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Forgotten Bodies or Silenced Voices? Recasting Women's Voices at the Bantu Square Massacre of East London, 1952

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Narratives of political and community struggles often privilege the role of men, painting them as the faces of the struggle. Yet, women have been (and continue to be) active participants who have fought against systems of oppression through active mobilisation and resistance. This article focuses on events on 9 November 1952 at Bantu Square in Duncan Village, East London, when police broke up a meeting and shot and killed hundreds of people, while angry mobs killed two white people in retaliation. 'Local historians' point to the crucial role of women in mobilising support for the meeting that day. Women not only attended in their hundreds and died in untold numbers, but have left a lasting impression on the generations that have followed, inspiring activism and the retelling of what they call the Bantu Square massacre. The article draws on life histories, interviews, secondary material (including a film and memoir) and theories about the silencing of black women in the apartheid archive (Bridger and Hazan) and marginalised women generally (Crenshaw), and about the fragmented narratives that are produced when the silenced eventually speak (Markham).

Keywords: women; resistance; narratives; silencing; 'local historians'; East London

Introduction

Narratives of general political and community struggles tend to depict women as providers of care work and emotional labour while men are painted as the faces of protest. This article challenges that perception in addressing the role of women in the events of 9 November 1952 in Duncan Village, East London, during the African National Congress (ANC) Defiance Campaign. On that day, police broke up a meeting in Bantu Square. The police shot and killed hundreds of people and two white people were killed by angry crowds, including a Roman Catholic nun, Sister Aidan Quinlan, whose body was mutilated. Literature on the events focuses on the leaders of the ANC Youth League, who were all men. My research shows that although women have not been foregrounded as leaders of the meeting in Bantu Square, they played an essential role in mobilising support for it and a significant number died in the police massacre.

This article draws on six years of ethnographic mapping research in Duncan Village which I conducted for my PhD between 2014 and 2020. In life history interviews and secondary material (including a film and memoir), local residents whom I call 'local historians' show the

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extent of women's involvement at the time and how women today draw their strength from historical struggles. The article contributes to efforts reasserting women's bodies at the picket line and highlighting their role in community protests from a historical perspective.[1]

A Note on Naming: Local Historians, Bantu Square, the Black Sunday

My account is informed by narratives of the events told by local people that I choose to refer to as local historians. I do this to acknowledge their intellectual labour. Most of those referenced here were not direct participants in the events of 1952 but heard reports from family or community; they have acted as intellectuals who are able to write or convey orally their own history. As I explain elsewhere,[2] I do not take the contribution of local historians for granted. Researchers in their own communities need to reflect constantly and critically on the social sciences methodologies that they adopt. As a resident of East London, and Duncan Village in particular, I use the concept of local historians not only to refer to participants who shared their historical knowledge with me but also to acknowledge their contribution to knowledge production. It is through their life stories and experiences that I came to enter and understand the world in which the historical events that are covered in this article took place. Without their contribution, I would not have had access to the history of the Bantu Square massacre and Duncan Village more broadly.

Given the nature of the historical events, and the multiple sides to the conflict that day, there are contestations around the naming of 9 November 1952 and the place where different events took place. The day is commonly known in Duncan Village as *ngalamini kutyiwa uNongendi* – loosely translated as 'the day when the Catholic nun was killed'. Much of the literature concerning the day also centres around the death of Sister Aidan Quinlan. Yet, local historians emphasise that the tragic death of Sister Aidan was preceded by a series of events that have been either omitted or narrated differently in existing literature.[3] This is not to downplay the death of Sister Aidan, but to recentre her death and locate it within the historical context in which it occurred. When you ask local historians about *lamini kutyiwa uNongendi*, they take you through what they refer to as 'the Black Sunday', beginning at Bantu Square, and add that on that day 'a dark cloud' appeared over Duncan Village and the broader East London community. It is not clear who originally named the day 'Black Sunday', but in the oral history of Duncan Village the black cloud that descended on the late afternoon of 9 November 1952 is a recurring image.[4] Local historian Mxolisi Koko Qebeyi, a filmmaker and former ANC councillor, produced a documentary on the events which he named 'Dark Cloud' but which he has also, at times, called 'Black Sunday'.

By employing the words 'Black Sunday' and 'Bantu Square', I not only reiterate the names used by my participants, I am also paying attention to the symbolic meanings attached to the naming. I am acknowledging the referral to Bantu Square as a historical space of memory in Duncan Village, and Black Sunday as part of the dark history that was experienced by the people of Duncan Village during one of the difficult historical moments

1 H. Ndlovu, 'Womxn's Bodies Reclaiming the Picket Line: The "Nude" Protest During #FeesMustFall', *Agenda*, 31, 3–4 (2017), pp. 68–77.

2 H. Ndlovu, 'Bodies That (Do Not) Matter? Black Sunday and Narratives of the Death of Sister Aidan Quinlan in Duncan Village Protest, 1952', *Agenda*, 34, 1 (2020), pp. 48–54; H. Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities and an Elusive State: A Study of State/Society Relations in Duncan Village' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2020); H. Ndlovu, 'An Agenda With No Gender: 2021 Local Government Elections and Patriarchal Domination in South African Politics', *Politikon*, 49, 4 (2022), pp. 396–410.

3 B. Delany, *A Martyr of Charity: Sister Mary Aidan Quinlan O.P.* (Port Elizabeth, Diocese of Port Elizabeth, 1953); A. Mager and G. Minkley. 'Reaping the Whirlwind: The East London Riots of 1952' (unpublished paper presented at a history workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 1990); L. Buur, 'The Horror of the Mob: The Violence of Imagination in South Africa', *Critique of Anthropology*, 29, 1 (2009), pp. 27–46.

4 See M. Breier, 'Introduction', in this part-special issue for a discussion of the naming of the day.

in South Africa. I argue that by retelling the story of the massacre using terms that are collectively shared by some community members of Duncan Village, we begin to contextualise the massacre and create space to trace back and locate women at Bantu Square.

Methodological Approach

In rewriting the history of the Bantu Square massacre, one is faced with an archive characterised by violence, silencing and erasure. Writing on sexual violence and the apartheid archive, Emily Bridger and Erin Hazan argue that the 'surfeit of material [in the apartheid archive] shockingly confronts the researcher through both its quantity and the violent racism and misogyny that permeates each narrative'.[5] Yet, for them, there are coinciding glaring silences pertaining to black women's subjectivities. For Bridger and Hazan, these silences render black women as both hyper-visible and invisible, making them 'appear to us in stasis, unmoving and unnamed'.[6] Citing Michel-Rolph Trouillot, they consider the way in which the historical silence is created, in four stages: 'when primary sources are made; archived; retrieved and used; and when significance is given to them through the production of history'.[7] In the same way one can consider how the silences about the women in Bantu Square were created.

It is difficult to find actual stories about women and their role on Black Sunday. According to Breier, no women were listed in the official death toll, apart from Sister Aidan. The only women mentioned in court records are those who were witnesses to Sister Aidan's murder, who were charged with arson or public violence or, in one case, with the murder itself.[8] The only ANC leaders mentioned are men. Yet we know that hundreds of women attended the meeting and many lost their lives.[9] To account for those lives I have had to rely on the oral histories provided by local residents.

The evidence presented in this paper is extracted from a larger research project for my doctoral dissertation, conducted between 2014 and 2020.[10] Four of the narratives presented here were told to me by women who were recounting events told to them by female relatives – either their mother or grandmother.

These are narratives of violence and trauma that were passed from one generation to another through oral histories. Reproducing them demands that I employ methodologies that are not only specific, but also sensitive, to the experiences that I explore.[11] These include experiences of marginalised women that sometimes intersect with experiences of violence and trauma. Assembling these stories told in private and making them public demands that I pay attention to the histories of silencing and erasure of women's labour and their contribution to knowledge and knowledge production. This means balancing the inclusion of women in retelling their stories while making sure that these very women are not exposed to

5 E. Bridger and E. Hazan, 'Surfeit and Silence: Sexual Violence in the Apartheid Archive', *African Studies*, 81, 3–4 (2023), p. 287.
6 *Ibid*., p. 2.
7 M.R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2015) cited in Bridger and Hazan, 'Surfeit and Silence', p. 295.
8 See M. Breier, *Bloody Sunday: The Nun, the Defiance Campaign and South Africa's Secret Massacre* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2021) for details of the death toll and court proceedings.
9 A police report cited by Breier, *Bloody Sunday*, p. 116, states that one-third of the people attending the meeting were women. As this report puts the total crowd at 700 to 800 people, then at least 200 were women.
10 Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'.
11 Ndlovu, 'Bodies That (Do Not) Matter?'; Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'; H. Ndlovu, 'Gendering Protests: Mapping Women's Participation in Community Protests in Duncan Village, Eastern Cape', in H. Brooks, R. Chikane and S. Mottiar (eds), *Protest in South Africa: Rejection, Reassertion, Reclamation* (Johannesburg, Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection [MISTRA], 2023), pp. 111–33.

further forms of violence and trauma, contributing to the dis-membering of their bodies and experiences. In using dis-membering here, I borrow from Meg Samuelson's analysis of experiences of women in war zones. She argues that 'in the war zone, women's bodies are simultaneously saturated with and stripped of meaning; in the process, they are rendered invisible'.[12] As I write elsewhere,[13] this comes with an understanding that in their everyday encounters with their many battlefields, women are constantly dismembered (torn into different pieces, literally or figuratively), as they are constructed as the 'other' in terms of their different 'female' body parts. In retelling their stories, I have tried to make sure that I do not participate in further dis-membering their bodies. I had to be sensitive and retell their stories in ways that, while engaging and staying conscious of my participation in textual violence, also ensured that I protect their identities from their families and communities.

Adopting the qualitative analytical framework of intersectional feminism allows one to exercise reflexivity and sensitivity in learning about, documenting and representing the experiences of women. Intersectional feminism(s) aims at identifying the interlocked and layered systems of oppression that affect the marginalised in society.[14] It borrows from the work of Kimberley Crenshaw to analyse ways in which race, class and gender intersect to shape women of colour's employment experiences.[15] Intersectional feminism therefore aims to broaden the first wave of feminism that drew mostly from the experiences of white, middle-class women. Peace Kiguwa argues that while it has its roots in black feminist critique, it

> also highlighted the importance of other marginalised feminisms, such as black and African feminism that aims to engage and make visible the voices and experiences of women of colour. Such an approach engages differences between women not just as a speaking-back to western feminism, but rather as new and alternative ways of reimagining gender and ways of relating to patriarchal systems that can create new resistances.[16]

Intersectional feminism(s) as a methodological framework opens up a space for the voices and experiences of the marginalised to tell their own stories. I borrow the idea of local historians as a methodological intervention to acknowledge people's agency in shaping the narratives of their own histories.

The exercise of assembling and retelling the stories presented in this paper draws on the fragmented narrative methodology. In fragmentation methodology, there is a realisation and acknowledgement of the superficiality of linear retelling as a mode of conveying psychological damage.[17] Annette Markham draws our attention to the importance of this methodology not only as a way of making sense of stories narrated by others, but also as a way in which we as researchers make sense of the whole data collection process, analysis and presentation of findings.[18]

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12 M. Samuelson, 'The Disfigured Body of the Female Guerrilla: (De)Militarization, Sexual Violence, and Redomestication in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 32, 4 (2007), p. 833.

13 Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'.

14 N. Yuval-Davis, 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13, 3 (2006), pp. 193–209.

15 K. Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 6 (1991), pp. 1241–99.

16 P. Kiguwa, 'Feminist Approaches: An Exploration of Women's Gendered Experiences', in S. Laher, A. Fynn and S. Kramer (eds) *Transforming Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Case Studies from South Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2019), p. 227.

17 Samuelson, 'The Disfigured Body'.

18 A.N. Markham, '"Go Ugly Early": Fragmented Narrative and Bricolage as Interpretive Method', *Qualitative Inquiry,* 11, 6 (2005), pp. 813–39.

Adopting intersectionality as a methodological and ethical approach and paying attention to the specificities and sensitivity of fragmented narratives has allowed me to acknowledge the possibility of distortion or misrepresentation of the historical facts, given that the stories presented here are stories of violence and trauma that were passed from one generation to the other through oral histories.

These methodologies have also allowed me to reflect on the meanings associated with 'dis-membering' and 're-membering' the bodies[19] of the women who continue to be silenced or erased from the narratives of the Bantu Square massacre and other community struggles. In assembling the life stories of women, I had to constantly reflect on their everyday lived experiences as I encountered their world through their narratives. The result is a negotiated position of representation where women participated in rewriting their own stories in ways they preferred them to be retold, while making sure that they are not being exposed to further danger of dis-membering.

I have chosen to adopt a narrative methodology to lay bare some of the realities of women's struggles in the everyday. Grace Musila notes that narratives can be used 'as a tool for mediating truth and knowledge'.[20] These narratives, by offering a window onto some historical reality, also shed light on certain truths and knowledge about these realities.[21] These stories represent part of the broader memories and experiences of women that I spoke to during fieldwork, and those of South African women broadly.[22] They challenge the researcher to rethink some of the invasive methodologies that have contributed to the dis-membering of women's bodies and experiences.

Forgotten Bodies or Silenced Voices?

The official death toll on Black Sunday was eight black people killed by police and two white people whose killings led, eventually, to the execution of four black men.[23] While the apartheid media played a big role in erasing black people from the Black Sunday death toll as part of a political strategy that aimed to highlight (and sometimes exaggerate) the plight of white people facing black violence, post-1994 narratives of the massacre have fallen into the trap of silencing and erasing the presence of women at Bantu Square, and their work leading to the fateful Sunday. Prior to 1994, the state, media and writers played a significant role in erasing the deaths of more than 200 black people, while distorting the narrative of what was happening on the ground. Judith Butler reminds us that the framing/frame 'does not only exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality'.[24] It is therefore not an accident that Sister Aidan's death dominated the news, with the apartheid government seeking to advance a certain 'reality' that black people were violent.[25]

While the pre-1994 period prioritised the propaganda of the apartheid state, the post-1994 period prioritised the heroic images of certain male figures in the ANC.[26] Some of the local historians believed that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) would provide a space for women of Duncan Village to outline their experiences of 1952 and reflect on the

19 Samuelson, 'The Disfigured Body', p. 833.
20 G.A. Musila, *A Death Retold in Truth and Rumour: Kenya, Britain and the Julie Ward Murder (*New York, Boydell & Brewer, 2015) p. 5.
21 *Ibid*.
22 Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'.
23 Breier, *Bloody Sunday*, pp. 152–75.
24 J. Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? (*Brooklyn, Verso, 2009), p. xiii.
25 Ndlovu, 'Bodies That (Do Not) Matter?'; Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'.
26 M. Breier, 'The Death That Dare(d) Not Speak its Name: The Killing of Sister Aidan Quinlan in the East London Riots of 1952', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 41, 6 (2015), pp. 1151–65; L. Bank and B. Carton, 'Forgetting Apartheid: History, Culture and the Body of a Nun', *Africa*, 86, 3 (2016), pp. 472–503.

loss of their loved ones. However, the TRC only allowed cases from 1960 to 1994,[27] refusing to hear about events prior to 1960. Consequently, the TRC only documents apartheid violence in Duncan Village between 1985 and 1986 and completely erases Black Sunday as a tragic event.[28] Nonetheless, despite different forms of erasure, the Bantu Square massacre remains a very important part of Duncan Village history. As Qebeyi maintains, when the death statistics are acknowledged, Black Sunday becomes larger than the Sharpeville massacre, where about 69 people were killed by the apartheid police on 21 March 1960. That day is commemorated as a public holiday in South Africa.[29]

There is considerable evidence that black lives in South Africa, both during and after apartheid, were not considered valuable, hence police could use maximum force in black townships. The Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the killings of schoolchildren in June 1976, the Bisho massacre in 1992, and the Marikana massacre in 2012 are all testimonies to the disregard for black lives. Butler reminds us that 'specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living'.[30] Similarly, if the lives of black people did not matter for the apartheid regime then the more than 200 lives lost alongside Sister Aidan could not be accounted for in reports, let alone grieved for. Commenting on the death of Sister Aidan, Bernard Delany notes that immediately after the murder the 'cruel news was flashed over the wireless, and it is no exaggeration to say that it shocked the world'.[31] While Sister Aidan made international headlines, back in East London, only seven (later eight) Africans were reported dead from 'a senseless riot'.[32]

Black Sunday and the Bantu Square Massacre, 1952

The participation of women in community protests is not a new phenomenon in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, nor have they been entirely neglected in historical accounts.[33] They have always participated and continue to participate in everyday community struggles and protests. In this article I focus on one episodic event that forms part of the province's history to show the presence and participation of women, particularly *omama boManyano* (women who are members of *Manyano* church groups) who hardly appear in documented histories of struggle and resistance in the Eastern Cape. The case study has been carefully selected because of the degree of violence, that made national and international media headline, and most importantly, because of the presence of women and the role that they played in mobilising the gathering, while it is their male counterparts who have been credited and recognised as heroes of the struggle. I argue that in efforts to de-gender protests, the reading and documenting of protests should shift focus from feminised protests (women's movements) and focus on some of the collective episodic events that involved both men and women, to resurrect the voices of women that are buried within those major protests.

On 26 June 1952, the ANC launched a Defiance Campaign to resist pass laws, stock limitation regulations and four apartheid laws that had been enacted since the National Party

27 United States Institute of Peace, *Truth Commission: South Africa* (1995), available at https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/12/truth-commission-south-africa, retrieved 22 March 2024.
28 SABC News, *Duncan Village* (2024), available at http://sabctrc.saha.org.za/glossary/duncan_village.htm, retrieved 22 March 2024.
29 M.K. Qebeyi, *Dark Cloud* (East London, M.K. Productions, 2011); Bank and Carton, 'Forgetting Apartheid'; Breier, *Bloody Sunday*.
30 Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 9.
31 Delany, *A Martyr of Charity*.
32 *Ibid.*; Mager and Minkley, 'Reaping the Whirlwind'. Breier, in *Bloody Sunday*, found that an eighth victim was added to the list in 1953. He had died in hospital.
33 W. Beinart, 'Women in Rural Politics in Herschel in the 1920s and 1930s', in B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987), pp. 324–57.

Government came to power in 1948: the Group Areas Act of 1950, the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 and the Separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951.[34] The campaign proceeded peacefully until a wave of violence started in Port Elizabeth, sweeping to Johannesburg, then Kimberley and finally East London. By 9 November 1952, when the East London violence broke out, most of the ANC leaders had been banned under the Suppression of Communism Act.[35] Alcott Skei Gwentshe, one of the Youth League leaders in Duncan Village, requested permission for a political gathering despite a ban on public gatherings under the terms of the Riotous Assemblies Act. Permission was declined and Gwentshe made a further request for a religious gathering that was permitted.[36]

The local historians say that, disguised as a church gathering, the meeting at Bantu Square was attended by a crowd estimated at between 1,500 and 2,000 people.[37] Hundreds of women put on their *Manyano* uniforms and headed to the prayer gathering. While the preacher was still reading the Bible, the police issued a warning, arguing that it was not a religious gathering. Within a few minutes, live ammunition was used and the fleeing crowd were shot at, injured and some killed, either by gunshot or in the stampede. The crowd broke into smaller groups while the police picked up those who were injured and locked them up in police trucks. The violence continued for about a week, with police arresting and killing people, while residents burned anything associated with white people and/or state power – that at the time was associated with whiteness.

Two white people were killed by angry crowds: Sister Aidan and insurance salesman Barend Vorster, who was in the township that afternoon to collect premiums. The death of Sister Aidan, whose body was mutilated, made headlines in South Africa and internationally. The police initially admitted to killing only seven people (later eight).[38] Seven decades later, the actual number of black people who died is still unknown, despite evidence being in the public domain. Then apartheid policeman Donald Card, who was tasked with investigating the murder of Sister Aidan, later acknowledged that their investigation revealed that more than 200 black people died on Black Sunday. Card claims that they found that many deaths were not reported because of the fear of further victimisation and possible arrests for the murder of Sister Aidan. In Qebeyi's documentary, *Dark Cloud,* Donald Card states that some bodies were secretly transported to King William's Town, while others were taken across the Great Kei River to rural areas.[39] Local historians also note that some funerals in the township took place at night as fewer than five people could gather for funerals in the day due to police violence.

The death of Sister Aidan is well documented.[40] Briefly, Sister Aidan was a medical doctor born in Ireland in 1914 and part of the Dominican Sisters based in King William's Town, South Africa, where she arrived on 16 April 1938. From 1940 to 1945, she studied

34 T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (London, Longman, 1987); Breier, 'The Death That Dare(d) Not Speak its Name'; Breier, *Bloody Sunday*; Bank and Carton, 'Forgetting Apartheid'.

35 Mager and Minkley, 'Reaping the Whirlwind'.

36 Breier, 'The Death That Dare(d) Not Speak its Name'; Breier, *Bloody Sunday*; Bank and Carton, 'Forgetting Apartheid'.

37 Breier, *Bloody Sunday,* pp. 115–16, reports conflicting figures from police officers. One told the media that 1,500 people attended, while another stated in court that 700 to 800 people attended the meeting and one-third were women.

38 Breier, *Bloody Sunday,* p. 146.

39 C. Thomas, *Tangling the Lion's Tale: Donald Card, from Apartheid Era Cop to Crusader for Justice* (East London, Donald Card, 2007); Breier, *Bloody Sunday*; Bank and Carton, 'Forgetting Apartheid'.

40 Delany, *A Martyr of Charity*; J.L. McFall, *Trust Betrayed: The Murder of Sister Mary Aidan* (Cape Town, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1963); Mager and Minkley, 'Reaping the Whirlwind'; L.J. Bank and A. Bank, 'Untangling the Lion's Tale: Violent Masculinity and the Ethics of Biography in the "Curious" Case of the Apartheid-Era Policeman Donald Card', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39, 1 (2013), pp. 7–30; Breier, *Bloody Sunday*, pp. 120–2, 155–91.

medicine at Wits University. She started her medical career at Glen Grey Hospital and established her clinic at St Peter Claver Mission, Duncan Village in 1949, where she worked until she met her tragic death on 9 November 1952.[41] The legacy of her work remains in the hearts of the people of Duncan Village and her memorial centre at what is now called St Peter Claver Parish continues to run many programmes for the community and young people.

Narratives of 9 November 1952 that Recast Women at Bantu Square

The history of the Bantu Square massacre has haunted many local historians, especially those who are still seeking justice from the state, if only to acknowledge the lives of the black people lost along with Sister Aidan.

Qebeyi's Film: Dark Cloud/Black Sunday

Mxolisi Koko Qebeyi, a Duncan Village resident with a long-standing concern about the events of 9 November 1952, played a central role in the ceremonies that were held in 2002 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the day. He obtained funding from the Eastern Cape Department of Arts and Culture and other sources and co-ordinated the anniversary events. A memorial to Sister Aidan was erected at St Peter Claver Mission where she used to live and work and both Catholic and African traditional ceremonies were held. The events were designed to appease both the ancestors of the black people who were killed by police and the Roman Catholic sisters who lost their sister.[42]

Qebeyi subsequently obtained funding from the provincial Department of Arts and Culture to make a film about the day. In newspaper reports, Qebeyi is quoted as saying he wanted to tell the 'true' story of what happened[43] and is described as being 'on a quest to change the history books and have the 1952 Duncan village massacre recognised as the country's biggest and bloodiest'.[44]

From the start there has been some confusion around the naming of the film, with Qebeyi giving it the title 'Dark Cloud' while newspaper reports refer to it as a film about 'Black Sunday'.[45] One copy of the DVD was distributed in a cover entitled 'Black Sunday', but the film retained the title 'Dark Cloud'. The confusion is illustrative of the complex web of texts, oral and written, including newspaper reports, that shape narratives of contested events such as those that took place on 9 November 1952.

The 25-minute film is a moving account of the poverty and police oppression of black people in East London in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the events that led to the outbreak of violence on 9 November 1952. It consists mainly of recent interviews by Qebeyi with elderly people who were at the meeting at Bantu Square, including one woman who was shot by police, arrested, and charged with the murder of Sister Aidan (she was acquitted). Interspersed between the interviews, with a narrator speaking over them, are black and white clips from historical images, including film and video footage which Qebeyi attributes to the archives of the *Daily Dispatch*, the East London Museum and the National

41 Delany, *A Martyr of Charity.*

42 See L.J. Bank, *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City* (London, Pluto Press, 2011) for a detailed description of the events.

43 B. Hollands, '"True" Story of Nun's Murder Captured', *Weekend Post*, Port Elizabeth, 10 September 2011, p. 7.

44 Z. Mukhuthu, 'Film Reviews EL's Black Sunday', *Daily Dispatch*, East London, 22 October 2011, p. 3.

45 See Hollands, 'True Story'; Mukhuthu, 'Film Reviews'; L. Sifile, 'New Doccie Asks How Many Died on DV's Black Sunday', *Daily Dispatch*, East London, 11 November 2011, p. 2. Breier ('Proving a Secret Massacre', in this part-special issue) says the term 'Black Sunday' was first used by *Daily Dispatch* journalist J.L. McFall in a 1963 biography of Sister Aidan.

Film Archive. The images include stills from books and newspaper reports that depict conditions in Duncan Village (past and present) and protests in the 1950s, including a few scenes from the Defiance Campaign. The video footage includes scenes of police shooting and victims falling that are clearly from archival footage of the Sharpeville massacre. In this way, Qebeyi sought to create a sense of the events in Bantu Square even though there are no known photographic images from 9 November. According to Breier, members of the press were not allowed to enter the township that day.[46]

The film was launched in Gompo Hall, Duncan Village, on the fifty-ninth anniversary of the day and has been shown at various venues since then. It was broadcast on SABC2 and shown most recently at the Eastern Cape Filmhub in East London on 7 May 2021. In his Facebook advertisement of this event, Qebeyi calls the film 'Black Sunday'.[47]

The film includes the interview with Donald Card referred to earlier and supports the claims that there were hundreds of women at Bantu Square, many in their *Manyano* uniforms, and that many of them died.

An elderly Duncan Village resident, Mr N. Nginga, told Qebeyi that church women gathered in their numbers that afternoon as it was 'a prayer day'. Another elderly resident, Notemba Bente, said:

> We were praying when the police truck came … the Bible was still open … they told us to disperse within five minutes … As we were preparing to leave, police shot at us … we were scattered by bullets … and what was really shocking was to see people falling next to you as you were running. I don't know how I survived, only God knows.

Ronald Mynie was a young boy at the time. He recalled:

> That day people were baton-charged. They were shot at. I remember you find these big mamas with big legs where the bullet went into the back side of her leg and at the back it made a neat tiny little hole but at the front, there were a gaping terrible looking wound with blood oozing out of it. These people were shot, they were loaded into cars, there were no ambulances, they were rushed to the Frere Hospital and whoever was treated that day at the hospital they were treated, and [then] they were locked up immediately no matter what your wounds were like.

Mavis Mkobeni (the woman who was charged with Sister Aidan's murder but acquitted)[48] described the shootings:

> I was there when we were shot at and a bullet hit me and I fell … someone held me and the police said leave her, she is ours. Everyone who was shot at was thrown into a police van including me, covered in blood … it was very bad and a lot of people died there. The ground was covered with people's blood … other bodies were lifeless and we were picked up between those bodies.

Asked to comment on the official death toll, Mkobeni said: 'No! No! That's a lie, I wish I knew who said that nine people died there. There were more than that … maybe about 300'.

Qebeyi concludes the documentary by stating the importance of this historical event and arguing that if correctly documented in history, the massacre is larger than the Sharpeville massacre, therefore deserving the same level of recognition. In emphasising his point,

46 Breier, *Bloody Sunday,* p. 203.

47 Popcorn Fridays, *Black Sunday: Documentary Film* (6 May 2021), available at https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1174196009764945, retrieved 22 March 2024.

48 Breier, *Bloody Sunday,* provides an account of the court proceedings following 9 November 1952, pp. 162–6.

Qebeyi asks where the victims of the massacre are buried: '*[s]ixolisile kuNongendi, kodwa aphi na amathambo amaqhawe awangaleyomini?'* [we have apologised to the nun, but where are the bones of the heroes from that day?].[49]

Although seen as controversial by some in the Duncan Village community, the film played a significant role in reinserting this tragic event into wider memories and discussions of the past.

A Nurse's Published Account

A different eyewitness account was recorded in dramatic form by a nurse, Connie Manse Ngcaba, in her memoir, *May I Have this Dance*. Ngcaba was born in Cala in Transkei in 1929. She attained a Junior Certificate at Healdtown near Fort Beaufort and then started training as a nurse at Coronation Hospital in Johannesburg. She had to give up that position when the hospital stopped providing free accommodation. She moved to Frere Hospital in East London, where she witnessed the aftermath of the shootings at Bantu Square:

> I first experienced the barbarity of apartheid in November 1952. It was a Sunday afternoon. I was looking to the end of my shift at 4.30 pm. Suddenly, there was a call on the intercom 'Emergency. Emergency in Casualty. Please, everyone come' … What was usually a well-ordered unit was in utter chaos. There was blood everywhere, injured people groaning and pleading for help … more ambulance drivers were pushing their way in, with heavy stretchers … Dozens of friends and family members anxiously pushed into the crowd, hoping to identify those on the floor. The police were there too pulling people aside, asking questions, threatening, trying to find ringleaders of what they called a riot … My head reeling, I picked my way over bodies of people who were already dead … some still clutched the Bibles fresh from church … so many women were lying around … women of prayer that were familiar faces, some already dead … Some of the injured had been shot in the head and the back. If they survived, they would probably be permanently crippled or paralysed. [50]

After that night Ngcaba decided 'the apartheid system was unacceptable and [she] had to be part of the effort to fight it'.[51] She went on to become a staunch member of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) while continuing her work as a nurse, wife and mother to six children. Her outspokenness about conditions for black patients compared with white patients at Frere Hospital led to her being fired. She found another job with the Duncan Village Health Centre, where she worked for 32 years without promotion. Under the auspices of the YWCA, she provided multiple forms of support to people in Duncan Village who were suffering under apartheid, and to young people going into exile to join the liberation struggle. For her activism, she was detained without trial for a year between June 1986 and June 1987.

Oral Histories

From the material recorded in the film and in Ngcaba's memoir, I now turn to life history interviews for accounts of Black Sunday. Most of the women I interviewed were born after 1952 and were reflecting on memories that they had heard from others.

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49 See Breier, 'Proving a Secret Massacre', in this part-special issue for a discussion of the burials and graves.
50 M. Ngcaba, *May I Have This Dance: The Story of My Life* (Muizenberg, Cover2Cover Books, 2015), pp. 43–4.
51 *Ibid*., p. 45.

A Woman Survivor's Story

One exception was an 86-year-old woman, Nothemba Mabutho (not her real name), who was a teenager at the time. She spoke about the way in which *Manyano* women mobilised each other to attend the meeting, contributing to the efforts of the youth who announced the meeting by loudhailer. She recalled in an interview in 2017: '[t]he youth was all over the community. But I remember three more women, *omama beBhatyi* [in *Manyano* uniform] one after each other coming home to tell my mother that as *omama boManyano* we must all go out. Things were really bad.' At the meeting, she said, 'we were mostly women. Hundreds of us … We were all dressed up in our *Manyano* uniforms. Those were difficult times, we needed women of prayer to stand up'.[52]

An Activist/Daughter's Account (Mam' uThozama)

Mam' uThozama was born in East London and attended different local schools until her life was disrupted by the political upheaval in Duncan Village – a township where she grew up. Her first encounter with political activism was in 1976 during the student revolts. She was initiated into politics by her older brothers and other people she considered brothers in the community. It was at this point that she began to be politically active; she was required to hide comrades, transport letters and act as a messenger between different groups. In 1981, Mam' uThozama left school because of political instability and started working at one of the factories in East London. In the same year, she was encouraged to join a trade union. In 1983, there was a strike in her factory and she was dismissed because of her activism.

Reflecting on challenges faced by women in society, Mam' uThozama noted that the silencing and erasure of women in general dates back to many struggles before. It is not only practised by men: women also contribute to this erasure. As the holder of a senior political position at the time of my research, she believed that the liberation of women must start with women taking themselves and others seriously.

> *Idabi okumele sililwe lidabi lasenqondweni* [the biggest battle to be fought is the one of the oppression of the mind]. It begins with that day, *ngalamini kutyiwa uNongendi* [the day they killed the Catholic nun]. People must tell the story of women and how they were present at the meeting. In fact, it was the meeting *yomama bethu* [the meeting of our mothers]. No one talks about how they were foot soldiers who mobilised for that meeting, how they went door by door calling, asking people to attend because some genuinely believed that those were difficult times that needed prayer. If people really want to understand the struggles of that community [Duncan Village], they must return to the history, they must talk about women, *omama be Bhatyi* [women of prayer or *omama bo Manyano*] who went to pray for the community, for the country, *omama* who were seated on the ground when that violence broke out. Most of them died, but some of them lived to tell the stories. And because of that, we will never keep quiet, we will never remove them from the history of this community.[53]

For Mam' uThozama, the key point was to reinforce the political import of the massacre, and the role of women in the collective memory of the community.

A Comrade/Granddaughter's Account (Mam' uYoliswa)

Mam' uYoliswa was born in Duncan Village township in the 1950s and grew up in a one-roomed house that she shared with her family and extended family members. After completing her secondary school studies, she undertook a teaching diploma. She returned home and started to look for a job. She started her leadership role as a street committee

52 Interview, Duncan Village, 15 April 2017.
53 Adapted from the life history interview of Mam' uThozama, 4 May 2017.

member, moved to become an area committee member, and finally to the political branch level. As a young comrade, Mam' uYoliswa also experienced challenges from her own comrades. She was supposed to make herself available to the men in her political movement because she was not married or involved in an intimate relationship. Mam' uYoliswa has witnessed traumatic scenes of violence: her father was taken by police and never returned until his body was found dumped somewhere. Her encounter with the Bantu Square massacre was through her grandmother recalling violent times of the apartheid era:

> after a couple of weeks of being silent and not talking to anyone after the burial of my father, my grandmother opened her mouth to say 'it has always been like this, things have never been better. You will think that this only happens to men, but no, these evil people also kill women. I watched with dismay at Bantu Square when they wanted to finish with us. They wanted to finish the whole community, I mean, hundreds of us were sitting on the ground when they started shooting. Those people [the police] have no shame. Imagine shooting a place where there are women, not just women, but we were women of prayer wearing our church uniforms. We had gone out in numbers as *omama bomthandazo* [women of prayer] because we needed to pray, things were not ok, times were difficult. But what did they do? They started shooting randomly, and some of our women did not make it out of that place. Every time I pass there, I am afraid, I only see graves of our people, it is like they buried them there, because why would you kill women? With your father, I knew this was going to happen the moment they took him. If they killed women of prayer on that Black Sunday, women, imagine women, what would they make of my child?'[54]

For Mam' uYoliswa, police violence is something that they grew up with as stories of police brutality were passed from generation to generation. A later event triggered the memories of her grandmother, who was a participant at Bantu Square but had died by the time I interviewed Mam' uYoliswa.

A Manager/Granddaughter's Account (Mandisa)

When I met Mandisa in 2017 she was an acting manager in one of the departments in Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality. She had been acting manager since 2015 and her position was now being advertised. She holds a diploma and a BTech in public administration and she has also done a number of self-development and career development short courses. Mandisa works for a very small department; she is the youngest and most qualified staff member and the last person to join. She joined the Municipality in 1999 and at that time was a personal assistant in a political office. Her boss was purged and she was then moved to her current department. Mandisa felt that her biggest challenge was resistance from the people that she is leading, who refused to see her as their manager 'simply because I am a woman and I am young'. She constantly felt undermined at the workplace and every time she contributed an idea in a meeting, there was always someone who feels like adding to what she is saying.

Reflecting on how she deals with conflict at work, Mandisa drew from her painful past and troubled childhood. Every struggle was a constant reminder of what she has gone through in life, 'but the same way I survived, I have hope that I will survive'. Her grandmother is from the generation of church women who were at Bantu Square during the massacre and Mandisa believed that once people begin to understand the historical role of women leading up to the events, they will begin to respect women at the workplace

54 Adapted from the life history interview of Mam' uYoliswa, 13 August 2014; 30 September 2017.

regardless of their age and gender. She believed that people downplay the role that has always been played by women in historical struggles. She noted:

> You know, I am a direct descendant of the Bantu Square massacre … I mean a grandchild of the people who were at Bantu Square on the Black Sunday *ngalamini kutyiwa uNongendi* [the day they killed the Catholic nun]. I am not sure whether you have heard of the story, but what I am trying to say to you is that as women we are not about to disappear from these corridors. Our grandmothers have always been there in the struggle, they were at Bantu Square, imagine what a volatile situation … My grandmother was a church woman, a devoted member of *uManyano*. Even though I got to hear about her death, later at the hospital, she was among other women who encouraged other women and community members in general to attend that bloody meeting [at Bantu Square] that left us with no grandparents. And now people think they can just silence us just like that? That they can just make us disappear from these streets of leadership? No! they must educate themselves. They must revisit the history of *uNongendi* [Sister Aidan], the history that left hundreds of women dead, imagine church women. How ugly can it get?[55]

Qebeyi has asked: where are the bones of the heroes of Black Sunday? I ask: *[a]phi na amagama amaqhawekazi awanikelwa kwimfazwe yase Bantu Square?* [where are the voices of women (dead or alive) who were sacrificed at the battlefront of Bantu Square?]. While Qebeyi's question is important for retelling the history of the Bantu Square massacre, I argue that in correcting this history, we also need to recognise and centre the role of women and *omama boManyano* at Bantu Square and in community protests and struggles of Duncan Village.

A Museum Historian's Account

The other important figure in the oral histories of Black Sunday is Zuko Blauw, who is a historian working for the East London Museum. Blauw is also a member of the Catholic church and over the years has worked closely with the Dominican Sisters. He has a rich history of St Peter Claver Mission (Parish) in Duncan Village as a resident and church member, and is chairperson of the Sister Aidan Community Trust. Despite his position in the community and the church, Blauw strongly believed that the story of Sister Aidan should be told in a balanced way that captures the complexities that do justice, not only to the death of Sister Aidan, but also to the political atmosphere of the time and the many other deaths that day.[56] In locating the tragic death of Sister Aidan at Bantu Square and focusing on the political atmosphere of the time, I argue that we begin to recognise the role of *omama boManyano* in mobilising for the meeting, given that it was disguised as a church gathering. Without their intervention, which simultaneously locates them as active organisers, the mobilisation would not have yielded the turnout it did.

Working on the Film: A Daughter's Account (Pumza)

Pumza Mkonqo is a community activist and leader who is also a devoted member of *uManyano* under the Baptist church of Duncan Village. As Mkonqo shares in a documentary titled *Inkululeko*,[57] she comes from a generation of women of *uManyano* and draws most of her skills and strategies from this movement. Her mother, affectionately known to community members as uMaMbhele, was part of the team that conducted research for the *Dark Cloud* documentary. Mkonqo speaks of the emotional stress and trauma that she

55 Adapted from the life history interview of Mandisa, 10 March 2017.
56 Interview with Z. Blauw, East London Museum, 2017; Ndlovu, 'Bodies That (Do Not) Matter'.
57 S. Barry, *Inkululeko* (Johannesburg, 2024).

suffered when her mother was conducting this research. For Mkonqo, women occupy a very important space in the history of Black Sunday and other community struggles in Duncan Village. In her own words:

> to be *umama woManyano* means that people trust you and take seriously whatever you say to them. This is because when you get that uniform, they button it to the last button. The significance of the last button is trusting you as *umama woManyano* with *imfihlo zabantu* [people's secrets]. Those were difficult times and having to convince people to come out and attend any gathering, given the political atmosphere, whoever was calling people needed to be trusted. No one could have done that in ways that *omama boManyano* did. Therefore, I insist that when the Eastern Cape finally recognises the people of the massacre, the names of these women [*omama boManyano*] must be thoroughly searched and be written in this history of the province.[58]

Mkonqo contended that, as shown by the evidence gathered during research for *Dark Cloud*, the role of *omama boManyano* in mobilising cannot be contested and, by extension, they were the main victims of the Bantu Square massacre, both dead and alive.[59] She noted that: 'at a gathering of more than 1,500 people with women seated on the ground in their *Manyano* uniforms, one cannot help to imagine [when] scenes of violence break out and [the] implications of their disadvantaged sitting position'.[60]

Elsewhere, I argue that battlefronts of protests are usually masculine in nature but casualties tend to be mostly women, even where violence has been deployed by men, like in many recent violent #FeesMustFall protests that wrecked South African public universities.[61] Similarly, according to the local historians I spoke to, women, and mostly *omama boManyano*, were the main victims of the violence that broke out at Bantu Square, with hundreds of women who were seated on the ground incurring severe injuries and later dying, contributing to the unrecorded death toll. One local historian said: '[b]odies of women were all over the ground. I saw them, I was scared. I ran over them because there was nothing that I could do. They were women of [the] church in their uniforms'.[62]

Women were affected by the Bantu Square massacre, either as participants, mothers, wives, daughters or girlfriends of participants, among other relationships. Many identified as *omama boManyano* and consciously mobilised under this identity – as the legitimate and authoritative voice of reason at the time. Lihle Ngcobozi reminds us of 'the legitimacy of the *Manyano* women's identity as the entry point of political activism – their characterisation as mothers and the reliance on motherhood should be read with a level of complexity and depth'.[63]

Given the heightened resistance across the country in the 1950s, particularly the role of women who led the historic march of 9 August 1956, it would be a mistake not to locate the Defiance Campaign of Duncan Village within broader women's activism across the country. However, in the 1956 protest women were only visible because it was an outright protest mobilised and led by women, protesting issues that were specific to them like the regulation of pass laws. Writing on the experiences of women and pass laws in the 1950s, Nomboniso Gasa argues that the struggle against the pass laws, which were meant to undermine women's rights, was in fact 'a struggle to be in the public domain at the same time as a

58 Interview with P. Mkonqo, Duncan Village, 2022
59 Interview with P. Mkonqo, Duncan Village, 2014.
60 Interview with P. Mkonqo, Duncan Village, 2014; Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'.
61 H. Ndlovu, 'The Journey Through Wits #FeesMustFall 2015/16', in C. Chinguno, M. Kgoroba, S. Mashibini, B.N. Masilela, B. Maubane, N. Moyo, A. Mthombeni and H. Ndlovu (eds), *Rioting and Writing: Diaries of Wits Fallists* (Johannesburg, Society, Work and Politics Institute, 2017), pp. 30–8.
62 Interview, Duncan Village, 2016.
63 L. Ngcobozi, *Mothers of the Nation: Manyano Women in South Africa* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2020), p. 20.

struggle for free movement'.[64] I argue that in an effort to de-gender community protests, the same recognition given to women in the 'women only' protests should be afforded to collective and sometimes violent protests. Like many other communities across the country, *uManyano* provided a collective space for women as a 'site of struggle, survival and resistance'.[65] The presence and role of *omama boManyano* at Bantu Square should not be erased from the history of the Black Sunday and their participation should be given the same recognition as that of men such as Alcott Skei Gwentshe, Joel Mabi Lingisi and Cornelius Fazzie, whose roles are privileged in accounts of community struggles in Duncan Village. I seek to shift the narrative of the Bantu Square massacre to include, among others, voices of women like Connie Manse Ngcaba, a nurse and leading voice of dissent against the apartheid regime, and Irene Ngcebesha Gwentshe, who has been remembered as a political activist as well as the wife of Alcott Gwentshe and mother of their five children, including sons Mzwandile and Mzimkulu, who were both imprisoned on Robben Island for furthering the aims of the ANC.

Irene Gwentshe's youngest son, Zweliyazuza, tried to tell the TRC about her experiences when he gave evidence in 1997 but was cut short by the evidence leader who argued that he had not warned the committee in advance that he would be speaking about his mother. He had said would be speaking about his father and brother, Mzwandile.[66] Unfortunately, while Ngcaba wrote a memoir about her experiences as an activist as well as a nurse and mother, there is no public written record of Irene Gwentshe's life, apart from anecdotes from local historians who have acknowledged her role and influence in both community activism and the church. Reliving the memory of her mother and her role in documenting the story of uNongendi, Mkonqo also pays tribute to the work of Irene Gwentshe. She noted:

> *babekhona omama uGwentshe, besebenza kakhulu kwizinto zasekuhlaleni, bencedisa kakhulu nasecaweni. Kodwa soze uve kuthethwa ngabo. Soloku kuthethwa ngamadoda qha!* [There were women like Irene Gwentshe who were very instrumental in community issues, they were also very helpful at the church. But you will never hear anyone talking about them. They only talk about men].[67]

Sharing the same sentiments, one former ward councillor of Duncan Village whom I interviewed in 2014 noted that: '[t]he work of the Duncan Village Residents Association was very important, especially in the 1980s. We also had women from the church among us. Women like umam' uGwentshe, uMaMtolo, oBhelekazi down iNdende street, held this community together during those difficult times'.[68]

Nic Dawes, former editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, has noted the importance of works such as Ngcaba's. In a review of her memoir, he wrote: '[a]s accounts of South Africa's long, difficult 20th Century proliferate, far too little space has been accorded to the women whose lives were lived at the intersection of the political, the domestic, and the personal'.[69]

For Dawes, Connie Ngcaba helps us to correct that record in fine-grained detail. This is to highlight the presence of women and their active roles in the political space in the historical period.

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64 N. Gasa (ed.), *Women in South African History: They Remove Boulders and Cross Rivers* (Johannesburg, HSRC Press, 2007).
65 B. Haddad, 'The Manyano Movement in South Africa: Site of Struggle, Survival, and Resistance', *Agenda*, 18, 61 (2004), pp. 4–13.
66 See Breier, 'Introduction', in this part-special issue for more details.
67 Interview with P. Mkonqo, Duncan Village, 2022.
68 Interview with former councillor 1, 10 November 2014; Ndlovu, 'Fractured Communities'.
69 N. Dawes, *Review: May I Have This Dance*, African Books Collective, available at https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/may-i-have-this-dance, retrieved 23 November 2023.

Concluding Remarks

Drawing on the film by Qebeyi, the autobiography of Ngcaba, and oral histories of the Black Sunday and Bantu Square massacre, I have argued that the role played by *omama boManyano* is crucial for de-masculinising community protests in the Eastern Cape province. Without their intervention, as active organisers, the mobilisation for the meeting at Bantu Square on the afternoon of 9 November 1952 would not have yielded the turnout it did. While some narratives of Black Sunday have fallen into the historical trap of erasing women from organised community struggles that were linked to broader national struggles, retelling this history by centring the role of women and *omama boManyano* will contribute to a process of resurrecting their voices and recasting their role and presence at the Bantu Square massacre of 1952. The representation of this history through images and voices of men, such as Alcott Skeyi Gwentshe, Joel Mabi Lingisi and Cornelius Fazzie, among other prominent figures in the history of Duncan Village, should shift to include women like Connie Manse Ngcaba, whose activism is recorded in her autobiography, Irene Ngcebesha Gwentshe, whose contribution has still to be voiced and recorded, or the women whose stories were passed on to the daughters and granddaughters cited in this article.

This is not to argue that men do not deserve to be placed at the centre of the narratives, or that they do not deserve recognition. However, it is to undo processes of deliberate omission that continue to erase and silence women from community struggles to which they contributed immensely.

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