

## Public memory, digital media, and prison narratives at Robben Island

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**Abstract:** In this article, the authors analyze face-to-face and interactive tours of Robben Island, South Africa. Using ethnographic and rhetorical research methods, they consider the ways in which the Island employs themes of triumph over oppression as a form of nation building. In addition, they consider the ways in which museum narratives may limit how visitors think about social justice in contemporary South Africa.

**Keywords:** ethnography, multimedia, South Africa, Apartheid, Critical Museum Studies

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*La mémoire publique, les médias numériques et les récits de la prison à Robben  
Island*

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, les auteurs analysent les visites en face-à-face interactives de Robben Island, en Afrique du Sud. À l'aide des méthodes de recherche ethnographique et rhétorique, ils considèrent les façons dont l'île utilise les thèmes du triomphe sur l'oppression comme forme de construction de la nation.

En outre, ils considèrent la façon dont les récits des musées peuvent limiter la façon dont les visiteurs réfléchissent à la justice sociale en Afrique du Sud contemporaine.

**Mots-clés :** ethnographie, multimédia, Afrique du Sud, apartheid, Critical Museum Studies

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### Introduction

During the decades prior to the end of Apartheid, South African rhetors worked to transform the country into a more equitable society through political action, cultural performance, and international pressure. At the center of these changes sits a small island 14km off the coast of Cape Town, where Nelson Mandela was held for 27 years. The monuments and memorials on Robben Island can be considered performative examples of what Pezzullo (2007) has termed activist tourism, where locals work with visitors to raise awareness about salient social justice issues.

Like most sites of memory, the rhetorical construction of Robben Island invites visitors to remember and forget key moments of violence in contentious colonial and postcolonial contexts. Robben Island has become a tourist attraction as well as a source of heated debates about how to represent the struggle against racial and ethnic oppression. Marback (2004) suggests that Robben Island, as a symbol, has gone through a dramatic transformation, which has shaped the collective consciousness of South Africa. In its earliest iterations, the prison was viewed as a place of extreme fear, but today, it has been transformed into a symbol of freedom that "... symbolize (s) the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom, and of democracy over oppression" (Unesco, 2016). In this essay, we study the rhetorical practices, as well as the ideological features, of the *dispositifs* (Foucault, 1980, p. 194) associated with Robben Island. Moreover, we critique some of the presences and absences that exist when the Island is viewed primarily as a place of uplift and triumph. We believe that by visiting Robben Island, listening to the prisoners' narratives, viewing the marketing materials, and participating in the interactive tours one can appreciate what Urry (1990) terms "post-tourism" in which the experience often becomes highly sanitized, commercialized, and eventually consumed. Further, we suggest that some of the historical complexity is lost when one views the Island as a place of freedom to the extent that narratives of oppression are often lost in grander stories of triumph.

We analyze the ideological power of *place* by tracing select rhetorical strategies that are used to promote the theme of triumph. The theme is readily apparent from the moment one disembarks from the ferry that travels between Cape Town and Robben Island. A large panel is prominently displayed along the water's edge (figure 1), creating a multisensory experience that, according to Pezzullo (2007), is a powerful means of consciousness-raising. The first panel shows early photographs of prisoners, including Xhoxho chiefs from the 1900s. Further along the image, one can view the race riots and violence of the 1960s. And eventually, one reaches the final panel that shows Nelson Mandela, hands held high, in an image of triumph.

These types of display not only help conjure up the horrors of the white Apartheid state that existed before the rise of Nelson Mandela; they also remind visitors of the colonial and imperial genealogies behind these social injustices.

This message of hope is not only conveyed through visuals, but also through the text that accompanies the images. The top of the mural reads “Freedom Cannot Be Manacled,” and along the base can be found the following text: “repression, release, and resurrection.” The phrase, coupled with the image, can be considered what McGee (1980) has termed an ideograph, which is a kind of shorthand (visual and textual) that contains deep political commitments in a very memorable fashion.



**Figure 1.** *Mural on the dock of Robben Island*

Not surprisingly, this theme was strategically deployed as a form of nation-building. As noted in the 2007 annual report for the Robben Island Museum, the purpose of the Island is to

... symbolize, not only for South Africa, and the African continent, but also for the entire world, the possibility of righteousness to prevail over wrong, enormous hardship and adversity. In so doing it has offered to a world struggling under social injustices and intolerance a new path to the future (Robben Island, 2007 Annual Report, p. 6).

Although the message is powerful and positive, as with any historical representation, certain aspects of the narrative are deflected as one focuses on key moments at the exclusion of others. In this essay, we ask the question “Are there any ideological costs that are incurred through the circulation of these metanarratives, or should they

be considered essential commemorative building blocks of nation change and “resurrection”?

To answer this question, we used a multi-modal analysis of the face to face tours of Robben Island, as well as digital representations contained within associated web sites. Other scholars have suggested that it is useful to combine ethnographic and rhetorical analysis of sites (Wilkins & Wolf, 2011), and we have used similar methods in our analysis of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Hasian & Wood, 2011). Following this approach, one of us traveled to South Africa to collect data by participating in multiple tours. On these tours, the co-author carefully recorded the narratives that were presented to visitors. Further, building upon the idea that rhetorical constructions are embedded in a variety of modalities (Sheridan, Ridolfo, and Michel, 2012), he photographed each exhibit and catalogued other printed placards and marketing materials. Upon return, the co-authors gathered contextual materials from the internet and other sources to uncover key patterns of nationalistic argumentation and narrative constructions. Part of these triangulating efforts included analyses of the interactive website that was developed by Google to determine how it adheres to and differs from the face to face tours. It should be noted that we apply a critical, rhetorical approach to our analysis. Rather than mere description, we believe that scholars have an obligation to engage in work that is both descriptive, but also investigates structures of power with an overarching goal to contribute to a more equitable society.

The remainder of this essay is divided into five major sections. We begin our study by considering the ideologies that circulate on Robben Island to uncover what we consider to be the dominant “interpretive” dispositif (Foucault, 1980) of the various Robben Island tours. This is then followed by an overview of the tours as we describe a typical “face to face” guided tour. The third portion of the essay extends this analysis by explaining some of the rhetorical figurations and performative choices that were used during the tour to convey feelings of victory. The fourth section complements this analysis by illuminating the ways that an internet tour of Robben Island allows for vicarious witnessing of some of key South African historical moments, while the fifth, and concluding section, explains the theoretical and pragmatic importance of this type of triangulating study.

### **1. Interpretive museum planning, public memories, and tourism narrations**

Public memory is created through a complex network of narratives that shape the overall impression of a place. In the case of Robben Island, these narratives were constructed from the actual memories of the tour guides, who were held as prisoners during the Apartheid years, along with key texts that are used to guide the museum experience. For example, an official South African document, entitled “The Robben Island Conservation and Interpretation Plan,” signposts some of the communicative approaches of docents when it notes that a tour of the Island should be viewed as “... an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through

the use of original objects, by first-hand experience and illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Robben Island, 2013, p. 3).

For those who are interested in activist tourism, this official text helps contextualize the tours even before one steps onto Robben Island. Note the emphasis on *interpretation* rather than mere *communication of factual information*. Certainly, contemporary researchers might argue that all forms of communication include an interpretive component; however, in this particular case, we find it significant that museum personnel see their role as guides who shape the meaning of the Island in very specific and self-conscious ways. This is an example of what Urry (1990) terms post-tourist reflexivity in which a particular site employs its political and geographical location as a form of resistance. Although a didactic approach is not an unusual approach for a museum, it may be somewhat of a surprise that scholars have described this activity as a form of “branding” (Deacon, 2004).

A brand, in the context of a museum, provides a symbolic identity that can easily be communicated to an audience through a “... simple statement that encapsulates as well as simplifies what is often a complex set of meanings associated with a site” (p. 4). Furthermore, if one considers a brand to represent a unifying experience, then certain narratives will, by necessity, be excluded, especially those that do not mesh well with the identified brand filled with ideographs like “resurrection” or “victory.”

Deacon (2004), in her analysis of Robben Island, contends that the Apartheid survivors faced a particularly challenging task in developing a symbolic brand. The museum personnel hoped to create a space that could be interpreted on multiple levels simultaneously. For example, the Island was historically represented as a place of oppression, but at the same time, there was a desire to supplant the negative connotations with a sense of uplift and resilience (p. 5).

If one views the narratives of Robben Island as a kind of branded dispositif, then it is useful to identify the core principles that guide visitors’ experiences. The museum personnel have created an interpretation plan, including specific themes and sub-themes that are used to frame the tourist experience. Each of these themes is delineated in a document entitled The Robben Island Conservation Management Plan. These themes are outlined in the plan as quoted below:

Theme 1: The Island as a microcosm: Robben Island as a microcosm of the world, and colonial and Apartheid South Africa, and its legacy of resistance and resilience belongs not only to the people of South Africa, but also to those who fought against Apartheid in Africa and the world. The site offers a world struggling with social injustice and intolerance an example of the indomitable nature of the human spirit. The site is a catalyst for healing and a source of enlightenment of the dangers and futility of myopic philosophies and practices (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

Theme 2: Robben Island as a ‘University of Life’: Robben Island is a place of enlightenment and that symbolizes the triumph of wisdom and largeness

of spirit against small minds and pettiness. It became known as the 'University of Life' to many of those incarcerated there and demonstrates the values of lifelong learning and debate, and their place in building a democratic society (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

Theme 3: Triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil: Robben Island should become a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over evil and myopic philosophies and should bear testimony to the hardship endured by all who were banished and imprisoned there over the centuries (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

It is interesting to note that all three themes position the Island as a place of redemption, focusing on the more positive, communal aspects of incarceration over individuated suffering. Beyond the conceptual and theoretical importance of the ideas contained in the themes, we have found them particularly useful as a kind of ideological matrix from which the visitor's experience can be analyzed.

In the section that follows, we provide an overview of the face to face tours to provide some context for the reader before we delve into the rhetorical analysis of the interpretive themes.

## **2. An overview of the tours**

### *Face to Face Tour*

The face to face tour begins at the Robben Island Museum, which is located on the pier near the Cape Town shopping district. From the museum, visitors take a short ferry ride to the Island from which one can see Table Mountain growing smaller in the distance (Figure 2). The view provides a sobering context for the tour as the landscape brings to mind the prisoners who would have followed this same route without any hope of eventual release.

Once on the Island, there are two possible paths for the tour. Depending on the numbers of visitors on a given day, groups either begin by walking through prison cells and other historic buildings or by taking a bus ride around the Island to various locations such as the quarries where prisoners were forced to mine limestone. Both routes are led by former prisoners who were held captive during the Apartheid years, which adds a powerful element of authenticity to the pilgrimage to the Island.



**Figure 2.** *View of Table Mountain from the Ferry*

Perhaps the most popular destination on the tour is Nelson Mandela's prison cell. One by one, visitors file past the small enclosure where the South African leader was held for twenty-seven years (Figure 3). For most of the visitors, the view of the small space and the meager surroundings serve as powerful reminders of the struggles of Robben Island's most famous prisoner.



**Figure 3.** *Visitor taking picture of Mandela's cell*



**Figure 4.** *Limited signage on the tour*

At each location, the tour guide provides an overview of the historical significance of specific enclosures. Very little signage is included on the tour, so the bulk of information is provided through the narrative conveyed by the guides. On the limited occasions in which signage is included, it is illustrative of key events that are chronicled by one of the tour guides.

For example, Figure 4 shows an image of prisoners at work in the courtyard. As explained by the docents, the pictures depict prisoners breaking rocks, a most painful and difficult task. The image is interesting because it shows the reality of the prisoners' experience, whereas during visits from the international press, inmates were instructed to weave baskets rather than break rocks to create the illusion of a more humane captivity.

The tone of the tour is quite somber, and the docents request that visitors speak in hushed tones as a form of respect. In our experience, most individuals understand the importance of the site and strictly adhere to this request. Visitors are, however, encouraged to ask questions. In the final portion of the tour, former prisoners engage in an interactive forum that often generates lively discussion of key events in South African history that are related to imprisonment and Apartheid in general. In this sense, the face to face tour incorporates a degree of interpersonal as well as public address interactivity, but this only occurs at the conclusion of the tour.

In the section that follows, we describe the ways in which the key themes from the museum's interpretive plan are performed through an analysis of the face to face tour.



### 3. Analysis of the face to face tours

#### *The Island as a Microcosm*

The first theme outlined in the official Interpretation Plan for Robben Island is titled “The Island as Microcosm” (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13). The official language defines this theme as follows:

Robben Island as a microcosm of the world, and colonial and Apartheid South Africa, and its legacy of resistance and resilience belongs not only to the people of South Africa, but also to those who fought against Apartheid in Africa and the world. The site offers a world struggling with social injustices and intolerance an example of the indomitable nature of the human spirit. The site is a catalyst for healing and a source of enlightenment on the dangers and futility of myopic philosophies and practices (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

A microcosm, by definition, is a smaller version of a larger system, and, as cited above, Robben Island has been depicted as a place of “enlightenment” in which the “dangers and futility of myopic philosophies and practices” are demonstrated (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13). As a microcosm, it is helpful to consider the ways in which the museum illustrates how the world should address intolerance and become a “catalyst for healing” (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

The tour begins with an illustration of institutionalized violence against South African citizens within three different systems. Each of these can be considered a microcosm for the world at large: The Pass Laws of Apartheid Era South Africa and the associated documentation required of all black South Africans, the documentation that was carried by all prisoners on Robben Island, and finally, conditions in contemporary South Africa. As described below, each of these systems is metaphorically linked together.

There are many examples that could be used to illustrate the myopic vision of Apartheid politics, but the tour begins with a discussion of the well-known Pass Laws. These laws were problematic for three related reasons: they forced Black South Africans to live in designated areas under the worst conditions, work in the least desirable occupations, and live in situations that prohibited interracial relationships. Visitors to Robben Island quickly learn that to enforce these laws, Black South Africans were required to carry the *Dompas*, which literally translates to “stupid pass.” The *Dompas* was a kind of internal passport that allowed the government to control all movement of its citizens within the country, and it reflected the racial hierarchies of a colonial state that was organized in myriad social Darwinian ways.

The act of describing Apartheid Era politics may, at first glance, appear to be an odd way to begin the Robben Island tour, but the guides underscore how these practices in South African society were reflected in the experiences of the prisoners. For example, on the Island the *Dompas* was replaced with a card that functioned in a

similar fashion (Figure 5). Upon prisoners' arrival, a card was issued, which contained basic information such as a prisoner's tribal affiliation, religion, and crimes committed. Like the Dompas, a prisoner caught without the card would be severely punished, an example of the discipline and punishment that was so aptly critiqued by Foucault. Sadly, Apartheid practices and prison regimes on the island maintained disparate power relationships between the "races," and prisoners could lose privileges including meals, books, and communication with family members.

In the most severe cases, the punishments were intolerable. For example, in an interview with a former inmate, one of the authors learned that during the Apartheid years some individuals were buried up to their necks in dirt and the guards would urinate on them, or, in the worst cases, a helicopter would arrive in the night, and prisoners would be taken away, never to be seen again (Vusumsi Mcongo, personal interview, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015). The arbitrary nature of the Apartheid system contributed to a climate of dehumanization.

As a microcosm of South African race relations, the symbolic connection between the Dompas and the material conditions of those who carried the Robben Island prison card is important. The South African laws and the conditions on the Island are overtly presented during the tour, but later in the tour, subtler ideological links are made to contemporary conditions in South Africa. The guides implore visitors to visit the township after leaving the Island because they want visitors to see the conditions that persist, despite the fact that the Apartheid Era politics are over. In other words, the Island, that in some cases can be presented in official narratives as a place of resurrection becomes a much more ambivalent site of memory when the face to face tours actually take place.

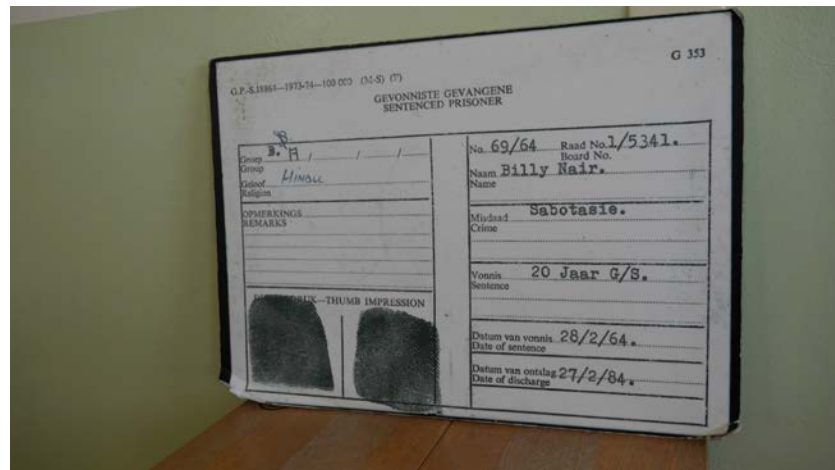


Figure 5. Card carried by all prisoners

If the tour ended on this dark narrative, then visitors would likely leave with a sense of futility. Yet this is not the intention of those who planned the tours, for as we noted above in our discussion of the Interpretation Plan, Robben Island is supposed to provide a sense of “enlightenment” and “healing” (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13). In order to magnify this point, the guides express feelings of gratitude to the visitors, stating that visitors, as international citizens, played a role in the elimination of Apartheid through international sanctions. The overriding message becomes one of reconciliation and hope, in which freedom fighters and visitors are metaphorically interpolated into narratives about transnational or cosmopolitan social justice. However, even as visitors hear this positive message, they are often left with feelings of melancholy as the seed of despair sets in as tourists consider the harsh conditions that persist in a post-Apartheid South Africa. In this sense, the Island as Microcosm may not be the most effective rhetorical strategy. The message of inhumane practices is readily apparent, yet the expected uplift of enlightenment is not as powerful when one considers the terrible economic and social conditions that still exist in the country.

*Robben Island as “A University of Life”*

The second theme outlined in the official Interpretation Plan for Robben Island is titled “Robben Island as ‘A University of Life’” (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13). As with the other two themes, the Interpretation Plan describes a very specific message to accompany this theme:

Robben Island is a place of enlightenment and that symbolizes the triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness. It became known as the ‘University of Life’ to many of those incarcerated there and demonstrates the values of lifelong learning and debate, and their place in building a democratic society (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

In many ways, Robben Island literally functioned as a kind of university. Prisoners took correspondence courses during their incarceration, which helped to create an intellectual tradition that served the country as it developed into a full-fledged democracy. For example, Ahmed Kathadra, one of the former prisoners, completed degrees in Criminology, African Politics, and Library Science. Nelson Mandela, as another example, completed over 50 correspondence courses (Brady, 2014, p. 116). In an interview, Vusumsi Mcongo, who was incarcerated on the Island, explained that education (formal and informal) was an important aspect of prison life, and that many of those who were imprisoned believed that it would become *the* most valuable asset to the future leaders of a new nation (Vusumsi Mcongo, personal interview, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

The theme of life-long learning, even under the most trying of prison circumstances, plays an integral role throughout the tour. One could argue that supposed enemies of the state were turned into peacekeepers when young “terrorist” prisoners

were given opportunity to learn “lessons of life” from the greatest freedom fighters of their time. For example, the guides describe discussions with prominent individuals like Nelson Mandela and Robert Subukwe, who tempered their ideas with an emphasis on healing and a new democratic South Africa.

As the guides walk through vacant courtyards, they describe how prisoners would engage in heated discussions related to politics and civil disobedience. As a visitor, it is inspiring to consider the discussions that must have taken place in the space (Figure 6), but according to Urry (1990), tourism is about more than the positive emotions associated with the tourist experience. Below the surface of these positive narratives, one is likely to sense the inherent violence that necessitated the learning that took place on Robben Island.

For example, in an interview with Sonny Venkatathnam, as quoted by Brady (2014), one young prisoner paints a picture of an almost transcendental understanding through suffering. He states that the older prisoners taught him to “laugh at the tortures” that they went through (Brady, 2014, p. 109). In other words, learning on the Island resulted in net positive gains for the country, but at a cost to individual prisoners that is often lost in the larger narrative of positivity. The focus on pedagogy, turns what could have been a place of “dark tourism” into a place of edification, hope, and redemption. Here, one finds symbols of national opportunities rather than commentaries about revenge or resentment.

Perhaps no character epitomizes the ways in which prisoners learned from the experience on the Island better than Nelson Mandela. Throughout the tour, he carries great rhetorical power as a hero and example. Guides note that when he was given the opportunity to leave prison, he decided to remain with the others as a form of protest. And even in his resistance, the experience is framed as a form of learning (Brady, 2014). In Brady’s (2014) contextualization of these affairs, Mandela is framed as a redemptive figure who learned great lessons through suffering such as forgiveness. As readers might imagine, this narrative resonates with those who believe that South Africa is facing a similar situation, and Mandela is an excellent metaphor for a country that could easily seek vengeance, but chooses reconciliation.



**Figure 6.** *Courtyard*

Today, the Island continues to play a role as a place of learning through its tours, conferences, and even theatrical performances. Through these types of activities, the Island is transformed into a place of redemption rather than one of pain. This, in theory, creates spaces for healing and reconciliation for the country at large.

*Triumph of the Human Spirit Over the Forces of Evil*

The third theme from the official Interpretation Plan for Robben Island is titled “Triumph of the Human Spirit Over the Forces of Evil” (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13). The theme is defined as follows:

Robben Island should become a symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over evil and myopic philosophies and should bear testimony to the hardship endured by all who were banished and imprisoned there over the centuries (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

As moving as the images of struggle and education appear, there is little question that the performative display of anti-Apartheid triumphalism is equally impressive. One of the most powerful narratives, as part of the face-to-face tours (and as part of the interactive site that we discuss later) can be found at a limestone quarry. As relayed by the guides, prisoners worked every day in the quarry, and that work in turn was meant to serve as punishment for those who theoretically terrorized White defenders of Apartheid. According to the narrative relayed by the guides, the conditions in the quarry were appalling, and the light was so intense that Mandela re-

quired dark glasses for the remainder of his life. Yet as with the other themes, the Robben Island narrative emphasizes the ways in which the prisoners overcame this intense hardship. A small cave near the quarry provided the perfect location for political discussion. During the tour, guides explained how prisoners would sit in the shade during breaks and discuss political philosophy. Mandela, during a visit back to the Island, took a small stone and placed it in a pile near the quarry. Other prisoners who accompanied him followed suit, and in time, the single rock had turned into a pile of multi-colored rocks (Figure 7). The tour guides explain that the rocks, which are easily visible from the road, are now a symbol of the multicultural society that is South Africa. On the tour, the emotion of this experience is palpable. As with the other facets of the tour, the story of the quarry could have been framed by the hardship of the prisoners, but instead, the interpretive experience focuses on the ways in which the human spirit triumphs in the face of adversity.

As moving as the story of the quarry has become, Mandela is only one of many individuals who are the subject of tales of triumphalism and perseverance. According to Phelps (2004), “we can only know the past through competing narratives, and we can only envision a future by incorporating this polyphony into a new national story” (p. 127). There is tremendous opportunity for complex truth telling on the Island, as the docents who lead the tour are, in fact, past prisoners. They could, for example, relate accounts of their own experiences in the prison—relying on first person narrative. Instead, the first-person is replaced with more objective language associated with traditional, historical museums. A brief example illustrates this process in action. At a key moment in the tour, the docents describe the prisoners’ first night in captivity. As shown in Figure 8, visitors gather in a long room with a series of bed rolls running along the perimeter.

The guide describes how there was little comfort afforded by the room and the limited bed rolls were given to the elderly prisoners so that they could experience a semblance of comfort. The description is moving, yet it is expressed in the language of an outsider, not someone who actually experienced it. There is great opportunity for the prisoners to describe their own stories in a very personal way. This is not a condemnation of the choices made by the museum personnel, only an observation that this rhetorical choice has an impact on the visitor’s experience and the narrator’s sense of justice. In the final analysis, much of the rhetorical experience associated with Robben Island is contained within general tales of adversity, which fit nicely with the themes associated with the interpretive plan and leave the visitor with a sense of justice, yet there may be other tales that are lost in the design of the tourists’ experience.



**Figure 7.** *Rocks in quarry*



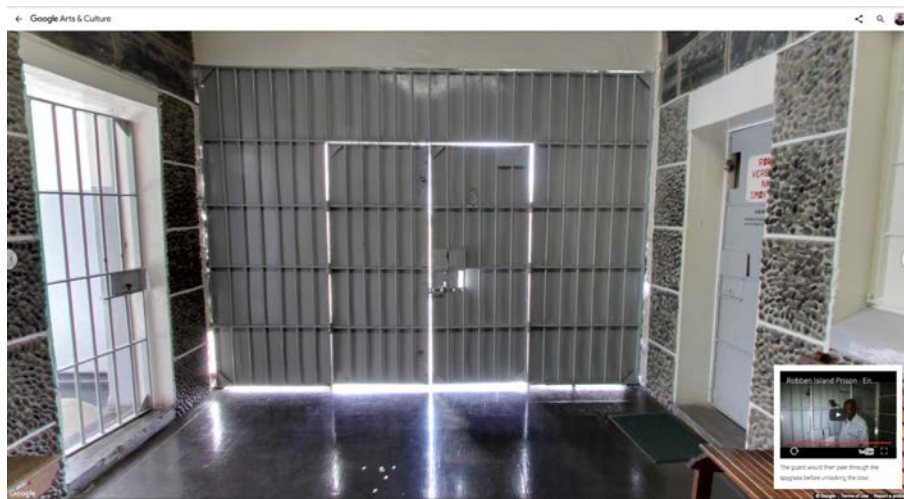
**Figure 8.** *Vusumsi Mcongo explaining prisoners' experience*

#### **4. Analysis of the interactive tour**

In early 2015, Google created an interactive version of the tour of Robben Island. We feel it is important to discuss this recent development because it provides another entry point into the narrative conveyed to tourists—physical and virtual. In addition, it is another form of tourism, one that has not been studied to the extent of

traditional tourism. Although the Google tour was not part of the interpretive framework developed by the Robben Island Museum, it is interesting to note that many of the same themes appear in the online experience. In this section, we provide a brief description of the online tour, followed by an analysis of some of the key rhetorical themes.

The interactive tour incorporates the latest web technologies such as 360 degree views of specific locations, along with interactive video. Using this technology, the visitor can move through photographs by changing the position of the mouse (Figure 10). In this sense, the interactive tour is similar to the face-to-face tour in which the field of vision is controlled by the viewer; however, there are limitations to what can be experienced. For example, one can move in a circular pattern, but movement above and below the field of vision is somewhat constrained.



**Figure 9.** *Interactive tour*

The user moves from location to location by clicking on an arrow on the right-hand side of the screen. Once clicked, a new location appears. Within the screen, short video segments play in which the virtual tour guide describes each location. The narrative for these videos borrows much of the content from the face-to-face tour; however, the clips have been edited to their most salient points, and these commentaries don't always provide the depth and breadth of information that can be gleaned from the actual Robben Island guided tours.

That said, the interactive tour provides several locations that are not available in the face-to-face tour. For example, one screen shows the view from the guard's tower. This is an interesting feature, but displaying that point of view would be impossible to incorporate within the face to face tour, due to the large numbers of visi-



tors. In a similar fashion, the interactive tour allows the visitor to move around Mandela's cell, which would not be possible in the face to face tour due to limited space.

In terms of tone, the interactive tour is very similar to the face-to-face tour in which a somewhat scripted presentation is provided by the docent. Beyond the video descriptors, there is some text-based information that appear as asides on several screens. These segments are written in third person and include key factual elements such as dates, statistics, and a description of specific items that appear in the photographs. It should be noted that, unlike the face-to-face tours, there is little room for improvisation. It could be argued that the interactivity afforded by the navigation structure offers user control, yet the movement afforded is limited to moving from screen to screen, scanning photographs, and stopping and starting the video segments.

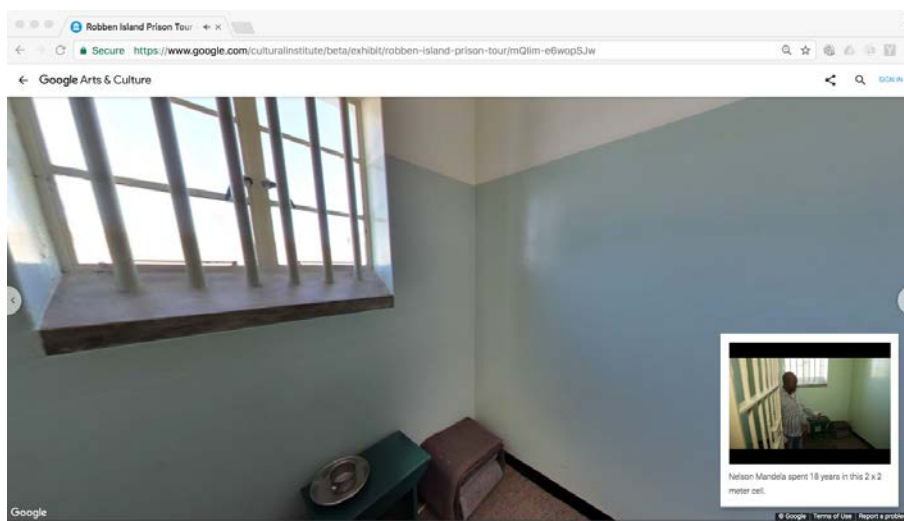
Like the face to face tour, the interactive website emphasizes the ways in which the experience on Robben Island allowed the prisoners an opportunity to grow through adversity to become the leaders of their country. One interactive narrative on the Google Robben Island website describes how the prisoners once formed a soccer league, and how through sport, they learned to live together in a spirit of democratic cooperation. According to the description on the website,

Football was a popular and highly competitive sport among prisoners, who formed their own league with a binding constitution. The prison league strictly adhered to FIFA regulations and principles and won FIFA recognition for their struggle and adherence to governing principles (Google Arts and Culture, 2015).

Like the face to face tour, the interactive web site reinforces the message that Robben Island served as a place of learning through traditional education, informal discussion, and even physical activity that would impact the future of the country. Participating in sports that provided another illustrating of the non-violent nature of post-Apartheid redemptive practices. This is further emphasized through the depiction of Nelson Mandela's cell. The virtual visitor is initially presented with a 360-degree image that shows Mandela's meager living conditions (Figure 11). The camera pans in a circle to reveal a 2-meter by 2-meter space with a bed roll, a dinner plate, and a small bucket. This small space was Mandela's entire microcosmic world. And yet, as described on the tour, within the confines of the cell, he grew to become one of the greatest leaders of our time.

The interactive tour visually reinforces the message that Mandela passed his time on the Island by reading and studying. To support this idea, the interactive tour shows an image of a makeshift desk that was constructed by Mandela and his cell mates to hold his books as he studied the ideas that would eventually provide the core philosophy for the burgeoning nation (Figure 12). The image, along with the narration on the website, suggests that part of Mandela's ability to thrive came through the crucible of fire that was Robben Island.

In almost religious terms, Mandela is presented by the interactive site as an individual who faced intense violence, but through a monk-like existence he controlled his anger. For example, the site includes images of Mandela's bed roll, which was carefully stowed each night to make room for his books and study materials. In this sense, the space appears as a meditative location in which one might turn inward for learning and inspiration, as there is no other option in the painful confinement of the cell. This is the place to plan all sorts of individual and communal resurrections.



**Figure 10.** *Mandela's cell*

In addition to focusing on his living area, the interactive website invites viewers to recall that Mandela was politically active during his incarceration. As noted, he discussed politics with all prisoners and maintained a positive attitude, believing that one day all of the prisoners would exit their cells to a more equitable society. We are informed that even in his incarceration, he fought for prisoner's rights. In an image immediately following the depiction of his cell, Mandela is shown, leaning against a shovel in an attitude of defiance. The caption describes how he protested unannounced visits by outsiders, and in a letter to the warden, suggested that the visits were an "invasion of privacy" (Google Arts and Culture, 2015). In other words, Mandela's struggle never ceased; he fought against oppression in all of its forms.



Figure 11. Mandela's desk

Like the face-to-face tours, the web offers great rhetorical possibility as a means of conveying personal narratives, particularly as an educational resource. As noted by Ahmed Kathadra, a former prisoner, one of the most difficult aspects of incarceration was not being able to interact with children. He states, “There’s poetic justice that children in classrooms all over the world will now be able to visit Robben Island using this (the Google) technology” (Carrington, 2015, para 10). At the same time, however, when one visits the interactive site, the narrative employs the same disembodied tone as the face to face tours. For example, one of the initial screens shows the outer gates of the prison with the following text:

The Robben Island prison gate was constructed by political prisoners using stone from one of two quarries on the island where prisoners were required to labor in the harsh conditions. The grey slate was taken from the blue quarry (Google Arts and Culture, 2015).

Note the passive voice in which “harsh conditions” are mentioned, yet personal accounts from individual prisoners are absent. Contrast the detached narrative with an account from the biography of Moses Dlamini (1985) who recalls a particularly difficult winter.

We are still starving and many of us have lost a lot of weight. And the number of ill comrades has increased. Richmond du Preez the ANC comrade who has often been a victim of Jan Kleynhans has now been accepted at the prison hospital. It was discovered that he suffered from TB. Paul Masha the PAC comrade whose left lung got punctured when he was tortured by the Special Branch at the Grays Building, has also been admitted as a

TB patient. My friend David Ramagole is now a pitiable sight. He's virtually a bag of bones. Walking in the distance from the quarry to prison every morning completely exhausts him and he's still coughing blood (p. 151).

As we read these commentaries, we wonder whether these testimonials will ever be used for more than tourist remembrance. Yet it could be argued that their rhetorical power is essential to the healing process on Robben Island. The problem, it seems, is that the more personal, painful experiences of the prisoners may not mesh as well with the narrative that has been designed as part of the interpretive plan developed by the museum personnel.

### **Conclusion: Critiquing the presences and absences on Robben Island**

As Urry (1990) explains, "post-tourist" critics are the scholars who can understand, and yet critique the dominant messages that circulate in spaces that provide both uplifting and dark messages, and like all museum tours, Robben Island provide us with only select remembrances of "what happened" during the Apartheid years in South Africa. Simply decoding the dominant narratives of these tours should serve as the beginning, and not the end, of our critical tourist investigations of this famous site.

In this case, there is little question that for many South Africans and foreign visitors that Robben Island functions as a rhetorical vehicle for building bridges for the country of South Africa. Like the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions,<sup>1</sup> the Robben Island museum presents a history that is strategic and contained, leaving out much of the violence that was perpetrated upon Black South Africans. The tours do not avoid discussing some of the violent features of the Apartheid years, but this is a history that focuses a great deal of attention on the problematic nature of the White colonial culture that helped build, and maintain, Apartheid prison systems.

As one walks through the hallways, cells, and courtyards, the pains of the past are presented as something that has ended in post-Apartheid South Africa. In the words of the guides, through the efforts of the prisoners, coupled with pressure from international communities, "the human spirit prevailed" (Robben Island, 2013, p. 13).

We believe this is an important step toward reconciliation. At the same time, however, as critical ideological scholars, we find it troubling that South Africa continues to face many of the same obstacles that have historically plagued the society.

Many years ago, one of us spent over a year in South Africa. At that time, South African society was still very segregated. The Group Areas Act was still enforced, and consequently, Black South Africans lived in townships outside of the major cities in shanty towns under terrible conditions. As we triangulated our work and conducted the present study, a member of our team worked with the Desmond Tutu Foundation to develop a series of public service announcements with youth groups.

That work led to the recognition that conditions since Apartheid have ended are not that much materially better for many South Africans. Ethnic groups are still separated, and if one walks through the township near Robben Island today, the conditions are similar to the Apartheid Era. This raises the issue of whether the Robben Island tour, with its emphasis on spiritual redemption and victorious resurrection is helping ameliorate these types of conditions. In many instances, the answer is yes, it is helpful to hear a story of hope. On the other hand, we are concerned that visitors may leave the tour without a deeper understanding and concern for contemporary problems in South Africa and the world at large. Rather, it seems that the narrative contains problems as though they are merely issue from a painful past, long since solved.

As an example of the ways in which *parts of this dispositif* is still tacitly in place, consider what has been called the first post-Apartheid massacre known as the Mari-kana Massacre. In 2012, platinum miners went on strike, hoping to receive better pay. Police were eventually called to the scene, and 34 protestors were killed (Basa, Karimi, & Mabuse, 2012). Immediately following the shooting, protests erupted across the country. The president's response was interesting in light of the present study. He claimed that "This is not a day to apportion blame. It is a day for us to mourn together as a nation. It is also a day to start healing" (Basa, Karimi, & Mabuse, 2012). The response is not unlike the narrative presented on Robben Island in which reconciliation is emphasized over justice.

Beyond labor practices and living conditions, issues related to Apartheid continue to be raised by those who argue that more substantive change needs to take place. According to The World Bank, 10 percent of the South African population controls 58% of the country's wealth (World Bank, 2011). This is certainly born out in terms of labor statistics as well. The unemployment rate in South Africa is well over 20 percent, and among youth, it is as high as 50 percent (Looney, 2013). In analyzing these statistics, one cannot help but make comparisons to the past in which Pass Laws forced Black South Africans into less desirable jobs.

Education also plays a major factor in the problems of South Africa. One of the major race riots in the past centered on disputes regarding education reform. In Soweto, during June of 1960, youths gathered together to protest the inferior education that they were receiving in the Townships. During riots, it is estimated that as many as 76 people were killed by police. As an indicator of the past, this riot is mentioned during the tours of Robben Island, but the problems with the education system persist, albeit in different forms.

Many schools in South Africa are still largely segregated, especially along socioeconomic lines. In a recent article, Mmusi Maimane cited some staggering statistics. According to Maimane, a black child in South Africa is 100 times more likely to grow up in poverty and 6 times less likely to go to the university, which he sees as the legacy of Apartheid (Nkosi, 2016). In visiting the schools during a visit to South Africa, one of observed first-hand how this was definitely the case. Schools in the

townships are largely understaffed and they provide an inferior education to those schools in largely white areas. That said, we realize that many South Africans might respond that this is still better than life under Apartheid.

In short, in spite of the universalist messages circulated during both tours and vicarious tours of the Island, the remnants of Apartheid are still lingering over the country. Although Robben Island addresses some of these issues in a fashion, the visitor leaves with the sense that problems of the past are largely solved. We suggest that Robben Island might be the perfect place for these kinds of discussions, so that the Island might function as a forum in which problems of the past are described and reflected on present conditions.

While it is important that we recognize the achievements of those who have gone before, such as the prisoners who worked on the island, we suggest that a nuanced post-tourist critique of the presentation of narratives circulated on and about Robben Island needs to also take into account the economic disparities, ethnic tensions, and class structures that confront post-Apartheid South Africa.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Scholars have noted the ways in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission operated in a similar fashion. According to Brants and Klep (2013), truth commissions often "... flatten-out, so to speak, complex memories and understandings of the past into an inclusive nation-building narrative which they envision as a collective memory" (p. 1). In essence, the resulting story robs some individuals of acknowledgment from the government of social injustices. In essence, resulting in a twice perpetrated form of violence.

<sup>ii</sup> As a means of creating a positive experience for the visitor and as a way of bringing together disparate communities within the country, we are cognizant of the power of this message; however, we contend that important polysemic narratives are lost when historical sites such as Robben Island focus on a unified theme at the expense of more complex, and oftentimes nuanced, historical accounts. For example, in an interview with Vusumsi Mcongo, who was a prisoner on the island and is currently serving as a tour guide, to truly understand race relations in South Africa, one must travel to the townships, where black South Africans still live in terrible conditions resulting in unemployment, poverty, and oppression, which, he suggests, should be part of the narrative at Robben Island (Vusumsi Mcongo, personal interview, October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

