

RITA BARNARD

## Introduction

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was one of the most revered figures of our time, and rightly so. A “life-loving man” by his own description, he committed himself to a compelling political struggle, faced the death penalty, and endured a prison sentence that entailed the sacrifice of a third of his life to his cause.<sup>1</sup> During these long years, he became not only the world’s best-known prisoner, but a symbol of his people’s demand for liberation from racial injustice and a galvanizing icon for millions of others all around the world who cherished the principle of equality and yearned for a politics of moral conviction in their own national spheres. He became a name (rather than a face, for it was forbidden in South Africa to circulate his picture) that encouraged many who otherwise might have remained apathetic to identify with the struggle against apartheid. He emerged from prison unbowed and, despite impossibly high expectations, did not disappoint. Gracious but steely, he steered a country in turmoil toward a negotiated settlement: a country that days before its first democratic election remained violent, riven by divisive views and personalities. He endorsed national reconciliation, an idea he did not merely foster in the abstract, but performed with panache and conviction in reaching out to former adversaries. He initiated an era of hope that, while not long-lasting, was nevertheless decisive, and he garnered the highest international recognition and affection. He won the Nobel Peace Prize (along with F. W. de Klerk, the man who agreed to his release and to the unbanning of his organization, the African National Congress, or ANC) and remained in the global public eye thanks to many other awards and celebrations, including a series of AIDS benefit concerts. As a statesman who was in no one’s pocket, Mandela remained loyal to friends who were unpopular with the Western superpowers; he opened his speeches with lists of predecessors in whose footsteps he saw himself as following; and he boldly condemned injustices perpetrated in many parts of the world. Unlike many leaders who buy into their own image and overstay their welcome, Mandela chose to step down from the presidency of South Africa after only

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one term, thereby asserting the importance of the democratic process over his own personal prestige. Of course, as Mark Gevisser has noted, Mandela did not cease to be a global icon after his retirement – a fact that often made things difficult for his successor, Thabo Mbeki.<sup>2</sup> As a private citizen, Mandela continued to exert influence, both nationally, through his various foundations, and internationally, through organizations like The Elders group, a collective of distinguished senior political figures working together for world peace and human rights.

His record, especially viewed from within South Africa, has never been entirely without controversy. There were times during the prison years when he was considered by some in his organization to be a sellout, and his solitary decision to initiate talks with apartheid government officials was likewise faulted. He presided over the adoption of a macroeconomic dispensation that many still consider a raw deal for the poor, and he failed to address HIV-AIDS at a time when the scope of the pandemic might still have been curbed. There is also a sense in which his chiefly bearing and mode of conduct, the very respect and authority he accrued in representing his nation in his own person, went against the spirit of democracy and, while he constantly insisted that he was a servant of the people and a loyal member of the ANC, his popularity nevertheless generated something of a cult of personality.<sup>3</sup> The effects of his earlier brave and flamboyant actions are also open to debate. The decision to embark on the armed struggle, as well as his conduct of it before his arrest in 1962, was not beyond dispute, even among other activists at the time, and the effects were enduring. As a revolutionary, he displayed a romantic recklessness that led to his capture and thereby, arguably, damaged the anti-apartheid cause. While the trials of the 1960s, in which his appearances were electrifying, enhanced the drama and international visibility of the struggle, they also set it back organizationally. This said, the hope that Mandela inspired, the dignity he embodied, and the moral authority with which he restored South Africa's standing in the eyes of the world were of incalculable benefit to the country and its citizens, as was the model constitution adopted in the second year of his presidency: a constitution that bans all forms of discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of sexual preference. For a while, Nelson Mandela made it possible “to think an aesthetics of innovation, an ethics of conversion, a politics of revolution” – but a revolution that, as he liked to put it, turned out to be a legal, not a bloody, one.<sup>4</sup>

### On Transcendence and Disjuncture

Former US President Bill Clinton's remark that “every time Nelson Mandela walks into a room, we all feel a little bigger” can be seen as a down-home

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way of getting at the politics of the sublime: something that exceeds and transcends the structures, constraints, and ordinariness of the present.<sup>5</sup> Such a politics – or ethics – is articulated in a more philosophical and arresting way in Mandela’s own reflections on freedom in the final pages of his autobiography.<sup>6</sup> He describes how his concept of freedom evolved from the callow belief of a country boy that he was born free – free to run in the fields, to swim, to roast mealies under the stars – as long as he obeyed his father and abided by the “customs of his tribe.” As a young man, he tells us, he started to feel hemmed in, but merely by rules and circumstances that hampered his individualistic pleasures, like the desire to go out every night or read entirely what he pleased. It was only as an adult that he came to understand that he was living in a country where freedom was systematically denied to people who looked like him. He realized, as he puts it, that “not only was [he] not free, but [his] brothers and sisters were not free.” The moment he joined the ANC thus represents for him the moment when “the hunger for [his] own freedom, becomes the hunger of the freedom of [his] people.” This realization is based on the perception that “freedom is indivisible”: “the chains on all of my people were the chains on me.” In prison, paradoxically, his understanding of freedom grew even more capacious: it becomes, in his description, a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. This expansion is inseparable from a more profound understanding of the meaning of confinement. As Mandela puts it, the “man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness.” Thus, “the oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.” Mandela’s retrospective meditation culminates in a remarkable assertion: “When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both.” It offers, also, a call to future action. Even though the struggle for a democratic South Africa has been accomplished, he declares, freedom has not yet been achieved: “The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free. The right not to be oppressed.”

These inspiring reflections, coming as the climax of a life story as arresting as Mandela’s, go some distance toward explaining his national and international appeal. On the most obvious level, one can see how such a story of liberation would speak to colonized people and those who have been denied their civil rights – to those for whom the metaphors of chains and prison have painful historical resonances. One can also see how this narrative draws on and extends a profoundly African understanding of the obligations of kinship, of humanity-in-reciprocity, as captured in the term *ubuntu*. But we should remember that there are also resonant memories in Europe and the Americas of the dream of liberty and the exultation of

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release, from the sack of the Bastille, to the Emancipation Proclamation, to the collapse of the Berlin Wall. And while the worldview expressed here is not strictly speaking a Christian one, it is clearly open to Christian projections: Mandela's life can and has been read in terms of a forgiveness of enemies and the possibility of messianic redemption. For people of conscience, who are tainted nevertheless by privileges enjoyed at the expense of others, these reflections are also deeply moving. White South Africans, in particular, can find in these words a release from the shame of being international pariahs and a generous invitation to transcend the prison house of prejudice. It is also quite characteristic of the way Mandela has functioned as a national and global icon that the conclusion to his autobiography is future-oriented and pedagogical. Freedom is not won for once and for all, or by one individual, but must be claimed and lived out by others. These meditations, in other words, are not addressed merely to Mandela's contemporaries. They also issue a challenge to those who have yet to shape their world. Such are the universal resonances of Mandela's conception of freedom, and they are made all the more powerful by his own story of suffering and overcoming. At stake in Mandela's summary of his life's achievement is a call to imagine "the totality of the possible, the infinity of the Maybe," something that goes beyond the present and extends into the past and the future.<sup>7</sup>

While offering us this sublime dare, Mandela insisted again and again that he was a man of his movement and of his moment, "an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances."<sup>8</sup> But what was Mandela's historical moment? It has often been observed that the global imaginary tends to fix South African politics in a kind of freeze-frame: the anti-apartheid struggle seems eternally captured in the photograph of Hector Pieterse, shot by the police in the 1976 Soweto Uprising, while Mandela often seems to be fixed at the moment of his release in 1990, when he first lifted his fist in a power salute to greet the crowd.<sup>9</sup> Even if this were the only Mandela scrutinized in this collection, it would be impossible to understand him at that moment without also bringing in the history of his organization, of the years of collective resistance inside South Africa, and of the end of the Cold War and its Manichaean geopolitical system, which made change in South Africa seem so intractable. The South African transition to democracy and Mandela's rise to power occurred at a moment when, however briefly, the winds of change were felt in many parts of the world.

But even this is far too narrow a historical contextualization to properly frame the wide-ranging chapters in this collection, which certainly do not succumb to the temptation of being mesmerized by one victorious moment. A more useful way of framing these essays is suggested at the conclusion to Anthony Sampson's authorized biography of Mandela, where he describes

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his subject as both premodern and postmodern. The former designation underscores Mandela's formation in the rural spheres of Xhosa tradition, and the latter addresses the ease with which he, in later years, rose to the role of media celebrity, becoming a "master of the photo-opportunity," capable of "mixing politics with showbiz."<sup>10</sup> While it is easy to see what Sampson means, it seems to me that the very disparity he identifies compels us to describe Mandela, quite simply, as *modern*. Mandela, I would suggest, is a man of the twentieth century, viewed in its global complexity as an era of a radically incomplete and uneven modernity. Grasped in this way, the modern world cannot be understood solely as Euro-American, as only a matter of the global North, and it certainly cannot be understood unless we also take account of the history of colonialism – and, for that matter, of anti-colonialism, which has often involved a re-energizing and redeployment of local traditions.

The Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson reminds us that the protagonists and shapers of modernism in the arts and philosophy were often people whose experiences straddled very different worlds: "born in those agricultural villages we still sometimes characterize as ... premodern, they developed their vocations in the new urban agglomerations with their radically distinct and 'modern' spaces and temporalities."<sup>11</sup> His point is that, even in Europe, the modern experience was one of disjuncture, of living in many worlds and marching to many different beats. Those who grasped this best were people with a sensitivity to temporal lags and accelerations, people with a heightened comparative capacity: with an understanding of both tradition and innovation, stagnation and progress. It is therefore not fanciful to propose that the quintessential modern subject might well be someone like Mandela: a black South African, born in a rural and tribal world, coming into manhood and political consciousness in a vibrant, materialistic colonial city, and ending up as a citizen of the world, a deft participant in the contemporary cultures of the media spectacle.<sup>12</sup> The fact that the white Nationalists who instituted an anachronistic regime of racial segregation were set on denying such subjects a place in modernity, that they refused to see their black compatriots as persons and contemporaries, that they tried, as it were, to turn back the clock is deeply ironic from the perspective I am putting forward. For the system of apartheid only served to exacerbate the sense of disjuncture and discontinuity that was the very hallmark of modernity for so many individuals worldwide.

Mandela was possessed of an unusual flexibility, a "shape-shifting" quality, which enabled him to bridge the different worlds he inhabited in the course of his life with extraordinary courage and grace.<sup>13</sup> As Sampson points out, he was able to find common ground with very different communities and

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people: “he could relate personally ... to rural tribesmen, to mine workers and streetwise city slickers, to African nationalists and freedom fighters, to Indian and white comrades, to Afrikaner warders, to international businessmen or to heads of state.”<sup>14</sup> But it is important not to smooth over what Rob Nixon describes as the ambiguities and contradictions of Mandela’s relationship to place and time – which was particularly complex during his imprisonment.<sup>15</sup> In these years, Mandela was physically absent from the world at large, alive only in memory and in collective dreams of a transformed future. While he was engaged in the dreary, inflexible routines of prison life on Robben Island, he occupied, in the imaginations of others, a kind of messianic time of suspended hope. When he was finally released, Mandela presented something of a puzzle to the international media personalities who interviewed him: they could not make up their minds, as Nixon puts it, “whether he was a maker or a misser of history.”<sup>16</sup> His manners seemed quaint and formal. If, during the 1950s, he seemed to be following the style of the African nationalist leaders like Nkrumah and Kenyatta, he seemed, in the United States of the 1990s, to be reanimating the promise of the long-deceased Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, of whom he was a contemporary.<sup>17</sup> And if, in the eyes of the world, Mandela had what Nixon calls a “marvelous, disconnected, time-machine aura,” the sudden acceleration of experience – indeed, of South African history – that followed his release was certainly equally strange for the man himself. Mandela’s fellow prisoner Ahmed Kathrada has described himself and his comrades as Rip van Winkle figures, for whom the world into which they were released was a kind of science fiction world: strange and unfamiliar. The first microwave oven they ever saw, in the kitchen of Mandela’s house at Victor Verster Prison, made a big impression on them; they had not yet encountered computers or fax machines, or even things like multi-lane highways, overhead bypasses, and so forth.<sup>18</sup>

If Mandela adapted brilliantly to the brave new world of the mass media and, even more importantly, to the anachronistic task of shaping a feeling of nation-ness at the very moment when various global forces were combining to undermine the sovereignty of nation-states, that does not mean that his personal experience was without strange jolts and surprises.<sup>19</sup> In *Long Walk to Freedom*, he reveals, for example, that he did not immediately understand that the woolly objects members of the press held out to him were microphones, and he recalls how surprised he was that a group of young Inuit well-wishers in frigid Goose Bay had watched his release on television and were able to greet him on his arrival at the airport with authentic struggle slogans like “Viva ANC!” His comments beautifully register his astonishment at the complexities of space and time, the rapidity of change, the

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incongruities of cultural contact, and the transformational possibilities of technology. “In my seventy-two years on earth,” Mandela muses,

I had never met an Inuit [*sic*] and never imagined that I would.... What struck me so forcefully was how small the planet had become during my decades in prison; it was amazing to me that a teenaged Inuit living at the roof of the world could watch the release of a political prisoner on the southern tip of Africa. Television had shrunk the world, and had in the process become a great weapon for eradicating ignorance and promoting democracy.<sup>20</sup>

This is Mandela, not just as modern subject, but as modernizer. And the incident is particularly striking to him, the passage makes clear, because he identifies with the Inuit as colonized subjects, about whose “backwardness” he once read as a pupil in English mission schools and who are still carelessly referred to by the Canadian official who accompanies him as “Eskimos.” Mandela’s interest in culture and “tradition,” in other words, is part of his alertness to the possibilities of modernity and part, also, of what Elleke Boehmer describes as his postcolonial assertion – in his life, writing, and thought alike – that humanness and African-ness (or Inuit-ness for that matter) are not oppositional, but coextensive.<sup>21</sup>

If, then, we must reflect on Mandela’s historical circumstances, it is also important that we reflect on our own: on the present moment that surely drives and shapes the collective inquiry of this volume. This collection was produced at a time both auspicious and difficult for such an enterprise. The contributors, while often noting the creative and multivalent qualities of their subject in his heyday, worked with the aged and frail Mandela in mind: Tata Mandela with his silver hair and cane, whose recurrent hospitalizations had all South Africans deeply concerned, already pondering the loss occasioned by his death. We were also aware that South Africa and the world have changed since Mandela’s presidency. While some parts of the world have been transformed in positive and uplifting ways (one thinks of the election of Barack Obama as US president and the Arab Spring revolutions), South Africa has evolved in a rather more sobering direction. By the time that readers hold this book in their hands or peruse it on their computer screens, the brave new democracy, initiated with the inauguration of Nelson Mandela in front of Sir Herbert Baker’s grandly terraced Union Buildings in Pretoria, will have reached its maturity: twenty, twenty-one years old. The astonishing changes from the apartheid era, which may still strike the older ones among us as news, are simply quotidian realities for the young. And those realities are not always happy ones. The economic statistics capture something of the situation: the Gini coefficient, the standard measure of inequality, rose from .57 in 1995 to .63 in 2009. The income



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share of the top 10 percent of the population grew from 45 to 52 percent. The income share of the poorest 20 percent shrank from 3.6 to 2.7 percent, and the share of the next-poorest 20 percent shrank from 6 to 4.6 percent.<sup>22</sup> On the more human and psychological level, too, there has been a palpable shift from the structure of feeling of the Mandela years to something different, darker – or perhaps merely ordinary.

But this ordinariness clearly means something different from what it meant back in the mid-1980s, when Njabulo Ndebele called for the “rediscovery of the ordinary” as a much-needed change from the “spectacular” but simplistic adversarial rhetoric of the anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>23</sup> “Despite the many radical and real manifestations of social transformation,” writes Gareth Cornwell, “it would seem that South Africans have lost that sense of exceptionalism that the more or less peaceful transition of power in the early 1990s conferred upon them, in the eyes of the world, as well as their own.” This has meant an adaptation to a number of harsh facts:

[South Africans] are getting used to the inflated promises of politicians and the disappointment of non-delivery; they are getting used to the idea that their well-being depends upon the vagaries of international economic trends; they are getting used to the fact that they will be governed, like everyone else in the world, by unimaginative self-serving bureaucrats, and that what “freedom” means for the poor is little more than the freedom to assume personal responsibility for their poverty.<sup>24</sup>

What is most striking in these reflections (which arise in an essay subtitled “Long Walk to Ordinariness”) is, of course, that final thought on the contemporary connotations of “freedom.” The word seems today to have lost something of the quality of hope and transcendence with which it was infused in Mandela’s autobiography. It has been narrowed down and hollowed out by neoliberal constraints: by the inequities of capitalism and the market rather than those of race. This change is something that many of the writers included in this volume have tried to assess. They have felt compelled to ponder the pervasive perception that “the Mandela years had been the era of the dream,” the Mbeki presidency the years “of the dream deferred,” and that South Africa has now awakened, for good and ill, to “a time beyond dreams.”<sup>25</sup>

To write about an icon is never easy, especially when one’s aim is not the crudely reactive one of iconoclasm. (It is remarkable that not a single essay in this book is interested in debunking its subject, but rather in complicating, recontextualizing, and renaming him.)<sup>26</sup> The problem is beautifully evoked by Jeremy Cronin, a former political prisoner himself and now deputy minister of public works, in his 1997 “Poem for Mandela”:



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It's impossible to make small talk with an icon  
 Which is why, to find my tongue,  
 I stare down at those crunched-up  
 One-time boxer's knuckles.  
 In their flattened pudginess I find  
 Something partly reassuring,  
 Something slightly troubling,  
 Something, at least, not transcendent.<sup>27</sup>

None of the contributors to this collection, writing at their desks in the United States and South Africa, were close enough to stare at the one-time boxer's knuckles; and, besides, metaphor is for poets. Drawing on the resources of many disciplines – history, anthropology, jurisprudence, political theory, sociology, literature, cinema, and gender and visual studies – the writers included here have had to come up with more than eight lyric lines. Yet they have followed Cronin's example in their efforts not to see their subject's meanings as fixed or inaccessibly “transcendent,” but to remain alert to the processes whereby he shaped himself, his country, his continent, and the world. In so doing, all the contributors have had to confront the fact that narrative, the revisiting of a biography that has assumed the character of a sanctified national allegory, can hinder as much as help the discovery of new insights. For narrative, as Tom Lodge, one of Mandela's best biographers, puts it, is the very medium in which Mandela operated. “For Mandela,” he notes, “politics has always been primarily about enacting stories, about making narratives, primarily about morally exemplary conduct, and only secondarily about ideological vision, more about means rather than ends.”<sup>28</sup> To understand Mandela anew, then, is not to deny that his was, as Lodge puts it, a “politics of grace and honour,” but to consider also how it came to be that he was able to embody such high things. The chapters in this volume, while they do cumulatively reveal a great deal about Mandela's life, are therefore best seen as interrupting and interrogating that linear narrative, stirring though it be. Given the range of methodologies and points of view represented here, this collection is the first academic investigation of Mandela that matches the shape-shifting qualities of its subject.

## Political and Personal Life

The first part of this book is entitled “The Man, the Movement, and the Nation.” Read in sequence, the chapters of which it is composed provide an overview of Mandela's youth, the beginnings of his political career, his imprisonment, his release, the dramatic years of the transition, and the glory days following his inauguration. They also probe the most compelling

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relationships in his life: with his political organization, the ANC, and with his second wife, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. But these chapters are analytical and argumentative as well. The last three in particular are marked by an interest in the ethics and politics of affect: in structures of feeling, emotional styles, and national sentiments. This is a new way of approaching Mandela and one that addresses an arresting paradox: that a man who has not been prone to reveal his emotions should have generated such intense public feelings.

Chapter 1, by Philip Bonner, is one of the most narrative and historically capacious essays in this volume, ranging as it does from the years of Mandela's rural upbringing in the 1920s to the final years of his imprisonment in the late 1980s. The main focus, however, is on the period of Mandela's early political activity, from the moment he became a resident of Alexandra township to the moment of his removal to Robben Island – an eventful twenty-year span. Bonner's concern is to trace out what he calls the "antinomies" that define Mandela: tensions between rural and urban influences, familial and political commitments, submission to party discipline and individual assertion, and between antithetical but deeply ingrained personal traits. Whereas the tendency in most biographical and autobiographical writing – a tendency scrutinized in the final section of this book – is to subsume all contradictions into a linear, developmental narrative, Bonner perceives Mandela's greatness not as something achieved by an overcoming or resolution of his antinomies. He suggests, rather, that it may be precisely these unresolved tensions that made Mandela a great man. Bonner's method, therefore, is not to have us see Mandela's rise to prominence as natural or predictable, but to pinpoint moments where that ascent seems unlikely: moments where the contradictions in his character seemed to precipitate new directions.

One of Bonner's most thought-provoking observations is that the veering between Africanist and non-racial positions evident in Mandela's early career also characterizes South African politics more broadly. The history of the resistance struggle, he proposes, has involved a constant seesawing between these two poles, with neither tradition ever disappearing; one always occupies the ascendant position, while the other is temporarily submerged. It is an idea that readers could profitably bear in mind as they engage with other chapters in this book (especially those of Ngwane, Ndlovu, and Van Robbroeck). It is also worth noting how readily the key arguments of this opening chapter can be extended beyond the point at which it ends: with Mandela's decision to begin talks with government officials. This is a momentous instance of individual assertion and, Bonner suggests, one by which Mandela's legacy will be judged. But one also sometimes hears the