We Are What We Pretend to Be: The Cautionary Tale of Reading Winnie Mandela as a Rhetorical Widow

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Abstract

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, currently a member of the African National Congress's National Executive Committee, is most widely known as the former wife of Nelson Mandela. While she continues to be a popular politician in South Africa, she has essentially disappeared from the U.S. imagination. A rhetorical analysis of the U.S. popular press about Winnie Mandela reveals that although she was primarily seen as Mother of the Nation in South Africa, in the U.S. she was constructed as a rhetorical widow. A rhetorical widow is a woman, widowed or not, whose rhetorical exigency and authority comes from her husband's inability to speak. This case study demonstrates that although the rhetorical use of traditional gender roles, such as widowhood, provides an elevated platform from which women can speak, it also transforms women from credible individuals in their own right to the role of simple mouthpieces.

Introduction

Winnie Mandela was banned by the South African government in 1962. *Time* reported:

> Banning is one of the most chilling methods for suppressing dissent in South Africa. There is no requirement for formal charges, no trial, no

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> appeal. . . . Those who are banned are forbidden to write anything, even a diary, and the press is prohibited from quoting them—even after death. Their freedom to work is restricted; they are under constant police surveillance; their homes, telephones and cars are often bugged and their mail is intercepted. ("Non-Persons" 1982, 43)

Although she officially remained banned until apartheid ended in 1989, Winnie Mandela was well-known in the United States. Many people in the United States knew who she was and what she stood for even though they had never heard her speak.

The United States public knew her primarily through the stories told in the United States media. Winnie Mandela symbolically represented her husband, Nelson Mandela, who, in turn, represented the suffering of black South Africans. As a result, to the U.S. public she represented black South Africans who were languishing under apartheid. Steven Mufson of *The New Republic* wrote: "[i]n contrast to her husband [Nelson Mandela]—who appeared remote and forbidding (even his wife sometimes referred to him as 'Mandela')—she [Winnie Mandela] was approachable. She could be seen, maybe even touched" (Mufson 1989, 15). Mandela's imprisonment made him literally, not just figuratively, untouchable.

Winnie Mandela symbolically represented Nelson Mandela and functioned as his spokesperson while he was imprisoned. Although he was alive, due to his incarceration U.S. media understood her through the trope of the rhetorical widow. A rhetorical widow is a woman, widowed or not, who speaks publicly because her husband is unable to speak for the family. Rhetorical widowhood, then, presents one example of a traditional female gender role used as a strategic rhetorical persona. Marriage as an Anglo-American legal institution is the merging of two people into a single legal entity. This conceptualization of marriage is what gives credence to a wife speaking for her husband after he has died.[1]

Women continually negotiate their gendered experience by assuming "feminine" rhetorical styles and personae in order to participate more fully in the public sphere. Women politicians have negotiated "a suitable tension between womanliness-as-admirable and womanliness-as-stereotyped" (Whalen 1976, 207) or have employed the "feminine style" as both a rhetorical strategy and as a "critique of traditional grounds for political judgment" (Dow and Tonn 1993, 286–87). This essay is characterized as a

cautionary tale because traditional gender roles (mother, wife, widow), such as were attributed to Winnie Mandela, although they are available and inviting personae, often function as restraints that tend to devalue both the individual woman and women as a group. By arguing for the right to speak based on one's connection to another person (particularly a male relative), the rhetor risks that his or her role within the public sphere will be reduced entirely to that of spokesperson. In Kenneth Burke's terms, if a woman uses synecdoche, emphasizing her role as a representative of the couple in order to gain a platform, there is a distinct possibility that she is also inadvertently using metonymy, which would reduce her to the role of the spokesperson instead of being a credible person in her own right (Burke 1969, 503–17). By examining what happened when the press constructed Winnie Mandela's identity as Nelson Mandela's widow, it becomes clear why women should think twice before constructing their own identity as an offshoot of a man's.

In the case of Winnie Mandela, it was the U.S. media that portrayed her as a rhetorical widow. If she had been free to speak while Nelson Mandela was imprisoned, it is unclear how she would have constructed her ethos. Analyzing the U.S. popular press's configuration of Winnie Mandela as a rhetorical widow illustrates both the power and limitations of this role. The limitations are clearly illustrated in the shift in media coverage of Winnie Mandela before and after the release of her husband.

Rhetorical Widowhood

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, in her groundbreaking work *Man Cannot Speak for Her*, theorized that in the nineteenth century some women were rhetorically effective by modeling their rhetoric on women's traditional craft-learning (Campbell 1989, 13). She suggested that traditionally, women learned "women's work" through hands-on experience. Therefore, they found it persuasive to create discourse that was personal in tone, used examples and evidence from personal experience, was structured inductively, allowed for audience participation, accentuated identification between the speaker and the audience, and functioned to empower the audience (Campbell 1989, 13). Building on Campbell's work, Mari Boor Tonn argued that "maternal roles were particularly apt rhetorical strategies for female labor union agitators because agitation and mothering often share two essential dimensions:

nurturing and militancy" (Tonn 1996, 2). Like motherhood, widowhood can also function as a powerful rhetorical strategy. This is so because widowhood works within traditional female roles to empower the female orator by layering three types of testimonials on top of every argument: convert testimony, expert testimony, and borrowed testimony.

First, convert testimony denotes a speaker's retelling of a personal narrative and marks a change in an attitude or belief. When a personal narrative is paired with an argument, the implication is that the expressed belief is grounded in or at least intensified by the transformative experience. Robert James Branham established that "convert testimony has been a central feature of the public discourse generated by many important political movements and controversies" (Branham 1991, 409). In the case of widowhood, by foregrounding her identity as a widow, the orator presents her life story as going from "wife of" to "widow of." This transformation appeals to the audience's compassion and sympathy. For example, in the role of a martyr's widow, rhetorical widows, through their stories of personal tragedy combined with sudden activism, present themselves as models for their audiences. Even when the women were active long before their husbands were silenced, their identification as widows reinforces the notion that the "death" of their husbands is the main reason they are now speaking. Because convert testimony offers a model for the audience, the audience is supposed to witness the widow's conversion and, as a result, become engaged in the martyr's cause without having to endure the tragedy of losing a spouse (Branham 1991, 410). Rhetorically, the argument is that the widow's life experience imbues her with wisdom that she can pass on to others.

Second, the testimony of a rhetorical widow is that of an expert. Whatever her background prior to becoming a widow, widowhood brings with it the assumption that the wife shares her husband's expertise: since they were a single unit as a married couple, she embodies his expertise. Moreover, she is perceived as an expert on her husband; she knew him better than anyone else. This makes her uniquely qualified to speak for him in his absence.

Third, rhetorical widowhood works as borrowed testimony. A widow is seen as a stand-in for her husband. Because her husband is dead (literally or rhetorically), the rhetor is engaged in *eidolopoeia*, the act of speaking as the living embodiment of a dead person (Lanham 1991, 61–62). Even if the husband in question is still physically alive, the construction of his identity

as "rhetorically dead" allows the rhetorical use of *eidolopoeia*. The rhetor's words come from the "dead" husband as well as from the speaking "widow." *Eidolopoeia* strengthens the rhetorical widow's credibility because she inherently shares her husband's credibility. The audience is able to perceive that the once-married couple is still speaking in unison via the rhetorical widow's body. This method of expanding ethos to include the rhetorically dead husband's ethos is an unusually effective form of borrowed testimony.

Taking on the identity as a rhetorical widow can function as a powerful rhetorical strategy for women wanting a voice in the public sphere. Although it is undeniable that to be a widow is to be a woman whose husband has died, widowhood also has deeper connotations for the widow's gendered position in U.S. culture and her access to spheres not traditionally available to women. When women invoke widowhood as a rhetorical strategy, they enhance the notion that they are only extensions of men instead of being individuals in their own right.

Widowhood as a Cultural Commonplace

Historically, widowhood allowed for freedom of movement that other women were denied. A widow was able to participate in the public sphere without needing the permission of her husband. Marriage in the United States retained the British common-law notion of coverture. Under coverture, when a man and a woman are married, they become a single male legal entity.

> By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs everything. (Tucker 1969, 441)

Thus, to be a widow is to be a woman who has lost the male component of her legal identity.

The idea that it is reasonable for a widow to continue her husband's work, to provide for her family, and to carry on her husband's legacies blossomed in the twentieth century. Since World War II, it has been increasingly common for women to enter the workforce regardless of their

marital status, yet widows continue to hold a distinctive status. Widows symbolically represent their husbands when the men are no longer able to represent themselves. The most obvious place this expectation has materialized is in the United States Congress. Forty-four widows have filled their dead husbands' vacant seats in the U.S. Congress, beginning in 1923 with the first female congressional representative, Mae Ella Nolan, who was elected by special election after the death of her husband (Biographical Directory of the United States Congress).

More recently, the case of Jean Carnahan exemplifies the expectation that a widow will perform her husband's professional duties as he would have done. After she was appointed to finish her husband's term in 2000, her spokesperson told the *New York Times* that Carnahan was "very pleased that Governor Wilson has put his faith in her to carry on her husband's legacy" ("Governor's Widow" 2000). Feminist historian Jo Freeman explained that, "[Jean] Carnahan is operating within traditional attitudes toward women. She is acting as her husband's surrogate, and serving his party by helping it to gain a Senate seat" (Freeman 2000). Thus, even modern-day women are often expected to follow "tradition" in the way in which they enter into the public sphere. The practice of a wife succeeding her husband in political office when he is no longer able to carry out his duties is not limited to the United States. For example, Mireya Moscoso was inaugurated as the first female president of Panama in 1999. The *New York Times* reported that she was the widow of Dr. Arnulfo Arias, and that she invoked his memory in her inaugural address (Gonzales 1999).

Widows of African Descent in the Public Sphere

Public office is not the only context in which women use their status as widows to construct a space from which to speak. Many widows of martyrs have used their widow status to move from the private sphere to the public sphere. Whether they were previously active or not, their stories serve as convert testimony. Myrlie Evers-Williams, Betty Shabazz, and Coretta Scott King all were widows of civil rights martyrs, and all three worked for the progress of civil rights by speaking publicly as widows. In doing so they participated in the rhetorical construction of their husbands as martyrs and enacted their husbands' martyrdom as they enacted their own widowhood. In her autobiography, Evers-Williams recalled: "There had been

other violent deaths in the movement, but Medgar's was the first to attract national attention. Once the media gave the public a glimpse of his thirty-year-old widow at the podium a mere twenty-four hours after his death, people wanted *more*" (Evers-Williams 1999, 121). After Coretta Scott King's death in 2006, the U.S. press referred to her as having been one of the "three widows" (Ifill 2006), an identity that Evers-Williams acknowledged ("Coretta Scott King" 2006, 6). Their husbands were murdered to silence their message of equality. As widows, they kept their husbands' concerns fresh in the minds of America.[2]

Given the troubling patterns of mainstream media coverage of black women in general and black mothers and wives in particular, media framing of civil rights widows is exceptional in terms of positive, sympathetic portrayals in the news. Mainstream representations of black families are, for the most part, structured by images and narratives of dysfunction and misplaced gender authority (Collins 1992; Lubiano 1996; Clawson and Trice 2000; Collins 2004; Dyson, 2005). Most notoriously codified in Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1968) and replicated in the neo-conservative rhetoric of welfare queens, the emasculating black matriarch and sharp-tongued, hyper-sexual, violent Sapphire are ever-present stereotypes of black mothers and wives in mainstream discourse.

It is also notable that of the "three widows," Betty Shabazz received the least media attention after her husband's death. This is attributable, perhaps, to the persistent unease mainstream news has with black nationalist politics. From Marcus Garvey to the Black Panthers, from Malcolm X to Louis Farrakhan, mainstream media frame black nationalism and/or black self-determination in monolithic terms as an inherently violent and unjustified response to white supremacy (Squires 2000; Ogbar 2005; Rhodes 2007). Related is the American press's usual framing of anti-colonial movements in Africa as barbaric and radical (Hawk 1992). Thus, when the press portrayed Winnie Mandela as a sympathetic widow in the mid-1980s, many other frames and narratives for black women and anti-colonial struggles were available and at the ready, some of which emerged after her husband's release.

Political Widowhood in South Africa

Political widowhood was commonplace during the apartheid era as many activists were killed or imprisoned. Being a "political widow" is similar

but not identical to being a "rhetorical widow." The main difference is that political widows do not speak; they merely exist as a human face for the political struggle. Mamphela Ramphele, although never married to Steve Biko, had two children by him and describes herself as a South African political widow. She explained that "[t]he acknowledgment of the pain and loss of social actors is a profoundly political act. . . . The term 'political widowhood' reflects the appropriation of certain women's bodies as part of the symbolic armor mobilized by political movements in the contest for moral space following the fall of heroes in the struggle for power" (Ramphele 1996, 101). Ramphele described Winnie Mandela as a political widow even though her husband was incarcerated rather than deceased because:

> the symbolism of political widows extends beyond those whose partners/spouses have died in a struggle. It also includes many women who lived as "widows" during the long periods of their spouses' imprisonment. The inclusion of this second category of political widow is deliberate and intended to show the complexities of the processes of negotiation of the personal and political by women who were drawn by choice or force of circumstance into the struggle for liberation in South Africa. (101)

Ramphele contended that "[Winnie Mandela] thrived on her political widowhood status, but ultimately transcended it. She is now a free agent with enough of a power base to compel her former sponsors to continue to pay their respects to her. She is the ultimate outsider-insider. She is done with the business of being a woman, and has become a powerful agent for better or worse" (Ramphele 1996, 113). Ramphele's claim that Winnie Mandela is "done with the business of being a woman" is intriguing but misguided. Winnie Mandela was able to transcend "political widowhood" not because she stopped being a woman but because her primary position, for South Africans, was as "mother of the nation" (113). This perception endured even after Nelson Mandela eliminated her role as wife/widow by divorcing her. The status of motherhood is not defined in relation to a man (father) but in relation to the children; more accurately, it is an identity that is not relational but functional. A woman is a mother if she gives birth to or mothers someone, not if someone else defines her as a mother.

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

Winnie Mandela is a complex woman who was prominent during a turbulent time in South Africa's history.[3] She was most widely known as the wife of Nelson Mandela, the first post-apartheid president of South Africa. Although the African National Congress (ANC) did not allow women members until 1943, Winnie Mandela attained the position of chairperson of the Orlando West branch of both the ANC and the ANC Women's League by 1958 (ANC Women's League). Winnie Mandela, then, had a substantive political career and public presence before she married Nelson Mandela in 1958. Nelson Mandela was arrested in 1962, and in 1964 was sentenced to life imprisonment for sabotage. For the length of his imprisonment, Winnie Mandela was his primary connection to the outside world. It was she who kept the name "Mandela" alive in the world's media through the trope of the rhetorical widow.

Regardless of her ongoing popularity in South Africa, her reputation in the United States became permanently tarnished in 1989 when she was accused of murder. In January of 1989, Winnie Mandela's bodyguards, better known as the Mandela Football Club, killed a 14–year-old named Stompie Moeketsi. Jerry Richardson, the "coach" of the club, was found responsible for the murder. He claimed that he acted on Winnie Mandela's orders. After she was convicted of kidnapping and accessory to assault in 1991, her husband separated from her. A year later the Mandelas' divorce was final.

Although she was convicted of a crime, Winnie Mandela's sentence was only a fine. She proceeded to be re-elected regional chairwoman of the ANC Women's League in greater Johannesburg. She was also appointed by her ex-husband to the post of Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in the first post-apartheid government in May 1994 (Keller 1995). In 2003, she was accused of fraud and resigned both her parliamentary seat and her position as president of the ANC Women's League ("Winnie Mandela Resigns ANC Posts" 2003). Eventually, twenty-five of her convictions were dismissed, and her entire sentence was suspended (Wines 2004). Even after that scandal she continued to have a large following in South Africa. Indeed, in December 2007, she regained her position in the ANC. Despite her return to the ruling party, her presence in popular journals of the United States essentially vanished after her divorce.

Examining U.S. Press Coverage of Winnie Mandela

Since Winnie Mandela was banned from speaking to more than two people at a time, and the South African press was banned from reporting on her, this paper will not analyze how Winnie Mandela used her "widowhood" as a rhetorical strategy. In this unusual case, the "text" has to be redefined. Instead of analyzing Winnie Mandela's speech texts, Winnie Mandela herself will be analyzed as a text that the popular press in the United States presented to its audience. In this manner, the paper will examine how the concept of rhetorical widowhood shaped our understanding of Winnie Mandela and affects our understanding of women in general.

In the 1980s, Winnie Mandela was so well-known and well-regarded that a 1987 poll of 250 international newspaper editors named her one of the ten most important women in the world, listed fourth, just below Mother Teresa and just ahead of Queen Elizabeth II ("Winnie One of the World's 'Most Important Women'" 1987). As such, she was often written about in U.S. popular journals such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, *Ms.*, *U. S. News and World Report*, *Life*, and *The New Republic*.[4] Taken together, all of the articles written about Winnie Mandela in these magazines constitute an important window into the U.S. understanding of her as a text. As a text, the meaning of Winnie Mandela should be neither predetermined nor singular. Instead, she should be considered polysemic and polyvalic in that she has the possibility of multiple interpretations and multiple values. Intriguingly, there is a consistency of interpretation that supports the contention that "Winnie Mandela," as constructed by the popular press of the United States, is a unified text. An analysis of the articles about Winnie Mandela in the U.S. popular press from 1982 to 1989 reveals that, although the press knew Winnie Mandela was seen primarily as mother of the nation by her fellow South Africans, she was constructed as Nelson Mandela's rhetorical widow more often than as "mother of the nation."

Media Construction of Winnie Mandela as a Rhetorical Widow

The U.S. media portrayed Winnie Mandela as a rhetorical widow in the tradition of the 1960s civil rights widows. The U.S. popular press made use of the cultural commonplace of widowhood by establishing the following: first, that she should be seen as analogous to other rhetorical widows; second, that

she was an extension of the imprisoned Nelson Mandela; and third, that she was the most reliable spokesperson for Nelson Mandela. As a result, they constituted Winnie Mandela as a text whose ethos embodied the three types of testimonials inherent in the persona of the rhetorical widow: convert testimony, expert testimony, and borrowed testimony. Once Nelson Mandela divorced her, rhetorical widowhood was no longer a viable rhetorical personae.

Associations with Other Widows

The first way that the U.S. popular press defined Winnie Mandela as a rhetorical widow was by association. Both *Life: The Year in Pictures*'s "Women of the People" and *Newsweek*'s "Three Against the System" compared Winnie Mandela to strong political widows. In *Life: The Year in Pictures*, Winnie was compared to Corazon Aquino and Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto:

> She [Winnie Mandela] remained the link with its leader, husband Nelson Mandela, who has been in prison for 25 of their 28 years of marriage. For one such woman to emerge as a national symbol of hope is remarkable. There were two others. Like Mandela, the Philippines' Corazon Aquino and Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto inherited constituencies from the men they loved. Last year they came into political power of their own. Each had a devotion to a country and a cause that was an inspiration to the world. ("Women of the People" 1985, 123)

Aquino's husband, Senator Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., was assassinated on August 21, 1983, and Bhutto's father, former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was executed in 1979 after he lost his position in a coup d'état in 1977. By grouping these women together the press implied that they should be seen in similar ways. They entered into the public sphere because the men in their lives were dead or imprisoned. By placing Winnie Mandela in this group of women, the press presented her as the dutiful female who carried out her husband's legacy.

In *Newsweek*'s "Three Against the System," Mark Whitaker and Richard Manning grouped Winnie Mandela with Aquino and Yelena Bonner of the then Soviet Union. They reported:

> [a]ll three women married men who became powerful voices of political dissent in their native lands—and eventually were silenced. All three chose to break that silence, carrying the messages their men no longer

> could deliver. Slowly, reluctantly in one case, all became almost mythic figures in their own right, independent figures in the fight against oppression. (Whitaker and Manning 1985b, 34)

Ironically, the three women were described as "independent figures." Yet the entire thrust of the article was that they took over for their husbands. Their actions were not "independent," but instead these women functioned as stand-ins for their men. They were expected to speak and act in ways that reflected what their men would do if they were able. They were expected to act as widows.

Winnie as Extension of Nelson

Although associated with widows, Winnie Mandela was not, in fact, truly a widow. The press infused her persona with the notion of widowhood by foregrounding her as a wife instead of as an individual. A life sentence suggested that Nelson Mandela would die in prison, rendering his present absence and his future demise as essentially the same: Winnie would become a true widow eventually. More important, the rules governing his imprisonment rendered Nelson Mandela rhetorically "dead" because he was unable to be seen or heard.

The U.S. press formed a view of Winnie Mandela as an extension of her husband through short biographies and her own words. These short biographies reinforced the notion that she did not exist except as an extension of Nelson Mandela. Most of her biographies began with her introduction to Nelson Mandela, as if she did not exist before she met him, ignoring her extensive political activity prior to their marriage:

> Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964—and since then his wife has devoted herself to carrying on his work. She has been banned for most of 23 years, confined first in Soweto, then Brandfort. She has been jailed repeatedly, once spending 18 months in solitary confinement. Still, she has continued to act as what one friend calls a "one-woman resistance movement." She has organized soup kitchens, received hundreds of foreign visitors and carried messages from her husband in prison. (Whitaker and Manning 1985a, 35)

If her early life story was told, it was offered merely as the preamble to her life with Nelson Mandela. For example, the 1986 *Ebony* article "The

Mandelas: First Family of South Africa's Freedom Fight" commented, "Winnie Mandela, born Nomzamo Winifred Madikizela, was the first Black female social worker in South Africa. After marrying Mandela, she joined him in the liberation struggle" ("The Mandelas" 1986, 68). Even this brief allusion to her job apart from Nelson Mandela obscures her official ANC roles and places her in a U.S.-friendly civil rights discourse of "black firsts" that has little to do with the anti-apartheid struggle. Moreover, by emphasizing her job as a social worker, she is further feminized by association with a profession that is mostly female.

Although being seen as merely the extension of Nelson Mandela was a minimization of Winnie Mandela, she seemed aware of and resigned to her status as his wife. She even composed her language to reinforce the idea that she and he were a single entity. Winnie Mandela titled her 1985 autobiography *Part of My Soul Went with Him*. In an excerpt reprinted for the U.S. audience by *Ms.* and *Ebony*, she explained that she perceived herself not as an individual but as a symbol of her people's struggle:

> I ceased a long time ago to exist as an individual. The ideals, the political goals that I stand for are the ideals and goals of the people of my country. My private self does not exist. Whatever they do to me, they do to the people in this country. I am and will always be only a political barometer. From every situation I have found myself in, you can read the political heat in the country. When they send me into exile, it's not me as an individual they are sending. They think that with me they can also ban a political idea. What I stand for is what they want to banish. I couldn't think of a greater honor. (Mandela 1985, 100)

Two years later in an interview with *Ms.* magazine, when asked what kind of life she would like to live after the struggle, Winnie Mandela responded:

> I hope to be myself. I hope I will return to what I personally think I was really meant to do. I have my secret loves; I have an obsession about children. I hope one day I will return to that kind of life whereby I could heal the brutalized little souls who never led a normal life, who were compelled to contribute to our struggle not by their choice, but by the immoral racist Pretorian regime. (Frense 1987, 103)

In interviews, Winnie Mandela repeatedly made it clear that she did not choose her life or even her way of being. She placed the blame (and credit)

for her persona on the Pretorian regime. She argued that all black politicians have been made by the Afrikaners: "[t]he Afrikaner has made me what I am. The Afrikaner has made each and every black politician in this land" (Nelan 1987, 37). Her statement to *Ms.* further explained that she had not been shaped merely by political circumstances, but she had stopped being anything but the ideas she represented. At the time of the 1987 interview, Winnie Mandela did not represent herself as an individual but as a "political barometer" (Mandela 1985, 100).

Having accepted that she is a synecdoche for the movement, she also accepted that the U.S. read her as an extension of Nelson Mandela. Winnie Mandela often used the first-person plural when answering questions for herself and her husband, linguistically alerting her interlocutors that they should see the couple as a single entity. When *Newsweek* asked Winnie Mandela, "Do you believe it is too late for talks between the ANC and the government, as your husband reportedly said last August?" (Manning 1985, 28), she replied, "We keep being misunderstood. We never said, at any stage, that we are not prepared to speak to the government" (28). The use of the first-person plural reinforces the notion that she saw herself as a symbol of Nelson Mandela just as she saw Nelson as a symbol of the entire struggle. This is exemplified in the same 1985 interview when she stated "a call on Mandela is not a call on Mandela as an individual, but on all those who have gone into the country's countless prisons for fighting apartheid" (28).

Although it was not uncommon to see wives as extensions of their husbands, or for wives to define themselves as part of a couple, linguistically it is less common for a wife to function as a spokesperson for her husband. Nevertheless, the third way that the U.S. media represented Winnie Mandela as her husband's rhetorical widow was by positioning her as the most reliable spokesperson for her husband. The press argued that the whole world saw her in that light. For instance, on January 5, 1987, *Time* printed: "[t]o much of the outside world, Mandela's wife Winnie, 50, has become his surrogate and a symbol of the fight against South Africa's racial repression" (Nelan 1987, 37). Then again, after her fall in 1989, *Time* printed, "[t]o much of the outside world she [Winnie Mandela] became the grande dame of the South African revolution, a worthy surrogate for her husband Nelson, imprisoned black nationalist leader" (Nelan 1989, 36).

Winnie Mandela as Reliable Substitute for Nelson Mandela

The U.S. media actively constructed Winnie Mandela as a reliable spokesperson by offering evidence that she had seen and spoken with him when no one else was able to do so. The suggested conclusion was that when she spoke on his behalf, she was reporting on what he had said to her in confidence. In an article on Nelson Mandela in 1986, *Time* reported, "[Nelson] Mandela's most direct link to his black countrymen is his strong-willed wife, Winnie" (Smith 1986, 68). The press also provided evidence that Winnie Mandela had access to Nelson Mandela by documenting the timeline between when she saw Nelson Mandela and what she said. In 1985, although she was still banned, *Newsweek* reported, "After visiting her husband in prison she held a press conference to announce that the ANC was no longer interested in a national convention and wanted to talk only about handing over power to the blacks" (Whitaker and Manning 1985a, 35). Then again in the same article *Newsweek* explained, "[w]hen Pretoria renewed an offer to release him [Nelson Mandela] if he renounced violence, Mrs. Mandela arranged for a meeting with lawyers. And it was she who announced that 'Mandela is not about to accept release under any conditions'" (Whitaker and Manning 1985a, 35).

Using Winnie Mandela to verify their stories, U.S. reporters also passively constructed her as a reliable spokeswoman for Nelson Mandela. For instance, in a 1986 article, Anthony Sampson of *Newsweek* disputed a *Washington Times* interview with Nelson Mandela by going to Winnie Mandela as the authority on Nelson's position. Sampson writes:

> I asked Winnie Mandela, Nelson's wife, who is periodically allowed to visit him, whether this report represented his real views. "They wanted to emphasize the violence," she said. "Mandela has always stuck to the last statement he made in the dock. He was compelled to violence by the violence of the racist government. He would still accept a talk with the government on the terms the congress has asked for—the dismantling of apartheid." (Sampson 1985)

Winnie Mandela was clearly put forward by the U.S. media as the authority on the views of Nelson Mandela. Her authority was built on being his wife, and therefore an extension of him, and on her access to him while in prison. Once she was divorced from him, not only did the press accord her less attention, but it also cast aspersions on her validity as a political figure.

Winnie Mandela after 1989: Corrupt Matriarch

Before 1989, the U.S. popular press presented Winnie Mandela as a widow-heroine, but, after the murder of Stompie Moeketsi in 1989, she was reframed as a pariah. During February of 1989, *Time* reported in "Decline and Fall of a Heroine" that:

> [Winnie Mandela was] publicly read out of the antiapartheid movement. At a press conference in Johannesburg, the two largest black antigovernment organizations, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the banned United Democratic Front, charged that she had "violated the spirit and ethos of the democratic movement" and called on the black community to "distance" itself from her. Though less critical, the exiled leadership of the African National Congress (A.N.C.) in Lusaka said Mandela made mistakes. (Nelan 1989, 36)

Throughout that month, popular magazines detailed how the anti-apartheid movement was distancing itself from Winnie Mandela while keeping her husband Nelson Mandela safely within the fold. *Newsweek* ran the stories "Soweto's 'Winnie Problem'" and "Mrs. Mandela's Disgrace," and *U.S. News and World Report* ran "The Sudden Unmaking of Winnie Mandela." *Jet*, which had published a minimum of one article a year on Winnie Mandela since 1984, did not comment.[5]

One month later, in March 1989, *The Nation* asked the question, "who put Winnie Mandela on a pedestal in the first place?" ("Pedestal Politics" 1989, 325), suggesting that she did not deserve the positive interpretation that she had received before 1989. The magazine answered its own question by placing the blame on the media, stating that "[w]hat was reported of her [Winnie Mandela's] life in recent years was selective" (325). It elaborated on the problem by writing, "[b]ecause the name and the mass movement had become interchangeable, the movement suffered when the symbol was tarnished—even when the townships had begun to question whether the symbol might have become a liability" (325). These remarks imply that reporters did not do their best job as "watchdogs" to find the hidden "truth" about Winnie Mandela behind the widow persona. Moreover, those who retroactively question why she was put on the "pedestal" in the first place suggest that this woman was misplaced in her role as mother of the nation/representative of her husband. This has particular resonance for a

black woman, since the trope of the black matriarch rests on the idea that black wives and mothers are powerful in ways that emasculate husbands and fathers. Thus, one interpretation here is that in elevating Winnie Mandela in her husband's absence, black South Africans made the mistake of letting a black woman take charge.

The most obvious way she lost her identity for the U.S. public was through silence. The decision of the two black magazines, *Ebony* and *Jet*, not to report on the fall of Winnie Mandela was a clear example of silence obliterating her identity. After 1990, the rest of the U.S. popular press also stopped reporting on Winnie Mandela. By not writing about her, they effectively concealed her from the U.S. audience because mediated reports had been the public's main connection to her. Although she stayed active in South African politics, she was no longer a person of interest in the United States.

The few journals that did not immediately enact an unwritten policy of silence worked to reinterpret Winnie Mandela's persona outside the role of Nelson Mandela's rhetorical widow. They systematically dismantled her credibility by stripping her of the three testimonials. Instead of empowering her words with the power of the convert's tale, she was portrayed as self-serving. In 1989, *Newsweek* reported that "last year she moved to sell merchandising rights to the Mandela name. (The ANC leadership and her jailed husband ordered her to drop the plan.)" ("Mrs. Mandela's Disgrace" 1989, 44). *Newsweek* said she had "an inflated sense of personal grandeur," pointing out that "she built a sleek 'presidential mansion' amid the poverty of Soweto" (44). *Time* reported that "[Winnie's Soweto supporters] frowned when she built a luxurious new house nicknamed 'Winnie's Palace'" (Nelan 1989, 36). These depictions of a black woman living in luxury amid poverty revisit narratives of "welfare queens" gaming the system to hoard checks and buy Cadillacs in the ghetto, further distancing Mandela from the prestige of legitimate black political wives/widows such as Coretta Scott King.

By showing her to be self-serving instead of serving the movement, these articles concluded that her words were not those of a convert—or of a good wife/widow. Rather than being seen as an expert on her husband and as a spokesperson for the anti-apartheid movement, she was presented as an embarrassment with poor political judgment: "[h]er praise for brutal burning-tire executions—'With our boxes of matches . . . we shall liberate this country'—embarrassed mainstream antiapartheid leaders and brought rebuke from ANC leaders" ("Mrs. Mandela's Disgrace" 1989, 44). *Newsweek*

also reported that she "has given black activists pause ever since she praised the burning-tire executions of suspected collaborators with the white regime three years ago" (Reiss 1989, 35). *Time* wrote, "the rift between [Winnie] Mandela and her Soweto supporters has a long history. . . . The ANC and the UDI disavowed her comments in favor of 'necklacing'—hanging gasoline-filled tires around the necks of blacks accused of 'collaborating with the system,' then igniting them" (Nelan 1989, 36).

Unraveling her expertise exposed her remarks as not being examples of speaking for the dead (*eidolopoeia*). Once Nelson Mandela publicly rebuked Winnie Mandela, her speech was no longer imbued with borrowed testimony. Although still his wife, she did not speak for him and therefore was not covered by his credibility. Also, his speaking against Winnie Mandela to the press made it painfully obvious that Nelson Mandela was not dead, rhetorically or otherwise, and therefore her testimony could not be an example of *eidolopoeia*. Winnie Mandela continued to speak out against apartheid, and with the end of apartheid, she assumed real positions of power. However, she never regained her status in the United States. Without the amplification of the three testimonials inherent in the role of the rhetorical widow, she was unable to reach the U.S. readership.

Selective reporting, while evident, does not sufficiently explain the U.S. experience of the rise and fall of Winnie Mandela. Instead, the media chose to deploy the common understanding of the traditional gender role of widowhood to represent her to the public. This dependence on widowhood was the true culprit in her undoing as a positive public figure. Readers of the U.S. press were presented with Winnie Mandela as a "rhetorical widow" in the tradition of the U.S. civil rights widows. In this way, they could more easily relate to the situation in South Africa as analogous to the civil rights struggle in the United States. Thus, the media chose to depict her as a rhetorical widow by representing her solely within traditional female gender roles and as a reliable spokesperson for her incarcerated husband. Constructed as a rhetorical widow, popular press readers identified Winnie Mandela as an extension of Nelson Mandela rather than as a person in her own right.-

Winnie Mandela as South Africa's Mother of the Nation

Before and after the murder trial, glimpses of Mandela's role as "mother of the nation" did appear in the popular press, although not as often as the

widow role. When *U.S. News and World Report* published an article in August 1985 on Nelson Mandela, "From Behind Bars, a 'Mythic' Appeal," claiming that "If blacks consider [Nelson] Mandela to be the father of their movement, his 51-year-old wife Winnie is regarded by many as the mother" ("From Behind Bars" 1985, 22), the implication was that this status was based merely on her relationship with Nelson Mandela. The role of "mother of the nation," although integrally connected to his position as "father of the nation," is more than a mere reflection of her being married to Nelson Mandela and the mother of some of his biological children. Instead, it is a rhetorical persona that, according to the U.S. press, black South Africans embraced and articulated. When reporting on Winnie Mandela's first (illegal) public address in twenty-five years, *Time* reported, "people quickly recognized the woman who emerged from the car . . . they escorted her into the stadium shouting 'Winnie! Winnie! Mother of the nation!'" (Simpson 1985, 36).

Life printed a 1986 article entitled, "Mother of Revolt: South Africa's Blacks Look to Winnie Mandela," which provided quotes by black South Africans as evidence that the people saw her as their symbolic mother. Reporting on Winnie Mandela's illegal return to Soweto, *Life* magazine wrote, "[a]t funerals and protests, the mere presence of the imposing woman with the broad smile, colorful dresses and ever-changing hair styles sets off frenzied chants of '*Mama Ngawethu*!' (Our Mother)" (Whipple 1986, 30). The same article later noted, "[d]espite police surveillance, young township radicals come and go, seeking blessings from 'Mommy.' Bidding farewell recently to two teenage comrades, Mrs. Mandela smiled and embraced each one. 'Represent us well,' she instructed them. 'The nation hugs you'" (34). This last quote suggests that South Africans did see Winnie Mandela as "Mother of the Nation," and also softens her image with mentions of hugs and smiles.

Direct quotes from her speeches suggest Winnie Mandela herself embraced the mother role. When reporting on her illegal 1985 Mamelodi funeral oration, the U.S. press depicted her as rhetorically constructing herself as a mother figure. For instance, *Newsweek* reported Winnie Mandela saying, "'I have come to weep with you, my children . . . I have come to wipe up the blood of your sons and daughters with you'" (Whitaker and Manning 1985a, 34). By referring to the audience as "my children," she created the ethos positioning of the mother. By discussing the

audience's children, "your sons and daughters," she clarified her position. She was not their literal mother; she was their symbolic mother.

Even articles concerning her fall from grace reminded readers that South Africans saw Winnie Mandela as the "Mother of the Nation" (Reiss 1989, 35). In February 1989, *Newsweek's* first article on the fall of Winnie Mandela, "Soweto's 'Winnie Problem'," described her as "Winnie Mandela, a woman long revered by many black South Africans as 'Mother of the Nation'" (Reiss 1989, 35). A week later, in "Mrs. Mandela's Disgrace," *Newsweek* introduced her as "Winnie Mandela, wife of jailed African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela, the woman known as 'Mother of the Nation'" ("Mrs. Mandela's Disgrace" 1989, 44). *The New Republic*'s article, "Winnie the Shrew," quoted a South African activist saying, "She was very much of a mother to all of us" (Mufson 1989, 15). However, the article's headline refers to her as a "shrew," and the mother role is referred to in the past tense in the quotation. Here, Mandela has moved from the soft, comforting mother who orated at earlier funerals to the harsh, sharp-tongued shrew who endangers the family.

Rhetorical Consequences of Being Understood as a Rhetorical Widow

The U.S. popular press's construction of Winnie Mandela as a rhetorical widow should be seen as a cautionary tale. Rhetorical widowhood has both rhetorical and personal consequences for the woman framed in this specific way. Winnie Mandela was willing to play the role of widow, although it was not the only way in which she defined herself. With an active rhetorical widow speaking for him, Nelson Mandela's captors were not able to silence his message. She was able to speak for him and live as an embodiment of his struggle. Engaging in the role of his rhetorical widow strengthened the force of her words through the three testimonials: convert testimony, expert testimony, and borrowed testimony. Yet with the U.S. audience, her own credibility as an individual suffered immensely. She was merely his spokesperson; she was not a competent, compelling individual in her own right.

When Nelson Mandela emerged from prison and distanced himself from her, to the U.S. public she had betrayed him and them by deceiving them into believing that she had been representing Nelson Mandela. Since

he did not support her when she was accused of participating in causing the death of Stompie Moeketsi, people began to question whether she had fairly represented him while he was in prison.

Nelson Mandela's previous position as rhetorically "dead" meant that the world had to trust that she accurately and fairly represented him. Once that basic trust was shattered, the dominos started to fall. It became apparent retroactively that she had not truly been his rhetorical widow, and she was not on the same moral high ground as the civil rights widows. As her credibility was built on this sinking foundation, she lost her status as Nelson Mandela's rhetorical widow in the eyes of the U.S. popular press. When Nelson Mandela was released from prison (symbolically resurrected), Winnie Mandela became incidental to the U.S. media (although to the people of South Africa she continued to play a central role as the "mother of the nation"). Thus, when Winnie Mandela's husband divorced her, she lost her identity and her credibility in the eyes of the U.S. public.

Winnie Mandela's construction as a rhetorical widow was complementary to the popular press's construction of Nelson Mandela as a rhetorical martyr. It was also consistent with U.S. audiences' cultural belief in the political meaning of widowhood. The media presented Winnie Mandela as speaking for her husband, who could not speak. She was not an individual but an appendage of Nelson Mandela. As such, she had celebrity status in the United States and functioned as a symbolic embodiment of the suffering black South Africans experienced under apartheid. When the press reported on Nelson Mandela's separating himself from Winnie Mandela, her identity crumbled. If she was not speaking for Nelson, for whom did she speak? The demise of Winnie Mandela also heralded a rebirth for Nelson Mandela. Distancing himself from her because she was considered pro-violence and non-democratic, he became anti-violence and pro-democratic. With Winnie Mandela discredited as his spokesperson, everything that his wife reported that he had said while he was imprisoned became unreliable. As a result, he obtained a clean slate. Her diminished status elevated his. A year later, when he was released from prison, he was free to speak on his own and to craft his own image without the burden of Winnie Mandela's prior public statements as his spokesperson.

As Nelson Mandela's rhetorical widow, Winnie Mandela had commanded international celebrity status. She was sought after for interviews. Most people knew her name and therefore knew her struggle. Since the

Mandelas' separation in 1991, Winnie Mandela has all but disappeared from the pages of the U.S. popular journals. Most of the next generation of the U.S. public is ignorant about who she was and what she once represented. Winnie Mandela has vanished from the U.S. imagination and therefore from our understanding. Nevertheless, U.S. feminists have a great deal to learn from Winnie Mandela's story. Traditional female gender roles may create platforms for speech, but they also can diminish the individual orator and function detrimentally as an ingredient in the confining cultural construct of womanhood. The rhetorical use of traditional gender roles, such as widowhood, provides a platform from which women can speak. Unfortunately, it can also reduce these same women to the role of mouthpieces instead of credible individuals in their own right.

Notes

1. Children can also speak for their deceased parents, but the meaning and effect is different. A child speaks from the point of view of inherited information whereas a widow speaks from the point of view of an intertwining connection.
2. The best example of this was Coretta Scott King's tireless effort to have her husband join George Washington as the only United States citizens commemorated with a federal holiday.
3. It should be noted that this article provides a brief biography of Winnie Mandela that essentially begins with her relationship to Nelson Mandela. Ironically, this article cautions against reducing a woman to her status as a wife.
4. Searches of the aforementioned magazines yielded a number of articles that focused on Winnie Mandela. It is important that we included *Ms.*, *Jet*, and *Ebony* to ascertain whether feminist and/or African American-oriented journals would frame Ms. Mandela differently from the mainstream press. Scholars have shown that civil rights issues and black leaders are covered differently in the black press, and that white-dominated periodicals continue to emphasize tension, violence, and "pathologies" when covering people of color (e.g., Jacobs 2000; Squires and Brouwer 2002; Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao 2005; Shah and Thornton, 2006). Likewise, feminists and feminism are usually framed in a negative light in mainstream news (e.g., Vavrus 2004). Surprisingly, all of the journals assigned the role of "widow" to Winnie Mandela, with little variation.
5. It is notable that *Jet* and *Ebony* ceased coverage of Winnie Mandela in the aftermath of the murder. This could be due to Johnson Publications' role as cheerleader for black "firsts" and the black press's traditional role of trying to counter negative frames in the dominant press. We speculate that the silence

of the two black-owned and oriented magazines signals their unease with the events of 1989 and the negative light cast on South Africa's most famous black woman.

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