

The Courtship of Nelson and Winnie Mandela: the quest to live exemplary lives

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The story they were to tell about their courtship – the story *both* of them were to tell, Nelson and Winnie alike, over and again, told so often they appeared to have forgotten that it was not entirely true – went like this.

It was a weekday afternoon in the summer of 1956/7. Nelson was giving his friend, the medical student, Diliza Mji, a ride from Soweto to central Johannesburg, when he saw, waiting at a bus stop outside Baragwanath Hospital, a beautiful girl, indeed, so beautiful that he considered turning his car around and going back.

He does not describe her. In the thousands of pages of letters and memoirs Nelson wrote, there are almost no physical descriptions of women, only of men. One is left to imagine that he was struck by the huge mournful eyes, so out of place on her youthful face; by the high, sculptured cheeks; and, incongruous with the mournfulness, by a regal authority, quite formidable, even at a glance. She was very young, barely out of her teens, he may well have surmised; and indeed, on the day he clapped eyes on her she was not yet 21.¹

¹ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little, Brown, 1994), 199; Nelson Mandela, interview with Anthony Sampson, 29 November, 1995, Anthony Sampson papers, Weston Library, University of Oxford.

Nelson, famously, drove a two-tone Oldsmobile, the paintwork pastel green, the hubcaps walled and brilliant white. Everyone in Soweto knew the Oldsmobile, and everyone in Soweto knew of the man behind the wheel. When he drove through his neighbourhood on a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon, a time when people were out on the streets, they would gather and wave and shout his name.

And when he drove through central Johannesburg to his law firm, Mandela and Tambo, the heads of the drivers in the cars on Fox Street, almost all of them white, would turn. For although most white people still did not know the name Nelson Mandela, or, if they had heard the name, could not put it to a face, the sight of a black man in so extravagant a vehicle signalled that something was up.

And Nelson himself was as much a spectacle as his car. Six-foot-two, with the body of an athlete, at 38 years of age still youthful and strong, he wore double-breasted suits, made bespoke by the most sought-after, and the most expensive, tailor in Johannesburg, Alfred Kahn, whose clients included many of the city's white mining magnates.²

And if the sight of him was arresting, the idea of him was no less so. It was not just that he was a lawyer, indeed, one of only 62 black lawyers in all of South Africa, placing him in the top echelons of the black elite; it was not just he was famously theatrical in court, his aura of command a lesson to white judges and lawyers that he was their equal: five years earlier, he had become the poster child of the Defiance Campaign, a nationwide action of civil disobedience in which more than 8,000 people, among them the most esteemed black men and women in the land, went to prison for defying segregationist laws. Just then, in late 1956 and early 1957, he and 155 others were standing trial for treason, a trial covered faithfully in the black press day after day, month after month, and about which black South Africans were speaking incessantly at their kitchen tables.

And if Nelson's public performances were growing increasingly famous, his private exploits were becoming less and less private. Among Nelson's colleagues and friends it was no secret that he was a red-blooded heterosexual man – 'I can't help it if the ladies take note of me,' he was to tell his biographer later. 'I'm not going to protest.'³ The father of three children, his marriage – to

² For the bespoke suits, see George Bizos, *Odyssey to Freedom* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2007), 338.

³ Nelson Mandela, interview with Anthony Sampson, 29 November 1995.

Evelyn Mase – was in ruins, and rumours about his love life were much discussed among his comrades, his legal colleagues and his friends.⁴

And so if there was any man in South Africa, hitting forty and married, who might turn his car around because he had glimpsed waiting at a bus stop a magnificent woman almost half his age, it was Nelson Mandela.

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Although he could not have known it, he and the girl on the side of the road were bound to meet. For Nomzamo Winifred Madikizela resided at the Helping Hand Club for Native Girls at 76 Hans Street on the eastern side of town; and there she was becoming increasingly friendly with Adelaide Tshukudu, fiancé of Oliver Tambo, Nelson's partner in the law firm Mandela and Tambo.

One afternoon in early March 1957 it was pouring with rain – as it often does in Johannesburg on summer afternoons – and hailing, to boot; Adelaide, who did not fancy the prospect of making her way from work at Johannesburg's General Hospital to Park Station in such weather, phoned Oliver to ask for a ride. Barely had she and Oliver left the hospital than they spotted Winnie and another woman, Florence Dube, making their way to the station on foot; they invited the two women into the car.

Adelaide announced that she was ravenously hungry and so they stopped at a delicatessen on the side of the road. But as Oliver searched in vain for his wallet it appeared that the four people in the car did not have a penny between them. And then, from the driver's seat, Oliver spotted the tall figure of Nelson in the delicatessen; he told Adelaide to get whatever she wanted and ask Nelson to pay. A few moments later, Adelaide emerged from the delicatessen with Nelson in tow. He peered through the car window, and there on the back seat was the woman he had glimpsed at the side of the road. Oliver introduced her as Winnie Madikizela from Bizana.

'Oh, so she's a relative,' Nelson said, for Oliver, too, was from Bizana.

⁴ Oliver Tambo, interview with Luli Callinicos, fill in ref...; Leon and Laura Levy, interview with author, 7 July 2018; Ronnie Kasrils, interview with author, 12 December 2018.

‘Don’t you know Winnie?’ Oliver replied. ‘She is always dancing up and down the newspapers,’ for Winnie’s beauty had recently caught the attention of the weekly *Golden City Post*.⁵

Nelson phoned Winnie in her office the next day; would she have lunch with him, he asked.

Years later, in her memoir, Winnie would recall being scared out of her wits. What did this famous man, held in such godlike regard, want with her? She was pretty, to be sure; she had been aware of that for a long time. But she was a nobody, desperately young and utterly unknown, her career hardly begun.

She swallowed her fear and told him that she might indeed be available for lunch, if they could find a suitable time.

And so they agreed that on the coming Sunday, March 10th, she would be fetched from her hostel and taken to Kapitan’s, the Indian restaurant near Nelson’s office where he ate every day.

Winnie spent the period between the phone call and the date with Nelson in a state of high anxiety, she would recall; what would she say in response to his questions; and what questions might she possibly ask him?

And, as she remembers it, the lunch itself did little to calm her, for she understood after just a few moments that she would have to share this man, even now, on their first date; no sooner had they sat down than a line of people formed at their table to talk to him. She looked on, silent and self-conscious. And just when the line evaporated and she and Nelson began to talk, a new ensemble would come to greet him. She felt she was an audience to a show in which she had no part.

And, to make matters worse, she had never eaten spicy Indian cuisine; her whole life she had lived on the institutional food of boarding schools and women’s hostels and on the stodgy meals prepared in her father’s rural home. Her tongue burned whenever she put her fork in her mouth; she had constantly to drink from her water glass, but with each sip the burning only grew worse.⁶

After lunch, things went on in the same vein. The short journey from the restaurant to his car took half an hour as so many people stopped him to talk, to consult, to ask advice. She had never before

⁵ Adelaide Tambo, interview with John Carlin, 1999, at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mandela/interviews/tambo.html>. The first published photograph of Winnie was published in the 7 May, 1955 edition of *Golden City Post*.

⁶ Winnie Mandela, *Part of My Soul Went With Him* (New York: Norton, 1985), 58.

witnessed a human being who belonged so wholly to *everybody*, she would recall. She was ‘stunned and fascinated’.

If they were to get any time alone together, they resolved, they would have quite literally to leave town, and so they drove into the countryside and went walking in an empty field. But, even here, alone, the inequality between them was palpable. Her sandal strap broke and she had to walk barefoot over rocky ground. She was hobbling and tripping over, and, to balance her, ‘he held my hand just as my father would hold a little girl’s hand’; and when they got back to the car he suddenly kissed her.⁷

He phoned a few days later; he wanted to see her again. But between his law practice and the endless treason trial; between his escalating work in the African National Congress and his insistence that he exercise every week day, without fail, he simply did not have time to see her. He would have to double up, to have her with him while he was doing something else.

And so their second date, she discovered, was to take place at his gym. She was to watch him while he laid into a punching bag and skipped and did push ups, this big, imposing man, the sweat pouring off him, his body sculptured and fit. This was not a shy man. Neither of them ever said when they first slept together, but on this, their second date, he was preening, without shame, displaying his body to her, displaying its sheer impressiveness, while she sat there, watching, clad, one imagines, in one of the full-length dresses she wore to work.

Neither Winnie nor Nelson recounts when exactly they decided to marry; it was sometime in 1957, in the months after they met. The point, though, is that Nelson did not *ask* her to marry him; he *informed* her that they were to marry, informed her in passing, as it were. As she recalls it, they were saying goodbye, at the end of a date, when he mentioned, casually, that the wife of the head of the South African Communist Party, a woman called Ray Harmel, was a seamstress in a factory, and that Winnie should talk to her about making a wedding dress.

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By the end of 1957, Nelson was divorced; he and Winnie married the following June. They exchanged their vows on the grounds of a Methodist mission near Winnie’s ancestral home in

⁷ Winnie Mandela, *Part of My Soul Went With Him*, 58-9.

Bizana, more than a thousand kilometres from Johannesburg, in a ceremony that was more a Madikizela than a Mandela affair. Winnie's father, Columbus, was a significant figure in the district and it was expected that his daughter's wedding would be large and generous; hundreds of Bizana's citizens crammed the church pews.

The bridegroom's party, in contrast, numbered barely a dozen. When Nelson walked down the aisle he was flanked by two of his closest political peers, the lawyer, Duma Nokwe, and his comrade and close friend, Lilian Ngoyi. The ceremony's only recognition of the bridegroom's fame was the car in which the couple left the mission grounds; it was draped in the black, green and gold of the African National Congress, the organisation that had dominated Nelson's life since the mid 1940s. Nelson himself barely managed to obtain permission to attend his own wedding. Serving a banning order, his movement heavily restricted, he was granted leave from Johannesburg for less than a week.

After the ceremony, the wedding party returned to Columbus's home where a feast rolled on unabated for four days; anyone and everyone could come and partake. By the time Winnie and Nelson took their leave to return to Johannesburg, the Madikizelas of Bizana –*scores* of Madikizelas, for the family was large and famous – were stumbling around in merriment.⁸

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They lived under the same roof such a short time, just over three years, before Nelson had to disappear underground. During this brief period – the only period in which friends and comrades observed them together until after Nelson's release from prison decades later — the story that Winnie and Nelson themselves would come to tell, of the powerful public man and the gorgeous naïf, would be repeated ad infinitum. Winnie was 'as shy as she was beautiful', one of Nelson's political associates would recall years later. 'It was hard to get to know her because she said so little.'⁹ And when Nelson and his peers gathered socially for Sunday lunch at the suburban home of a white comrade, Winnie would go off alone with a pile of fashion magazines.¹⁰ Or, while the

⁸ Fatima Meer, *Higher Than Hope: The Authorized Biography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Penguin, 1988), 121-126.

⁹ Luli Callinicos, interview with author, 24 May 2018.

¹⁰ Rusty Bernstein, interview with Anthony Sampson, 18 August 1996, Anthony Sampson papers, Weston Library, University of Oxford.

adults were talking politics, she would slip away to the bedroom of the teenage daughter of the lunch's host and gossip.¹¹

Indeed, many of Nelson's male comrades teased him, with a nod and an understanding wink, for following the blind heat of his desire. One morning during a recess in the treason trial, while the accused were chatting outside, Moses Kotane, a comrade of Nelson's and a fellow co-accused, nodded his head at Winnie, who had been watching the trial from the gallery.

'Such an intimidating and seductive beauty does not go with a revolutionary!' he said, bursting into laughter.¹²

Years later, Nelson's authorised biographer would chide him for his choice of second wife. She provided an 'exotic contrast' to his political life, the biographer would write; and in choosing excitement he was sacrificing something else, something he would sorely miss in the troubled times ahead; for Winnie would not provide 'the kind of stable home base which many of his political friends took for granted', and which he would desperately need when imprisonment threw his affairs into disarray.¹³

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But this depiction – of the celebrated man besotted with a girl barely out of adolescence, and of a raw young woman swept off her feet by a powerful older man – is deceptive. The bare facts are without doubt true. Nelson *did* do a double take upon sighting a beautiful young woman on the side of the road. And they *were* introduced in a delicatessen one afternoon in early March; many years later, Adelaide Tambo remembered the moment vividly. And Nelson *did* invite Winnie to Kapitan's for lunch, for his comrade, Joe Matthews, remembers picking her up at midday to take her to Nelson.

But the *sense* of what happened between them is what is deceptive.

¹¹ Barbara Harmel, interview with author, 25 May 2018.

¹² Cited in Fatima Meer, *Higher Than Hope: The Authorized Biography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Penguin, 1988), 119.

¹³ Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (London: Harper, 1999), 113.

Much later, in 1970, when Nelson was six years into his life sentence, he wrote Winnie a letter filled mainly with family matters.

‘By the way,’ he added, near the end of the letter, apropos nothing at all, ‘the other day I dreamt of you convulsing your entire body with a graceful Hawaiian dance at the BMSC [Bantu Men’s Social Club]. I stood at one end of the famous hall with arms outstretched ready to embrace you as you whirled towards me with the enchanting smile that I miss so desperately.’

He went on to try to interpret his dream.

‘I cannot explain why the scene should have been located at the BMSC. To my recollection we have been there for a dance only once – on the night of Lindi’s wedding reception. The other occasion was the concert we organised in 1957 when I was courting you, or you me. I am never certain whether I am free to remind you that you took the initiative in this regard. Anyway the dream was for me a glorious moment. If I must dream in my sleep, please Hawaii for me.’¹⁴

And so we are informed, in passing, many years later, as we eavesdrop on a letter between husband and wife, that the story they tell, not just for public consumption, but for their own consumption – ‘I’m never certain whether I am free to remind you...’ Nelson writes – is not quite right.

Another letter from that time, from Nelson to Winnie, gives an inkling of what actually happened between them. It is written in deep code for Nelson is aware that the prison authorities and the security police will see it long before it reaches his wife.

He has been in prison for seven years. Winnie has sent him a photograph of herself; he has been staring at it endlessly and is beguiled. His thoughts, he tells her, have wandered ‘to Hans St where a friend would jump into a blue van & unburden herself of all the solemn vows that are due from fiancée to her betrothed & immediately thereafter dash across to an Olds on the opposite end of the block with vows equally sweet and reassuring.’¹⁵

Seventy-Six Hans Street is the address of the Helping Hand Club for Native Girls, the women’s hostel where Winnie lived when she and Nelson were courting. And the ‘Olds’, of course, is Nelson’s Oldsmobile. Winnie was not only engaged to Nelson and another man at the same time;

¹⁴ Nelson Mandela to Winnie Mandela, 1 August 1970, in Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2013), 190.

¹⁵ Nelson Mandela to Winnie Mandela, 2 April 1969, in *The Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela* ed. Sahn Venter (New York: Norton, 2018), 80.

she would, in Nelson's account, literally dash between the cars of her respective fiancées as each waited for her outside.

Nelson remembers, too, 'the skill with which she manipulated her evening "studies" at Chancellor House [the building in which Nelson's law firm rented offices] & made it possible to receive and entertain old friends as soon as new ones proceeded to the boxing gym.'¹⁶

Again, Nelson is concealing the meaning of his story from prying eyes. But he is clearly reminding Winnie that when she spent her evenings in Nelson's offices, 'studying', she would receive another lover the moment he left for the gym.

They had been apart for seven years when Nelson wrote this letter. His infatuation heightened by the photograph Winnie had sent him – it 'depicts ... the devastating beauty and charm which 10 stormy years of married life have not chilled,' he wrote – he remembered how audacious, how self-possessed, how positively scandalous she was, when they were courting.

The other fiancé, incidentally, who waited in Hans Street in the blue van, and who visited Winnie in Nelson's office when Nelson was at the boxing gym, was a man called Barney Sampson. A little older than Winnie, he was stylish and good looking; he also did not have a drop of political blood in his body. When Winnie told him that she was marrying Nelson, Sampson, heartbroken, tried to take his own life with an overdose of pills. Nelson rushed Winnie to the hospital to be at Sampson's side.¹⁷

And so the notion that Winnie was a young naïf when she married Nelson, a notion both of them did so much to encourage, is not right. And, indeed, if we interpret the biographical facts of Winnie's early life correctly, the idea that she was witless and shy when she met Nelson becomes improbable.

As a child, Winnie was formed in a world quite unlike our own; the danger of reading her anachronistically is great. Winnie did not help much in this regard; aware of her audience's ignorance of her childhood milieu, she encouraged a great deal of misunderstanding. One of her biographers described the young Winnie as the equivalent of a 'dumb blonde', concerned with clothes and men and with little else.¹⁸ It would hardly be possible to get further from the truth.

¹⁶ Ibid, 80.

¹⁷ Meer, *Higher Than Hope*, 120.

¹⁸ Emma Gilbey, *The Lady: The Life and Times of Winnie Mandela* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 38.

If we read Winnie's childhood as it ought to be read, the notion that any man, no matter how powerful, might sweep her off her feet, becomes highly dubious. When Winnie met Nelson she was young and beautiful, but she was also an extremely serious young woman of whom, I will show, a prestigious career was not just expected, but demanded. She had indeed been groomed for the highest accomplishments possible for a black woman at that time.

Nor was she new to the advances of men much older and more powerful than herself. Her recollection, in her memoir, that Nelson's phone call took her utterly by surprise – what would such a man want with me? – is disingenuous to say the least. By the time she met Nelson, she had been the object of at least half a dozen such advances, each of them persistent, each of them pursued, not just by influential men, but by *the most* influential men, lawyers, doctors and senior members of various Xhosa royal families. And she had honed an arsenal of defensive weapons against these advances; she had mastered quickly, because she had had to, elegant ways of dodging them.

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Why would Nelson and Winnie spin a story that is not quite right: a story told not just to the world but to themselves? Why would Nelson tell Winnie, 13 years after they met, that he was 'never certain whether I am free to remind you' that it was *she* who courted *him*?

We need to think ourselves back into the sexual mores of those times. A married man, famous, powerful, and almost forty years old – today, such a man going hard after a 20-year-old beauty raises eyebrows. Back then, such a scene may have seemed daring, perhaps even presumptuous. But it was the reverse that was beyond the pale: a pretty girl, barely out of adolescence, pursuing a married man. Pretty girls did not wear their sexual desire on their sleeves, not unless they were prepared to be branded as dishonourable.

Winnie and Nelson censored their tale, even when they told it to themselves, because at the time Winnie's role was barely tolerable. Nelson took the burden of the seduction onto his broad shoulders, for it sat more comfortably there.

Indeed, it would become Winnie's *modus operandi* to conceal what she was doing behind an old-fashioned woman's role: after her performance as a young naïf she would become wife, mother, social worker – and she would twist each of these roles into forms seldom witnessed before.

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There are other reasons why the tale of Winnie as young innocent has held so fast. The world has long been divided between her defenders and her detractors and the story suits them both.

The tale of a naïf turned monster has a deep and ancient pedigree and to her detractors the temptation to tell it is overwhelming. That such a pretty thing transmogrified into a beast is, quite literally, the stuff of legend.

And if young Winnie the innocent is the best way to start the tale that condemns her, it is also the necessary beginning of the story that celebrates her. For the most salutary point of this latter story is that she was made by what she came to suffer. And nobody can deny that in the years after she married Nelson Winnie suffered.

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But there is another reason Winnie and Nelson told the story that they did; they had neither the words nor, indeed, the concepts, to describe the partnership they were actually creating; so they told an inadequate story instead. In years to come, in his letters to Winnie, Nelson would expend thousands of words trying to name it.

Nelson and Winnie met more than six years before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and so they could not have known, because the world had yet to witness it, what it meant for every inch of a family's private life, every tear shed, every heartbreak suffered, every grin and every laugh, to have a double life, to be at once deeply personal and yet also to exemplify the collective life of millions.

The closest either of them had come to grasping this phenomenon was in their understanding of the life of Jesus, which had been rammed down Winnie's throat since she was knee-high. They both claimed to have grown fed up with Jesus, but they were to learn from him nonetheless. When Nelson wrote to Winnie from prison, to counsel her that her every gesture was a lesson to her people, it was through the story of Jesus that he told his tale.

By 1957, I will argue, Nelson was on his way to becoming a man whose consciousness of his performance on the political stage had penetrated the depths of his inner life. As such, he was never alone with himself, for even in his most private meditations he was shoring up what he would need for his political life.

As for Winnie, the most important aspect of her childhood, I will show, resides in the fact that the last two generations of her paternal family remade their world and everyone in it. The Madikizelas were not just famous and powerful; they were exemplary. Everything they said, everything they did, was emblematic of the new world they had made. And Winnie herself, I will show, was a central figure in these exemplary performances. The idea, not only that she was a leader, but that she lived her life before an audience, an audience that learned to live their own lives by watching her live hers, was familiar to her.

And so, although I cannot prove it with incontrovertible evidence, I can certainly show its deep plausibility: that when Nelson and Winnie met they shared an affinity; they both understood, as few others might understand, the sheer power of what they would look like together.

They may not have been entirely conscious of it, for among the feelings that spurred them on vanity surely had a central place, and it is difficult to be honest about being vain. But perhaps they desired one another, so urgently and so soon, in part because they were seeing themselves together through the lens of a camera.

And it was not long before the cameras of photojournalists and the pens of magazine writers were drawn to them and their marriage. This was 1957; nearly two decades would pass before the apartheid government was to permit the introduction of television to South Africa; we are not talking of the saturated coverage of personal life with which we are familiar today. But the degree of media interest in their romance was highly unusual for the time. When they were engaged, the *Golden City Post* sent a photographer and a journalist to cover the event and gave it three-quarters of a page. And when they visited a jazz venue together their picture appeared the following day in *Bantu World*. Soon after, they were pictured together by a photographer from *Drum Magazine*.

This degree and type of attention was not unusual for figures in the world of entertainment and sport: it was quite unusual for a political figure. Nelson grasped the significance of this; the spectacle of himself with Winnie was not ‘an exotic contrast’ to his political life; it was deeply political. If anyone understood that the force of one’s politics resided, not just in the content of what one said, but in one’s appearance when one said it, it was Nelson Mandela.

‘Decades before “black is beautiful”’, a perceptive commentator has observed, ‘[Nelson and Winnie] were a visible celebration of black African glamour and desirability...’¹⁹

They did not yet have the experience to grasp the full implications of what they were getting into: they did not yet know its dangerous power. For it was not just their image that they were casting into the public sphere, but their very lives. The idea that public life might swallow private life in its entirety, all of it, was foreign to them; and yet this is precisely where they were going. They were throwing themselves into the maelstrom of history, and nobody in a maelstrom is in control of their journey.

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To appreciate the novelty of what was happening between Nelson and Winnie, it is necessary to step back from the Johannesburg milieu in which they met, and back, too, from the country in which they were both born. For they courted at an auspicious moment in world history and their romance should be placed in its broadest context.

Across Africa, across the Asian subcontinent, through to the Dutch East Indies, British Malaya and French Indochina, the great European empires of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were surrendering their colonies when Winnie and Nelson met. Just four days before their first date, on March 6, 1957, a black man, Kwame Nkrumah, had been sworn in as President of Ghana, the first of Africa’s post-colonial independent states. The remainder of Britain’s, France’s and Belgium’s African colonies would follow in a rapid cascade.

A decade earlier, in India and in Pakistan, indigenous south Asian men had come to power and for the first time since imperial conquest began to rule their lands. And five months after Nelson and Winnie met, in August 1957, the Federation of Malaya declared independence from Britain.

¹⁹ Brenna Munro, ‘Nelson, Winnie and the Politics of Gender,’ in Rita Barnard (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 94.

In short, not just across much of the African continent, but through a swathe of the world, previously colonised men were either beginning, or preparing, to take office. And in all of these places a question was asked: what sort of men were fit to exercise power? What should men who had been colonised do to prepare for public office?

The answers of course varied from place to place; we are talking, after all, about a broad ensemble of human beings. But one answer, and a surprisingly common one given the diversity of people involved, was that to command the public sphere men must be patriarchs. The vast audiences that watched these men perform their public duties should clock the fact that they possessed a hinterland, glimpsed briefly on ceremonial occasions, in which there was a wife, or wives, and children and servants. That this hinterland was largely *private*, that its innards were sheltered from public view, was extremely important. Between their lives as statesmen and their lives as patriarchs a line was drawn; the drawing of this line was a *sine qua non* of the dignity required to exercise power.²⁰

‘It is held,’ wrote Jomo Kenyatta, the founding father of independent Kenya, ‘that if a man can control and manage effectively the affairs of a large family, this is an excellent testimonial of his capacity to look after the interests of the tribe.’²¹ Kenyatta was talking about the mores of the Gikuyu, into which he had been born and raised; but he may as well have been talking about much of the early post-colonial world.

The wives of anticolonial leaders were never entirely invisible; in fact, many of the men who liberated their people from imperialism spoke and wrote about the women they married. But the way they did so often only reinforced the public/private divide. This was true even of Mohandas Gandhi, more interested in the soul, and thus in the interior life of people, than any other anticolonial leader, and liable at any moment to discourse at length on sexuality, male and female alike.

Since his parents died, Gandhi told an audience in 1929, his wife, Kasturba, had ‘been my mother, friend, nurse, cook, bottle-washer and all these things.’ And, he added, he and his wife had ‘come to a reasonable understanding that I should have all the honours and she should have all the

²⁰ Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²¹ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York: Vintage, 1962), 175.

drudgery'. As his biographer points out, Gandhi was both mocking himself and being quite serious.²²

Kasturba was in fact actively involved in many of the Gandhi's political campaigns and was on more than one occasion jailed for her troubles. But they were very much *his* campaigns. Indeed, he understood her growing political involvement as a wife's act of submission to her husband. 'According to my earlier experience,' he was to write, 'she was very obstinate. In spite of all my pressure she would do as she wished. This led to short or long periods of estrangement between us. But as my public life expanded, my wife bloomed forth and deliberately lost herself in my work.'²³

Gandhi's close colleague, Jawaharlal Nehru, who would become independent India's first prime minister, and in whose career Nelson was to develop an intense interest, wrote very movingly about his wife, Kamala, for she died young, leaving him bereft. When he was 'living like a person possessed, giving myself utterly to the cause I had espoused,' he would write more than a decade after Kamala's death, she was his 'haven... What indeed could I have done if she had not been there to comfort me and give me my strength, and thus enable me to re-charge the exhausted battery of my mind and body?'²⁴

This, indeed, was in many parts of the world the ideal figure of the freedom fighter's wife: a woman as impassioned by the struggle as her husband and who thus sympathised with his consuming commitment to public life; a woman who understood that giving him succour and keeping his house was a *political* task as it gave him the space to do his work.

Nehru wrote of his deep love for his wife, but when he did so it was not just as a lover and a husband, but as a *nationalist*. Taking in the sum of what she meant to him as she lay dying, she became, in his mind, 'a symbol of Indian women, or of woman herself. Sometimes she became curiously mixed up with my ideas of India, that land of ours so dear to us, with all her faults and weaknesses, so elusive and so full of mystery.'²⁵

It was rare that a marriage became a truly *political* spectacle. There were exceptions, though. One was when a prominent leader wed a white woman; such a union oozed political meaning and demanded public management. Thus, when Leopold Sengor, the great intellectual of Francophone

²² Cited in Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 247.

²³ Mohandas Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (New York: Dover, 1983), 9.

²⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, first published in 1946), 40-41.

²⁵ Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 43.

decolonisation and the first president of Senegal, married Colette Hubert, a Frenchwoman who had been his secretary, in 1957, he felt compelled to write poetry about her. And in his poems she became a stand-in for Europeans in general; he was *choosing* a relationship with a white woman, he wrote, because in loving her he could also find love for those who had invaded his land and bespoiled his heritage. His marriage thus became a performance of his capacity to forgive and an exemplar of the collective forgiveness he wanted his people to offer their erstwhile colonisers.²⁶

But what was being performed, of course, was *his* capacity to forgive; Hubert herself played no role at all other than to be written about.

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By the time he met Winnie in 1957, Nelson understood himself to be a major political figure in the making. His first marriage had broken down in part because his wife neither shared his political passion nor accepted the extent to which his work took him from home. And so there is little question that while he and Winnie courted, the marriage he imagined was one in which politics would take centre stage.

But, casting an eye around the decolonising world – and he certainly *did* cast an eye, for black South Africa's political leaders watched with obsessive interest as indigenous men took office in Asia and then in Africa – there was no model for the marriage he and Winnie were to make. Such a marriage had yet to be invented.

And, indeed, we can be fairly certain that Nelson, as co-creator of his marriage to Winnie, had only the dimmest sense of what their union would become. For Nelson was in fact one of those who thought that the hinterland of a public man should be screened. When his first wife, Evelyn Mase, confided in one of Nelson's colleagues about their marital strife, he was beside himself with rage. Airing delicate household matters in public, no matter how small that public, was, for him, beyond the pale.

²⁶ Jean Vaillant, Jean Vaillant, *Black, French and African: A Life of Leopold Sedar Senghor* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 280-282.

And yet Nelson also understood the power of public performance like nobody else in his political milieu; and there is abundant evidence that he wanted the spectacle he and Winnie made to be *seen*. He did so precisely because he knew that it emitted political meaning, that the spectacle of a desirable black couple carried immense power.

Between these two competing ideas – that a public man has a private hinterland and that his marriage should be seen – was, I believe, a zone of cognitive dissonance. Nelson simply did not have the experience to grasp how incompatible these ideas might become. Bringing a marriage into the public sphere means bringing with it attendant matters of gender, and, most especially of sexuality, complicated matters to contend with on the public stage to say the least. Nor did he know, despite his excitement at her audacity and at her sheer will for *life*, what a staggeringly powerful woman he was marrying, a woman who would not only demand a place in public life, but who would perform there as few other women ever had. In the years ahead she would become a master of spectacle; and there was nothing she would not sacrifice, not even her own wellbeing, to get that spectacle right.

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The book I am writing is about Nelson and Winnie Mandela's marriage and what became of it during their long period of separation. It is a very personal story, to be sure, for theirs is a tale of love and its betrayal. But it is also a story about politics and leadership. For Nelson and Winnie enlisted their marriage into public life. They were among the select few who choose to offer their personal journeys as material for collective journeys; their very lives were fashioned to provoke answers to great moral questions.

And they were both successful in this endeavour beyond even their own grand imaginations. For in the period in which they were apart Nelson and Winnie were to become two of the most famous people on the planet; and their fame was to give each of them extraordinary power.

And yet, as they became world famous so they grew estranged. And with their gathering estrangement each began to offer opposing answers to urgent questions.

One of the great questions traversing all times is what to do about the past. Does one forgive the injustices committed by those who have wronged one? If so, on what terms? By the time she died,

Winnie had become an eloquent skeptic of forgiveness. She tied this skepticism to an account of the suffering she had endured while Nelson was in jail, declaring that she was the product of the violence her enemy had inflicted upon her. She thus exhibited her own life as evidence that the past does not die and that its wounds do not heal. Nor would she apologise for her own violence, which was not inconsiderable and at times was meted out on the defenceless and the weak; black people, she said, should never apologise for what they did when they were oppressed.

I write in the wake of her death when the public meanings attached to her memory remain unsettled. But it is likely that in generations to come she will be remembered, along with Franz Fanon and Malcolm X, as a proponent of the violence of the oppressed. One can already see this legacy taking shape in South Africa, where disillusion with the terms of the settlement Nelson negotiated run deep, and where tens of thousands took to the streets to mourn Winnie's death.

But a crucial difference between Winnie on the one hand, and Fanon and Malcolm on the other, is that Winnie was a woman. When she advocated violence and, indeed, when she exercised it, she described herself, not just as a soldier, but as a wife, a mother and, indeed, as a social worker.

In all of these roles she was ungovernable. The more the apartheid state hurt her, the more defiant she grew. The more the African National Congress tried to tie her to organisational discipline, the more maverick she became. She did what she wanted, said what she wanted and slept with whom she wanted. It was as an ungovernable woman that she commanded distaste and adoration; and it is as an ungovernable woman that she will be remembered.

Nelson, as we know, came to very different conclusions about the past. It is not just that he forgave what happened there. It is that he grasped, as few others have, the creative power of forgiveness. Long before the end of apartheid, he came to believe that black people could not be free unless they forgave. And he came upon this insight in relative isolation for his colleagues in prison were absorbed with other matters.

He believed, too, that to forgive was not to forget what happened in the past, but, on the contrary, to claim control over it. Only forgiveness could conserve the memory of outrage and yet release people from it. Only forgiveness could refuse the right of white people the power to determine what black lives meant.

When he was released from prison Nelson did not so much tell this to the world as he showed it. Through his own public conduct he exhibited that one could forgive without losing honour or self-respect. Indeed, it is the one who is forgiven who risks losing dignity; to forgive is a form of

triumph. This is one of the many antinomies of Nelson's politics, and an access point to its dark side, much more of which later.

It will be book's contention, not just that Winnie and Nelson will be remembered for giving opposite answers to an enduring question, but that the evolution of their respective politics arises from their marriage. They worked out their politics as they worked out their relationship with one another, the two stories inextricably entwined.

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In the space left to me, I will give one example of this – a dialogue between them, extending over many years, concerning Winnie's long and painful period of imprisonment in 1969 and 1970. But I must start the story a few years earlier, on the eve of Nelson's incarceration:

In 1960, the African National Congress was banned. The following year, it turned to armed struggle and Nelson went underground to lead it. He left home. From now on, he and Winnie would only see one another sporadically, in secret, every few weeks.

This situation stretched in 1962. For all of this time Nelson and the apartheid state played a game of cat and mouse. He would emerge from hiding briefly and spectacularly, always carefully choreographed, always ensuring that a camera was on hand, only to disappear again.

His appearance had subtly changed. He had grown a beard. He now wore a trench coat. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara were just entering public consciousness. The slick lawyer had been replaced by the revolutionary.

Black South Africans watched this drama with growing emotion. For it was obvious to all that the cat would sooner or later catch the mouse; Nelson would be arrested and put on trial; and then he would almost certainly be sentenced to death and hanged.

He was a soon-to-be martyr, and as black people followed his escapades, they began to love him. What he would come to suffer seemed to embody all black suffering. In his willingness to sacrifice, a heroism was born that commanded both sorrow and unbounded hope.

All of this he staged quite self-consciously. Later, in letters to Winnie, he would tell her that he when he was on the run he was fairly certain that he was soon to die; his task, as he saw it, was to write own his death as a fable, one that would inspire black South Africans to win their freedom.

And if people began to love Nelson because he was to be executed, they began to love Winnie, too, for she was the martyr's brave bride. She was young and in love and her husband seemed destined to die. And as she began to speak publically, the conviction and the clarity she displayed were remarkable in one so young. She was heading for tragedy with her eyes wide open.

Nelson and Winnie were drawn to one another because they both understood the power of their image. But neither could have known how soon their marriage would come to tell a story of such drama and scale.

When their trial came to an end in June 1964, Nelson and his co-accused were spared the hangman's scaffold, but they were jailed for life. Nelson was carted off to Robben Island to a life of hard labour and a bare cell. As for Winnie, she was left a single mother of two toddlers.

And she was also left as the custodian of her nation's most famous tale. She had agreed to enlist the story of her life into politics. But she was no longer in control of the story her life would have to tell. For it now fell to her to remain brave and outspoken and to keep her husband's name alive. And, by the same token, it fell to her to remain celibate, not just for the sake of marital fidelity, but as a matter of political commitment.

Winnie was to become Homer's Penelope, as an astute commentator has pointed out.²⁷ In the story their marriage now told, it was for her to wait chastely, year in and year out, seeing off more than a hundred suitors, for Odysseus finally to return.

Nelson was a heterosexual man locked in a prison with other men. During his long separation from Winnie, he appears to have been offered little temptation. As a sexual being he would grow increasingly abstract, his love for his wife exclusive and idealised, grounded in memory and in grand visions of the future.

As for Winnie, the odds of her playing the faithful Penelope were improbable. She was young and possessed a wilfulness the world did not yet know about. Agents of the apartheid state, who visited her in guises of escalating cynicism, were hungry to ruin her marriage. And she was more than

²⁷ Njabulo Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (London: Ayebia Clarke, 2004).

simply desirable – to share her bed would bring with it all the illicit excitement of cuckolding a famous man.

I do not have the space to go into the details here, but in early 1965 on Robben Island, Nelson was made aware of an affair Winnie was having. He consulted with Walter Sisulu about whether to divorce her. Sisulu dissuaded him. The matter was then formally discussed on Robben Island, Mandela calling meetings with the leadership of the PAC and Yu Chi Chan Club, an extraordinary story about his handling of the connection between the personal and public I will have to save for another time. Here I will instead explore a series of his letters to Winnie at that time.

In his letters, he addressed her as ‘My Darling’. And he signed off each letter, always, ‘with tons of love and a million kisses’. And, then, from out of the blue, in 1969, he began a letter, not with his usual ‘My Darling’, but with ‘Dade Wethu’ – ‘sister’, in isiXhosa.

‘The salutation in this letter will not surprise you,’ he wrote. ‘In the freedom struggle we are all equals and your responsibility is as great as mine. We stand in the relationship, not of husband and wife, but of sister and brother.’

In an exchange of letters just months earlier, they had joked, flirtatiously, about a young medical student who had courted Winnie in the mid 1950s (and whom Winnie’s father, Columbus Madikizela, had urged her to marry instead of Nelson).

‘Perhaps this arrangement,’ he now wrote, ‘will provide room for the legions of students, medical or otherwise, that have crossed the life of one or the other of us.’²⁸

And so he had said it – their sexual lives would be conducted with others; their relationship with one another would be as brother and sister.

Months later he would recant and tell her that she was once more his wife. Their relationship was only politically charged, he would say, because it was erotically charged. As we will soon see, Nelson would come to a resolution about the connection between their sexual and their political relationship that would provoke Winnie’s anger.

²⁸ Nelson Mandela to Winnie Mandela, 16 November 1969, Donald Card Collection, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg.

What were Winnie's thoughts about Nelson and her marriage at this time? How did she understand her infidelities? Those in whom she might have confided in the mid and late 1960s – the activist, Helen Joseph, who Winnie considered a mother; the Anglican priest, Leo Rakale, who drew her into his church and became her spiritual advisor – are dead; they have taken whatever Winnie might have said to them on the matter to the grave.

Shortly after Nelson was jailed she wrote to him – and there is no reason to think that her words are not heartfelt – of what he meant to her.

'Most people do not realise that your physical presence would have meant nothing to me if the ideals for which you have dedicated your life have not been realised,' she wrote in November 1962. 'I find living in hope the most wonderful thing. Our short lives together, my love, have always been full of expectation... In these hectic and violent years I have grown to love you more than I ever did before ... Nothing can be as valuable as being part and parcel of the formation of the history of a country.'

And yet the gossip in political circles, among people who were meant to be Winnie's comrades, was endless and it was very unpleasant. A person who knew Winnie at the time recalls travelling with her in a lift up to her office at the Johannesburg Child Welfare Society sometime in 1964. Winnie gripped the railing on the side of the lift and gritted her teeth.

'They keep talking about me,' this person recalls her saying. 'They keep talking and talking and talking. One day Nelson will know the truth about me.'²⁹

And when this same person fled into exile later that year, the talk in South African political circles in London was all about Winnie and her infidelities.

This incessant gossip caused Winnie to flee Nelson's comrades; caused her to take refuge, ironically, in further relationships with men, men besotted and eager to care for her, to become her factotums, her servants, her lovers. Intimacy was Winnie's natural currency. Throughout the years Nelson was in prison, she would draw people into intense, consuming relationships. But, back in the 1960s, the motives of at least some of these people were not honourable. For the rest of her life she would have to live with the knowledge that she had misjudged people terribly.

²⁹ Barbara Harmel, interview with author, 25 May 2018.

And then, in May 1969, Winnie was jailed with several others and charged under the new Prevention of Terrorism Act for furthering the aims of the now banned ANC. She would remain behind bars for 17 months. During that time, she was starved, deprived of sleep for days upon end, and she was tortured. It appears that she was targeted for this brutal treatment because she was a Mandela; destroying the wife of South Africa's most famous prisoner was a prize in itself. Winnie's chief interrogator, a man named Swanepoel, already implicated in an extra-judicial killing, serially humiliated her. When her lawyer, Joel Carlson, laid eyes upon her many months after she had been detained, he found that she was malnourished and demented.³⁰

Nelson was beside himself. His mother had died the previous year and when the authorities denied him permission to attend the funeral he was deeply wounded. And now, two months after Winnie was detained, he learned that his first-born child, Thembi, had been killed in a car accident.

His letters during these months were filled with pain and fear. Displaying a degree of cruelty that beggared belief, the authorities chose this moment to cut off his communication with his family. And so he did not know what was happening to Winnie in detention and he feared the worst. Nor he did not know who, if anyone, was looking after his daughters, now aged ten and nine, or whether they were simply alone in the house.

And on top of it all, he believed that the authorities would never let Winnie out, that they would set up a grand show trial and sentence her to life imprisonment.

'[Winnie's] arrest has now cut me off from my home, my friend, my relatives...' he wrote to his sister-in-law in a letter the authorities would not deliver. 'It is nothing less than a calamity...'³¹

In the midst of this despair, he wrote Winnie an extraordinary letter, its aim to guide her through her imprisonment and her ensuing trial.

'Dade Wethu,' he begins, addressing her as 'sister', 'A novel by Langenhoven, *Skadumees van Nasaret* (*Shadows of Nazareth*), depicts the trial of Christ by Pontius Pilate.'

CJ Langenhoven was an Afrikaans writer and a pioneer of Afrikaner nationalism; Nelson was thus announcing that he was to take a lesson from the literary canon of the very regime that had jailed Winnie and him.

³⁰ Joel Carlson, *No Neutral Ground* (London: Quartet Books, 1973), 163-4.

³¹ Nelson Mandela to Tellie Mtirara, 15 July 1969, Donald Card Collection, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg.

The novel takes the form of a letter, he tells Winnie, written by Pontius Pilate to a friend in the wake of the trial of Jesus. Nelson read the novel in 1964, he says, thus signalling that he read it in midst of his own trial.

And then Nelson begins to ventriloquize, adopting the voice of Pilate.

‘For the first time in my experience I faced a man whose eyes appeared to see right through me,’ Nelson’s Pilate writes as he walks into the courtroom and is confronted by the sight of Jesus. ‘He gazed upwards and his eyes seemed to pierce through the roof and see right beyond the stars. It became clear that authority was not in me as a judge, but was down there below in the dock where the prisoner was.

‘My wife,’ Nelson’s Pilate continues, ‘passed me a note in which she informed me that the previous night she had dreamt that I had sentenced an innocent man whose only crime was that of messiah to his people... I knew that what my wife said was quite true, but my duty demanded that I should sentence this man irrespective of his innocence... [O]ut here in the provinces far away from Rome we are at war. A man who is in the field of battle is interested only in results; in victory and not in justice, and the judge himself is on trial. So it was, that even though I knew that this man was innocent, my duty demanded that I give him the death sentence and so I did. The last time I saw him he was struggling towards Calvary amidst jeers, insults and blows, under the crushing weight of the heavy cross on which he was to die. I have decided to write you this personal letter because I believe that this confession to a friend will at least salve my uneasy conscience.’

And then Nelson leaves Pilate and his own voice returns.

‘...[C]omment is unnecessary,’ he writes, ‘save to say that Langenhoven wrote this story in the twenties to arouse the political consciousness of his people in South Africa where, at the time ... the organs of government including the judiciary were monopolised by Englishmen.

‘To the Afrikaner this story may recall unpleasant experiences and open up old wounds,’ he continues. ‘To you and I it raises issues of a contemporary nature. I hope you will find it significant and useful and trust it will bring you some measure of happiness.

‘Tons of tons of love, Mhlope,’ he concludes, using one of his many nicknames for her, ‘and a million kisses.’³²

³² Nelson Mandela to Winnie Mandela, 1 January 1970, Donald Card Collection, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg.

He was showing her what she might do with her immense suffering. She was to martyr herself, to make of her fate a searing display of injustice.

‘Those who are on the front line should be willing and ready to draw the fire onto themselves,’ he wrote to Winnie in another letter at much the same time, ‘in order to inspire...’³³

And although he did not say it in so many words, she was to become a facsimile of him. For he had used his own trial five years earlier to brilliant effect, exposing the injustice the apartheid regime was forced to inflict upon him to secure its own existence.

And, perhaps, too, the idea of Winnie on the cross was some sort of resolution to the problem of her infidelities. For if she were to become a copy of him he would possess her. Political possession would substitute for sexual possession.

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What did Winnie make of these words at the time? It is hard to know. The long period of torture and deprivation had rendered her incoherent; her letters during these months are babbling and strange.

But in years to come her memories of the torture to which she was subjected in 1969 would take centre stage. She would make from these memories a politics of rage.

‘If you keep pounding and pounding on the same spot the feeling dies, the nerve dies,’ she would write of her torture decades later. “And they wonder why I am like I am.”³⁴

She would use her memory of this time, too, to attack Nelson’s politics.

‘And they have a nerve to say, “Oh Madiba [Mandela] is such a peaceful person, you know. We wonder how he had such a wife who is so violent.”’ The leadership on Robben Island was never

³³ Nelson Mandela to Winnie Mandela, 16 November 1969, Donald Card Collection, Nelson Mandela Foundation, Johannesburg.

³⁴ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2013), 235.

touched; the leadership on Robben Island had no idea what it was like to engage the enemy physically. The leadership was removed and cushioned...'³⁵

She wrote these words in 2012, 43 years after Nelson's letter, a letter in which he advised her to do with her suffering what he did with his. They are her belated reply.

You cannot tell me about suffering, she was saying; you don't know the half of it.

And so the politics for which Winnie was to become famous, and for which she will be remembered, arose from her marriage. They are a critique of Nelson's politics. And they are also, at a deeper level, an effort to wrest from him the meaning of her most painful experience; she, not he, would decide what her suffering might mean.

³⁵ Madikizela-Mandela, *491 Days*, 235.