

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

Screening *Winnie* and African Feminist Herstories

by Awino Okech



WINNIE (2017) DIRECTED BY PASCALE LAMCHE

It is August 2018 and the London Feminist Film Festival is screening *Winnie*, a documentary on Winnie Mandela by Pascale Lamche. This is the only documentary endorsed by Winnie Mandela and at the time it had only been shown in South Africa and in the film festival circuit. The festival and documentary screening happened four months after Winnie Mandela's death. The documentary, which features interviews with Winnie and her daughter Zindzi, is argued to be one of the most comprehensive overviews of Winnie Nomzamo's life. *Winnie* is a haunting and extensive tale of a South African freedom fighter who was more publicly known as the wife of Nelson Mandela, the first Black post-apartheid South African President.

The documentary offers a comprehensive story of the woman beside Nelson. It is a view of apartheid from the front seat of one of South Africa's most persecuted families – the Mandelas. *Winnie* foregrounds a social worker who met a handsome lawyer who became a liberation icon through whom she became an active leader of the South African Black freedom struggle. Winnie becomes the consummate struggle hero's wife but also a freedom fighter in the African National Congress (ANC). The documentary paints a picture of a woman who co-led the release of the famous Nelson Mandela. In fact, it demonstrates that without her relentless campaign, many would have forgotten about Nelson Mandela. It chronicles Winnie Nomzamo's sacrifices – banishment, arrests, harassment – incurred because she was the wife of the "terrorist" and incarcerated Nelson Mandela. It is a difficult documentary, as is any film about apartheid South Africa.

I spent four years doing my postgraduate studies at the University of Cape Town, so I thought I had a fair understanding of South African politics. However, I walked out of the documentary screening with a new respect for Winnie Mandela and a realisation of how little her legacy had been recognised. It was a reminder of a feminist insistence on women's stories, their documentation and legibility. Through *Winnie*, the viewers were able to see first-hand how a woman's history could be re-written to serve the purposes of hetero-patriarchy – in this case her well known husband – Nelson Mandela. In life and death Winnie was haunted by actions taken as part of an armed struggle by the African National Congress against the apartheid regime. Specifically, the death of Stompie Seipei, a murder that she was found to not be responsible for (Saba, 2018). Winnie was also vilified for having a sexual life after becoming a political widow due to the twenty-seven-year incarceration of her husband. Winnie was thirty-three years old when Nelson was jailed and he was seventy-six when he was released in 1994 (See Msimang, 2018).

"Some people come in and out of history, but mummy is a constant"

– Zindzi Mandela

I teach at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS, University of London. SOAS is publicly known for its history as a training ground for British colonial officers and much

more recently for its work on decolonising higher education¹. In March 2019, I decided to screen *Winnie* to my gender studies students and open it up to other students in the university. I asked the gender studies student representatives to reach out to student societies to announce this as an open event. As a result, I ended up with a majority non-gender studies room. I saw *Winnie* as a powerful commentary on an argument I had made in class about the importance of feminist histories on the one hand and the invisibility of feminist intellectual knowledge in non-feminist spaces on the other hand. I structured it as an informal event within the university precinct that would be followed by a discussion session. I was clear that I wanted students who were African or Black but who were not part of the gender studies degree programme to benefit from this screening.

Given that the documentary chronicles the violent history of apartheid South Africa, the choice of a non-formal classroom space was critical to holding emotions in a way that a formal classroom could not do. I was also aware that there were a number of South African students who would be moved by the film very differently from those who did not have an understanding of South African history. I needed the students/observers to be present as film goes not as students. In this way we could process the complexity of their emotions outside of a classroom environment where they might be expecting me to hold them accountable to their critical engagement on the theme of the week as well as to hold space for others who may not necessarily feel any connection to the issues being discussed through the documentary. However, I was clear that I was constructing it as a pedagogical space even though it was happening outside formal classroom hours. I also saw this screening as a continuation of conversations I had begun in the classroom.

I paired the documentary with a musical performance by Thandiswa Mazwai, a South African artist performing her song *Nizalwa Ngobani* at Winnie Mandela's funeral service at Orlando Stadium¹. The song is a tribute to the African continent's freedom fighters and a reminder to younger generations to remember their labour. The song invokes Winnie and when she performs it at the funeral she focusses on that invocation. I chose this song as a follow-up to the documentary for two reasons. It was performed to a packed stadium that had gathered to celebrate Winnie's legacy. It was a powerful testament to how a woman who in life had been shrouded by decisions made for the liberation struggle or for personal freedom could in death hold the global stage and not in relation to her husband. Secondly, the song, which is an ode to memorialisation and intergenerational narratives of liberations, also served as an emotional bridge after a heavy documentary.

I followed this song with a speech by Julius Malema², the firebrand leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters political party. Malema's speech at the funeral service was the most talked about speech after that of Winnie's daughter Zenani Mandela-Dlamini. Malema's speech projects a narrative about Winnie Mandela that was missing after her death. As the former president of the ANC youth league, Malema offered a fairly comprehensive overview of Winnie Mandela's contributions to the liberation struggle in South

Africa. In addition, he “called out” individuals and institutions who had publicly dissociated themselves from Winnie when she was alive but who took centre stage during her funeral. In his refrain – “send me a signal, Mama” – he invoked for many Africans who discussed his speech on Twitter someone who wanted to set the record straight. I saw this speech as a powerful vindication if you will that would counter-balance the feeling of Winnie having been hard done by that is evident when you watch the documentary.

Post screening discussion

After the screening, I set up a circle of chairs and those who chose to remain were invited to reflect on how the film made them feel. What questions it raised for them in this moment and in relation to where we were – a university in the United Kingdom. I was struck by the fact that the non-Black students joined the circle, but they chose to witness the conversation rather than participate. While I suspected that this was a deliberate move on their part, I spoke to some of the students after the screening who confirmed that they did not think it was their place to intervene in a discussion that was rooted in an experience of Blackness that they did not have. The documentary exposes the violent and the complex machinery of the apartheid regime and it is hard to not be impacted by it. This was an act of solidarity. Rather than leave the room after the screening they stayed to witness their comrades. This was powerful.

Two strands of discussion emerged from the circle that I want to draw attention to in relation to critical feminist pedagogy, particularly using experience as a resource, transformative learning, and resisting hierarchy. In setting up a screening and discussion space outside the classroom we could collectively build the contours of the discussion and decentre me as a teacher. We therefore disrupted the power dynamic that ordinarily exists in a classroom where it is always expected that the teacher knows more than their students and who is ultimately looked to, to resolve any contention, confusion, or inaccuracies. Secondly, in this space I could actively call on the students’ feelings. We could discuss what those feelings invoked without the pressure of learning outcomes and the one- or two-hour class limit. We could witness these feelings. Third, I did not facilitate the discussion space. We collectively facilitated it. This was made possible by three actions. The first is through the non-Black students who chose to listen and learn. The second is in the other Black students who wanted to honour the South Africans present by giving them space to remember their histories, and for most of them this was embodied in the 2015 Fees Must Fall protest movements (See Agenda, 2017). Finally, the South African students who invited the others in by situating the apartheid history in the Black experience at SOAS.

Secondly, there was organic learning that happened in three main ways. First, the South African students in the room had watched this documentary before but in a context in which the discussion focussed on Winnie the murderer (See Saba, 2018). They commented on the pairing I curated

for this documentary. They noted that it altered the way they were able to be present in the room including making their emotions available to grieving Winnie rather than being angry at Western narratives about Winnie Mandela that I pointed out at the beginning. Secondly, the non-South Africans in the room had an opportunity to have a deeper understanding of racial justice issues in South Africa and contextualise the Fees Must Fall student protests for free higher education that were well known in the United Kingdom as part of decolonising universities projects (See Chigudu, 2020).

Third, there was a transfer of the underpinning questions of white supremacy that framed apartheid and its legacy in South Africa to their manifestation in a university that outwardly projects itself as a decolonising champion. In this context, the documentary and the discussion after elicited their concerns about their frustrations about the nature of the classroom experience both in relation to curriculum and how Africa in particular was taught. These frustrations were discussed in relation to racialisation and the implicit anti-Blackness that they experienced in the university. The fact that the space drew students from across the university allowed us to unpack what their version of a decolonised curriculum was and to discuss the opportunity that the screening had created for other forms of pedagogical engagement that they did not have in the classroom.

In conclusion, this experience drew attention to the limits of the university classroom today, particularly in institutions that take seriously the meaning of transformative and conscientizing education. There is a tension between learning outcomes, assignments, and employability and the desire that both students and teachers have to create organic and evolving spaces for transformative learning. The space that was created in screening *Winnie* was a reminder of what it means to create a critical pedagogical space where the hierarchies between the lecturer as the “knower” and “the student” are disrupted. This is a request that is often desired in the decolonised university, which is challenged by concerns with a degree certificate and value for money due to rising university fees.

Notes

1. <https://www.soas.ac.uk/centenary/the-soas-story/early-years-1917-36/>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnBssyqI3U4>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmQktSjP2Jq>

References

Agenda, Volume 31, Issue 3-4 (2017). Feminisms and Women's Resistance within Contemporary African Student Movements.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ragn20/31/3-4?nav=tocList>

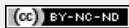
Chigudu, Simukai. 2020. Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford: a critical testimony, *Critical African Studies*, 12:3, 302-312, DOI: 10.1080/21681392.2020.1788401

Msimang, Sisonke, 2018. *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela*. Text Publishing Company

Saba, Athandiwe. 2018. "Stompie burnt into Winnie legacy".

Mail and Guardian. 6th April 2018.

<https://mg.co.za/article/2018-04-06-00-stompie-burnt-into-winnie-legacy/>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).