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The Forgotten Women of South Africa: Mamphela Ramphele and Her Role in the Anti-Apartheid  
Movement

An Honors Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By  
Ellie Wolfe  
Lewiston, Maine  
April 3, 2023

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the role of women in the anti-apartheid movement, looking specifically at Mamphela Ramphele. Ramphele—an activist, doctor, academic, and politician—was Steve Biko’s romantic and political partner. When the Black Consciousness Movement and the South African Students Organization (SASO) emerged, Ramphele helped bolster them, working side by side with Biko and other young activists. Although we know a lot about Biko’s roles in fighting the apartheid state, Ramphele remains largely overlooked in the history of South Africa. Put simply, Ramphele has remained in the footnotes of most history textbooks. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources, I argue that Ramphele played a very crucial role in the fight against apartheid and that her experience reflects that of many other South African women. Overall, by studying Ramphele’s life and legacy closely, this thesis seeks to illustrate the complex, but overlooked, roles that women played in fighting apartheid and the challenges they encountered as they tried to navigate male-founded organizations.

## **Introduction: Recovering Mamphela Ramphela**

It was her second pregnancy, and like the first, it was not going well. She didn't miscarry the first one, but it felt like she did, since her daughter died before her first birthday. The stress of her work-life balance was easy to ignore, easy to push back behind the mountainous to-do list in her head, except when her body became a vessel for another being. That is when every stressful situation and sleepless night affected someone other than herself. She was excited to have the baby, a representation of the feelings she had for the complicated man she had grown to love, but her activist lifestyle was starting to affect the child she felt so joyous to be carrying. It was then, another morning on bedrest in Shiluvane hospital, another day of sitting in a crowded hospital, waiting to deliver her baby, waiting to see if this one might be healthy enough to make it through a tumultuous childhood, that Mamphela Ramphela's life changed.

The call to her hospital room, the call that changed the scope of her life forever, was placed by one of her sisters. "You need to take this," the nurse told Ramphela as she sat, confused, in her hospital bed. Worried about breaking her bedrest, she told the nurse that she did not want to. Her family needed to learn how to solve their own problems, and she was focusing on her unborn child. But the hospital worker insisted. Slowly rising and making her way to the phone, Ramphela collapsed when she heard the news on the other end of the static filled receiver. Steve Biko, the father of her child, the man who she credited with kickstarting her activism, had died in police custody after being brutally beaten by police officers in Cape Town.<sup>1</sup>

A young and impassioned speaker promoting the idea of Black Consciousness and self-respect, Biko emerged as one of the leading Black voices in the anti-apartheid movement. Born in 1946, just two years shy of the creation of apartheid in his home country, Biko grew up to

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<sup>1</sup> Ramphela, Mamphela, *Across Boundaries: The Journey of a South African Woman Leader* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 134.

herald the Black Consciousness Movement, creating the South African Students Organization (SASO) and traveling around the country as much as he could, spreading his then-radical ideas.<sup>2</sup> His idea of Blackness included Indian and “colored” South Africans, and Biko defined Black Consciousness as a mental attitude rather than a matter of pigmentation, focusing on psychological empowerment first and foremost.<sup>3</sup>

Championing and spreading his beliefs put Biko on the watchlist of the brutal and racist South African apartheid police, leading to his banning order in 1973 which prevented him from leaving his home district or speaking to more than one person at a time.<sup>4</sup> Despite the danger, Biko frequently defied the orders of the state, which eventually led to his arrest and murder in 1977 at the hands of white police officers while Ramphele was pregnant. Besides just changing Ramphele’s life, Biko’s death altered the direction of the anti-apartheid movement in the entire country, as it brought a significant amount of international attention to the issue.<sup>5</sup> Biko became a martyr, and his story was frequently used by the African National Congress (ANC) and other activist organizations to highlight the brutality of the South African police.

While his martyrdom did change the course of the movement in significantly positive ways, it also overshadowed many of the people that worked with him and pushed him to become the leader that he was. Biko’s ideas and gruesome death were promoted heavily by activist groups, oftentimes at the expense of Ramphele and others who had helped lift him up. Furthermore, by creating a God-like legacy for Biko, activists and historians alike often ignore

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<sup>2</sup> Lindy Wilson, *Steve Biko* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, *Steve Biko*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 110.

<sup>5</sup> Biko’s death was not just covered in the news media, but also in popular culture. A song by Peter Gabriel, entitled “Biko,” served as a musical eulogy to the activist. Released in 1980, the song reached no. 38 on the British charts. The song was banned in South Africa, so despite its international popularity, few within the country actually heard it.

the ways in which he, and SASO, worked. More specifically, they have overlooked the culture in the organization and how men treated women. As a result of this oversight, we do not know much about the women in SASO and their roles in dismantling apartheid, with history books instead focusing on the role of Biko and other male leaders. What roles, if any, did these women play in fighting apartheid in South Africa?

This thesis focuses on Mamphela Ramphele, one of the most important women in SASO and one of the many forgotten women in the anti-apartheid struggle; specifically, it seeks to contextualize her life within the anti-apartheid movement, which has historically, as I have mentioned, been dominated by male figures. I argue that focusing on Ramphele, her life, and work, helps reveal not only her own roles, but also the complex roles women played in the anti-apartheid struggle as a whole. I contend that without women like Ramphele, the anti-apartheid movement would not have come to fruition the way it did. A brief retelling of her history helps illuminate the complexity of her life, her roles within the movement, and even the lives of other people—women that played many crucial roles behind the scenes but have been tossed aside in favor of scholarly obsession with men like Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Desmond Tutu.<sup>6</sup> This thesis seeks to renegotiate the ways in which historians view and

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<sup>6</sup> See the plethora of literature about men like Nelson Mandela; Anat Singh and Chadwick Justin, *Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom* (Johannesburg: Videovision Entertainment, 2013), Anthony Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorized Biography* (New York City: HarperCollins, 2019), John Carlin, *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation* (Westminster: Penguin Books, 2009), Mandla Langa and Nelson Mandela, *Dare Not Linger: The Presidential Years* (London: Macmillan, 2017), Steve Biko; Donald Woods, *Biko* (New York City: Paddington Press, 1978), Tendayi Sithole, *Steve Biko: Decolonial Meditations of Black Consciousness* (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2017), Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, Nigel C. Gibson, *Biko Lives!* (London: Macmillan, 2008), Oliver Tambo; Luli Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2012), Luli Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: His Life and Legacy* (Johannesburg: Real African Publishers, 2019), Z. Pallo Jordan, *Oliver Tambo Remembered*, (London: Picador Africa, 2017), Albert Luthuli; Robert Trent Vinson, *Albert Luthuli* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), Scott Couper, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), G.J. Pillay, *Albert Luthuli* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2012), Robert Sobukwe; Benjamin Pogrand, *Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe: New Reflections* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2019), Benjamin Pogrand, *How Can Man Die Better: The Life of Robert Sobukwe* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2006). To say that the women supported them did not receive the same kinds of attention as them is a gross understatement.



understand the history of the anti-apartheid struggle, centering the conversation on the experiences and impacts of women like Ramphele.<sup>7</sup>

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Mamphela Ramphele was born in Northern Transvaal to two schoolteachers. Because of her parents' careers, she was lucky to have a bit more privilege than most of her peers and soon excelled in her academic endeavors. Her mother was an independent woman and encouraged her daughter to think well and act confidently, which helped in her academic career, especially when in an incredibly rare feat, Ramphele enrolled in pre-medical courses at the University of the North when she was twenty years old. A year later, in 1968, she was accepted into the University of Natal Medical School, which at the time was the only academic institution in the country that allowed Black students to enroll without governmental permission. Ramphele was already on her way to becoming one of the most accomplished young Black women in the country; to get into medical school in South Africa as a Black woman demonstrated both her incredible intelligence and the privilege she had to grow up in a family that so valued education.

While studying at the university she met many young activists, including the father of her future children, Steve Biko. It was from these people, Biko most specifically, that Ramphele credits the conception of her activist mind frame.<sup>8</sup> In school she felt more and more comfortable showing her rebellious side, smoking cigarettes, being more confident in her natural hair and wearing tight clothing, and standing up for herself.<sup>9</sup> These university years were a crucial step in

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<sup>7</sup> I would be remiss not to mention the countless efforts to better understand and chronicle the work of African women and women feminists in the continent. Works about Ghana, South Africa, and Angola can especially be studied. I would like to give a special mention to Selina Makana's work on feminism in the continent.

<sup>8</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 68.

<sup>9</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 57.

Ramphele's growth as an activist as she slowly became more comfortable and confident in her own voice. As she entered the informal activist sphere, which was mostly full of men, she grew closer to Biko and eventually supported his initial campaign to form and then gain leadership control of the SASO, helping him organize events and write speeches.

Though romantically interested in Biko, Ramphele was engaged to a young man from her home community. Biko pressured her not to go through with the marriage, but scared of the prospect of starting a romantic relationship with someone whose activism was such a prominent point in his life and feeling pressure from her family and friends, Ramphele embarked on a failed relationship. Choosing to settle down with someone from her home community, someone she recalls knowing was not the right person, was the most conventional decision Ramphele made in her life and career. She did not conform for long, however, as after Biko married, the two of them, both unhappy and unfulfilled by their relationships, soon commenced what would be a years-long affair. Their affair, though emotionally fulfilling for Ramphele, became the thing that completely defined her political and activist career.

It was in these years which Ramphele completed some of her most impressive projects, opening and operating multiple public health clinics in underfunded communities while also, just as she had done in their university days, helping Biko write his speeches and comforting him emotionally. Despite her own accomplishments, it was in these years, too, that Ramphele began to be included in the story of the anti-apartheid movement as a side character rather than as a protagonist. The roles that Ramphele, and other women in the movement, played have often been overlooked by historians and scholars. This thesis aims to rectify this problem while also answering some important questions about her life and political legacy. How was Ramphele's

activism shaped? What roles did she play for both Biko and the anti-apartheid liberation movement? Why have she—and other women—been overlooked in South African history?

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In the fall of 2019, during my first semester at Bates, I took a first-year seminar about the history of apartheid in South Africa. I had never learned about the country or the racist system in high school and was eager to explore a new historical moment. From the readings and the films we watched in class, it became clear to me that South African history was almost exclusively about men. Women were rarely mentioned in the liberation movement.

In the winter of 2022 during a 300-level seminar on apartheid, I first encountered Mamphela Ramphele. I read much about Steve Biko, and Ramphele's name seemed to continuously pop up in small, but impactful, ways. Later, when I began to read more about her, I realized just how largely she loomed in the movement, though her character and achievements were resigned to the shadows by most historians. I was fascinated by her accomplishments and surprised that there seemed to be a large gap in the literature about her life.

As a result, in the summer of 2022, I conducted research at Boston University's African Studies Library. It was there that I found many works by and about her, which ranged from memoirs, newspaper articles, and scholarly publications she had contributed to or written. These works allowed me to learn much more about Ramphele. My interest in her peaked, inspiring me to explore her life and accomplishments in my thesis.

Because of both my time at the African Studies Library at Boston University and my personal research through Bates College, this thesis draws on an array of primary and secondary sources. One of the most important sources in this thesis is Ramphele's memoir, which chronicles her early life, focusing on the impact her family, and her mother specifically, had on

her values. This memoir is a powerful account of her relationship with Biko, how she supported him during the early stages of SASO and as his activist status grew, and how Biko's death in many ways changed the trajectory of her life. The final part of Ramphela's book focuses on her career after his death and illustrates the work she has done, both in activism and in academia, to help shape post-apartheid South Africa. This memoir provides a powerful insight into Ramphela's experiences, especially after the death of Biko. While the book is an incredibly important source, as with most primary sources, it has its own problems. The memoir is solely from her point of view; by only featuring her perspective and excluding the experiences of others, it does not encapsulate the entire picture of Ramphela's personal life, career, and, most importantly, her thoughts.

To gain a more nuanced understanding of Ramphela, especially her thoughts on South African issues, I turned to her academic writing. These writings focus on her views on inequality in South Africa and the experiences of women in the region. These works bring to light her intelligence and experience dealing with a plethora of issues, showing just how much she has done for South Africa. Her writings, and professional knowledge gleaned from them, show a perspective that is unavailable in the memoir—her research and dedication to uncovering hard truths about life in South Africa. The reader comes to understand her better, expanding the picture from just her personal experiences and into her actual hard career accomplishments. Unsurprisingly, like the other sources, her academic texts also have faults. While they show her thoughts and experience, it is hard to grasp from these writings the impact of Ramphela's ideas and thoughts on South African people.

To gain an even more nuanced understanding of Ramphela and her roles, I relied on other primary sources like newspapers. Many of these articles reveal her work, roles, and, more

importantly, how people understood her. However, in many articles, Ramphele was treated quite negatively, especially as she began her own political career. She was often dismissed as “Biko’s girlfriend,” making it difficult to gain a better understanding of her and her roles. Moreover, most of the articles are written by men, meaning that the majority of the evidence I gathered from newspapers often lack a female perspective, which is crucial in studying such an iconic female force in the country.

Finally, this thesis draws on a number of secondary sources, including academic books and articles about the SASO, the Black Consciousness Movement, and women’s movements. These secondary sources helped ground the primary sources like Ramphele’s writings and other newspaper articles in strong factual and analytical footings while helping me shape the way I conceived my project. Though all of the sources I used inevitably presented some challenges, they were still incredibly valuable in helping me recreate Ramphele’s life and thoughts, helping me grasp her role and those of other women in South Africa.

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This thesis is organized chronologically and broken down into four chapters. Chapter 1 gives important background on the apartheid state in South Africa, focusing especially on the experiences of Black women. It aims to show the conditions in which Ramphele and others were living in, arguing that the lead up and eventual persistence of the apartheid state was especially brutal for women.

Chapter 2 focuses on Ramphele’s complicated relationship with Biko, shining a light on the work she did on behalf of the anti-apartheid struggle and how that impacted their friendship and romantic affair. This chapter shows just how much she contributed, while also examining the dynamics of their personal relationship and how it impacted the way she was perceived by

others. I argue that Ramphele's activism started with her family's influence rather than Biko's, and that without her, Biko's activism would not have taken shape—or been as successful—in the way it has.

Chapter 3 analyzes Ramphele's contributions to activism and SASO, studying both how she and other women were treated in activist circles and organizations, as well as how complicated it was for women to balance the fight for gender equality with the one for racial equality. I argue that the Black Consciousness Movement perpetuated a misogynistic environment that aimed to exclude women from positions of power.

Finally, chapter 4 examines how Ramphele's career shifted both after Biko's death and after the fall of the apartheid government in 1994. This chapter focuses on Ramphele's work, especially how she was treated by the media when she began to concentrate more seriously on academia. It concludes by showing the intense scrutiny that women were under compared to their male counterparts. I argue that the media in South Africa fostered a hostile environment for Ramphele and created a climate of distrust about her accomplishments, which helps explain why women have been overlooked in South Africa.

Overall, there are thousands, if not millions, of forgotten women in the anti-apartheid struggle. All of these women contributed in small ways to dismantling the apartheid system. I contend that by focusing on Ramphele, we can begin to see the roles these women played in South Africa. Taken together, this thesis aims to show Ramphele's roles not only in supporting Biko, her partner, but also the liberation movement that helped bring down the racist apartheid regime in the country. Her experiences, I argue, mirror those of countless other women in South Africa and around the world.

## Chapter One: The Emergence of the Apartheid State in South Africa

Matlala Aletta was born in a small village in South Africa in 1887. Not much about her early life is known, but before her marriage to Sethiba Michael Mahlaela, a tobacco and corn farmer, she was a teacher.<sup>10</sup> Born just a year after the discovery of gold in the region, Aletta was raised in a newly transformed South Africa. Few around her were literate, so she used her extraordinary memory to gather important information not registered by authorities. Collecting births and deaths, weddings and funerals, Aletta served as sort of a “mobile archive for the region.”<sup>11</sup> As with many women living in pre-apartheid South Africa, one that did not have its oppressive laws officially inked in books, Aletta had to become a jack of all trades. Besides just her terrific memory, she was a traditional healer, an efficient manager of her household, and could even preserve a roasted pork in its own fat for up to three months without a refrigerator.<sup>12</sup> While Aletta, Ramphele’s grandmother, enjoyed her childhood, South Africa would change for the worse. Over the course of her young adulthood, the Afrikaner domination of the land commenced after a war, fought by two different colonizing groups, neither with any real or legitimate claim to a country already occupied, began.

This chapter looks at South Africa from the beginning of the twentieth century through the mid-1950s. Specifically, I intend to focus on the major events leading to the founding of the apartheid state in 1948, touching briefly on the laws put in place after the system was created. Moreover, it looks at the African reaction to the oppressive regime. All of this information is studied through the lens of Ramphele and her family’s experiences, focusing on the histories of Black women specifically. I aim to demonstrate that the lead up and eventual perpetuation of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 2.

apartheid state was especially brutal for women and highlight the history of South Africa as an oppressive country for its female citizens.

### ***The Beginnings of Colonization***

By the 1860s, about twenty years before Matlala Aletta was born, there were a variety of political units in South Africa: British colonies, Afrikaner republics, and still, a few large African communities, one of which the grandmother of Ramphele was presumably born into. Most of the European colonies at the time focused on exporting resources like sugar, wine, and wool back home. By all accounts this was not a particularly dramatic time in South African history, but that changed in the late 1860s with the discovery of diamonds and even more so one year before Aletta's birth, in 1886, with the discovery of gold.<sup>13</sup>

These two minerals had the power to dramatically change the economic and political structure of the region. In fact, the amount of diamonds and gold discovered in South Africa exceeded all other parts of the world, leading to more foreign capital invested in the area than in the rest of the continent combined.<sup>14</sup> The white population in the Boer-dominated Transvaal increased eightfold, and to keep up with the demand, the British and Dutch conquered independent-African states in the 1870s and 1880s, confiscated most of the land, and imposed cash taxation demands. The dramatic industrial revolution in South Africa during this time benefited its colonizers, but unsurprisingly, not the colonized. African men in families were sent away to the mines, often sending back meager sums of money to keep their wives and children

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<sup>13</sup> Iris Berger, *South Africa in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68.

<sup>14</sup> Berger, *South Africa in World History*, 68.



fed and clothed. Meanwhile, the women had to take over a variety of roles in their home regions to keep up with the pressures of being the only parent present.

It was the tensions of the mineral rush and the excitement of exploitation that led to political clashes between the British and Boers. While Aletta was in her home village, learning African healing techniques taught by her mother, the two colonizing groups began their deadly clash in what became known as the Second Boer War. It was bloody and violent, not just for those who fought in it. Land was torched, civilians were murdered, and much of the culture, especially in African villages, was altered because of dramatic land, and human, losses. The Boers signed the Treaty of Vereeniging in May 1902, when Aletta was just 15 years old, agreeing to the incorporation of their territories into the British empire.<sup>15</sup> This treaty gave the Boers less power but guaranteed the continued reign of white supremacy, a concept that united both of the colonizing powers.

Under the British control of South Africa from 1902-1910, white politicians created the South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC) which laid the groundwork for apartheid almost half a century later. The commission recommended that Africans should not have the right to own land, determine their government, or decide where to live or work.<sup>16</sup> The brutal policies worked, and by 1910 only a third of the country remained in the hands of Africans.<sup>17</sup>

In 1911, however, the British quit South Africa, giving all the powers to the Boers, who continued the white domination that had been so successful. As the Boers gained more land, they worked to consolidate control over the state and strengthen their grip on the Black population. In 1913 they introduced The Natives Land Act, which created more separation by prohibiting

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2011), 16.

<sup>16</sup> Clark and Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Berger, *South Africa in World History*, 73.

Africans from purchasing or leasing land outside of the reserves they were forced to live on.<sup>18</sup> This law served as an important precursor for apartheid legislation, as it aimed to control exactly where Black citizens were allowed to live. In addition, it gave significant swaths of already occupied land to the white population, which helped economically advance the minority population significantly.

In an effort to achieve their racial domination, the Boers created land shortages and heavy taxation to impoverish families on African reserves.<sup>19</sup> In fact, living on the reserves caused African farming structures to essentially collapse. After 1913, those living on the reserves were no longer able to produce enough food to feed their families while also paying the taxes imposed by the government; over one-fifth of the children died within their first year of life.<sup>20</sup> The survival of any larger family, including Ramphele's, is remarkable.

Despite the oppression, many Africans, women especially, worked hard to give their children happy memories. This resilience carried onward in family structures throughout the years, including during the years of apartheid. Ramphele's grandmother Aletta, for example, worked hard to give her seven children a good life despite the hardships. Ramphele's mother, Rangoato Rahab, shared happy memories of childhood, where she lived with her family on a communal farm in the Moletsi district.<sup>21</sup> Aletta and her husband, Sethiba, provided their family with a seven-roomed house within walking distance of other relatives.<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to note that while this was an era in which Africans were treated brutally, they were still able to find joy in their day to day lives and comfort within their family and community structures, an important

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa: Third Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 163.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 155.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 3.

theme throughout the history of the region, which helped establish powerful resistance movements. Finding joy and building positive support systems was important, especially because of the brutal work conditions and repressive laws that Africans experienced.

African women were oftentimes forced to become heads of the household, as men frequently went to mines or urban areas to find work. Even when the men found jobs, they made just a fraction of their white counterparts: white gold miners' annual cash earnings were 11.7 times the case wages of Black gold miners in 1911.<sup>23</sup> Apartheid, and the discrimination that occurred before it, is often thought of as policies separating whites and Blacks, but in reality, the policies also enforced the separation of Black families. Men had to go to cities to work months at a time both before and during the apartheid state, which dismantled many important family structures within native communities.

Women were often not allowed in the compounds for African men working in cities, which led to isolation from family social networks and cultural opportunities. In addition to disrupting the cultural and familial structures of Black families, this labor system also forced women to assume more responsibilities. The division of the family caused significant damage to important historical and cultural structures that had been in place for centuries, though some traditional African values continued, especially since people began to rely heavily on their extensive kinship networks to receive food and shelter amid impoverishment. There was a focus on the decimation of African culture, starting with destroying family structures, followed by changing the education system.

### ***Christianity, Education, and the Birth of the Apartheid State***

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<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *A History*, 156.

Understanding the growth of religious faith among Africans during this time period is important in order to thoughtfully discern the ways in which religion played key roles in activism movements, like Black Consciousness, later on during the anti-apartheid struggle. It is crucial to note the impact of evangelization on Black Africans at this time, as decades later Black theology proved to be an instrumental part in many resistance movements, including SASO. Most Black South Africans were simply preoccupied with day-to-day survival, making them especially susceptible to evangelization, which often provided expanded opportunities.

Aletta's husband Sethiba, for example, was an evangelist of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>24</sup> The church did not just have an influence on her mother's side of the family; Ramphele's father, Pitsi, was born in 1916 at the Stofberg Bible School in the Free State, where his parents were living to enable his father to complete his training as an evangelist of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>25</sup> Often, the church provided opportunities for Black people that could not otherwise be afforded to them. For Ramphele's family, embracing Christianity moved them to the boundaries of their communities, but it paid off: she credits her father's ability to move up in the economic ladder and become a teacher because of her grandparents' privilege as Christians.<sup>26</sup> Though initially socially ostracized because of their religious conversions, Ramphele's family indicated a strong religious pattern by many, and by 1951, 59 percent of Africans and 91 percent of "colored" citizens were Christians.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> It is equally important to note that without her grandparents' commitment to a historically white religion, Ramphele's father could not have become a teacher himself, and Ramphele often credits her initial interest in education and learning to her parents' professions as teachers. So, ironically, though both of her grandfathers committed themselves to a predominantly white religion, that decision helped Ramphele become an activist in the Black Consciousness Movement, one she helped found when she was in college, which she attended because of her own family's privilege of education.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, *A History*, 156.

The growth of Christian religions is largely attributed to the number of missionary schools in the region. The government failed to provide adequate education to most Black children; oftentimes their only option to receive an education was at these religious institutions. In 1939, fewer than 30 percent of African children were receiving any schooling at all.<sup>28</sup> Missionaries were some of the only places where children found education that could prepare them for the increasingly industrialized economy, one that needed workers who were at least semi-literate. Though they were educated, the quality of their schooling was not nearly similar to that of their white counterparts. In 1946, the government was paying more than twenty times as much per capita for white education as it was for Black education.<sup>29</sup> While teaching African children to read and write, missionaries were able to indoctrinate them with Christian ideology.

After the 1948 elections, which saw the rise of the National Party and the formal creation of apartheid, even more race-based legislation was passed. The system of apartheid, which translated literally means “separateness,” was an all-encompassing brutal regime meant to disenfranchise, discourage, and ultimately destroy defiant Black South Africans. Created by the all-white National Party in 1948, the policy stipulated that nonwhite South Africans, including Blacks, Indians, and all others deemed as “colored,” had to live in separate communities and use separate facilities than their white counterparts, despite making up the majority of the population. Though white South Africans claimed that their goal was simply to separate themselves from South Africans of color, the laws passed under the apartheid regime told a different story: one where the minority desired complete control.

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<sup>28</sup> Thompson, *A History*, 164.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson, *A History*, 181.

The Population Registration Act, passed in 1950, classified all South Africans into four primary racial categories: white, “colored,” Indian, and Bantu. Ramphele’s family, like most Africans, was categorized as Bantu. This law was so important because it institutionalized the racial hierarchy supported by the apartheid regime—the racial classifications were used to determine access to social services and other important resources. The apartheid government worked quickly to further solidify its power, passing laws that further wrote segregation and racism into law.

In 1950, the government banned sexual relations between people of different racial classifications in the Immorality Act of 1950, which worked to limit social interactions between races and abolish “racial mixing.” The Abolition of Passes Act passed in 1952, creating a reference book that had to be carried by all Black men and women. This worked to control Black movement in the country. One year after that the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act passed, implementing legal segregation of public premises, vehicles, and services, which further separated the society based on racial identity.<sup>30</sup> There were hundreds of more pieces of race-based legislation that passed and were debated on, illustrating that the most important thing to the white minority at the time was to gain complete control of the overwhelming racial majority living in the country. By creating so many strict laws with extreme punishments, the white government was able to create a society based on fear. Though there were millions more Black and “colored” South Africans, the punishments they received for breaking these segregationist laws were extreme, causing most of them to submit to the legislation out of fear.

### ***The Emergence of Resistance Movements***

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<sup>30</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 230.

Despite these discriminatory laws being followed by most of the racial majority, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which Black and “colored” South Africans fought back against this racist legislation. In fact, even before the creation of the apartheid system, Black South Africans and other races formed their own organizations to fight oppression. After the war ended but before the official system of apartheid government began, many Africans built political bodies to represent themselves and their interests, including the South African Native Congress, which was established in 1898 but grew to prominence in 1902, the Native Vigilance Association in 1901, and the African Political Organization (APO) in 1904.<sup>31</sup> By 1910 the APO had approximately 20,000 members.<sup>32</sup> Although these organizations grew substantially, they struggled to make or maintain any real change. Despite this, however, the existence of these groups illustrates that Africans did not merely sit back as their rights were stripped from them; instead, they worked hard to form collectives and tried to prevent white supremacy from spreading significantly.

In addition, World War II allowed thousands of African and “colored” men to fight, all as volunteers, exposing them to ideas of liberation and freedom, as well as changing the internal landscape and makeup of South Africa. 42,627 African men and 27,583 “colored” men signed up to fight in the war.<sup>33</sup> Along with the introduction of freedom ideals that the war brought, the fighting saw a large number of Africans, especially women, settling permanently in towns and cities. This migration solidified the creation of squatter camps and segregated slums: during the second half of the 1940s alone, between 60,000 and 90,000 Africans settled in camps outside of Johannesburg in the area later known as Soweto.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 230.

<sup>32</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 230.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, *A History*, 177.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *A History*, 178.

African women, like their counterparts around the world, saw the expansion of economic opportunities with the war. Increasing numbers of women moved to urban areas to find work in factories, further shifting the demographics of the area, which greatly impacted the ability of groups like the African National Congress (ANC) to organize. This once again illustrates the importance of Black women in the country's history—by shifting demographics, they helped activist movements grow throughout the middle of the twentieth century. Women did not just bolster these movements themselves, however. They raised their children within activist communities, further expanding the reach and influence of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Because of the history of these political organizations, it should be no surprise that especially after the formation of the apartheid state, Black resistance groups organized in opposition to the policies passed. In 1952, under the leadership of the ANC, many Africans participated in the Defiance Campaign, “a passive resistance that saw thousands of Black South Africans deliberately contravene discriminatory legislation in an attempt to show the futility and unjustness of the apartheid laws.”<sup>35</sup> Though Ramphele was just five years old during the campaign, the political movements that emerged during her childhood show how politics and resistance movements seeped into her adolescence. She often credits the rise of her activism to her relationship with Biko, however much of it has to do with the political environment of her surroundings. Ramphele was around activism even before she took her first steps, as all around her Africans began to focus increasingly on political organizing and resistance, two skills that her own grandparents had to cultivate in an effort to rid their land of colonizing forces.

By the mid 1950s, the ANC had become one of the most important anti-apartheid movements in South Africa, in large part due to its commitment to non-racialism; its 1955

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<sup>35</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 231.



Freedom Charter states that “South Africa belongs to all who live in her, Black and white.”<sup>36</sup>

During their Defiance Campaign, volunteers were often called “defiers of death” because of their willingness to die to promote their fight against the apartheid laws.<sup>37</sup> Because of its power, the apartheid government tried to censor and muzzle the organization heavily.

The 1950 Suppression of Communism Act, which gave the Minister of Justice the power to ban individuals, limiting their ability to organize, was often used against members of the ANC (though not exclusively, as banning orders were usually used generously against all Black activists, including Biko and Ramphela).<sup>38</sup> The banning orders were so effective because they were imposed at the sole discretion of the Minister and could not be challenged in court.<sup>39</sup> These banning orders did not just impact those they restricted. Just like in the urbanization of the male labor force, the banning of politically prominent men led to the further dissolution of traditional African families.

The work of the apartheid state to suppress the ANC and other organizations led to the arrest of Nelson Mandela and the fleeing of Oliver Tambo, and though the organization’s membership increased, its leaders became more and more threatened. Those in charge of organizations like the ANC were identified as terrorists and banned, leading to many activist groups being shut down before they could truly start. Interestingly enough, as more and more ANC leaders were banned, an opening was created for emerging activist groups. Without the banning of many ANC leaders, the Black Consciousness Movement and SASO may never have gained as much prominence as they did. Because of its popularity early on, the ANC attracted

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond Suttner, “The African National Congress Centenary: A Long and Difficult Journey,” *International Affairs* 88, no. 4 (2012): 727.

<sup>37</sup> Suttner, “The African National Congress Centenary,” 727.

<sup>38</sup> Suttner, “The African National Congress Centenary,” 727.

<sup>39</sup> David Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2010), 110.

members of all ages, which separated it demographically from SASO, the organization that Ramphele helped to found. Just like in the pre-apartheid era, there were a number of important movements that worked to dismantle the system of white supremacy in the region, including SASO, of which an entire chapter of this thesis is dedicated.

### *Conclusion*

Ramphele's grandmother, Matlala Aletta, was born just a year after the discovery of gold in South Africa, which effectively changed the political and economic landscape of the country. Just like her grandmother, Ramphele was born on the cusp of another major historical event: the creation of the apartheid state itself.<sup>40</sup> Aletta is described by Ramphele as being an important community leader in her village, a quality that Ramphele managed to emulate throughout her life, creating multiple village clinics that saved countless lives. While women have often been shunned from the historical narrative of the emergence of apartheid and the creation of the apartheid state, I've argued throughout this chapter that they were constantly impacted by each policy. From the urbanization of the labor force to the banning of mostly male activists, South African women have been forced to bear the brunt of the consequences of the institutional racism that made up the country's policies. This thesis seeks to tell the stories of women persevering through these politically devastating times. The next chapter explores Ramphele's activist upbringing and her later relationship with Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement.

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<sup>40</sup> Ramphele, born in 1947, was only a year old when the National Party implemented the apartheid state.

## Chapter Two: Ramphele's Complicated Relationship with Steve Biko

When Rangoato Rahab was about ten years old, she found herself stuck in a tree.<sup>41</sup> Normally it was the boys in her neighborhood that climbed trees to search for bird eggs, but she wanted to prove to them that she could do it too. What started as a mission to demonstrate her equality turned into a rather sticky situation once Rahab realized that she did not have the guts to climb down. Her brother went to call for help, and soon her father arrived to coax her down with a ladder. She wouldn't escape that easily, as her mother, Matlala Aletta, soon beat her with a stick. While she did get punished for this act of defiance, Rahab's stubbornness and rejection of gender norms proved to be an integral part of her life. Instead of a traditional career path for a young woman at the time, she decided to pursue education and became a schoolteacher at Bethesda Normal College. It was there that Rahab, Ramphele's mother, met Pitsi Eliphaz, a shy soccer player training to become a teacher alongside her.

Following her rebellious nature as a child, Rahab insisted on a somewhat non-traditional marriage to Eliphaz, Ramphele's father. She challenged many patriarchal traditions within her family: she "walked on a tightrope as she carved out space for herself to live with dignity within the extended family," Ramphele remembers.<sup>42</sup> Traditionally, newly married women were expected to prove themselves as hard workers to their new family from the first days of marriage onward. Rahab worked hard to demonstrate her skills to her new family but worked equally hard to establish boundaries with them. One holy tradition, in which men slaughtered and cooked special livestock for certain dinners, bothered Rahab immensely. The men often took their time cooking, preparing the best parts of the animal for themselves and leaving the women waiting for

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<sup>41</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 14.

just the scraps.<sup>43</sup> Without consulting anyone, she decided to dig in and enjoy the food before the men—they were stunned, especially once the other women quickly followed her lead. Rahab’s “transgressive act had liberated both men and women in the extended family from an archaic custom.”<sup>44</sup>

Ramphele grew up with a mother who did what she wanted. She challenged aspects of the patriarchy within family life and worked as a teacher while raising her children, which was quite untraditional. In many ways, Ramphele learned to be an activist and a reformer from watching her own mother stand up for what she believed in. This did not just impact herself, but also her siblings. Politics was not discussed loudly in the house, rather, Ramphele remembers hearing her parents discuss politics in “hushed tones,” especially when those they knew got in trouble with the apartheid government.<sup>45</sup> Despite the quietness of politics in her home, her mother’s constant standing up for what she believed in impacted her children. Ramphele’s eldest sister, Mashadi, was expelled from high school in 1961 “because she had participated in a demonstration against the celebrations of South Africa’s becoming a Republic.”<sup>46</sup> Mashadi and some of her classmates believed that the political change only worsened the conditions and oppression of Black South Africans, and she stood up for what she believed in, partly because she witnessed her mother continuously do the same.

This chapter seeks to contextualize Ramphele’s relationship with Steve Biko through the lens of her own activism and dismantle the common notion that she was merely a side character in the fight to end apartheid. She often credits Biko with her initiation into anti-apartheid

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<sup>43</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 28.

activism, however I argue that it was her family, particularly her mother, who first lit the fuse that inspired her to seek justice. Looking at both her role in the Black Consciousness Movement and her role as a partner, both politically and romantically, with Biko, this chapter works to unravel her complicated yet integral presence within the Black Consciousness Movement. The latter part of this chapter focuses on the ways Biko treated her as he balanced a romantic relationship with both her and his wife. I then analyze Biko's relationship with women more generally, something that is historically understudied. Biko's lifestyle reveals that he often treated women poorly; he wasn't frequently called out for this behavior because of his status within the Black Consciousness Movement. Overall, this chapter seeks to show Ramphele's personal relationship with Biko as well as her contributions to the Black Consciousness Movement, far beyond the way she has been perceived by many.

### *An Initiation into Activism*

Throughout her memoir, Ramphele credits her experiences at Natal Medical School, and meeting Steve Biko, as her initiation into activism.<sup>47</sup> I argue that this was not the case. From a very young age, Ramphele heard stories of her mother rebelling against patriarchal traditions and witnessing her sister act against oppressive systems. It is clear that she was raised to be an activist and enjoyed being surrounded by powerful women. Historians would be remiss to credit the rise of her activism to Biko, though that is what they often do. It is true that Biko pushed Ramphele's

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<sup>47</sup> Ramphele's memoir is the most important source used throughout this chapter. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the memoir is an incredibly significant source because it provides personal insight into Ramphele's relationship with Biko. Because this chapter relies so heavily on the memoir, it is once again crucial to note that there are holes in the narrative of this book. Ramphele could have left important things out, and it is the reader's responsibility to take that into account. The memoir is so crucial here because few biographies discuss the personal and romantic relationship of Ramphele and Biko.

activism further, but it did not begin in college—she was raised to seek respect in a state which only aimed to oppress.

Ramphela connects the further rise of her activism with Biko, when in fact it was cultivated by her growing confidence after the start of medical school. Attending medical school was difficult but empowering. Not many Black students were able to pursue higher education, and for women there was even more stigma in the educational system, though oftentimes Black women were seen as less threatening than their male counterparts, usually because they were believed to be less intelligent and politically minded. She writes, “Natal Medical School did not only provide me with medical training, but it offered an environment for the transformation of my life from an innocent rural girl to a person who became alive to the vast possibilities which life has to offer.”<sup>48</sup> Going to a prestigious medical school was incredibly empowering for Ramphela; it exposed her to many different people and perspectives, and also made her feel like she could chart a more successful life for herself.

This empowerment stretched far beyond just understanding that she could carve out a better future for herself—her increasing activism led to defiance of even some authority figures at the school. Ramphela grew increasingly angered by a particularly patronizing dean, Professor E. B. Adams, and, in one tense meeting with him, refused to stop smoking. When he grew angry and threatened to use his power to thwart her career, she “dared him to act as he pleased.”<sup>49</sup> This defiance was partially due to her increasing confidence in her activist circles, but it also mirrors the behavior exhibited in the past by her mother and sister, demonstrating the confidence that was instilled with her from childhood. Reflecting back, Ramphela wrote in her memoir that she

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<sup>48</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 57.

<sup>49</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 70.

felt “ashamed of my behavior at the time, but in the circumstances of the period I felt quite good about my defiance. As a woman, an African woman at that, one had to be outrageous to be heard, let alone be taken seriously.”<sup>50</sup> Ramphele witnessed the women in her family have to take bold stands, and with her newfound confidence in medical school, she felt able to do the same.

### ***Dedicating Herself to Biko Professionally***

It is clear Ramphele got a lot of her activism from the women that surrounded her as she grew up, but she often credits Steve Biko with a lot of her growth in resistance movements. She was in awe of him, and though she spent the majority of her young adulthood helping Biko with his work, she has gotten very little credit for his own momentous career. In most of his own writing, Biko does not acknowledge the work that Ramphele did for him, a pattern which has continued even after his death. In many biographies of the Black Consciousness leader, there is little mention of the work that Ramphele put in. “I spent many late nights helping Steve meet deadlines for his articles,” she recalls. “He was notoriously poor at managing time. I would write down his thoughts as a stream of consciousness which he would dictate to me, and later I would read the text back to him as he typed with two fingers until I was done—not uncommonly in the early hours of the morning of the deadline.”<sup>51</sup> It is clear that without Ramphele, Biko would not have been able to make the impact that he did. She helped him write political articles for SASO and helped organize his ideas and beliefs into a clear message.

Besides just helping him with his speeches and articles, Ramphele, like the media and the culture at the time, was also frequently more understanding of the things that Biko had to

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<sup>50</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 71.

<sup>51</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 59.

balance. For example, she writes in her memoir that Biko's grades began slipping in medical school because it was "difficult for him to maintain a balance between his personal development and national service—a common problem of many student activists."<sup>52</sup> Here, Ramphele continues to make excuses for the dissolution of Biko's medical career, yet she herself worked closely with him and SASO and managed to continue onward to get her degree. Historically, international media and historians speak at length about Biko's talents, when in reality, Ramphele was the revolutionary that was able to continue her studies successfully while balancing the activist lifestyle. The sexist stereotypes that have been used when discussing Biko's legacy seem to have seeped into Ramphele's own memory of him—rather than acknowledging her own accomplishments, she seems to focus only on his.

Ramphele's impact on Biko was not forgotten by all historians, however. In some biographies of the activist's life, authors admit that Ramphele often had the most influence on Biko. She was frequently able to help him with personal matters because of their especially close relationship, not just in terms of building his political movement: "Ramphele was one of the few people who could calm him down and get him to go away to some quiet place. He shared many of his innermost thoughts with her as well."<sup>53</sup> She often does not acknowledge the emotional work she did for Biko, a symptom of the patriarchal system she grew up in. Women activists, especially those in romantic relationships with resistance leaders, often had to play two very taxing roles. First, they had to assist their partner with work related matters, as Ramphele described often doing. She continuously helped him with speeches and articles, oftentimes through the night, even when she had to go to classes the next day. Second, women like

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<sup>52</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 66.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *Steve Biko*, 114.



Ramphela also had to do emotional labor to help their partners. She listened to him and gave him advice, and as the previous quote proves, she frequently was in charge of reigning in Biko's emotions when he became especially tense.

The impact of attending medical school, working as a founding member of SASO, and helping Biko both politically and emotionally, must have been draining on Ramphela. During that time in her life, she frequently missed out on sleep because of the many commitments she had.<sup>54</sup> Despite this amazing feat, Ramphela is often not credited with balancing her responsibilities in the same way a man would be. Much of that is due to how tied her persona and experiences are with Biko, who is often an overshadowing figure. In many ways, Ramphela did not help herself. She often took Biko and his work into account when deciding her career moves, which further perpetuated the increasing power dynamic between them in their intensely personal relationship. Biko was an incredibly charismatic figure, which is one of the reasons he grew to such prominence in the anti-apartheid movement. It is also the reason that Ramphela became so infatuated with him. Multiple times in her career she moved internships and jobs to be closer to him. For example, in 1973, she arranged her medical internship at King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban to be closer to Biko when he was banned, and later on she transferred the internship to be even closer to him, moving to Livingstone Hospital in Port Elizabeth.<sup>55</sup>

By becoming so emotionally codependent on Biko, and wanting to be as close to him as possible, she further connected their images. One Biko biography states that “a dynamic, exciting, symbiotic relationship grew up between them, their skills complementing one another in many ways.”<sup>56</sup> Once their working relationship grew romantic it furthered the connection the

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<sup>54</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 69.

<sup>55</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 84-5.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson, *Steve Biko*, 71.

two had in activist circles. Much scholarly work revolving around the Black Consciousness Movement is focused on Biko, ignoring many of the behind-the-scenes workers like Ramphele, something she did not seem to mind because she became so deeply infatuated with him. After his banning, she recalls “I lived off the warmth of the feelings between us and the wonderful memories of our intimate times together.”<sup>57</sup>

Additionally, she spent much of her meager salary on continuing her romantic connection with Biko. In both her memoir and biographies that include details about their relationship, Biko does not seem to provide much financial or emotional support to Ramphele. While that is partially because of his banning, it is also because he did not prioritize her as much as she did him: “I started living from one visit to the next and spent an inordinate amount of money on telephone calls to Steve,” she writes in her memoir. “Such was the cost of a long-distance triangular relationship.”<sup>58</sup>

While it is somewhat surprising that Ramphele would agree to an affair with Biko, ignoring his wife and child and instead prioritizing herself, it is quite understandable given how much she was committing to the Black Consciousness Movement as a whole. Biko began to take the relationship for granted, not prioritizing seeing her, which perpetuated the complexity of the power dynamic between them. The cracks in the relationship began to show after Ramphele became pregnant with their child: “Steve was clearly ambivalent about having a love child in the circumstances, but I desperately needed to have something more tangible from our complex relationship...The thought of sharing in the act of creation with Steve was exhilarating.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 85.

<sup>59</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 88.

### *Biko's Treatment of Women*

It is clear throughout Ramphele's retelling of her pregnancy that Biko did not care much about the situation. In addition, his romantic relationship with her is barely discussed in multiple biographies, and her first pregnancy with his child is certainly not widely reported on. When their first child, Lerato, died just a few months after childbirth, Biko was not there to share her pain. "Steve had to remind me in the end that Lerato was his child also and that his pain was all the more unbearable because he had been denied the opportunity to get to see and know her."<sup>60</sup> While it is understandable that Biko, too, mourned their daughter, his need to prove that his feelings were stronger than her's shows the innate misogyny that perpetuated his views and was embedded in the Black Consciousness Movement at the time.<sup>61</sup>

Biko's treatment of Ramphele, which included not being available for even phone calls leaving her feeling "abandoned" should not be surprising for historians or the general public given his treatment of women in general.<sup>62</sup> In fact, Biko did not just have an affair with Ramphele, as she later found out. He had sexual relations with a plethora of women, mostly within the Black Consciousness Movement, behind the back of both his wife and Ramphele. Ramphele has excused his behavior by comparing it with other activist leaders at the time. "Like many popular idealistic leaders in history, Steve did not escape the folly of admiring available women at every turn."<sup>63</sup> In fact, Ramphele claimed that she was "blissfully unaware" of the affairs, and though initially hurt, was not too bothered because "we both knew we were destined to end up together."<sup>64</sup> While she was surprisingly calm about his womanizing habits, others in

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<sup>60</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 90.

<sup>61</sup> The misogyny and sexism within the Black Consciousness Movement will be discussed at length in the next chapter of this thesis.

<sup>62</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 89.

<sup>63</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 110.

the Black Consciousness Movement grew concerned about his behavior: “Some senior leaders of the political movement, including Robert Sobukwe, expressed their unhappiness about his multiple relationships and the impact these could have on the movement.”<sup>65</sup>

Duncan Innes, the president of the National Union of South African Students in the late 1960s, knew Biko well and shared his womanizing ways. In fact, Innes was so equally notorious for his sexual exploits that he and Biko participated for the “Duncan Innes Trophy,” which went to the man “who slept with the greatest number of women. The women hated this but the men, including Steve, were not the least bit bothered.”<sup>66</sup> While the personal life of an activist is not always the most important part of their legacy, it is significant for historians to consider when analyzing their accomplishments. Though Biko contributed an immense amount to the anti-apartheid struggle, it is clear from the pattern in his personal life that he also severely mistreated and undervalued the women in his life, frequently taking them for granted or considering them mainly as sexual objects.

Biko is not widely remembered for being a womanizer, but I argue that his behavior should play an important role in his legacy. It is crucial to study this behavior not just to better understand Biko as a figure, but also to acknowledge that these habits bled into the Black Consciousness Movement, as well.<sup>67</sup> More relevantly, it also demonstrates the attitude he had towards his relationship with Ramphele. It is clear that she put in more than she got in their relationship, and by becoming tied to him without getting much of the recognition, she has lost a part of her legacy that she deserves, especially as one of the principal founders of the Black Consciousness Movement. The experiences that Ramphele had with Biko, both professionally

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<sup>65</sup> Xolela Mangcu, *Biko: A Life* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 19.

<sup>66</sup> Mangcu, *Biko: A Life*, 133.

<sup>67</sup> This will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

and personally, are not isolated incidents—women were frequently mistreated, overlooked, and underappreciated within the Black Consciousness Movement.

As Biko's importance in the movement grew, he became less and less attentive to his personal relationships, including his partnership with Ramphela. His growing popularity in the Black Consciousness Movement made it increasingly difficult to reach him. Biko always believed in not creating a leadership cult, frequently supporting centralizing “the people's attention onto a real message,” though in reality, according to one biography of the activist, “the word ‘democracy’ was not part of the language; rather the word used was ‘communal.’”<sup>68</sup>

Ramphela was one of the few people who called Biko out for his mistakes or risky decisions. As he began to break his banning order more and more, Ramphela recalled his ego growing significantly, causing their personal relationship to crumble: “I was one of only a few people who challenged him on the recklessness of his lifestyle. He became impatient with my criticism.”<sup>69</sup> As his figure and status grew, Biko became less concerned with the feedback of others. In the early parts of her memoir, Ramphela frequently recalled sharing ideas and critiquing policies as a group, yet towards the end of his life she describes a leader who rejected feedback and criticism in general.

Ramphela admits that “in some ways political activism is a form of religion,” noting that “the risk of a personality cult developing is extremely high.”<sup>70</sup> While she claims Biko did not seek that role out, it was one that he certainly filled. Though he tried to share power and frequently promoted activists, believing in their potential, he was referred to by the local people

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<sup>68</sup> Wilson, *Steve Biko*, 95.

<sup>69</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 109.

<sup>70</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 106.

as “The Son of Man.”<sup>71</sup> He frequently reassured her that he would leave his wife and focus more time on his relationships but never seemed to be able to follow through. She indeed worried that “he might well be enjoying having the best of all worlds.”<sup>72</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Throughout this chapter I have argued that Ramphele’s roles have been continually overshadowed by Biko’s “Son of Man” persona, partially due to her own actions. By constantly tying herself, her activist legacy, and her overall beliefs to Biko, Ramphele adds to the incorrect narrative that the work that she has done in her career is less remarkable than his. Instead of praising him for inspiring her activism, Ramphele’s image would be better served if she cited the women in her family, like her mother and sister, for teaching her about standing up for oneself and being bold. She let Biko, and his ill treatment of women, constitute her time at SASO and within the Black Consciousness Movement, which dilutes her work and the work of dozens of other women.

The Black Consciousness Movement perpetuated frequent misogynist behavior, at the order of Biko and many of the men he worked with. As will be discussed and analyzed in the next chapter, the Black Consciousness Movement, though an intensely important historical movement in the fight to end apartheid, had significant flaws, especially in its treatment of women. This chapter has argued that Ramphele’s beginnings in activism are owed to her mother, and the next chapter continues that push by arguing that the Black Consciousness Movement needed women to build up its messaging, yet continually rejected them.

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<sup>71</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 109.

<sup>72</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 97.

### Chapter Three: The Misogynistic Nature of The Black Consciousness Movement

Charlotte Maxeke must have been confused, but not surprised, that the ANC did not allow women to be official members of the organization in the early 1900s. Growing up as a Black woman at the turn of the century in South Africa, she was not afforded most of the rights she felt she deserved, so when she found out that she could join the ANC, just not as an official voting member, she promptly ignored the invitation and started her own group. In 1918, Maxeke founded, and became president of, the Bantu Women's League (BWL), where she and thousands of other women organized protests against pass laws, rising food prices, and the exploitation of domestic workers.<sup>73</sup> She was a leader, not a follower, and made her presence known in organizing circles throughout the country: "Her anti-colonialist politics and ideas—although specific to South Africa—reflected and echoed the broader call for race pride, self-reliance, and Black self-determination which galvanized Black people on the continent and across the African diaspora."<sup>74</sup>

Unlike other male activists both of her time and after, Maxeke "understood that the liberation of African women from the yokes of colonialism was as strongly bound up with issues of imperialism and racism as it was with sexism."<sup>75</sup> Though she did not call herself a feminist—language challenging patriarchal structures was not yet widespread in the area—Maxeke embodied key traits of feminism and proved herself to be an astounding activist. It is not surprising that after witnessing the level of commitment she showed and the things she accomplished, the ANC reversed its decision in 1941 and accorded full membership to women.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Selina Makana, "Owning Her Rightful Place: The Intellectual and Activist Life of Charlotte Manye Maxeke," *Gender & History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 450.

<sup>74</sup> Makana, "Owning Her Rightful Place," 445.

<sup>75</sup> Makana, "Owning Her Rightful Place," 445.

<sup>76</sup> Makana, "Owning Her Rightful Place," 450.

Maxeke emerged as one of the leading voices of anti-colonialist feminist discourse, which was a method of speaking out against the “colonized African female subjectivity” through specific social conditions, like labor migrancy and socioeconomic anxiety.<sup>77</sup> Deeply religious and well educated, Maxeke pushed activist groups across South Africa to identify issues that impacted Black women. Despite her groundbreaking career in activism, many of the issues Maxeke fought to recognize remained unresolved and misunderstood by male organizers well after she left the public sphere. Born nine years after her death, Ramphele, and other women activists in SASO and beyond, worked hard to continue carrying the torch that Maxeke lit. Many of the concerns that Maxeke had about the challenges faced by Black women resonated deeply with the women involved with activist organizations like SASO, which, like the ANC in the early 1900s, struggled to accept women’s issues as important and relevant in the fight to end apartheid.

This chapter seeks to understand the misogynistic environment within the Black Consciousness Movement while simultaneously analyzing Ramphele’s, and other female activist’s, contribution to activism and SASO as a whole. By examining the language used by male leaders, as well as the feminist debate within SASO and the efforts to create a woman-centered branch of the organization, this chapter examines the ways in which women were stifled within the Black Consciousness Movement. I then show the role of women in SASO, putting them, and their feminist behaviors, at the forefront of the historical narrative instead of as biographers. Finally, the chapter concludes with a closer look at Ramphele’s own accomplishments, focusing on her work with the lens of the complicated relationship between feminism and activism within SASO.

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<sup>77</sup> Makana, “Owning Her Rightful Place,” 453.



### *The Gendered Language of the Movement*

When analyzing the Black Consciousness Movement and its relationship to women, it is necessary to study the language the group used, which portrayed men at the forefront of the fight against the apartheid state. In reality, however, women were often standing beside men, putting in the same work. Language was a key component in the publicization of the movement. Biko constantly emphasized the importance of self-respect for Black men specifically. Despite his anti-colonialist beliefs, the colonial system actually impacted the language used by activists during this time, specifically undermining the position of women. “Whereas [the] Igbo language did not impute gender roles, English, which became the official language, masculinized or feminized roles and created stigma.”<sup>78</sup> The impact of colonization is important to study when dissecting the origin of the anti-feminist environment within the Black Consciousness Movement. While identifying as Black instead of non-white became an affirmative statement, Biko and others emphasized the rights of “the Black man” in South Africa. It was up to women within the movement to appropriate that idea and “forge their own form of liberation as women.”<sup>79</sup>

This exclusion enforced ideas about a hierarchy within the Black Consciousness Movement that influenced the beliefs of many of the male activists within the organization. “Exclusion from the language and space accorded Black men directly points to Black women’s secondary status within the movement,” scholar Paula Gqola writes. “It is the ambiguous status

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Morrell, “Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 612.

<sup>79</sup> Ian M. MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements Under Apartheid* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018), 17.

of Black women which allows them to be silenced.”<sup>80</sup> With the economic recession and governmental repression that emerged in the 1970s, groups like the Black Consciousness Movement promoted the idea of masculinity heavily. By introducing the slogan, “Black man, you are on your own,” the group’s leaders not only further gendered the movement, but also completely discounted the decades of support given to Black men by Black women. To be Black is to be male, according to the language promoted by the group’s leaders. “The struggle presented [was] presented as one between Black men and white men” exclusively, ignoring the struggles faced by women.<sup>81</sup>

Not all women were seen as “powerless and voiceless,” within the movement, however.<sup>82</sup> Despite the respect that some women, like Ramphele, gained from their male peers, they were usually seen instead as “honorary men” rather than intelligent women. Despite the continued sexist undertones of that belief among the men in the group, some women were grateful to be recognized. In a 1994 interview, activist Emma Mashinini spoke about her indebtedness to the movement: “I think Black Consciousness made us. Black man, Black person, Black woman, wake up, and stand up for yourselves, and know who you are.”<sup>83</sup> The women, or “honorary men” that benefited from the male-centered movement were successful because they altered the language, as Mashinini did, to fit their own identity. Just as Biko claimed “Black man, you are on your own,” the Black Consciousness Movement left it to the women to create their own sense of belonging.

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<sup>80</sup> Pumla Dineo Gqola, “Contradictory Locations: Blackwomen and the Discourse of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2, no. 1 (2001): 142.

<sup>81</sup> Gqola, “Contradictory Locations.”

<sup>82</sup> Gqola, “Contradictory Locations,” 141.

<sup>83</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 156.

It would be irresponsible to claim this was only an issue within Biko's political movement. In reality, male-centric language infected almost all nationalist movements in South Africa. Dominant and important figures in South African history, both before and after the formation of SASO, have been male.<sup>84</sup> "Among the youth, for example, the assumption is that the amaqabane (comrades) are male, young lions who roar in anger, and who have the characteristics of warriors."<sup>85</sup> Male leaders' toughness is a trait that is celebrated, while when the same behavior is exhibited by women, it is frowned upon.

When Ramphele first met with Donald Wood, a white South African who formed a close relationship with Biko and worked to end the apartheid state, he described her as "a Black bombshell of a girl."<sup>86</sup> Ramphele was surprised to read Wood's reaction to their meeting, as she writes in her memoir: "I can only surmise that he must have been disorientated by the shock of meeting for the first time an African woman doctor who was young and self-confident. He must have anticipated the worst."<sup>87</sup> These stereotypes followed women around, especially when they were activists. While Biko was considered powerful for his passion, Ramphele was described based on her looks and probably nonexistent attitude. In reality, Wood's reaction should not be that surprising. SASO had so few women leaders that he must have been surprised to see a woman so strong-willed and self-confident.

### ***The Feminist Debate Within SASO***

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<sup>84</sup> See leaders like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and, of course, Steve Biko.

<sup>85</sup> Shireen Hassim, "Gender, Social Location, and Feminist Politics in South Africa," *Transformation* 15, no. 1 (1991): 70.

<sup>86</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 147.

<sup>87</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 100.

Just as colonialism and western languages impacted the rhetoric behind the Black Consciousness Movement, it also affected the group's views on feminism. Biko and other SASO leaders saw feminism and "the woman's question" as inherently Western discourse "which resonated discordantly with Black Consciousness. SASO activists' rejection of feminism as 'Western' and 'imperialistic' and its rhetorical prescription of traditional roles indicate that the Black Consciousness Movement was forced to set limits to what it envisaged as liberation."<sup>88</sup> Despite the group's unwillingness to include women in its messaging, it did not want women to work on a female-centered offshoot of the movement, which is surprising given it likely would have attracted a plethora of new female members.

Instead of seeing the inclusion of women as a recruitment tool, many Black Consciousness leaders were convinced that it could actually challenge the legitimacy of the movement: "The real challenge SASO activists were alert to was the danger of potential division in the ranks of Black solidarity that the women's struggle could precipitate."<sup>89</sup> Just like the colonial forces that oppressed them on the basis of their race, SASO leaders were worried that women focused on feminism would, empowered in their own fight, leave the anti-apartheid movement. The group's leaders argued that Black women fell under the same umbrella as Black men, but in reality, their experiences differed greatly. "The refusal of [Black Consciousness] to acknowledge that Black society is not monolithic, that experiences of oppression [are] different within the same community," impacted the fight for gender equality and the impact that women could have on the movement and programs.<sup>90</sup> The experiences of those who were not Black

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<sup>88</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 160.

<sup>89</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 149.

<sup>90</sup> Gqola, "Contradictory Locations," 135.

women “were not perceived as consequential enough to warrant inclusion into the discourse of the doctrine.”<sup>91</sup>

By negating the diversity in experiences of the two genders, the Black Consciousness Movement “claimed the right” to speak for Black women, and “to know their experiences.”<sup>92</sup> This is dangerous in a movement, especially since the needs of Black women were often being overlooked and ignored by Black Consciousness leaders purposefully. Deborah Matshoba, who worked closely alongside Ramphela, petitioned Biko to support the creation of a women's group within the greater organization. Biko rejected her idea: “For Biko there was no possibility that a woman’s student organization as ‘a branch within’ that Matshoba envisaged, could be formed. Biko’s deft handling of the situation still showed that the program was viewed as a threat by SASO.”<sup>93</sup> By aligning himself, and SASO, against the formation of a women's group, Biko positioned himself in clear opposition to women’s liberation, instead favoring his own powerful position.

This argument is not to say that some women did not support Biko’s rejection of a woman-only branch of the movement. In an opinion article in a SASO newsletter, activist Daphne Masekela called the women who worked with white feminists and supported women’s equality over racial equality, “spoiled Black women.”<sup>94</sup> Many within the movement felt that Black women who fought for gender equality, as well as racial equality, were somehow disloyal to the fight to end apartheid. This assumption is not only incorrect, but dangerous, as it completely overlooks the complicated and disadvantaged position that many Black women were

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<sup>91</sup> Gqola, “Contradictory Locations,” 136.

<sup>92</sup> Gqola, “Contradictory Locations,” 139.

<sup>93</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 150.

<sup>94</sup> Daphne Masekela, “Building a Nation: Black Women’s Power,” *SASO Newsletter* 5, no. 2 (1975): 7.

in. Masekela argued that “for Black women to resolve their unique problems they have to go it alone—the oppressed and the oppressor can never discuss adequately what the political situation is.”<sup>95</sup> Biko used the distrust that some, like Masekela, had against white women as a further argument against the formation of a women’s branch of the organization.

### ***Women’s Role in SASO***

Male leaders still relied heavily on women within their activist circles, though they were often pushed to the sides of the narrative. As activist Thenjiqe Mtintso told one Biko biographer, men in the Black Consciousness Movement “want you to be political, to be active, to be everything, but they still need a complement of women who are subservient.”<sup>96</sup> Mirroring Ramphele’s relationship with Biko, many women were expected to play roles as both activists and supporters. Though “members of the Movement were forced to rely on women in ways that exceeded the initial prescriptions of their roles,” they still refused to support the creation of a women’s branch of the group or put a special focus on the plight of Black women.<sup>97</sup> In fact, women activists not only helped men both organize and function, but were also important in the telling of history. Activist women, long after the fall of the apartheid state, were able to memorialize various male leaders and their struggles. Ramphele’s memoirs and papers from her days in SASO, for example, are important documents for historians to not only study the movement, but the man behind it.

In Ian MacQueen’s book on the Black Consciousness Movement, he uses Ramphele’s writings and perspectives as sources to describe Biko before eventually acknowledging the

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<sup>95</sup> Masekela, “Building a Nation,” 8.

<sup>96</sup> Wilson, *Steve Biko*, 60.

<sup>97</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 159.

importance she had on the movement as a whole. The role of Ramphele in this book, and many others chronicling Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, is of biographer rather than important character. Just as their activist colleagues did during the fight to end apartheid, historians often use women as witnesses, rather than protagonists. MacQueen quoted one romantic interest of Biko to detail a long list of accomplishments and positive attributes of the SASO founder while describing next to nothing about her: “Durban in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a hub of intense political debate and activity, involving many brilliant young minds,” NUSAS activist Paula Ensor said. “Dominating that space with the dazzling power of his intellect and political courage was Steve Biko.”<sup>98</sup> Ensor was an activist in her own right, yet she is only known in this book as a girlfriend of Biko. Most notably, she is only mentioned two more times in passing, her name grouped with others, her presence only relevant if tied to Biko romantically.

Despite their “jobs” as biographers of men’s lives, the women in SASO played crucial roles. More than that, however, they debated amongst themselves on how to carve out spaces to discuss feminist theory. Ramphele and Matshoba emerged as foils for each other. Though they worked together closely, the two women had different views of feminism and the role it could play within the Black Consciousness Movement. Ramphele recalled in her memoir that the women within SASO “did not [follow] a feminist cause at the time—feminism was a later development in my political consciousness” and that their fight was purely “an insistence on being taken seriously as activists in our own right amongst our peers.”<sup>99</sup> Contradicting Ramphele’s point, Matshoba stated that she believed the women in the movement were

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<sup>98</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 106.

<sup>99</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 66.

feminists: “We were in a way feminists. For instance we believed in Angela Davis. We believed in her and we admired the way she was...active in the Black Panther movement.”<sup>100</sup> Though Ramphela did not consider the work she was doing feminist at the time, the desire to be taken seriously and treated equally by her peers illustrates that in reality, feminism was already piercing through the consciousness of the women within SASO.

### ***Expressions of Feminism and the Difficult Balancing Act***

The activist women expressed their feminism mostly through the ways they dressed and behaved, often wearing more risqué clothing, drinking, and smoking: “By talking loudly, smoking and demanding equality in eating arrangements, female activists asserted their right to personal freedom from traditional constraints.”<sup>101</sup> By rejecting traditional roles, these women activists worked hard to be seen as equal to their male counterparts—women like Matshoba and Ramphela within the movement “resisted the supportive and nurturing mold through which female participation in [Black Consciousness] was framed.”<sup>102</sup> In challenging the idea that the women had to retire to bed early and take care of domestic responsibilities only, the female activists managed to break important gendered roles within the movement.

Ramphela recalls wearing “hot pants” and embracing her natural hair texture in her memoir.<sup>103</sup> The slogan “Black is beautiful,” popularized in the United States, inspired the women activists within SASO to stop using the “skin-lightening creams and wigs that were the mainstay of popular culture.”<sup>104</sup> By embracing then-radical ideas about racial equality, the women felt the

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<sup>100</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 138.

<sup>101</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 148.

<sup>102</sup> Gqola, “Contradictory Locations,” 138.

<sup>103</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 57.

<sup>104</sup> MacQueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements*, 147.



power to embrace the then-radical ways of living, including through the fashion choices they made. In this way, becoming involved with the Black Consciousness Movement really did allow women to embrace their Blackness in a new way.

While the embracing of Blackness served most of the women well, many still ran into a crossroads when trying to differentiate their experiences as Black people and women. Oftentimes women, like Ramphele, felt they had to balance the desire to be activists with the expectation of having a family. As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, Ramphele served as an emotional caretaker of Biko and birthed two of his children. This got in the way of her activist work, and like other women, she had to choose which came first. The choice between activism and domestic duties such as motherhood presents an interesting comparison to that of racial versus gender equality. Women activists in the movement were constantly forced to choose between two things, while the men leaders in SASO were allowed to have it all.

While Biko had multiple girlfriends, children, and a career as the head of the organization, women like Ramphele were surviving on very little sleep while trying to pursue everything they wanted. “Too many late nights and too much alcohol are not good for anybody, but their impact on those on 24-hour duty like myself was considerable,” Ramphele remembered. “I used to resent the inconsiderate noise from the late-night parties which disturbed my sleep. In some cases I would simply have to join in because my complaints went unheeded.”<sup>105</sup>

Like most other women activists during this time, from the beginning of Ramphele’s activist career, her personal and professional lives constantly clashed. Before she became romantically involved with Biko, she recalls her first husband, Dick, being against her passion for anti-apartheid activism. “He made it clear that he regarded our relationship as dead in view of

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<sup>105</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 105.

the priority I seemed to have given political activism, by spending time at the SASO conference instead of coming home directly at the end of term.”<sup>106</sup> Ramphele was already pushing the boundaries of accepted womanhood by pursuing her medical degree—to also be committing herself to an activist cause must have been overwhelming for her then-husband. Not only did she struggle to balance her time, but she did so on an underwhelming and borderline unlivable salary: “As an African woman, I was thus at the bottom of the pile in terms of salary.”<sup>107</sup> Not only did she have to support herself, but like many women at the time, Ramphele was also expected to support her widowed mother and help educate her younger brothers. As scholar Paula Gqola aptly writes: “Women’s burdensome obligations as both wage-earners and managers of families clearly limit their time and energy.”<sup>108</sup>

If feminism was more broadly discussed and accepted, perhaps the women in the Black Consciousness Movement would have been able to fight for better pay and treatment. “Interpersonal relationships remained largely unchanged” without the influence of feminist ideas, “with the man as the dominant partner, and many women remaining trapped in unsatisfactory relationships that violated their dignity as people.”<sup>109</sup> Some women, like Ramphele, made their dissatisfaction known. There was no training, especially for women trying to find a balance between the professional and the personal, something Ramphele struggled with immensely. She writes that not only was there no formal introduction to activism and finding a life balance, but that the high expectations from her colleagues were immensely frustrating. In response to her concerns about “their unhelpfulness in crucial areas where I needed assistance, such as having

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<sup>106</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 80.

<sup>107</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 86.

<sup>108</sup> Gqola, “Contradictory Locations,” 69.

<sup>109</sup> Wilson, *Steve Biko*, 63.

ready transport to important meetings or coping with numerous telephone calls,” Biko told her to “relax a bit more.”<sup>110</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The Black Consciousness Movement struggled immensely to understand the needs of women and support them in meaningful ways. Instead of accepting their struggles and carving out spaces where they could freely discuss the issues and discrimination that plagued them, the movement, and its leaders, tried hard to force women into certain boxes. Honorary men, scribes, and romantic partners were all women were seen as within SASO. By accepting the basic, one-sided history told by male activists, historians and scholars alike miss out on the key struggles and perspectives brought by female activists. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the role that women played in SASO and other organizations is under researched and not often appreciated. They served as activists while simultaneously getting paid less and being expected to do more, like support their families and children. While there were ways in which Ramphele, and other female activists, pushed back against the separate spheres they were placed in, they were continually disregarded by their male activist counterparts. When Charlotte Maxeke created her own organization for women, she carved out a space where they could not only fight for their rights, but demonstrate their power. Decades after her death, her contemporaries, like the women of SASO, were still fighting those same battles. As I will explore in the next chapter, Ramphele continued to carry on Maxeke’s fight beyond her days in SASO, continually working to carve out spaces for women to discuss and debate ideas and work hard for equality.

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<sup>110</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 95.

## Chapter Four: Career Shifts and Media Bias in a Post-Biko World

Morongwa and her family were not particularly worried when she was admitted to Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg for a fairly routine procedure. The doctors were supposed to clean out her womb after a miscarriage and she expected to go home that day, reuniting with her husband and their young daughter, Mamphela, named after Morongwa's favorite aunt. It was April 1991, and though the procedure was considered routine, Morongwa never came home. Particularly struck with grief was her aunt, Mamphela Ramphele, who called the death of her beloved niece "a big scratch to the scars left by previous bereavement" she suffered after the deaths of Biko and their infant daughter.<sup>111</sup>

Morongwa was like another child to Ramphele, who took care of her for seven years while living in Lenyenye. Ramphele knew all too well the sting of death, the emotional burden it took on those near. Every new death she experienced only compounded itself into the muted drum beat of devastation that was embedded within her heart. "Each loss has its own individual meaning, but also invokes the meanings of past sorrows," she wrote. "Wounds inflicted by these sorrows start to bleed again after each new one. The resilience which enabled one to accept the loss and to give up clinging to what is irretrievably gone is diminished by each additional loss."<sup>112</sup>

The continual losses that Ramphele experienced throughout her life are not extraordinary. In fact, most Black women who lived in South Africa during the years of apartheid, and beyond, suffered innumerable losses of family, friends, and community members. What sets Ramphele apart from her peers, however, is the devastation she endured within the public eye. After the

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<sup>111</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 197.

<sup>112</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 199.

death of Biko, she was thrust into the spotlight, touted as a grieving half-widow, given they were never married, forever linked to the man whose career and legacy she helped solidify. Besides experiencing loss on such a wide, public scale, Ramphela also endured intense media scrutiny, both before and after she entered academia and politics.

In this chapter, I argue that Ramphela championed the struggle to end apartheid but faced serious scrutiny from both the media and her peers at a scale much more intense than her male counterparts. I begin this chapter by examining Ramphela in the post-Biko era, one where she prioritized her own interests, entering the academic field and working to decolonize white institutions. Despite the serious and earnest work she put in, she was often criticized for “abandoning” her activist lifestyle. I then explore the role the media played in shaping her public image, oftentimes disparaging her in comparison to men and holding her to a higher standard than others. Finally, I analyze her career trajectory as a whole, focusing on her role at the University of Cape Town, the criticisms she’s receiving for supposedly “selling out,” and the impact her career has had on other Black South African women.

### ***The Post-Biko Era***

In order to protect her baby, Ramphela had to be sedated after she heard the news of Biko’s murder. For weeks she was on bedrest, tortured by loss, wishing for death: “I felt utterly lost. My world had collapsed around me. Gone were the anchors in my life and the security I had become so accustomed to.”<sup>113</sup> Ramphela found herself intrinsically tied to Biko, not just because she was pregnant with their child. As explored in the second chapter, she was deeply involved in his activism work, helping him write speeches and strategizing ways to expand the messaging and

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<sup>113</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 135.

reach of the Black Consciousness Movement. Both in her personal and professional life, she worked closely alongside Biko. Balancing her own grief with the grief of millions of Black South Africans proved difficult. She remarked in her memoir that “the dream which was killed had both personal and national dimensions.”<sup>114</sup>

In many ways, Ramphela did not get the opportunity to grieve privately until decades later, when immersed in academia and able to truly process the immense pain she had experienced. Because Biko was a political figure, her personal mourning process became clouded by his popularity: “The enlargement of the circle of mourners to incorporate the body politic to which the deceased also belonged brings both added support and tension,” she wrote in an academic paper about political widowhood, years after Biko’s murder. “Political formations naturally want to make as much political capital as possible out of the death of a comrade.”<sup>115</sup> Her own grieving process was complicated because she had to both grieve Biko’s impact on her life, while also committing to national mourning processes.

Despite her feelings present in *Across Boundaries* implying that her world stopped turning, clocks stopped ticking, and the earth had completely frozen over, Ramphela was able to continue to build an astonishing career in activism and public health after the murder of Biko. In the years following his death, when she was in her early-thirties, Ramphela “founded a private clinic, then used it as a seedbed for a diverse crop of self-help organizations that [covered] an area in which some 50,000 people live, sustaining daycare centers as well as literacy and health-education projects.”<sup>116</sup> In just a few short years after Biko’s death, Ramphela was already

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<sup>114</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 135.

<sup>115</sup> Mamphela Ramphela, “Political Widowhood in South Africa: The Embodiment of Ambiguity,” *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996): 106.

<sup>116</sup> Joseph Lelyveld, “For 2 Apartheid Foes, a Sisterhood of Shared Fate,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 1983.

proving herself capable of dismantling the assumption that her work was only alongside Biko. In her community work while living in Lenyenye, while taking care of her son and niece Morongwa, Ramphele was able to form important partnerships with locals and create programs that focused on improving the lives of rural Black South Africans. Despite these accomplishments, she remained incredibly negative when describing the events of this time in her memoir: “Everything had died inside me, including dreams.”<sup>117</sup>

Ramphele’s inner anguish did not impact her professional triumphs. She lived two contrasting lives that mirror the expectations, and responsibilities, of many Black women during the apartheid years: no matter how much pain a woman was in, she still needed to keep her family afloat and work hard. This pattern dates back to the years of migrated labor discussed briefly in chapter one. Before apartheid, when men were sent to the cities to work, women were expected to support their entire families physically and emotionally no matter what mental pain they endured. The power of Ramphele reflected that of countless women before her; she, like others, was “engaged in the continual process of unfolding *within* the society that harmed her.”<sup>118</sup> Ramphele was expected to still perform the duties she needed to, still achieve greatness for others, while simultaneously dealing with intense emotional trauma. She, like millions of other Black South African women, did just that.

### ***Entering Academia***

Soon after Biko’s death, Ramphele shifted her role, transitioning from activist to academic. She focused on academia, and decolonizing white institutions, in ways that prioritized her own

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<sup>117</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 147.

<sup>118</sup> William Michael Paris, “Assata Shakur, Mamphela Ramphele, and the Developing of Resistant Imaginations,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 4, no. 2 (2016): 217.

interests. For the first time in decades, Ramphele refused to make professional choices while considering a man's proximity or feelings. When she was with Biko, she often chose internships and career opportunities to be physically near him, as discussed in chapter two. Instead of making choices based on a man's location, Ramphele chose to work where she wanted to be. This revolutionary change in her life, though empowering, proved to be controversial among her fellow activists. I argue here that the scrutiny she drew, publicly and from friends, was magnified because of her gender.

The ways she discusses her initiation into academia at the University of Cape Town (UCT) demonstrate the impact of other's words and opinions of her. Ramphele recalls that she "joined the ranks of arm-chair intellectuals who occupied the ivory tower of academic life, the very people we as activists used to view with scorn. How could I justify my presence at UCT and claim it would make a difference?"<sup>119</sup> More than other, male, activists who switched career paths or focused on more financially lucrative opportunities, Ramphele faced both an inner-battle and public scrutiny for her choice to pursue academia. She constantly questioned whether or not what she was doing was "right" for the activist mission she had, even though by decolonizing a white educational institution, she was, in many ways, realizing a major goal of SASO. Many activists felt as though she had to pick between academia and activism, that Ramphele and others could not focus on both, in tandem. This provides an interesting parallel to the ways in which male activists viewed women within SASO who desired to focus on both women's rights and racial equity. In many ways, this outdated belief illustrates that many male thinkers within activist circles remained stuck in the same arguments and battles.

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<sup>119</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 165.



Ramphela had to work on actively convincing her former colleagues that she could still focus on the struggle while pursuing an academic career. Having to constantly justify her personal decisions to old friends and coworkers illustrates both the closeness of activism circles and also the fear that commanded many of their groups. “It was much more difficult to convince former co-activists and others who feared that my energies would be sapped by the demands of academic life, and that I would be neutralized as an agent of change. Many regarded my entry into the academic world as a loss to the struggle.”<sup>120</sup> Activists did not see Ramphela’s pursuit of academia as something exciting and positive for the movement, though she rose the ranks and enforced change, all while illustrating that a Black woman was capable of being in a position of power. Instead, they were scared, worrying that she would abandon her former beliefs. This difficult contrast has plagued her decades.

Once she joined the executive at University of Cape Town, Ramphela drew even more criticism. Instead of her promotion being celebrated, her achievement as a Black woman admired, she was accused of engaging and supporting the university’s supposed tokenism: “Some people thought that my joining the UCT executive in 1991 was going too far,” she recalled. “Was I not allowing myself to be used by white liberals, by having a token, high-profile Black woman?”<sup>121</sup> Rather than understanding that she got promoted because of her competency, Ramphela’s achievements were criticized and doubted. This scrutiny from her co-activists translated directly into the media’s portrayal of her, which worked to both tie her to Biko permanently and discredit her work and strides for Black South Africans. As she remarked in one

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<sup>120</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 166.

<sup>121</sup> Ramphela, *Across Boundaries*, 210.

interview: “I think the most important difficulty, or the greatest difficulty, one faces in any system, in any part, is that you become unpopular.”<sup>122</sup>

Ramphela’s unpopularity, which she remarked directly on in multiple interviews, was perpetuated by the ways in which she was portrayed by the media. She first lost favor within many activist circles once she stopped making career choices based off of what the movement needed and instead began focusing on her own passions. Her unpopularity within these circles bled into the ways she was portrayed in the media—ideas of Ramphela being selfish, difficult, and simply a token Black woman, both within relationships and her professional career became prominent. One of the reasons she became so unpopular was because of the complicated ways in which she was tied to Biko and his legacy.

### ***Persistent Connections to Biko in the Media***

Ramphela has acknowledged the difficulty the media had in her linkage to Biko often. “The fact that I am not Steve Biko’s widow is treated as a minor inconvenience which is brushed aside. I have over the years acquired the dubious status of ‘a political widow who could never be.’”<sup>123</sup> Ramphela believes she became so linked to Biko because of “society’s anxiety to re-establish its own equilibrium” by moving her to a place where she is acknowledged, at least as a part of Biko’s personal life.<sup>124</sup>

In a *New York Times* profile on both Ramphela and Winnie Mandela, the author acknowledges that for both women, being tied to their former romantic partners has in some ways defined them. “The name of each of these two Black women is inevitably mentioned in the

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<sup>122</sup> Kimberley Yates, Pumla Gqola, and Mamphela Ramphela, “This Little Bit of Madness: Mamphela Ramphela on Being Black and Transgressive,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality* no. 37 (1998): 92.

<sup>123</sup> Yates, Gqola, and Ramphela “This Little Bit of Madness,” 179.

<sup>124</sup> Yates, Gqola, and Ramphela “This Little Bit of Madness,” 179.

same breath as that of a key political leader,” it concludes. “Each of them has to bear an almost unbearable loss.”<sup>125</sup> Though briefly, the reporter understands that it is painful for both Ramphele and Mandela (and others, not mentioned in the article) to be forever linked with some of the country’s most famous political figures. For Ramphele, it was the death of Biko, and for Mandela it was the imprisonment of her husband, Nelson Mandela. The media, and political society, tied these two women with their romantic partners forever, which not only worked to diminish their impact, something that will be explored in the coming paragraphs, but also proved painful, given the personal agony that came with separation.

Unlike her male peers, Ramphele was consistently known for her former romantic relationship more than her academic and professional life. Instead of championing her accomplishments, many media outlets instead minimized her impact solely to the period of her life she knew Biko, ignoring the major roles she played, such as the clinics she started, papers she wrote, and lives she saved through her activism and medical career. The ways in which the media portrayed her, especially during the earlier parts of her academic career and into the 1990s, is important to study because it illustrates the slow but steady descent from tying her to a man to viciously attacking her livelihood and character. As both the media and public figures became more comfortable criticizing Ramphele for her professional choices, they opened the door for more vicious attacks, which would eventually turn into the norm. This created a dangerous precedent not just for Ramphele, but for other women in leadership positions trying to advance in the world. These vicious attacks started through seemingly minor misrepresentations of Ramphele’s career and influence, starting with her frequent ties to Biko.

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<sup>125</sup> Lelyveld “For 2 Apartheid Foes.”

Consistently throughout her academic and political career, Ramphele found herself frustrated with just how tied with Biko she was. In the late 1980s, she moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to become a Carnegie Distinguished International Fellow at Harvard University.<sup>126</sup> The program was prestigious, and she was selected because of her academic prowess and her background in activism. Despite these accomplishments, and her start in the program, she was still known in news outlets as purely the former partner of Biko. Her Kennedy School of Government biography listed her as the mother of Biko's child first, which she had to petition to get removed.<sup>127</sup> The school had hired her because of her academic accomplishments, but in its own biography of her, had written Ramphele as first and foremost the mother of Biko's child.

In 1991, when Ramphele was appointed to the position as Deputy-Vice Chancellor at the University of Cape Town, a popular magazine in South Africa called *The Executive*, wrote that "the mother of Steve Biko's son becomes UCT executive."<sup>128</sup> Ramphele called the newsroom and forced them to publish a written apology to her, which they did.<sup>129</sup> One 1994 article, written by *The Boston Globe*, which appears to have been taken down by the news outlet, was titled "Biko's Lover: Banished and Pregnant."<sup>130</sup> By 1994 Ramphele had a plethora of accomplishments, was a renowned academic and activist who had graduated from multiple programs, including the Carnegie fellowship. To label her purely as "Biko's Lover," without even a mention of her name, is not just inappropriate, but it is inexcusable and deeply offensive to her accomplishments. While these moments of coverage on her life may seem inconsequential,

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<sup>126</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 170.

<sup>127</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 179.

<sup>128</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 179.

<sup>129</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 179.

<sup>130</sup> Ramphele, *Across Boundaries*, 179.

over the years they intensified, turning from simple digs at her credentials (by tying her and her accomplishments solely to Biko) to direct and cruel attacks on her character.

Throughout her career, Ramphele proved steadfast in her belief that she should not be aligned with Biko professionally after his death, something that made her tough and intimidating to news outlets and political figures. Instead of pigeonholing herself and becoming solely a beacon for his legacy, she was determined to carve her own path based on her own passions. Rather than allowing the news media and politicians to continually tie her to Biko, demanding she speak for him, Ramphele insisted on staying true to her own beliefs; her toughness on the issue caused her to quickly become unpopular. The public's perception of her and the way she has been portrayed by the media has caused a great impact in her life. "It is remarkable the extent to which my public persona is often given 'respectability' by summoning Steve Biko from the grave to accompany me and clothe my nakedness, a nakedness that is intensely troubling to the patriarchal society I find myself in," Ramphele wrote in an essay about political widowhood. "In summoning him to my side as a 'political widow who could never be,' society chooses to forget the relationship I had with him as a colleague and fellow activist, but only dwells on the aspect of our relationship that presents me as an instrument of his nurture and the bearer of his son."<sup>131</sup>

### *Sexist Media Coverage*

Beyond just her relationship with Biko, Ramphele drew clear sexist criticism from those that covered her in the media. After shifting away from activism and into academia, many of her former colleagues remained wary of publicly defending her and the ways in which she was portrayed. After determinedly rejecting the Biko-centric coverage on her life, Ramphele proved

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<sup>131</sup> Ramphele, "Political Widowhood," 111.

“difficult” for news outlets. She stood up for herself, repeatedly. The negative attention was palpable, especially in some reviews of her memoir: “it is hard at times to imagine the petite, fashionable Ramphele as a serious activist, and readers interested specifically in the [Black Consciousness Movement] would be better served by reading Aelred Stubbs edited volume, *Steve Biko: I Write What I Like*.”<sup>132</sup> To base the capacity of her memory and understanding of a movement she helped start and build by her height and her fashion choices is shocking. What is more shocking, is that this review was published, and widely accepted.

The focus on her physical appearance has been prominent throughout coverage of her, with journalists often adding details in describing Ramphele to make her seem more robotic and less trustworthy. One journalist wrote that “she has long since traded the African-style dresses from her activist days for power suits. Her eyes appraise the world coolly through wire-rim glasses.”<sup>133</sup> The pattern of media outlets focusing on the physical appearance of women leaders is prominent all over the world, and what Ramphele dealt with is no exception. But it is the coverage of her fashion choices and appearance, coupled with her forever association with Biko and the idea that she, as a woman in power, was undeserving, that proved a perfect storm of sexist media coverage.

Ramphele’s personal memoir, which has been cited many times in this thesis, has proved such a powerful narrative because it gives her the opportunity to set the record straight on her time in SASO, her relationship with Biko, and her career as a whole. Despite becoming a key historical document, it initially met backlash, especially from women. “There are a lot of women who even today disagree with the fact that I have written my autobiography because they think

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<sup>132</sup> Catherine Higgs, “Full Circle: Sol Plaatje, Anton Lembede, Mamphela Ramphele, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in South Africa,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998): 387.

<sup>133</sup> Suzanne Daley, “The Standards Bearer,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 1997.

that there are certain things that shouldn't be said publicly," Ramphele said. "I happen to disagree. Nobody thinks that there's anything wrong with Mandela writing his autobiography."<sup>134</sup> Ramphele wrote her memoir as a space where she could be open about her career, but also about her personal relationship with Biko. In the book, she is able to tell a true story about their dynamic, righting wrongs that had plagued media coverage of him for decades. More than just her personal relationships, Ramphele's writing also creates an important historical context that had not been entirely present. "Mamphela Ramphele's autobiography arises out of a historical context in South Africa in which there once was a concerted effort to not only ban, but *erase*, Black writing from the educational and cultural sphere," wrote one scholar.<sup>135</sup>

Despite the bravery that came with writing such a personal memoir, *Across Boundaries* was criticized for being both too political and not political enough. One reviewer wrote about their disappointment with her supposed ignorance towards her personal, romantic life: "Two failed marriages are quickly dismissed, and her two sons drift in and out of the narrative."<sup>136</sup> In the review's next page, she is brandished for not being political or scholarly enough, now focusing too much on her personal life: "scholars will be disappointed by her lack of attention to the broader context and complexities of Black resistance politics from the late 1960s through the early 1990s."<sup>137</sup> The continual disparagement, by male critics especially, of her memoir is stark. In reality, Ramphele's written works have provided historians of South Africa important primary source scholarship on resistance groups and organizations like the Black Consciousness Movement.

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<sup>134</sup> Yates, Gqola, and Ramphele, "This Little Bit of Madness," 95.

<sup>135</sup> Paris, "Assata Shakur, Mamphela Ramphele," 214.

<sup>136</sup> Higgs, "Full Circle," 387.

<sup>137</sup> Higgs, "Full Circle," 388.

This coverage extended throughout her career, focusing not just on Biko or her appearance, but also that she could not relate to most students because of a “privilege” she had. The previous article included that though she, as a Black woman, came from rural South Africa, the privilege she grew up with made her somehow unable to work as a true activist: “Though they lived in a village without running water, her parents were school teachers, which makes some students regard her with suspicion.”<sup>138</sup> To write that because of her parents’ jobs that her activism or career was somehow inferior is surprising, especially because of the years of abuse she faced at the hands of the apartheid government, which dealt her banning orders and tried to stop her entire life’s work.

The article continued by critiquing her choice to enter academia in the first place, arguing that there were other, better career paths for former activists: “Most of South Africa’s prominent anti-apartheid activists have settled into high-powered jobs in the Government or in the corporate world. But Mamphela Ramphela has gone her own way, choosing to contribute to the new era by trying to upend—and yet preserve—a former bastion of white privilege.”<sup>139</sup> Ramphela turned to academia to pursue research that she was passionate about: anthropology work based on poverty, women’s rights, and racial equality. She published countless papers documenting health and social issues in South Africa. To say that the work, and the research, that she has done has been nothing but preserving racist systems is a bold claim, especially when the majority of her research focuses on the systems of inequality created and perpetuated by racist leaders.

Once she entered the political arena, the coverage became transparently worse. One profile on political leaders in the country, which ran in *The New York Times*, called Ramphela’s

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<sup>138</sup> Higgs, “Full Circle,” 388.

<sup>139</sup> Higgs, “Full Circle,” 388.



choices an example of “tactical miscalculation, haste, and ego,” while calling a political opponent, Julius Malema, who many argue is a fascist, a “firebrand and maverick.”<sup>140</sup> When a political deal she had made fell through, Ramphela remained polite about the other side in an interview with *The Guardian*, telling reporters that “I believed that we had the opportunity to transcend party politics and engage South Africans in a conversation about the future. The last week has demonstrated that, for some, this new way of thinking about our future will be hard to achieve right now... The time for this was not right.”<sup>141</sup> Her colleague in the deal, did not choose to dilute her words or opinions, telling reporters “I offered Mamphela Ramphela the world, she wanted the universe, and now she ended up with a shack in Pofadder.”<sup>142</sup>

The ways in which the media has portrayed her is not only harmful to her legacy, but also dilutes the work she could have done. Head of Political Studies at Wits University in Johannesburg Professor Daryl Glaser told *The Guardian* that the ways she had been treated by both the media and the political parties in South Africa ultimately harmed her own reputation and damaged her possible political career: “It is a bit of a tragedy. If she had managed her entry into politics better, she could have filled an important niche.”<sup>143</sup> Even Glaser, who acknowledged the important role she could have played, still found a way to blame Ramphela for her own portrayal in the media and political sphere.

As covered previously in this chapter, Ramphela refused to be a beacon for Biko’s legacy, often using the ideas she helped him formulate to attack other activists in the country. In 1995, she wrote an essay in *The Weekly Mail and Guardian*, a popular South African newspaper,

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<sup>140</sup> Alan Cowell, “Dislodging the Heirs of Mandela,” *The New York Times*, February 6, 2014.

<sup>141</sup> David Smith, “Mamphela Ramphela defends decision to quit election pact,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2014.

<sup>142</sup> David Smith, “Mamphela Ramphela announces she is quitting party politics,” *The Guardian*, July 9, 2014.

<sup>143</sup> Smith, “Mamphela Ramphela announces she is quitting party politics.”

arguing that it was “impractical to look back on leaders like Steve Biko for answers to today’s problems.”<sup>144</sup> Instead of understanding that a dead man’s ideas could not always translate to issues of the modern times, political leaders attacked her ruthlessly. The former president of the Azanian People’s Organization, which saw itself as an offshoot of the Black Consciousness Movement, said that Ramphela was continuing an anti-Black diatribe, “a systematic and constant rubbishing of the Black community as a way of climbing the ladder of white privilege.”<sup>145</sup> He added that the only things he remembered about her activist work in the 1970’s was that “she smoked during meetings and slept with Steve Biko.”<sup>146</sup> Many politicians and media outlets alike worked together to smear Ramphela’s name and dilute her accomplishments throughout her career. If she had been treated the way that Biko or other male leaders were by anti-apartheid activists, her career, especially as she ventured into politics, could have gone much differently.

Besides just impacting her career, the way the news media and politicians treat women in general both across the globe and in South Africa, is incredibly important. Like other “centers of persuasion” like universities and think tanks, news outlets serve as institutions that “give legitimacy to ideas.”<sup>147</sup> By constantly berating women like Ramphela’s accomplishments, reporters legitimize false claims and assumptions that she is undeserving of her roles and incompetent as a true activist. Especially in a country like South Africa, the media plays an incredibly significant role: “The news media have a particularly important role to play in a country where political participation is a new experience for many people.”<sup>148</sup> In many ways, the

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<sup>144</sup> Daley, “The Standards Bearer.”

<sup>145</sup> Daley, “The Standards Bearer.”

<sup>146</sup> Daley, “The Standards Bearer.”

<sup>147</sup> Anne Mayher and David A. McDonald, “The Print Media in South Africa: Paving the Way for ‘Privatization,’” *Review of African Political Economy* 34, no. 113 (2007): 446.

<sup>148</sup> Margaretha Geertsema, “Women Making News: Gender and Media in South Africa,” *Global Media Journal* 7 no. 12 (2008): 1.

media in South Africa has helped to shape how political parties and activists are viewed by citizens, and the constant disparaging articles about Ramphele have certainly impacted the public's view of her.

### ***Conclusion***

Just like the article discussed earlier that focused more intensely on her physical appearance, oftentimes news outlets play a role in “shaping constructions of femininities by reinforcing ‘acceptable’ gender roles, often where men are depicted as active and women as passive.”<sup>149</sup> By focusing on her fashion choices and the circumstances she grew up in, many news outlets overlook coverage of the decades of work Ramphele has done, both in activist and academic circles. One activist who Ramphele worked closely with in SASO, Thenjiwe Mtintso, now works with an organization solely focused on bettering the coverage of women in South Africa. She said that fixing the gender bias in the media was “an uncharted path—exciting but also frightening,” frightening because “when you dare to challenge the lion in its den, you are likely to encounter extreme difficulties.”<sup>150</sup> Her observation is astute—when Ramphele challenged news outlets and publications to identify herself as more than just the mother to Biko’s son, she received pushback and future mistreatment. Because of media biases, it is especially important to read firsthand accounts, including Ramphele’s memoir.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, Ramphele is such an important figure to study because there are patterns in her life and the ways she has been treated, by men, the media, and the government, that have so perfectly mirrored what other women faced daily in South Africa:

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<sup>149</sup> Nadia Sanger and Adrian Hadland, “Challenging Patriarchal Scripts? A Gender Analysis of South Africa’s Community Print Media,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* no. 77 (2008): 7.

<sup>150</sup> Margaretha Geertsema, “Challenging the Lion in Its Den: Dilemmas of Gender and Media Activism in South Africa,” *African Journalism Studies* 31 no. 1 (2010): 69.

“Her identity as Black, as South African, as a woman, etc., is not singularly rooted in her particular time and space; it stretches backward and forward.”<sup>151</sup> Ramphele has proved to be a mirror to the struggle of millions of Black people, South Africans, and women. She is a pinnacle of intersectionality in a way that many leaders, especially male ones, could not be. While Ramphele continues to be cited in countless books and articles, she remains merely a footnote in analyses about male leaders.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the immense personal and political hardships that Ramphele endured after the death of Biko. Despite her numerous professional accomplishments, including fellowships, academic positions, and the publication of both articles and a memoir, Ramphele’s legacy has remained muddled, linked to Biko with unfair intensity. Like other women leaders, and romantic partners of male leaders, Ramphele’s reputation in the political and professional arena is defined solely by her personal relationships, fashion choices, and shortcomings. Instead of viewing her solely as a side character, historians should consider Ramphele as a protagonist in an important story both about the anti-apartheid movement, and the intense media scrutiny that comes with being a woman.

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<sup>151</sup> Paris, “Assata Shakur, Mamphela Ramphele,” 215.

## **Epilogue: A Lonely Life, A Lived Legacy**

In 2011, Lindiwe Mazibuko, a thirty-one-year-old woman, was appointed parliamentary leader of the opposition in the South African National Assembly. A lonely position, she said, and one that opened her up to an extreme amount of “fame, scrutiny, and public ridicule,” especially as the first Black woman, and one of the youngest people ever, to be elected to the position.<sup>152</sup> Unlike many of those barrier-breaking women who came before her, Mazibuko was able to surround herself with a group of female mentors to help her bear the publicity and responsibility that came with the role. She’s been open in the press and public about the women that have shaped her, the women who have helped to mold both her beliefs and self-confidence. One woman that Mazibuko credits is Mamphela Ramphele: “Dr. Mamphela Ramphele has been mentoring me since just after I was elected opposition leader,” she said. “And she has been very intentional about it. So she’s been a really big influence in my life.”<sup>153</sup>

Often one of the “first” Black women to hold the roles she held, Ramphele, like Mazibuko, must have been lonely quite often. Unlike Mazibuko, however, Ramphele did not have the same strong female mentorship as she began those roles. In activism, academia, and politics, Ramphele had to begin her journey either surrounded by men or on her own, which put her at a sharp disadvantage. Ramphele is by no means a perfect example of womanhood in South Africa or female activism—she made mistakes—but she is an important figure to study because of her wide arrange of life experiences and the ways in which she overcame adversity as a Black woman in the country. Though she does not encapsulate the experiences of every single South African woman, she proves to be a pinnacle example of resistance and strength.

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<sup>152</sup> Thando Ndabezitha, “Don’t overmentor women, give them access to networks, says Lindiwe Mazibuko,” *Daily Sun*, August 12, 2022.

<sup>153</sup> Ndabezitha, “Don’t overmentor women.”

In most of these career transitions, Ramphele was alone and met criticism. Still forced to carry Biko's presence with her constantly, she served as a pathbreaking woman despite the ways in which she was treated by the media, politicians, and her fellow activists. Ramphele's experience is unique; very few women globally have been so close, both romantically and politically, with an organizer like she was with Biko. There have been a few articles comparing Ramphele's experience with that of Winnie Mandela, the wife of Nelson Mandela and an important activist and figure in her own right, but very little scholarly research done on the topic. If Biko had not been murdered by the apartheid police, Ramphele's life could have mirrored Winnie Mandela's, a figure who, like Ramphele, is forever tied to her romantic and political partner.

Many historians now focus on Winnie more analytically, understanding her "as a political actor" and "treating her own political biography as seriously as that of Nelson."<sup>154</sup> In many ways, the renaissance of scholarly work about Winnie Mandela has reignited the ways in which historians study women and marriages within South Africa. Though Ramphele and Biko were never married, their relationship, one enveloped in both romance and politics, mirrors the complicated dynamic between the Mandelas. If Biko had not been murdered, it is largely unclear what their relationship would have looked like and how Ramphele's career trajectory could have possibly changed. Winnie Mandela's journey was "shaped by her status as the wife of the nationalist leader, propelling her into the glare of the media."<sup>155</sup> It is peculiar that there has not been much scholarly connections between the two women, who suffered the loss of their

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<sup>154</sup> Shireen Hassim, "The Impossible Contract: The Political and Private Marriage of Nelson and Winnie Mandela," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 45, no. 6 (2019): 1152.

<sup>155</sup> Hassim, "The Impossible Contract," 1158.

loved ones in similar ways. Winnie is only briefly mentioned in Ramphele's writings and books, and Ramphele seems to have a complicated opinion on the late public figure.

Though she rarely speaks about Winnie, possibly because she does not want to and possibly because she is seldom asked, Ramphele did speak about her in one *New York Times* interview, published in 1993. Winnie, at the time, had spoken out recently, calling Black moderates the “elite of the oppressed,” sleeping in “silken sheets.”<sup>156</sup> Gently probed by the reporter about her more “comfortable” life, one that she admitted having “irrational twinges of guilt” about, Ramphele remarked, “Ultimately it’s actually impossible to have a society without elites. And it’s not very difficult to be an elite as a Black person, because people have been kept down for so long.”<sup>157</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, Ramphele was often accused of being privileged and unable to understand the experiences of poorer Black South Africans. Addressing Winnie Mandela more directly, she added: “the interesting thing, of course, is that Winnie Mandela is also sleeping between silken sheets.”<sup>158</sup>

The disdain of Winnie that Ramphele appears to possess is not particularly unusual, given the activist's politically controversial life. In addition, despite her large media profile in South Africa, it is true that Ramphele has not attained the level of stardom as figures like Winnie. “For all the plaudits and jobs, Ms. Ramphele has never attained the status of [Winnie Mandela],” writes one journalist in *The Financial Times*.<sup>159</sup> The lack of substantive research and understanding of Ramphele's life—the fact that there are not scholarly biographies about her career, both in activism and beyond—is a disservice to the study of anti-apartheid history. Like

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<sup>156</sup> Bill Keller, “Conversations/Mamphela Ramphele; A Voice Raised in Apartheid, Lonelier Now, Extols Self-Reliance,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 1993.

<sup>157</sup> Keller, “Conversations/Mamphela Ramphele.”

<sup>158</sup> Keller, “Conversations/Mamphela Ramphele.”

<sup>159</sup> Andrew England, “Mamphela Ramphele, taking on the ANC,” *The Financial Times*, February 22, 2013.

Winnie, Ramphela served as an important sounding board to her romantic and political partner. She worked both as a supportive quasi-spouse to Biko while also balancing her own activism and responsibilities. She worked in academia, publishing papers, reports, and books about issues facing South Africans, all while raising children and grieving Biko. She switched into politics, trying to create a political party to unify South Africa, enduring immense criticism from, oftentimes misogynistic, media outlets. While figures like Winnie Mandela attract more attention from scholars and the general public alike, Ramphela has proved to be a formidable figure in the history of South Africa, through the end of the apartheid system and beyond.

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the importance of Mamphela Ramphela on not only the anti-apartheid movement, but South African politics and society as a whole. Starting from a young age, Ramphela broke barriers by attending medical school as a Black woman in a segregated society. She worked hard to carve a space for herself and her ideas in activist movements like SASO by working grueling hours and contributing in ways that remain largely unnoticed. Her relationship with Biko, though at times tumultuous, was heavily influential on her career choices and personal life, to some detriment. Ramphela's experiences in SASO before Biko's death were complicated, as the organization itself was exclusionary towards the experiences of Black women. Finally, Ramphela's life after Biko's death, focusing on activism, academia, and politics, has been heavily scrutinized by her peers, the South African public, and the new media.

Despite all of these hardships, intensive time commitments, and career changes, Ramphela has proved to be a formidable force in South African culture. She is a prime example of the ways in which women had to contort themselves, and their schedules, to be able to pursue professional and activist careers while having familial and personal relationships. This thesis has



sought to show the understudied impacts of women on the anti-apartheid movement as a whole, as well as the barriers that women had to break down to participate in leadership and organizational roles in activist organizations. By studying Ramphele with a critical and analytical lens, historians can grasp at larger patterns of female leadership, and the female experience, in South African politics and activism.

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