Robben Island
Histories, identities and futures

The past, present and future meaning of place

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Introduction

The inclusion of place as a subject of historical investigation has proven to be as valuable as the traditional orientation towards time. Investigating the past via an orientation to place has uncovered the different ways in which people imbue specific places with meaning and how this meaning and process of meaning-making changes over time. This process of imbuing place with meaning can occur in a number of ways. It can occur experientially, that is, by living in it and interacting with it physically on an individual level. It can also be made socially and culturally, via collective interactions and experiences of place that are shared amongst a group. Place can also be given meaning through cognitive means – place can be imagined and connected with sometimes from afar. Memory is one such means through which this can occur. Memory plays a significant role in associating meaning with place, as remembering a past is crucial for a sense of identity. This past is bound not only in time, but in place.

The themes of place, experience, meaning, and memory bring us to modern-day South Africa, where its post-apartheid environment has brought about new values, goals, and visions of society and nation. In breaking with its apartheid past, creating a unified national identity, and promoting a new image of democracy to itself and to the world, South Africa has looked to present a 'collective representation of the past' in order to create a new imagined community in moving forward.[1] This representation has dramatically evolved and has been reshaped to meet the new projects of South Africa's self fashioning. Enter, Robben Island. In the case of this small island in the Table Bay region, two additional types of memory—public memory and national memory—are being created, which threaten to subsume the individual and collective memories and meanings of Robben Island's long list of inhabitants. Robben Island and its meaning have become part of, indeed, the most significant part of, post-apartheid identity building in South Africa and as a result have been reshaped. This reshaping as a consequence of the politicising and commodifying of Robben Island is collapsing its multiple memories and meanings into a single dominant narrative of a new South Africa as a whole. Robben Island has become a symbol of hope and triumph over apartheid, and of the nation's new democratic direction; but

[1] Veronique Riouful, 'Behind Telling: Post-Apartheid Representations of Robben Island's Past', *Kronos,* 26 (August 2000): 22-41, p. 22.

this inscribing of meaning is, ironically, obscuring a true democratic telling of its history. This context plays a vital role in investigating the notions of place and meaning on Robben Island, because when investigating memory and meaning associated with place, the multiple agendas, conflicts and negotiations that characterise the process of remembering the past and refashioning national identity all need to be considered. Memory and meaning can be instrumental. The past can be selectively recalled and refashioned as a means to support different aims.[2]

With this in mind, this paper begins by giving a brief history of Robben Island in order to highlight the varying roles the island has played and the various groups involved. Emphasising the entire history of the island is important, as what this paper will argue is that certain histories, memories, and meanings have been favoured over others. I then move on to discuss the multitude of meanings associated with Robben Island in two parts. The first part pays attention to individual and collective constructions of meaning and memory and their existance as internally and organically created. The second part pays attention to public and national constructions of meaning and memory as they have been externally imposed. As will be seen, these two constructions conflict, with the internal stories being subsumed by the so-called official story of the island. In tracing out the problematic reality of place serving national, political and commercial interests, multiple and conflicting interpretations of history and meaning of a place, and the need to recover lost history and meaning, broad thematic connections will also be made. In the final section I discuss debates concerning Robben Island's future, triggered by the problem of conflicting interpretations of place, and the central issue of whose meaning and history should be preserved.

This paper argues that for Robben Island, what is conserved in terms of the official meaning and memory relies on the chosen meaning and identity given to the island by authorities such as the Robben Island Museum. What emerges is that Robben Island's history and the memories and meanings associated with it extend far beyond the current emphasis on post-Apartheid South Africa celebrating its new democracy and a triumph over a dark past. The purpose is to illustrate how Robben Island's use as a symbol for the creation of a public and national meaning and identity threatens to ignore and ultimately lose a multitude of individual and collective meanings and memories. What is happening

[2] Steven Hoelscher & Derek H. Alderman, 'Memory and Place: Geographies of a Critical Relationship', *Social & Cultural Geography,* vol 5, no. 3, (2004): 347-355, p. 349.

with Robben Island speaks to the power of one place to become a symbol for issues larger than its own history.

I
History and identities

Robben Island, Dutch for 'seal island' is located at the entrance to Table Bay, seven kilometres west of mainland South Africa, and is itself only a few kilometres long and wide at just over five square kilometres in total area (fig. 1). The flat low-lying landmass that is visible is the top of a now submerged mountain linked to mainland Blouberg to its east. The island's flatness renders it close to invisible from the perspective of the mountainous mainland, which in stark contrast is always visible from the island. This combination of it being just far away enough and just invisible enough (figs. 2 & 3) unfortunately makes Robben Island an ideal destination for undesirables that prefer to be out of sight and out of mind.

In 1488, the first known European contact with the island occurred when Portuguese explorers rounded the Cape of Good Hope and set themselves up on the island, taking refuge in the natural shelter and protection of the island's caves, and using its animal and land resources. Robben Island was seen as a safer location than the mainland, inhabited by the native Khoikhoi. From around the turn of the seventeenth century, awareness of the island's importance as a maritime resting place grew and it became an unofficial mail station, playing a significant role in maritime communications.[3] From 1652, the Dutch settled the island, turning it into a refreshment post and sheep farm. By the beginning of the eighteenth century the Island's chief function was now as a place of punishment. Large numbers of prisoners began arriving on the island.[4]

In 1795, the British took over the Cape and island after it was abandoned by the Dutch, and continued to use the site as a prison until 1806, when all convicts on the island were relocated in preparation for the beginning of a new British prison settlement.[5] In 1846 a leper asylum, lunatic asylum, and chronic sick hospital were established, and between 1858 and 1910 period, a number of

[3] South African History Online, 'Robben Island: A timeline', retrieved on 25 May, 2012, available at: <http://v1.sahistory.org.za/pages/places/villages/westernCape/robben_island/timeline.htm>.
[4] Harriet Deacon, *The Island. A History of Robben Island 1488-1990,* (Bellville, 1996), pp. 20-21.
[5] Deacon, *The Island*, p. 32.

infrastructural and aesthetic improvements and upgrades were made.[6] Between 1921 and 1931, the lunatic asylum and leper hospitals were closed due to calls for the more humane treatment of lepers and the mentally ill and declining incidences.[7] From 1931, Robben Island took on a role as World War II military base and coastal defense station. A harbour, airstrip, and gun batteries were built and a system of tunnels and bunkers were carved into the island itself. The island fortress also now became the home for thousands of servicemen and women and became more accessible and less mysterious than ever before.[8] However, in 1959, the Minister for Justice announced that Robben Island would be used as a maximum security institution and that most of the ties with the city would once again be cut.[9] Robben Island would once again enter a period of isolation and invisibility in the eyes of the mainland.

From the early 1960s, in attempts to suppress opposition to apartheid, political prisoners began to be sent to Robben Island. In 1964 Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, and other ANC leaders were sentenced to life imprisonment on the island. It was not until 1990 that President F. W. de Klerck unbanned the ANC, PAC, and other organisations, and began to release political prisoners, and it was not until another two years later that the last of Robben Island's political prisoners were released into the newly forming democratic South Africa.[10]

[6] South African History Online, 'Robben Island: A timeline'. Among these improvements: a cemetery was added in 1858, a lighthouse in 1864, a restaurant in 1880, a garden and planting campaign was undertaken in 1882, in 1887 upgrades were completed on the leper houses with a separate female leper block added in 1890. Between 1892 and 1896 a tramway, library, guest house, Commissioner of the Island's residence, and Church of the Good Shepherd, and jetty were all added to the modernising island.
[7] Deacon, *The Island,* p. 75; South African History Online, 'Robben Island: A timeline'.
[8] South African History Online, 'Robben Island: A timeline'.
[9] Deacon, *The Island,* p. 92.
[10] South African History Online, 'Robben Island: A timeline'; Deacon, *The Island,* p. 141.

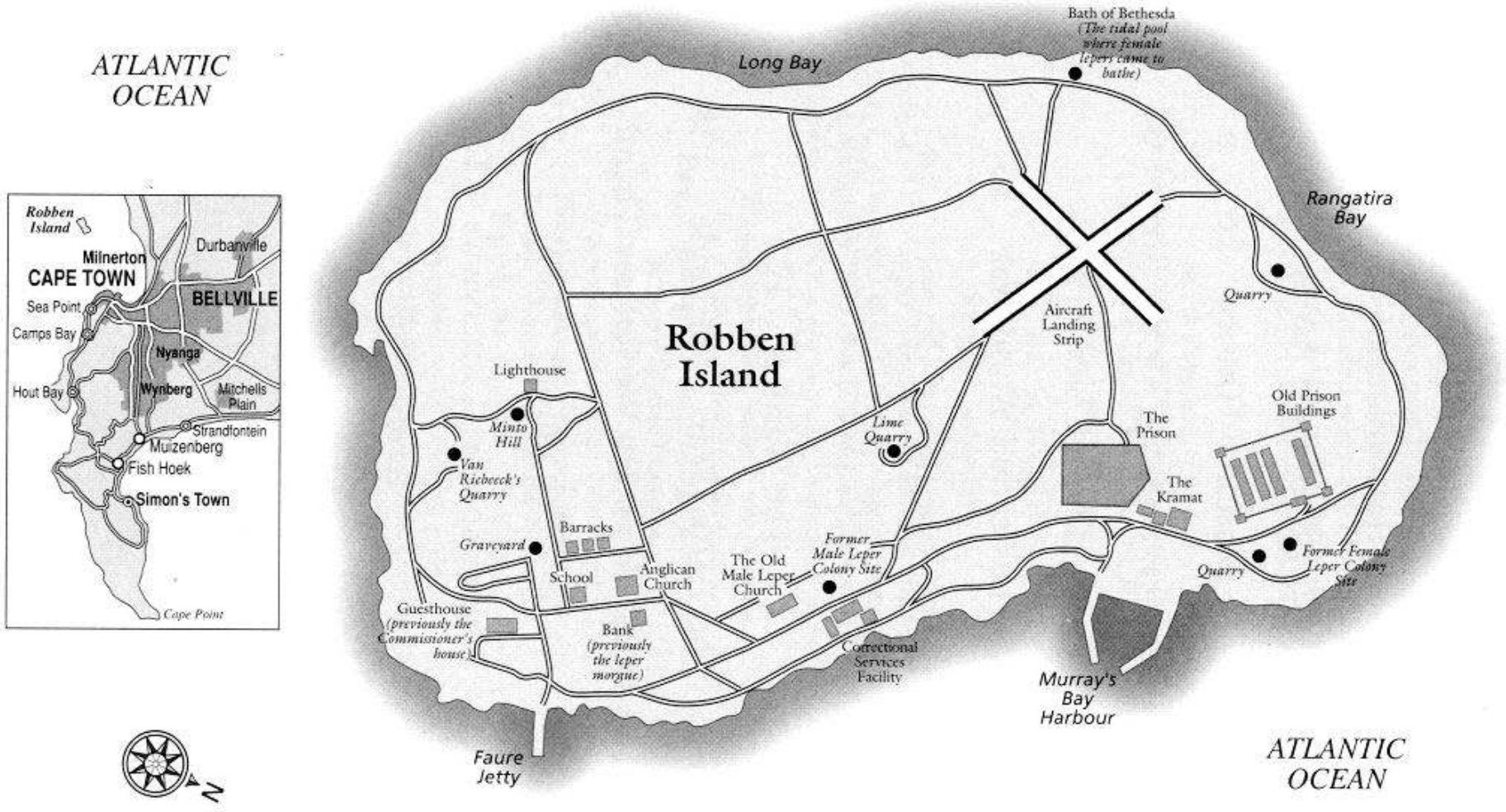

Figure 1: Robben Island and its features. (Source: The Geology of Robben Island, web.uct.ac.za)

Figure 2: Robben Island from mainland South Africa. (Source: travelpre.com)

Figure 3: Mainland South Africa from Robben Island. (Source: turtlesa.com)

In 1997, one year after the last common law prisoner left Robben Island, the Robben Island Museum was officially opened. The museum sees itself as a dynamic institution, which acts as a focal point of South African heritage. It runs educational programmes for schools, youths, and adults, facilitates tourism development, conducts ongoing research related to the island and fulfils an archiving function.[11] In 1999, Robben Island was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO, acknowledging the island's 'layering' of meaning (appendix 1B).[12] Indeed, Robben Island's history is extensive and complex in terms of both the various groups who had experiences there and how the space has been used. Its history is both proud and sombre, serving at times as helpful port of call for mariners and coastal defense, at others, as a place of medical, social, racial, and political exclusion. The Museum acknowledges this extensive and complicated history, as does the criteria by which UNESCO gave the site World Heritage status. However, the UNESCO criteria also illustrate that there is a tendency for the island to be associated exclusively with its apartheid history, strongly emphasised by the official story-tellers; in the process, excluding, ignoring, or conflating the rest of its history and meaning. The next section discusses these meanings among the multitude of groups associated with Robben Island. The apartheid narrative, as significant and powerful as it is, is only one of many narratives. A distinction will be made between the internally, organically created meanings by those various groups from the island's history, and the externally, politicised and commercialised meanings imposed by others. It is also a distinction between individual or collective, and public or national meaning and memory.

II
Meaning created and meaning imposed

Individual and collective memory

In discussing the importance of memory for knowing the past, David Lowenthal states that 'self-continuity depends wholly on memory' as recalling past experiences 'links us with our earlier selves,

[11] Robben Island Museum, 'History of Robben Island', retrieved 27 May, 2012, available at: <http://www.robben-island.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9&Itemid=46>.
[12] United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 'Robben Island', retrieved on 27 May, 2012, available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/916>.

however different we may since have become'.[13] These experiences are often bound up in the places we have lived in and interacted with, and, because memory is deeply individual, it has deep personal significance. The remembered past can also be collective. People do not just inhabit and experience place individually, but also as a socio-cultural group. It is history that is in fact responsible for 'perpetuating this collective self-awareness' and social preservation, as groups define themselves through history 'as an individual does through memory'.[14] A complex series of relationships therefore exists between place, memory, meaning, and individual as well as collective identity. Meanings and memories associated with place, because of how personal they are (individually or collectively), are, from an outside perspective, hard to change, as they are a type of 'private property'.[15] History, however, as the public telling and documenting of these meanings and identities, is more easily subject to revision, alteration, and selective preservation. Often the consequences of such changes are to conflate the past, where a diversity of previous experiences is reduced to a few themes within a narrow time span or to a 'generalised uniformity'.[16] To these types of memory we need to add public and national memory – what I see as the memories and meanings of Robben Island imposed on to it by external influences, namely, political and commercial. It is these two types of meaning-making that have begun to compete with the individual and collective (internally created) memory of Robben Island, and threaten to subsume them. With the previous section outlining the history and those involved in Robben Island, experientially, cognitively, or socio-culturally, this section discusses first the various internally created meanings and memories of place, and second, the externally (political and commercial) imposed meanings and memories. The distinction will play a big role in determining the future of Robben Island in terms of conservation.

Local experience and memory – meaning created

The native Khoikhoi are more than likely the first to have made consistent contact and use of Robben Island even though it was not their natural home. A trade relationship established with the newly arriving Dutch in 1660 turned violent, when war broke out between them. What eventuated was the

[13] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country,* (New York, 1985). p. 196.
[14] *Ibid.,* p. 213.
[15] *Ibid.,* p. 195.
[16] *Ibid.,* p. 349.

steady loss of independence for the Khoi as the Dutch took over control of grazing and resources, and brought the Khoi into slavery and also used them as translators.[17] One such Khoi leader, Autshumato would become one of Robben Island's very first political prisoners, when Van Reibeeck banished him there in 1658. After a year and a half on the island Autshumato escaped by boat, and, a year later resumed his role as interpreter before dying in 1663.[18] A similar story can be told of Autshumato's niece, Krotoa, who likewise had problems that led her to be banished from the island, and back there as a prisoner 1673.[19] Although the experiences of Autshumato and Krotoa are not indicative of the Khoi's traditional use and experience of the island, it illustrates that as well as this traditional experience, there was also a sombre experience of Robben Island similar to that of apartheid prisoners.

Another history that is largely marginalised is that of the various Portuguese, Dutch, and English visitors and inhabitants on Robben Island. Though the business of the day was maritime travel, trade, and empire-building, the island was also experienced in a personalised way. Take for instance, the experiences of Pieter de Neyn, who was sent to Robben Island by the Dutch East India Company as a judicial officer in 1671. His experience of the island is recorded in a poem he wrote, illustrating his less than pleasurable experiences (appendix 2A).[20]

There is also a strong Muslim history on Robben Island. The establishment of a Muslim community in South Africa is strongly tied to Robben Island, from when East Indian political prisoners were sent to the island from the late seventeenth century until the late eighteenth century. The first Muslims imprisoned on the island became important mosque and worship leaders for the Cape Town Muslim community, and were figureheads of a large Muslim population imprisoned on the island by the Dutch. The Moturu Kramat (fig. 4) was built on Robben Island in 1969 as a shrine that stands as 'a symbol of the struggle for the establishment of Islam', again, a narrative not too dissimilar to the apartheid basis for identity-building.[21]

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[17] History Webs, 'Assimilation of the Khoikhoi into the labour force', accessed 2 June, 2012, available at: <http://www.historywebs.co.za/articles/khoikhoilabour.html>.
[18] *Ibid.,* p. 28.
[19] Deacon, *The Island,* p. 19.
[20] Deacon, *The Essential Robben Island,* pp. 31-32.
[21] Cape Mazaar Society, 'Turan Maturah', accessed on 28 May, 2012, available at: <http://www.capemazaarsociety.com/html/robben_island.html>.

Figure 4: The Moturu Kramat, sacred Muslim pilgrimage site, built on Robben Island in 1969 in honour of the island's Muslim history dating back to the seventeenth century. (Source*:* http://www.capemazaarsociety.com)

A significant portion of Robben Island's history concerns its use as the site for various medical facilities – a hospital for 'lunatics', for lepers, and the chronically ill between 1846 and 1931. Life on the island was hard for patients, separated from family and friends, and having to deal with feelings of isolation the island created. Lepers complained about food, isolation, and the improper medical treatment they received, as illustrated by a patient who wrote to a newspaper in 1862 (appendix 2B).[22] Lepers soon began complaining of their 'detention' on the island, as another patient wrote in 1895 (appendix 2C).[23] Patients on the island also protested more actively, with Deacon paralleling the treatment of the lepers and patients on Robben Island with the problems experienced by apartheid prisoners.[24] Even in this single period (let alone the island's history as a whole), Robben Island as place was experienced differently amongst the colonial officials, hospital staff, indigenous, Dutch and English patients, and the settler public.[25] This variation speaks to the nuances of the relationship

[22] *Cape Monitor,* 29 April 1862, quoted in Deacon, *The Island,* p. 64.
[23] Memorial of F. Diedrichs, 3 Jan, 1895, CA, Health Branch, Robben Island 1895, CO 7192, quoted and translated by Deacon, *The Island*, p. 69.
[24] Deacon, *The Essential Robben Island,* pp. 49-50.
[25] Respectively as 'a secure holding place for the socially undesirable with the spartan advantages of the public-school or workhouse, as a healthy curative resort for the sick, or as a barren isolated wilderness'

between individuals and their experiences of place and the specific meanings generated that have been largely subsumed under more politically attractive narratives.[26]

Because of the island's involvement in World War II in defending the Cape region, it holds special significance for the military population there who experienced serving there during the war. It also holds importance to those who proudly trace their family history back to this time and place. Both John Hennessey and Michael Klerck for instance have shared their personal histories of Robben Island documenting their respective family's experience on the island during the war period. John Hennessey documents his mother's family (the Budd family) on Robben Island, beginning with Herbert Hayward Budd and his wife moving to the island after Herbert was appointed to the island's Mental Hospital Service in 1920.[27] Similarly, Michael Klerck, himself having grown up on Robben Island, has his own personal experience which, as he himself notes, stands apart from the apartheid experience (appendix 2D).[28] Michael refers to the island as having an 'island mentality – the feeling of being part of a special community that ran through everyone'. He interacted with prisoners and other inhabitants of the island, and has fond memories of the island and the prisoners he came to know (appendix 2E).[29] Michael also comments on an issue that this paper is moving towards – the future of Robben Island. He notes a desire for a reconstruction of the multitude of meanings and memories associated with the island (appendix 2F).[30] Michael captures the mood these first two sections have attempted to create so far – a single place having multiple actors, meanings and memories that cannot easily be captured in a single narrative.

The most well known legacy of Robben Island is its role in South Africa's apartheid regime. Indeed, it is the fact that this history has become the dominant public and national memory of the island at the expense of individual and group perspectives that forms the backbone of this essay. In discussing the experiences of apartheid political prisoners on Robben Island, it is impossible to divorce them from the prison which held them. It is worthwhile at this point to discuss how the prison

[26] Deacon, 'The Place and Space of Illness: Climate and Garden as Metaphors in the Robben Island Medical Institutions', Institute of Historical Research, 'E-seminars in history' accessed 29 May, 2012, available at: <http://www.history.ac.uk/resources/e-seminars/deacon-paper>.
[27] John Hennessey, 'The Budd Family & The Island', accessed 29 May, 2012, available at: <http://members.shaw.ca/mklerck/robbenisland/Hennessey.html>.
[28] Robben Island, 'Childhood Memories – a personal reflection, by Michael Klerck', accessed 29 May, 2012, available at: <http://members.shaw.ca/mklerck/robbenisland/index.html>.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *Ibid.*

shaped the experience, but also how it shaped the forms of resistance taken by apartheid prisoners. In developing his theory of discipline and the disciplinary mechanism, Michel Foucault traced the origin of the practices that contribute to such a mechanism – observing, individualising and ordering, to the way lepers and plague sufferers were inserted into a fixed place, observed, and recorded – an environment in which power was exercised.[31] This method of disciplinary power, Foucault argues, was present in nineteenth-century institutions such as the prison, the psychiatric asylum, the reformatory, the school, and the hospital. This list is interesting, considering that most appear on Robben Island, illustrating one way in which the island has been utilised – its history as a place of isolation, observation, and functioning of power stretches back long before to its use as a political prison. For the apartheid prisoners on the island, their experiences, in keeping with Foucault's disciplinary technique, were carefully structured and controlled. The techniques of discipline that the prison helps to create are listed by Foucault as isolation, regulation via routine, and the supervised transformation of the individual.[32] Robben Island as well as its prison more than achieves the first step of isolation. The prisoner's lives were also regulated heavily by routine (fig. 5), which sought to prevent the mind from wandering and focusing on potentially dangerous ideas. The third step—reforming the prisoner and returning them to society—was never on the agenda for the apartheid prisoners on Robben Island. While Foucault's argument goes further than the prison, ultimately into society itself in the form of discourse, for our purposes here, it is enough in showing that the prison framed and attempted to impose a certain experience and mindset for prisoners. However, the power exercised by the disciplinary mechanism did not stop them from successfully exercising very particular forms of resistance and creating their own meaning.

[31] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison,* (New York, 1977), pp. 197-99.
[32] *Ibid.,* pp. 236-48.

Figure 5: Political prisoners on Robben Island breaking rocks as part of the prison routine. (Source*:* fromcapetown.blogspot.com)

It is indeed important to explain 'why thousands of political prisoners who spent years in prison for the cause of liberation found the experience enriching and a source of pride'.[33] It is just as valuable, however, to explain how Robben Island was transformed from a place of repression into one of resistance for prisoners. 'Resistance' includes acts that consciously and intentionally remake the political environment.[34] The Foucauldian notion of the power of the prison as a structuring agent is used by Fran Buntman, but she focuses instead on how these constraints shaped the form that resistance took.[35] The transformation of Robben Island by prisoners from 'hell-hole' into 'university' represents one such act of resistance. As a means of coping with life on the island, prisoners developed a code of conduct they lived by which called for them to 'find and make positive things from one's imprisonment'.[36] Education became a way in which prisoners could self-improve and use their prison sentences usefully. Prisoners at times had the opportunity to study by correspondence through the University of South Africa – this opportunity was encouraged or prohibited based on the individual decisions of prison officials. The more powerful form of learning, however, was between

[33] Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid,* p. xi.
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 6.
[35] *Ibid.,* p. 251.
[36] *Ibid.,* p. 62.

prisoners themselves. Prisoners gathered in places such as the self-created space of 'the university', located in the rock quarries (fig. 6) to share ideas and knowledge – transforming a site of incarceration and prison labour into one of learning and resistance, using the acquisition of knowledge as a form of power to challenge both the prison and the broader apartheid status quo, and ultimately, as a form of resistance and method for identity-building.[37] Education led to a 'resignification' of Robben Island, where prisoners gave new meaning to their material realities, actions, and ideas.[38] The structural environment of the prison dictated the way in which (some) power was reappropriated, and meaning recreated for apartheid prisoners on their own terms. Meaning and memory, however, are not just created internally and organically by those who have been a part of the island's history. It can be imposed by external factors. The prisoners' creation of meaning out of oppression would not just become a powerful symbol for the prisoners themselves. Through politicisation and commodification, it would become a symbol that would be used to create a public and national memory.

Figure 6: 'The University' on Robben Island, located in the rock quarry where prisoners worked. (Source*:* traveljournals.net)

[37] *Ibid.,* pp. 62-65.
[38] *Ibid.,* p. 251.

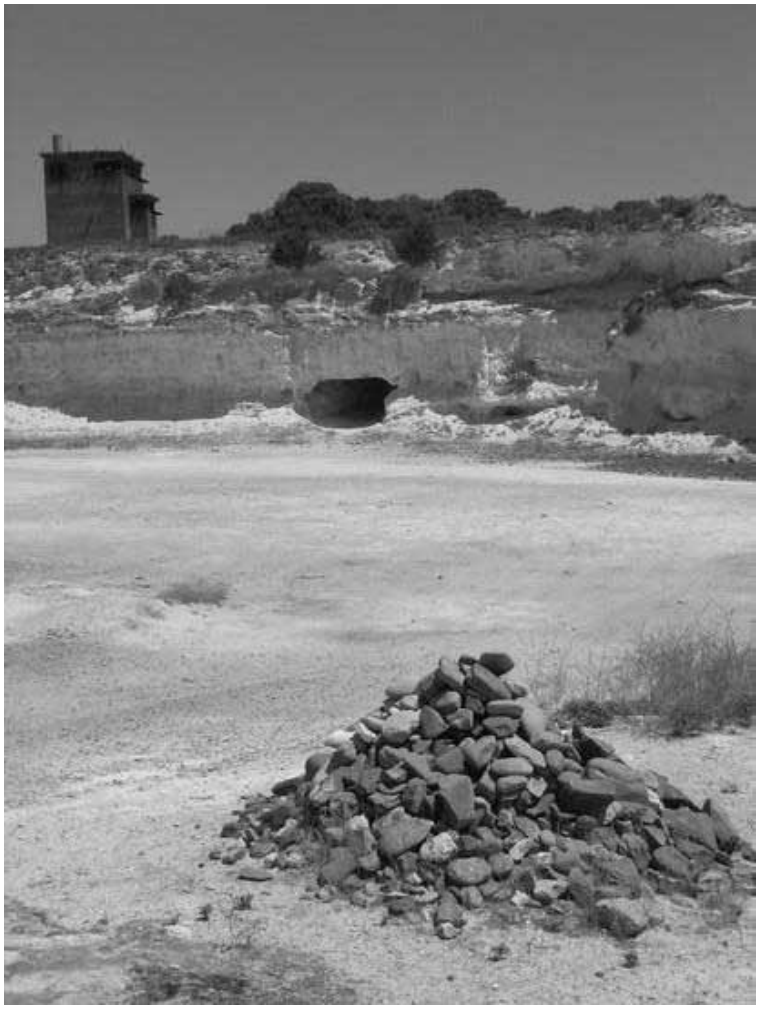

Figure 7: The rock pile at Robben Island which sits outside 'the university', and prison tower overlooking the site in the background. The pile was started by Mandela who sought to illustrate how easy it was to build a memorial to their years of struggle. He added one rock every time he revisited the former prison – other former prisoners began to do the same. The image symbolically captures the ways in which multiple meanings are overlaid on top of one another and exist within the same space – the prison tower, the 'university', which reinscribed the space, and the rock pile, which later commemorated this meaning. (Source*:* Flickr.com)

Public and national memory – meaning imposed

The symbolic power that Robben Island has come to represent has been manipulated and used for issues beyond its own immediate history. In this manner, Robben Island has become a 'rhetorical space' as well as a physical space. With the concentration on the political and racial tragedies occurring on Robben Island, it has become a symbol for the larger tragedies of race and politics in South Africa as a whole.[39] Robben Island's rhetorical space, that is, what the Island represents and communicates, has been deliberately transformed during the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid eras, with the public narrative of the island changing from one of tragedy to one of triumph

[39] Richard Marback, 'The Rhetorical Space of Robben Island', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* 34:2 (Spring, 2004), p. 7.

because it assists in the project of a democratising South Africa.[40] It also transformed the view of Robben Island for which most people had no direct experience, as a place of myth, as a space feared, isolated, and invisible to the public (appendix 2G), to an accessible public space through the use of rhetoric.[41] The island had long been a symbol of both repression and resistance, but the emerging democratic government which replaced the former apartheid government and its strong stance of resistance to racial domination meant that Robben Island's role as symbol became much more significant – a shift from individual and collective, to public and national.[42] This trend leads Richard Marback to note how Robben Island's meaning has been imposed for the sake of national identity and memory, and cites a speech in which Nelson Mandela himself asks the question of how the other narratives and memories of the island can be given equal importance, what Marback refers to as 'rhetorical reoccupation'.[43]

Clifford Shearing and Michael Kempa make a similar point when they speak of one way in which place can embody and symbolise hope, but also how that hope sensibility can be steered in certain directions by certain parties, which in the case of South Africa have involved South Africa's new democratic government and Robben Island's museum.[44] The role of the museum is given prominence as it is 'concerned with promoting sensibilities rather than with simply exhibiting valued objects' and these exhibits are 'intentional vehicles for shaping consciousness'.[45] What emerges is a hope grounded in the successful struggle against apartheid, and it is Robben Island that best symbolises it. This hope is able to be steered in certain directions by selecting which narratives and meanings are to go towards creating that hope. Shearing & Kempa characterise the museum as an institution that has worked to 'transform private and collective hopes into a public hope through drawing on and extending collective memory'.[46] In the creation of this public hope, however, certain

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 8.
[41] *Ibid.,* pp. 10-13 & 19.
[42] *Ibid.,* pp. 19-20.
[43] 'How do we look at the histories of different people who lived here, through various ages: lepers, prisoners, jailers all together; leaders of resistance not only from South Africa but from as far afield as Namibia and the Indonesian Archipelago? How do we give expression to these diverse histories as a collective heritage'? *Ibid.,* p. 24.
[44] Clifford Shearing & Michael Kempa, 'A Museum of Hope: A Story of Robben Island', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences,* 592 (2004): 62-78, p. 63.
[45] *Ibid.,* p. 65.
[46] *Ibid.,* p. 75.

individual and collective meanings associated with Robben Island have been largely ignored, perhaps because they are not as hope-inspiring as the struggle and triumph over apartheid.

Recently, with the island's status as a place of national importance and world heritage site emerging, not only has it received more attention in the rhetorical and symbolic sense, but with the opening of the Robben Island Museum along with tours held on the island, it has become a significant tourist destination. This attention has introduced a new side to the story of meaning-making on Robben Island as its space and meaning become increasingly commodified. Tourism has emerged as another factor playing a role in shaping meaning and memory from the outside. As a result of increased tourism to the site, multiple and conflicting interpretations of Robben Island continue to present themselves. The Robben Island prison and the apartheid history it represents currently is the 'centrepiece of the whole resistance to apartheid system', due in a part to its powerful association with the individual figure of Mandela. Interestingly however, tourism and commercial interests have meant that maintaining consumer interest in the destination is important, leading to a desire to widen the history presented on tours in order to maintain its attraction. The future of South Africa's tourism industry—which for tourists, continues the dominance of the apartheid narrative, and for commercial interests, seeks to widen it—but more importantly, the nation itself, depends on the successful management of its past.[47]

A widening of the current story told of Robben Island is made all the more difficult because of factors like the fame of Robben Island's political prisoners and the international level of notoriety of the apartheid history. These elements lead to a powerful and emotion-packed presentation of Robben Island, and make them prime ingredients for attracting tourism to the area. The stories of ex-prisoners, additionally, are the most accessible and presentable of all the island's histories, further adding to the preference to push them as the official story and memory of Robben Island.[48] It is the stories of the triumph of the human spirit over struggle and oppression and political transformation that Robben Island encapsulates that 'register most powerfully' with visitors, while the other silent

[47] *Ibid.,* p. 14.
[48] Carolyn Strange & Michael Kempa, 'Shades of Dark Tourism. Alcatraz and Robben Island', *Annals of Tourism Research,* vol. 30, no. 2, (2003):386-405, pp. 389-400.

majority of stories are marginalised and sidelined.[49] Myra Shackley shares this opinion, adding that commodification of the island and its tragic past threatens to 'trivialise the experience' and 'minimise the significance of the site to its primary controlling group'.[50]

So far, the first section of this essay outlined the history of Robben Island, and the second illustrated the multitude of meanings and memories associated with the island. It also illustrated how meaning and memory have been conflated and imposed onto Robben Island via the creation of national and public narratives of meaning that have drawn on the island's apartheid history. The next section discusses what this concentration on only one aspect of the island's history means for its future.

III

The future of Robben Island – meaning and conservation

The debates over meaning and memory being imposed on to Robben Island are not just for the sake of debate itself. The direction the future takes for Robben Island depends on which meaning is deemed important and therefore conserved. At the heart of the problem, as we have seen, is the difference between the national / public, and the individual / collective memory of the island, which threatens to be subsumed and lost as it is not deemed significant. The problem comes from outside interests—whether they are political or commercial—warping meaning and memory. Robben Island's Museum gets considerable attention concerning the island's future, as it is responsible for telling the correct narrative. The tensions caused by these differences demonstrate the issues caused by the dominance of external over meanings over internal, the political and commercial over local and of a conflated story over a multitude.

In a UNESCO World Heritage commissioned paper tellingly titled *Linking Universal and Local Values,* a section relating to Robben Island focuses on fostering an awareness of local community values. The reason that Dawson Munjeri gives for the lack of any such awareness is that the authorities and managers of the World Heritage site have failed to identify local meanings.

[49] *Ibid.,* p. 401.
[50] Myra Shackley, 'Potential Futures for Robben Island: Shrine, Museum or Theme Park?', *International Journal of Heritage Studies,* vol.7, no.4 (2001):355-363, p. 361.

Munjeri recounts a conversation with a former prisoner on the island now acting as a tour guide, who lamented that visitors to the island would never know its 'true value'. The guide takes the author to the limestone quarries (site of the 'university'), which is now off the visitors' route. The guide tells him 'this is the *real* Robben Island: this is where people actually really suffered and this is where they triumphed'.[51] The point is made that instead, the focus is on the 'popular sites', such as B Block where Mandela and other nationalist leaders had their cells, illustrating that the values the site authorities pinpoint are out of touch with those of the local (former prisoner) population – that authorities in charge of presenting and conserving Robben Island's values are unaware of its real meaning. Munjeri answers the question of whose values should be pre-eminent by stating that capacity-building for site management has to take place 'in the context of the values and norms of the local society'.[52] For Munjeri, however, the 'real' meaning of Robben Island is the meaning that apartheid prisoners ascribe. Even within a project that aims to present the 'local' meanings of Robben Island, the apartheid narrative and associated rhetoric of hope and triumph still dominates.

Deacon mounts a similar criticism of the management of Robben Island, but also acknowledges the need to accept other non-apartheid meanings. The 'values' spoken of are referred to by Deacon as 'intangible' heritage, which she defines as the 'aesthetic, spiritual, symbolic or other social values people may associate with a site, as well as rituals, music, language, know-how, oral traditions and the cultural space in which these traditions are played out'.[53] The issue for Deacon is not the inability of authorities managing the island to present the 'real' meaning and value of the apartheid prisoners – it is the inability of authorities to recognise let alone manage Robben Island's intangible heritage in its entirety. The central narrative of 'political prisoners standing strong in the face of apartheid' has obscured other areas of intangible heritage to the point of Deacon calling the imposing of symbolic value upon the island 'branding'. To brand is to create a simple statement that 'encapsulates as well as simplifies what is often a complex set of meanings', in the same way that meanings become conflated when history is altered.[54] In using the term 'branding', Deacon also brings

[51] Dawson Munjeri, 'Anchoring African Cultural and Natural Heritage: The Significance of Local Community Awareness in the Context of Capacity-Building', in E. de Merode, R. Sneets, and C. Westrik, (eds.), *Linking universal and local values: managing a sustainable future for world heritage*, (Paris, 2004): 75-80, p. 75.
[52] *Ibid.,* pp. 75-76.
[53] Deacon, 'Intangible Heritage in Conservation Management Planning', p. 2.
[54] *Ibid.,* pp. 4-5.

up the problem of conservation giving way to tourism in the sense that the story that is told of Robben Island is the one the public is most familiar with and wants to hear. This story has not gone unchallenged, with environmentalists, archaeologists, Khoisian lobby groups, World War II veterans, former residents, and even former political prisoners themselves challenging and doubting the truthfulness of the selective narrative.[55] Branding 'sells something for a particular purpose and from a particular perspective' and illustrates how conservation can be politicised and can lead to contested interpretation.[56] Once again, the museum is deemed as mediator, interpreter and presenter of Robben Island's totality of meanings, with Deacon noting that it would develop a more suitable non-exclusive management approach once authorities 'engaged more fully with debates over the significance of Robben Island'.[57] As Deacon alludes to, the dominant narrative of Robben Island is not only influenced by a politicisation of meaning, but tourism has emerged as another threat to telling the whole story of Robben Island and its various meanings

Similar problems and proposed solutions are discussed by Amareswar Galla, who also notes that Robben Island's Museum is the key institution in properly transmitting meaning and knowledge about Robben Island. The 'euphoria over the demise of apartheid' has led to new productions of history and heritage interpretation in the ultimate project of nation-building. The failure comes in museum and heritage practices which have not properly consulted all of those for whom the island has meaning and allowed participation in determining what is represented, and has concentrated on tangible heritage, largely ignoring intangible local cultural as well as pre-colonial heritage.[58]

Serena Nanda likewise places the museum (and Robben Island) at the centre of South African nation-building and national identity. As opposed to the tendency to base that national identity solely on the apartheid history Robben Island symbolises, in order for South Africa to build a new national identity, a shared national heritage must exist to be drawn upon. Indeed, this motivation led to a

[55] *Ibid.,* p. 5. Environmentalists and archaeologists see Robben Island in a wholly different light for its more tangible but equally as significant environmental, ecological, and archaeological heritage. Khoisian lobby groups challenge the emphasis on Mandela and other key leaders, citing a different set of meanings and memories of the island tied up in their own history of colonial oppression. World War II veterans and former residents remember their memories associated with the island and the positive aspects of life there. Former political prisoners themselves even challenge the selective narrative, voicing doubts over the true value of the 1994 elections as a sign of the triumph over oppression.
[56] *Ibid.,* pp. 5-7.
[57] *Ibid.,* p. 6.
[58] Amareswar Galla, 'Transformation in South Africa: A Legacy Challenged', *Museum International,* vol. 51, 2 (1999): 38-43, p. 38.

collapsing of Robben Island's history and the apartheid narrative dominating in the first place. The true way forward for rebuilding national identity that represents the move from apartheid to democracy is to incorporate all cultures and histories.[59] In this way, Robben Island still maintains its symbolic association with South African progress; now, however, the island's symbolic power would be in the democratic telling of its entire history instead of a selective one.

Conclusion
Histories, meanings, futures

At various stages throughout its history, Robben Island has been a refuge, pantry, farm, mail station, prison, quarantine station, hospital, convict station, World War II coastal defence and training station, museum, national monument, and world heritage site. These ebbs and flows from natural and strategic importance, to place of banishment, isolation and imprisonment, to national symbol and monument, have meant that Robben Island is a place that holds a complex multitude of meanings and memories for the countless individuals and groups who have been associated with this small isolated landmass over at least five hundred years. Individuals and groups who have lived on the island or who have had links to the island's history have positive and negative memories alike, which have proved equally as influential in building a sense of identity and meaning and which are impossible to separate from Robben Island as place. These meanings I have classified as being internally and organically created, that is, a result of the experiential, cognitive, and socio-cultural associations with Robben Island. I have described them in this way in order to distinguish them from what I have termed national and public meanings that have been externally imposed on to the island. I have argued that the latter threatens to, if they have not already, subsume and replace the former.

These national and public influences have involved inscribing Robben Island with meaning that goes beyond that created by its own history and people involved in it. National meanings have been created because the island has become a figurehead for South Africa and its triumph over apartheid and new democratic environment, becoming a symbol of hope for the future, and a rhetorical space where such hopes and narratives are situated. Public meanings have been created via

[59] Serena Nanda, 'South African Museums and the Creation of a New National Identity. Robben Island Museum. District Six Museum. Kwa Muhle Museum', *American Anthropologist,* vol. 106, 2 (2004): 379-385, p. 379.

Robben Island's attraction as a tourist destination, where the national story is one which is attractive to visitors and is one which they expect to hear and see when they arrive. Commercial and political interests have taken Robben Island's history and have presented selective parts of it to support national and commercial goals, in the process making them the dominant narrative, conflating the island's complex history into the narrative of the progression from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa. Institutions such as the Robben Island Museum and World Heritage Management Authorities bring these two aspects together, as the product that is presented to eager tourists is also the story which allows a democratic South Africa to celebrate itself as a nation which has triumphed over apartheid in the same way that Robben Island's prisoners did. As a result, Robben Island has become symbolic and meaningful for people outside of its direct lived and experienced history and memory. It has become bigger than itself and so has its meaning. Even amongst those that have been a direct part of Robben Island's history, there has been a complex multitude of contrasting experiences and connections with Robben Island—colonial and indigenous, positive and negative, local and foreign, experience-based and memory-based—that are hard to reduce into one master narrative. It is even more damaging then, when external factors impose their own meanings and conflate these internal meanings in the process.

This reality in the present has important connotations for Robben Island's future, because the process of conservation—a hotly debated topic for Robben Island currently—involves deeming what aspects are to be conserved in the first place. With only a selected part of its history, meaning, and memory being presented as that important element, the island's other cultural and physical legacies are at risk of being lost. Current debates therefore focus on institutions such as Robben Island's museum and its obligation to tell the whole story – one which incorporates all of its history, and all of those who went into creating it. Ultimately, the issue is to what extent public memory and meaning created by governments and institutions such as the museum obscures other parts of the island's history, meanings, and memories, and how this can be repaired. An historical investigation of place can fill previously left gaps. For Robben Island, the unearthing of previously hidden evidence which helps to recover histories and meanings is a case of recovering a democratic presentation of the island. This involves drawing on the multitude of memories of Robben Island which are found in its history

of inhabitants. Ironically, Robben Island's apartheid period does indeed serve as a symbol for South Africa in moving forward. Political prisoners once reinscribed their environment with meaning whilst under the control of the prevailing discursive power of the prison – indeed a powerful act. It seems as though this is what those in charge of presenting Robben Island's history and meaning today must do. They must reassert the entirety of the island's history and meaning whilst under the control of the prevailing discursive power that the conflated apartheid history, memory and meaning have created.

Appendix 1

History and identities

A. Diary entry of Jan Van Riebeeck, put in charge of the Dutch settlement of Robben Island, 1652.

We are half afraid that the aforementioned Harry – being very much attached to the Saldanhards [Peninsular Khoikhoi] nowadays whereas formerly they used to be his enemies – instead of acting in our favour, may be brewing mischief. If he is brewing mischief, it would not be inconceivable for him with his wife and children, together with all the watermen, to be taken to the Robben Island with sweet words and then left there, so that we might trade more peaceably and satisfactorily with the natives of Saldanha, who appear to be a good type of people. About all of this time will show us more. [Jan Van Riebeeck, *Journal of Jan Van Riebeeck*, vol.1, H. B. Thom (ed.), J. Smuts (trans.), (Cape Town, 1954), p. 103.]

B. UNESCO criteria for judging and awarding heritage status of Robben Island.

Criterion (iii): The buildings of Robben Island bear eloquent witness to its sombre history.
Criterion (vi): Robben Island and its prison buildings symbolize the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom and of democracy over oppression.
Integrity: The remains on the island as a landscape reflect the history of the island since the 17th century and all the attributes that convey its value.
Authenticity: Precisely because it has followed a historical trajectory that has involved several changes of use without conscious conservation efforts directed at preservation, the authenticity of the island is total. The evidence of layering reflects its history since the early seventeenth century and the events with which it is associated.
The symbolic value of Robben Island lies in its somber history, as a prison and a hospital for unfortunates who were sequestered as being socially undesirable. This came to an end in the 1990s when the inhuman Apartheid regime was rejected by the South African people and the political prisoners who had been incarcerated on the Island received their freedom after many years.
[United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 'Robben Island', available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/916>]

Appendix 2

Meaning created and meaning imposed

A. Pieter de Neyn, *Being on Robben Island, having been sent by the Council as Commissioner to Establish some order amongst a set of prisoners*, 1674,

Manned by a population of stupid roguery,
Where no provision for the throat or the tooth,
Or against the sharp Cold is made,
Sent as a Signor deputy;
But should I reach the firm land again,
This I swear by the highest Saint,
And give my right hand upon it,
And also my word and honour as pledge,
(Unless something's amiss with my head)
That no one will ever plant me there;
For know that I am of such a type,
Who likes to be a regular customer,
Where sadness is totally banned,
And glasses filled right to the rim,
And you merrily sit around with pipes, 'cos
I still sing in my same old fashion,
I shove this Island to one side,
And will have nothing to do with its arid sand.
[Deacon, *The Essential Robben Island,* pp. 31-32.]

B. Patient letter to a local newspaper, 1862

Many are suffering very bad from a bowel complaint cause by bad food and water, and three were buried yesterday in one grave, two white men and a leper. Many of us felt strange enough when we saw this way of burying the dead; but we dare not say anything about it to the authorities here, because if we make complaints it only makes matters worse. [The Clerk, Murray] is the only one who seems to pity the [the patients]. All hands are kept busy from morning till night making the new jetty. A lunatic of the name Varney refuses to work anymore, and says he has worked long enough for nothing. I hope you will continue to advocate our cause till we are removed from this place.
[*Cape Monitor,* 29 April 1862, quoted in Deacon, *The Island,* p. 64.]

C. Patient complaining about detention, 1895

The first of December 1894 was a happy day [...] because God had given England the power, 64 years before, to free their people [slaves] and gave England 20 million pounds and over a thousand people were freed so that men and women and children could together worship and thank the lord. My Honour, what have we done that we cannot enjoy this right. We are guarded like slaves night and day by Constables [...] we are now becoming impatient about this godless and sinful law.
[Memorial of F. Diedrichs, 3 Jan, 1895, quoted and translated by Deacon, *The Island*, p. 69.]

D. Michael Klerck and his own personal experiences of Robben Island

Many ex-inmates of the prison, including President Mandela, see the island as a special place. So do I, but then from a slightly different perspective. The first four years of my life were filled with happy memories of "the island" as my home. Far from being just a prison, it was first an army and then a naval base where my parents met and were married in 1953. While various nations of the world spoilt and abused it, there is no doubt that nature intended it to be special.
[Robben Island, 'Childhood Memories – a personal reflection, by Michael Klerck', accessed 29 May, 2012, available at: <http://members.shaw.ca/mklerck/robbenisland/index.html>]

E. Michael Klerck and his memories of Robben Island and the prisoners he came to know

Perhaps then, it is fitting to relate one last memory. One day a work-detail of prisoners arrived at our front door. I clung to my mother's side while the spokesman for the group handed over a gift roughly wrapped in brown paper. They had heard from Nanny that Bambi had been released - I had lost a friend and they wanted to show some solidarity. They had carved, lovingly, and probably with very primitive tools, the gift of a wooden spoon. The spoon took pride of place in the kitchen and always reminded me that along with the memory of a very special place, there are always memories of special people on Robben Island itself.
[Robben Island, 'Childhood Memories – a personal reflection, by Michael Klerck', accessed 29 May, 2012, available at: <http://members.shaw.ca/mklerck/robbenisland/index.html>]

F. Michael Klerck commenting on the future of Robben Island

There can be no doubt that ex-inhabitants and visitors must wish for some safe sanctuary in the future. No development besides a careful reconstruction of the architecture and natural beauty can give any justice to its rich history and the many conflicting memories. The recent decision to turn it into a tourist attraction under the umbrella of the Department of Arts and Culture is, perhaps, the best choice. There cannot be any doubt, either, that those friendly prisoners would have liked to have experienced the island as I did. Far from being just a "dumping ground for (offenders)", as one editorial in a Cape Town newspaper portrayed it recently, the island has played host to a great deal of 'normality' and even celebration.
[Robben Island, 'Childhood Memories – a personal reflection, by Michael Klerck', accessed 29 May, 2012, available at: <http://members.shaw.ca/mklerck/robbenisland/index.html>]

G. Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi, archivist of Robben Island

From a very, very early age, growing up in the 1970s, I was frightened to mention the place Robben Island. Because it was narrated to us as this mysterious location, so far away from us, in the middle of the sea, where Robert Sobukwe and Nelson Mandela were imprisoned for life. At that time to us in the townships of South Africa Robben Island was a myth. Today it is still a mystified place, to some degree. Thus, in these two senses of the past and present, Robben Island has always engaged us. It was never a choice.
[Marback, 'The Rhetorical Space of Robben Island', *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 34:2 (Spring, 2004), p. 10.]

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