gone outside to brief reporters, were arrested for trespassing. Fauntroy recalls the awkward looks District police officers displayed while following orders to handcuff their lone Congressional representative. The "both responsive and catalytic" pickets and arrests continued for two years and became the largest act of civil disobedience in American history. Each day a handful of people would leave the picket line, trespass within five-hundred feet of the embassy door, and be handcuffed (Author 2008, McDougall interview).

The embassy demonstrations cemented anti-apartheid activism as a central tenet of continuing and expanding the domestic civil rights movement. Rosa Parks picketed and was arrested on December 1, 1985--the thirtieth anniversary of her famous jailing for refusing to cede her Montgomery, Alabama, bus seat to a white man. In addition to Parks, other prominent Americans who were arrested included Coretta Scott King and three of her children, the late Robert Kennedy's children Rory and Douglass, Jesse Jackson and his children, Ron Dellums, Charles Rangel, Julian Dixon, and most other members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Arthur Ashe, Gloria Steinem, Harry Belafonte, and Paul Newman.

Singer Stevie Wonder chose Valentine's Day of 1985 to become a "conscientious criminal for world equality" and sang "We Shall Overcome" as officers handcuffed him (Lester 2003, 228). Connecticut Republican Lowell Weicker became the first sitting United States Senator to be arrested during an act of civil disobedience, stating as officers led him to the squad car that "Silence has been an ally of apartheid. Apartheid exists not because of a few South African political leaders. It exists because a whole world, and that includes us, tolerates it by silence

(Barker 1985, B1).” Dutch MP Jan Nico Scholten became the first non-American arrested. Entire trade unions, clergymen, participants at an Urban League convention, and mayors from across the nation chartered vehicles to drive to the embassy (Lester 2003, 229).

Arrests took place during the District’s summer heat and frozen winters. On some days, just a few protestors would be arrested. On others, more than two hundred were. Crowds reaching five thousand lined up along Massachusetts Avenue (Robinson 1998, 156). Crucially, the demonstrations made televised news. Images of physical violence against black South Africans and US protest against it accompanied another phenomenon (Krabill 2010). The 1970s and 1980s had seen the televised rise of the fictitious Huxtables and Jeffersons. These families epitomized to Americans of all races supposed progress toward black economic equality. Television’s centrality in American life provided images on the 5 pm broadcast of South African police teargassing, sjamboking, and rolling tanks upon black South Africans. The primetime fictional lineup followed these images with those of wholesome black American families transcending racial inequality. Images of interracial groups of Americans marching against apartheid helped connect these two seemingly disparate scenes. Still, these drew their power from the celebrity status that participants held *prior* to their movement work. “Ordinary” South Africans would soon gain celebrity status *from* their movement work.

Just two weeks after the protests began, Archbishop Desmond Tutu visited the National Cathedral and thanked picketers (Lester 2003, 228). From London, Oliver Tambo wrote to Robinson that:

We hail the fierce student campaigns in university campuses. Next to the heroic and sustained struggle of the Black in South Africa it is the support of the American people especially since last November that has thrown the Pretoria regime into a political and economic crisis such as it has never known in its history. It is in that context that Botha is beating about for a way out, although he is as yet unwilling to throw down the towel. However the collapse of his regime is no longer in doubt (Tambo to Robinson 1985).

Three weeks after the arrests began, an American researcher working in the Eastern Transvaal reported that neighbors had received word of them (Edgar to Davis 1984). Robinson wrote that “From Boston to Houston, Chicago to Pittsburgh, the demonstrations continued to grow, with

more than five thousand arrested nationally by the end of 1985. Black and white. Young and old. From sea to shining sea (Robinson 1998, 157).” ‘Designer Arrests’ moved from the purview of the rich-and-famous and into a space where ‘ordinary’ people could claim affiliation.

Journalists, participants, and skeptical Americans remained unsure of what end the political theater would bring. Some press reports compared it to civil disobedience of the 1950s and 1960s, further canonizing anti-apartheid struggles as a continuation of civil rights work. The 1980s protests featured one key difference. “This time,” Marion Barry said, “We’re in charge (Barker and Anderson 1984, A1).” African-American legislators were driving both public discourse and pending foreign policy changes. Within both the US and parallel movements such as that in the UK, youth played a pivotal role in connecting these spheres. Gavin Brown and Helen Yaffe have written about the centrality of youth within both the international (British) and the domestic (South African UDF) movement, both as catalysts and respondents (Brown and Yaffe 2018). Outside of South Africa, 16-24-year-olds experienced unemployment at high rates. This phenomenon provided both the time to take on causes and the propensity to view the self as in relationship with South African youths undergoing their own trials. Despite their limited agency in other spheres, young people were able to act as agents within the movement. For many, this served as an antidote to feeling purposeless (Brown and Yaffe 2018, 13-14 and 60). Many Western activists whose lives changed after public protest cited participation within the movement as foundational to personal growth and self-perception (Brown and Yaffe 2018, 90).

Symposium on Children in Detention

Gay McDougall, director of the Southern Africa Project of the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, aimed to connect Americans to the faces and stories of police brutality’s victims. She joined with Amnesty International and the World Council of Churches to organize a panel of “ordinary South Africans,” including human rights activists, doctors, lawyers, and parents of children who had been detained—and the children themselves—to testify before a special Joint Congressional Committee. (Author 2008, McDougall interview). The House had a sanctions bill pending, and McDougall hoped to ensure that any remaining doubters would be convinced of the scale of repression in South Africa. “Nobody on the Hill should be able to say they didn’t know about it (Author 2008, McDougall interview).” She and supporters hoped the Symposium would spur lawmakers toward passing a national ban on Krugerrands. While state

and local divestment efforts had been successful, McDougall worried that they would not stand up to the US Constitution's Commerce Clause that delegated foreign policy power to Congress (McDougall to Davis, 1985).

Drawing upon her relationship with the United Democratic Front, McDougall organized for UDF doctors to bring clients to the United States. Many details of the arrangements remain murky. While McDougall had previously met with UDF clients in Botswana when they could not obtain South African exit visas, it appears that many participants flew directly from South Africa. Still, both the official documents and interviews with McDougall failed to elucidate exact details. Given the nature of South African government allegations against former detainees, as well as attempts to discredit the hearings, it is likely that participants may have either exited overland without visas or flown out under another guise. Mamphela Ramphele and Jerry Coovadia likely obtained visas for a professional conference.

Planners labeled the June 25 and 26 hearing the Symposium on Children in Detention in South Africa (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law 1982, 8-9). American attendees and cosponsors included Senators Edward Kennedy, Carl Levin, Barbara Mikulski, Paul Simon, and Lowell Weicker; Representative Bill Gray; former Senator Dick Clark; and Julius Chambers, Peter Connell, William Sloane Coffin, Robert Coles, Marian Wright Edelman, Mary Futrell, John Healy, George Lindsay, Eleanor Holmes Norton, Nathaniel Jones, Randall Robinson, Eleanor Smeal, and Cyrus Vance (McDougall 1987a).

As she opened the symposium, McDougall noted the importance in raising the profile of South African abuses despite the state's denial of them:

It's not easy for the world to learn what goes on inside of South Africa. That government makes sure of that. But we believe that it is only through knowledge that we, concerned people in the outside world, can make a difference. The best hope for getting South Africa to stop its brutalization of children is to focus critical world attention to it. South Africa, despite the myth it seeks to propagate about its stubborn independence, does care about world opinion. And world opinion cannot ignore the evidence we will be hearing here today (McDougall, Kennedy, Mikulski, and Coovadia 1988, 10).

Thus, the fora attempted to shift attention from the celebrities on Massachusetts Avenue to those sitting on the Hill. McDougall cited the hearings as advancing knowledge of South African manipulation of the legal system, calling on the knowledge of young people who had become “experts in a field in which no one would choose to become an expert (Author 2008, McDougall interview).” She told attendees, “We hope that the sessions today will be as valuable to all of you as they will be troubling (McDougall, Kennedy, Mikulski, and Coovadia 1988, 12).”

Edward Kennedy provided opening remarks.² The man who had lost his brothers to bullets and famously spooked at loud noises, commented on the brutal attacks South Africa’s children had endured:

Surely the arrest, torture, and shooting of children must be viewed as so inconsistent with the standards and values of civilized society as to rank as a crime against humanity. The government of South Africa tells us that there is a system of justice with all the panoply of courts and a counsel, and judicial integrity and independence. But where is the justice in a system that thrives on the secret police, that provides for detention without charges, that protects torture by making it a crime for a witness to divulge anything seen or heard inside a prison? Those who inflict torture may know how to do it without inflicting marks on a man’s body, but they leave an indelible scar on the soul of a nation. Where is justice in a system that makes treason of minor offenses, offenses which in the rest of the Western World are regarded as inalienable rights (McDougall, Kennedy, Mikulski, and Coovadia 1988, 13)?

Then the hearing began. Panelists included Patrick Makhoba, aged sixteen, detained, tortured, and sent to solitary confinement for forty-two days; Pule Nape, denied visitation from his parents, hospitalized for mental depression, and denied the opportunity to attend his mother’s funeral; Eugene, aged thirteen, imprisoned for nine months; Daniel, aged seventeen, who

² In 1961, RFK famously asked “Where are the lawyers?” as he visited Alabama in the wake of Freedom Rights. He also perhaps lay the groundwork for Ted Kennedy’s activism through his own interest in South Africa. RFK visited the country for five days in June, 1966, as an invited guest of the National Union of South African Students and affiliated Bar groups. There, he met with South Africans of all races, including recent Nobel Peace laureate and ANC president Albert Luthuli. He spoke at university campuses from Stellenbosch to Durban and, according to his aides, greatly changed his thinking on and sympathy toward South Africa. Post-visit, however, Kennedy remained fundamentally opposed to economic sanctions against South Africa, which he believed would most harm impoverished black South Africans.

suffered brain damage as a result of his seventeen months in detention; and children who had had their teeth knocked out, been tear-gassed, and been sexually tortured (McDougall 1987b).

Mamphela Ramphela gave a physician's assessment. Jerry Coovadia of the University of Natal Medical School opened the panel by discussing the physical and psychological effects of detention on children, saying, "In this conflict, thousands upon thousands of innocent and defenseless children will die. They will become disabled and retain permanent scars on their minds and bodies (McDougall, Kennedy, Mikulski, and Coovadia 1988, 14)."

It continued, with South Africans risking their lives to speak of the violence that had become commonplace at home. Sylvia Jele told the congressmen that she feared for the life of her sixteen-year-old son, Sicelo Dhlomo,³ who had been detained and tortured after refusing to become a police informant:

I'm still a worried mother, because another son of mine is nowhere to be found. He only comes once a month, because the police are still looking for him. I'm now afraid that I might be unfortunate. They might kill him because now what they have told me (is) if they ever found him, they're going to kill him. We are worried mothers. We are only happy to see our children in bed at night because we don't know what is going to happen to them. Every mother is crying about what is happening in our country (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law 1982, 9).

Six months later, Dhlomo was shot execution-style in a field near Soweto.

He had been acquitted of all charges six months after the hearing. Following his release, security police allegedly visited the family's home and attempted to bribe him into becoming an informant. When he refused, they pledged to shoot him (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law 1986). McDougall wrote in her annual report that:

What happened to Sicelo Godfrey Dhlomo was not unique. His life experiences of intense political activity, detention, torture and hiding, as well as his murder are now common characteristics of childhood for black South Africans. South

³ Some documents use the spelling Dlomo.

Africa's youth have been in the forefront of the struggle against apartheid. And because of that, they have become special targets of the security forces (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law 1982, 9).

Indeed, few of the children and adult panelists went home to lives of peace; sources cited continued harassment throughout their lives. As famous as they became in the United States—featured on a PBS documentary, cited in future anti-apartheid legislation--anonymity at home became key to survival. Many chose to go underground. This anonymity has made them difficult to find in subsequent decades, meaning most of their voices were recorded in public just once—during that symposium. Celebrity served its political purpose, but it did not endure.

Dhlomo's story illustrates the risks of even temporary celebrity, as does the story of a mother who testified for the PBS documentary and a BBC accompaniment. In revoking visa credentials for Nicholas Claxton, a producer of "Suffer the Children," officials cited the case of Felicity Kubayka. Kubayka recalled spending three months in solitary confinement—and interludes of imprisonment alongside adult men--as a teenager. She later produced a birth certificate demonstrating that she was twenty-five at the time of detainment, along with a statement that she had been treated well and never tortured whilst in detention (BBC Monitoring Service 1988a). Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok quickly launched an effort to curb foreign press engagement. Veliswa Mhlawuli, one of the mothers on record and a journalist herself, was arrested under the Internal Security Act (Nazareth undated). When Symposium participants and families were not attacked physically, they often paid a high price in terms of credibility. This had ramifications for personal and professional lives, as well as for the potential for long-range police harassment.

Beginning two months before alerting local reporters to Kubayka's story, Minister of Home Affairs Stoffel Botha ordered an investigation on the grounds that reporters had not attempted to gain official government interviews for the program (BBC Monitoring Service 1988b). For its part, the organization quickly admitted that it did not, in fact, attempt to solicit these interviews (BBC Monitoring Service 1988c). Some of the film's marketing appeal—covert filming and smuggling out in order to evade censorship regulations—became yet another point for attacking procedural irregularities (BBC Monitoring Service 1988d). While the documentary itself ran at least twice, BBC officials carefully curated responses. When Diana Collins recorded

a session for “Reflections,” for instance, editors attempted to alter her script to “give a little more balance to the piece and make it appear a little less condemnatory of a specific administration and political leader (Craig to Collins 1988).” Collins did not alter the script describing her reaction to the documentary. Noting that “the recorded script does result in an obvious attack upon the South African government,” producers prevented it from reaching air (Craig to Collins 1988).

As Benedict Carton reminds, such fates are seared into in South Africa’s social landscape. “Untimely death in other words no longer looms as a residual outcome of social upheaval but transforms society itself (Carton 2003, 199).” Carton traces this looming death through colonial constructs and resultant millenarianism during the early twentieth century, anti-apartheid activism, and the era of HIV/AIDS. Death’s connotations to South Africans who often searched for meaning within martyrdom likely differed from those of Americans, who viewed teenage loss of life as anathema. These norms, Carton argues, often drove generational relations (Carton 2003, 203); in turn, they would have affected the ways in which “worried” mothers such as Jele differed from children such as Dhlomo in their perceptions of physical threats as necessary to struggle. They also inform the distinction between “adult” and “child” that Msimang mentions and upon which the Symposium relied for its emotional appeal.

These blurred lines created psychological trauma for South Africa’s youth, as well as physical. Gill Striker first argued this in 1992, after providing counseling services to South African youth at the behest of the South African Council of Churches (Striker, 1992). Many South Africans dealt with this trauma by trying to find meaning within violence. As Daniel R. Magaziner writes, by the 1970s, death had become such a central and powerful force for South Africa’s youth that martyrdom took on its own significance as a way of ascribing meaning to the daily struggles that they faced (Magaziner 2010). Life’s often painful and too-soon end became a powerful metaphor for its daily brutalities. The symposium focused on helping Americans understand these realities, even as it ultimately, perhaps resulted in some participants’ demises.

Project workers took members of the panel to the International Conference on Children, Repression and the Law in Apartheid South Africa in Harare two months later. The International Defense and Aid Fund funded the event, with the official sponsor listed as Trevor Huddleston under the auspices of the Bishop Ambrose Reeves Trust. It gave the panel of “ordinary South

Africans” their first chance to meet ANC leaders in exile (Herbstein 2004, x). The forum also provided a rare opportunity for international solidarity workers to interact with South Africans (Nzo to McDougall 1987). The British chapter of Lawyers Against Apartheid, founded in 1986, subsequently convened a similar 1988 panel in London.

Reporting on the hearings, McDougall said, “It is one thing to talk about the statistics, the numbers of nameless and faceless children who have been gaoled in South Africa; it is quite another to hear the names and stories of individual children, to face the detailed reality of torture (McDougall 1987).” In her statement, McDougall summarized the statistics and expert findings on torture and detention, linked them to the South African state, and added that:

The detention and torture of children and other detainees takes place within a legal context, not outside of one. The legal system of South Africa not only fails to protect children against abuses, it provides a legal framework for that abuse. The state-of-emergency regulations under which those children have been held expand the already existing security legislation which allows for indefinite incommunicado detention of individuals without charge or trial when a person is merely suspected of being likely to endanger State security. Ominously, the regulations give blanket indemnity from prosecution to any policeman or soldier who might abuse children or others (McDougall 1987).

A Medical Association of South Africa report on children in detention agreed and called for special provisions for young suspects, including charges within forty-eight hours. It critiqued the Internal Security Act, saying, “Children are not granted any special protection in terms of this legislation, either physically, mentally or legally. The potential consequences for child political offenders are therefore very disturbing (Whitfield 1986).”

Fourie dismissed the hearings as “rubbish,” then confided to McDougall years later that they had rattled him (Author 2008, McDougall interview). Eli Bitzer, first secretary in the South African embassy, noted “It’s absolutely ridiculous. The latest figures are that 11 children under the age of 16 are being detained in South Africa, and they’ve been charged with very serious crimes—like necklacing (Hall 1987).” To Fourie, as to South Africans, Americans, and observers from around the world, clear lines existed around victims and perpetrators. This story’s actors often disagreed as to who stood on which side of these lines, but they agreed on the existence of them. And yet,

as historians, psychologists, and sociologists have noted, creating these lines within an apartheid context was never simple. People may have seen categorization as necessary, but the Symposium sought to change that categorization—both through casting South African children as victims and through arguing that State violence traumatized the country at large.

In critiquing trauma theory, both Michael Rothberg and Diana Tietjens Meyers discuss the myriad constructions of “victimhood” that pervade venues such as the Symposium (Rothberg 2014 and Tietjens Meyers 2016). Tietjens Meyers discusses the “Victim-Hero” paradigm, while Rothberg focuses on the “Victim-Perpetrator” paradigm. What both flesh out is the degree to which these are “necessary categories for thinking about violence,” yet insufficient for political analysis (Rothberg 2014). While both call for an investigation into the conditions of violence in order to more fully understand victimhood, the Symposium, of course, relied upon these categories, even as they sought to question the conditions creating them. In a sense, more than transcending these categories, participants hoped to shift them; the South African state that had American ears would become perpetrator, and politically active youth would become victims. South African youth may have made decisions about what or how to protest, leading to the blurring of clean distinctions that Rothberg cites. Yet in an era when Americans were largely conditioned to see white supremacy as normative, FSAM members relied largely upon testimonies from victimized South Africans of colour to convey the magnitude of oppression within which participants lived and acted. Thus, they in many ways countered versions of trauma theory that Rothberg mentions as “faulted . . . for their focus on extraordinary catastrophes at the expense of insidious, structural, and everyday slow forms of violence (Rothberg 2014).”

That the participants positioned themselves as “ordinary” underscored the hellish reality so many South Africans faced during daily life under apartheid. This additional trope served to blur the line between hapless victim and juvenile delinquent. As a result, even while using this trope, participants pushed against it. Child victims of trauma were wholly victims, yes, but they also occupied a liminal space, where their agency depended upon larger social, cultural, and political structures.

The Southern Africa Project collected twenty thousand postcards from twenty-five states addressed to PW Botha and reading, “Free South Africa’s children.” They came not only from large-scale organizations, but also from schools and educational groups. Alongside symbolic

chairman Bill Cosby, then in his heyday of positive fame, McDougall engaged three-hundred activists to symbolically ‘deliver’ the postcards to Botha at the South African Embassy. That Cosby was enlisted as an opening act to the real show—children’s letters—demonstrated the degree to which the symposium had shifted public discourse toward children as heroes. Children from around the United States wrote heartfelt letters. Stacey from Pennsylvania wrote to Botha that:

I want to bring to your attention that your system of white control (of) blacks is stupid. I think the kids should not be put in jail. How would you feel if you were a child and thrown in jail? You treat your state like you would a pile of robots, AND I’M NOT KIDDING!! I would Appreciate if you would change your ways. PS You’re a dictator and more but I cannot say in public (Stacy to Botha 1987).

Another child from the same YMCA wrote:

I think the kids 18 and under should be out of jail. They don’t want to live like animals. For your concern I’m white. Yours not Truly, Mr. X (Mr. X to Botha, 1987).

A litany of similar stout, youth-penned epistles from across the country called Botha “very, very, very unfair” and asked him repeatedly to put himself in children’s shoes. In case the message failed to reach South Africa, McDougall took out full-page public service announcements advertisements in seven major in-country newspapers including *The Johannesburg Star*, *The Sowetan*, *The Diamond Field Advertiser*, *The Daily News*, *The Eastern Province Herald*, *The Cape Times*, and *The Weekly Mail*, expressing American concern for South African children in detention (Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law 1982, 11-12). Many of these adverts featured the words of American and South African children, a risky endeavor. They became some of the first public statements of US support accepted into South African papers. The full-page ads contained letters describing American support and solidarity for halting the detention of children. “Every day, more and more Americans are hearing about the repression against black South African children. We join you in the demand to: STOP THE DETENTION OF CHILDREN,” they read (McDougall to Terry 1987). Given the intensity of banning, it seemed particularly surprising that newspapers accepted the ads, probably fearful of the American repercussions for refusal (Author 2008, McDougall interview).

Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act(s)

McDougall's UN speech on children in detention precipitated a major policy victory in the United States that occurred following the hearing on Capitol Hill. Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act *and* mustered enough votes to over-ride Reagan's veto. The CAA compelled the United States to provide increased financial assistance and scholarships to community organizations, political detainees and their families; enforced the Sullivan Principles' Code of Conduct for American businesses operating in South Africa; and prohibited the importation of Krugerrands, South African-made weapons, computers, nuclear material or technology--including uranium--coal, iron, steel, crude oil and petroleum (Edgar 1990). In many ways, it represented the culmination of a decade's worth of effort through unsuccessful introduction of dozens of similar bills within both the House and Senate. As Robert Edgar has noted, "The Anti-Apartheid Act won passage because it was worded in such a way as to appeal to the widest number of legislators, especially moderate Republicans, who had to be convinced that it was important enough to override an anticipated Reagan veto (Edgar 1990, 1)." Several legislators utilized Symposium examples and stories during their floor debates.

Conclusion

The worldwide anti-apartheid movement existed at the intersection of several transnational activist interests. It saw the rise of the celebrity as spokesperson for people in conflict across the globe (De Waal 2015). Within this context, perhaps we can also see the rise of the subaltern as self-advocate. During the Symposium, Americans saw African children speaking of their own lives, rather than being filmed as objects in squalor for famine appeals or other humanitarian videos. For one of the first times, "ordinary" people—and South Africans to boot--were granted access to the US Congress. There, they told their stories and became celebrities of a sort. They built upon the momentum that the already-famous had crafted and experienced their own brief, and sometimes tragic, fame. To those who might be called "ordinary," this close connection to the halls of Congressional power proved empowering, just as it paved the way for future harassment at home. It made international conflict domestic for the American audience. It paved the way for subsequent legislative action like Dodd-Frank⁴, global anti-hunger legislation, and

⁴ The US Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (2010) outlined provisions that American legislators believed would protect American consumers in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse. It expanded

more, which increasingly relied upon the voices of people enduring dispossession to forward legislative aims. The celebrity of worried mothers and young South Africans may not have endured as household names and faces, but the legacies of their movement remain.

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federal oversight in much of the financial sector. Critically, it also included a proviso (Section 1502) that required companies to disclose the sources of their precious minerals, particularly those originating in the Democratic Republic of Congo or other politically unstable spaces. Christopher Dodd and Barney Frank, representatives from Connecticut and Massachusetts respectively, introduced the bill.

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