

# Undergraduate Research Symposium MAY 21, 2010 Mary Gates Hall

## Online Proceedings

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### POSTER SESSION 1

Commons East, Easel 33

12:00 PM to 1:00 PM

#### **An Analysis of First Person Narratives by Women Political Prisoners in Apartheid South Africa**

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*Mentor: Lynn Thomas, History*

The historical narrative of the anti-apartheid movement highlights the importance of continued activism during incarceration, most notably championing Nelson Mandela and his colleagues on Robben Island. Lesser known, but no less important, are the contributions of women political prisoners. An analysis of women's first-person accounts of incarceration reveals the breadth of their anti-apartheid activism, as well as the depth of their ongoing involvement during incarceration. Though women's reports feature a number of common experiences, the varying medium through which they speak shapes their narratives in important ways. Through a close reading of the autobiographies of Ellen Kuzwayo and Caesarina Kona Makhoere, and the testimonies of Theresa Ramashamola and Zahrah Narkedien before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), I attempt to identify the ways in which the medium of expression shapes the message. Sustained analysis of primary sources is supplemented with critical theory on the genre of autobiography and literary criticism of Kuzwayo's and Makhoere's books. In addition, I engage myriad commentaries on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, particularly regarding gendered experiences of testifying before that government sanctioned body. My study reveals that autobiographies emphasize the solidarity of inmates, and the power to collectively mobilize protests against poor sanitation, inedible food and unbearable work conditions. Frequently the authors narrate the experiences of other inmates. TRC testimonies, on the other hand, focus on individual experiences of torture and degradation, frequently affirming the detrimental long term effects of solitary confinement. The emphasis of community in autobiographical accounts, when compared to the disastrous results of solitary confinement featured in testimony before the TRC, reifies the power of the collective, both as a means of directing resistance and as a source of comfort to detainees.