

AN OPEN LETTER

TO THE COMMITTEE TO WELCOME NELSON MANDELA TO SEATTLE:

Although I understand that the committee to welcome Nelson Mandela to Seattle has already progressed in its several decisions, I believe it is nevertheless important at this time to submit a few respectful suggestions.

When Nelson Mandela came to the United States the year after his release from prison, his first request on arrival in Washington, D.C., as well as in the other cities he visited, was to meet with ANC associates, supporters, and community activists. A framed photograph from that time, taken by a South African colleague who was present at an ANC breakfast gathering, has occupied a special place in my house and studio since it was given to me six years ago. It shows Mandela holding the baby daughter of an activist from Zimbabwe—and cuddling her in a most practiced grandfatherly way.

During his visit to this city, in recognition of his love and regard for children, it seems appropriate that “Madiba” receive a gift of the print *Nontsikelelo’s Song: Albertina Sisulu with Baby* from the same series as the work displayed at the Funda Community College School of Art in Soweto, not far from the Sisulu household. As we know, Albertina Sisulu was an active midwife in Soweto for many years (I have enclosed a reduced copy of this print). Most suitably, this gift would be presented by Maryamu Eltayeb-Givens and her children at First Place in Seattle: a gesture that will not only inspire a sense of hope for these children, but may also resonate for the larger community with a suggestion of the essential spirit of Nelson Mandela.

Luckily, for this spirit of compassion and struggle to be further honored, many of the “larger community” of grassroots anti-apartheid activists are still living in Seattle. For instance, there are these former members of the Seattle Coalition Against Apartheid who are very much present in the community: Ruperta Alexis-Caldwell; Cecilia Beckwith; Bill Corr, Jr.; Rick Harwood; Sadikifu Akina-James; Charles Rolland; and, of course, Maryamu Eltayeb-Givens, who chaired the Coalition (following Gerald Lenoir)—and myself. Moreover, several former activists of the Church Council’s South African Task Force—and the University of Washington’s Students Against Apartheid (a persistent presence in the long struggle for divestment)—are still living in Seattle: Dr. William Cate, Elaine Hickman, Marjorie and Garry Prince, the Rev. Clarence Solberg and Helen Solberg, and Kwame and Zenko Turner (quite a few years ago, Zenko had a reception in her home for fellow South African Archbishop Tutu when he came to Seattle)—and Tracy Lai and Stan Shikuma.

Recently, the veteran South African activist Ahmed Kathrada, in the course of a discussion about his newly-published book *Letters from Robben Island*, confided to the interviewer that the prison warden told him (at the beginning of the infamous life sentences), “*In five years time, nobody is going to remember the name Mandela.*” Obvious as it must seem now, we would nevertheless wish to

acknowledge that without the years and years of steady, dedicated activism by the international community—without this broad, unrelenting solidarity of “ordinary” people with those who were suffering and defying apartheid inside South Africa and in exile—and without the *continuous organizing presence* of particular activists in Seattle—Mandela might never have been released nor apartheid brought down.

Somewhere, I still have a few of those rain-battered FREE MANDELA signs that we held in the countless picket lines at the Seattle “honorary” South African consulate during the last years of apartheid; and somewhere, in storage, are the displays created especially for the wonderful celebration of Mandela’s release—which occasion, of course, took place at Mt. Zion. (Like CAMP and Langston Hughes, Mt. Zion was “where it happened.”) But one does not want to remember only the first year of big demonstrations at the consulate, when so many citizens from diverse community, civil rights, labor, educational, religious, cultural, medical, professional, and political groups and offices marched up those stairs to be arrested: rather, one wants not to forget those who week after week, month after month, year after year, kept the pressure on and made the difference—people, for instance, such as Doris and Lenus Westman, both faithfully marching in their eightieth years (he has since passed on).

One also remembers different times—such as the lonely decade before the Soweto Uprising when few in Seattle wanted to embrace the “communist/terrorist” ANC and Nelson Mandela; in fact, it was towards the end of this period that our Municipal Judge Judith Hightower had the job of coordinating anti-apartheid work while at AFSC. Certainly, a great many people in Seattle contributed over the years in one way or another, as they could, to various anti-apartheid events and demonstrations (in particular to those organized by the Coalition), i.e., the annual Sharpeville commemorations; the annual South African Women’s Day celebrations (with a remembering of Harriet Tubman at the consulate, when Kikora Dorsey, Zakiya Stewart, Bettylou Valentine, and Bunny Wilburn were arrested, among others); the Youth Days (and one of the first Seattle rap contests!); the anti-apartheid art exhibition and other benefits; the tent city protests and agitations for divestment at the U.W.; the forums on health care and children (often organized by Cece Beckwith); the campus African Liberation Day events with their South African programs and marches; the numerous protests at the Federal Building; the intense public meetings with various ANC (and SWAPO) reps; the trips to Vancouver, B.C., and to New York, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco for conferences; the community teach-ins and workshops (especially at the MLK Birthday rally and march); the Dennis Brutus Defense Committee; the occasions with visiting South African unionists, and with theater people, performers, and musicians (such as Hugh Masekela and Abdullah Ibrahim during the cultural boycott of South Africa); the organized confrontations with official apartheid apologists and tourist promoters; the Seattle-Daliwe Sister Community Project; the triumphant trial of the arrested doctors; the Shell Oil boycott and protests; the rallies and vigils for the assassinated and the imprisoned; and, hardly least, the poetry readings, press conferences, proclamations, and fasts, not a few of which occurred at the consulate.

Unfortunately, one can compose here only the briefest summary of the anti-apartheid activities in the Seattle area, or the communities of people who entered into the organizing—such as the South Africans (and others from the continent) who gave so much to our efforts and have since gone home: who could forget the contributions of Michael Nixon, Maseko and Mokeshane Nxumalo, Neeta and Tivan Ravjee, Vivian and Peter Manyike, or ANC rep Fred Dubé? (One of the most memorable public forums in Seattle took place when Fred spoke at the Militant Bookstore, as he often did, in an evening dedicated to the memory of the powerful sculptor Dumile Feni, whose untimely death had occurred in New York in exile.)

It is more to the purpose of this letter that it allows me to record what a privilege it was to know and work with the Seattle activists who could be counted on to “hang in there”: Maryamu Eltayeb-Givens’ indomitable and uncompromising leadership of the Seattle Coalition Against Apartheid (at a time when—need we be reminded?—her own circumstances were extremely difficult); Eddie Rye, Jr.’s uncanny knowledge of when to do the right thing on the right issues (like stopping South African granite, if my memory is correct, from being shipped in for the tunnel); Marjorie Prince’s tireless and persistent demonstrating, advocating, and testifying (she was one of the international monitors in South Africa for the 1994 elections); Dr. Gretchen Kalonji’s unflagging welcome to students, exiles, and reps from South Africa into her home and dining table (she is one of the few internationalists who have taught at *Somafco*, the ANC school in Tanzania, and continues to visit ANC colleagues frequently in South Africa now); Rev. Robert Jeffrey, who generously opened the doors of New Hope for gatherings (not to forget the time of his fast at Boeing); Rick Harwood’s consistently complete and trenchant articles for *The Medium* and *The Facts* during Coalition events; Lora Chiorah-Dye’s boundless willingness to bring her family of musicians and dancers for performances at anti-apartheid benefits (such as the Mandela release celebration); Esther Mumford’s hosting of South African guests; Lynne Wilson, one of Seattle’s activist attorneys, offering her expertise to the movement (while still others were the Coalition’s legal stand-bys during the arrests); the years-long back-up support (and community backbone support) of Larry Gossett and Rickie Malone; the (years-long) anti-apartheid and Southern Africa solidarity work, especially on labor issues, of Tyree Scott (one also remembers a remarkable gathering at the Sims-Scott home with the brilliant ANC international rep Pallo Jordan); and the activist advocacy of Angela Gilliam through teaching and cultural work . . .

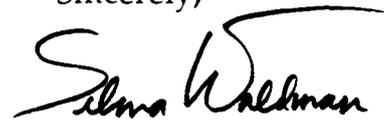
I will stop there, since the intention is not to describe the whole montage of all the people involved in all the events in Seattle’s anti-apartheid past, but rather to place the focus on those individuals locally who committed a definite part of their lives (for some it was a total commitment) to that struggle and should be recognized accordingly when the city hosts Mandela. Of course it is to be expected that Mandela would meet with elective officials—and with business, labor, and professional leadership, as well as with well-known community, religious, cultural, and civil rights leadership—but just as Mandela himself has made no bones about his high regard for those friends who supported the anti-apartheid forces in their epic struggle for a new South Africa (including Fidel Castro and Col. Ghaddafi),

the City of Seattle and the State of Washington must take his example and do no less in honoring those citizens of the area who were also engaged as his friends in one of the most significant human rights battles of the 20th century.

Coincidentally, last month I finally made the decision to transfer several dozen large boxes, portfolios, and files of anti-apartheid archives to the University of Washington and Douglass-Truth Library, precisely because an historical if modest part of the struggle took place here. These archives range from notes taken during Randy Carter's early presentations on divestment, to an invitation for the first reception honoring Dennis Brutus at Jeri and Johnny Ware's, to a vast collection of clippings and photos from the consulate demonstrations (including one moving image of Rev. Samuel McKinney and other pastors in their ecumenical robes descending the stairs to be handcuffed)—from the earliest ANC newsletters called *Mayibuye* published in Lusaka (1967–69), to stacks of the *Sechaba* magazine and other official ANC documents—from masses of flyers and announcements of Seattle events in Central Area community venues, schools, and community colleges, to London "Aid and Defense" materials—from announcements on the appearance in Seattle of the legendary Chris Hani (sponsored by the Communist Party) the year before he was killed by a hired assassin in South Africa, to the handout for a heady evening of South African choral music presented by Pat Wright and Fred West—from documents on the early ideological arguments between ANC, PAC, and other groups, to a compilation of Steve Biko's writings between the covers of the original Black Consciousness Movement pamphlets and books: literally hundreds of materials, international and local (one can scarcely recall most of them), which will surely engage a diversity of young scholars in the future.

When I stood in front of Mandela's cell on Robben Island with the poet James Matthews in 1997 (not only had James experienced solitary confinement but "the system" had confiscated his manuscripts), it was a personal epiphany: I had not expected to see Mandela released from prison in my lifetime. During his visit to Seattle, however, we will expect the spirit of *Ubuntu* to prevail, so that those of us who were committed "friends of the struggle" might anticipate being somewhere in his presence. *Ubuntu*, a characterization used in daily life in South Africa, is a worldview incorporated into the South African constitution. According to the book *Reconciliation Through Truth* (published in Cape Town), it implies the transcendent conceptual balance of "both compassion and recognition of the humanity of the other."

Sincerely,



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