

Scratching out one's days

Graffiti in the old Pietermaritzburg Prison

'The Tower of London contains one of the most grisly collections of graffiti in all of Europe. These inscriptions were produced by kings, queens, saints and scholars, many of them awaiting their deaths for political indiscretions or religious scruples. Mostly expressions of political or of religious ideals, these graffiti were written with nails or other hard object available at the moment.'

[Abel and Buckley, p.6]

Introduction

At the end of 1992 or the beginning of 1993, the Department of Correctional Services, having closed down the old Pietermaritzburg Prison at the south-west end of Prince Alfred Street, gave over the premises to Project Gateway, a group of church organisations serving the community.

Early in 1993, Ms. Michelle Wilter, one of the persons involved in the organisation of Project Gateway, enquired whether anyone from the Department of Zulu was prepared to investigate various graffiti in the old prison cells, especially those of condemned prisoners, before this valuable social comment was plastered over in the process of renovation. Ms. Wilter was under the impression that most of the graffiti were in Zulu¹. At the time I was making suggestions to third-year students regarding topics for their major-year research, and two of these students, Messrs Mthandeni Mthembu and Alex Dladla, undertook to do a socio-linguistic research project on the condemned-cells graffiti.

Some background to the Pietermaritzburg Prison's becoming Project Gateway is given in the introduction to Mthandeni Mthembu's research paper:

About three years ago, after the cessation of this institution as a prison, a group of Christians appealed for the conversion of ... the institution into community project units. The government agreed provided that the group would meet the costs estimated [at] a million rand. Failure to meet this sum would result in the [building's] being left unoccupied. Mr. Zephaniah, an ex-prisoner from whom we got some of the information about the history of the prison, told us that this concerned group of Christians, failing to [raise] the amount required, came several times to march round the institution, just like the march led by Joshua around the walls of Jericho, while they prayed. In the case of Joshua, the walls

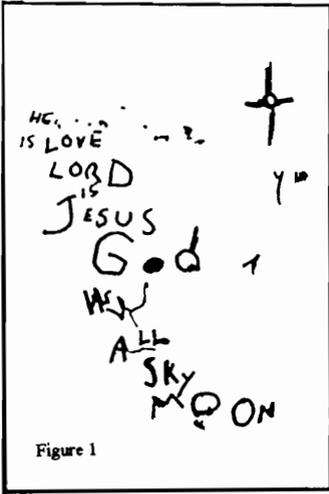


Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 3 is a mixture of written and drawn graffiti: PHANSI UN... NOTHELEWENI (Down with ... and Inkatha), a dagger, a heart, a cross, a discreetly covered belly and hips, and two 28s.

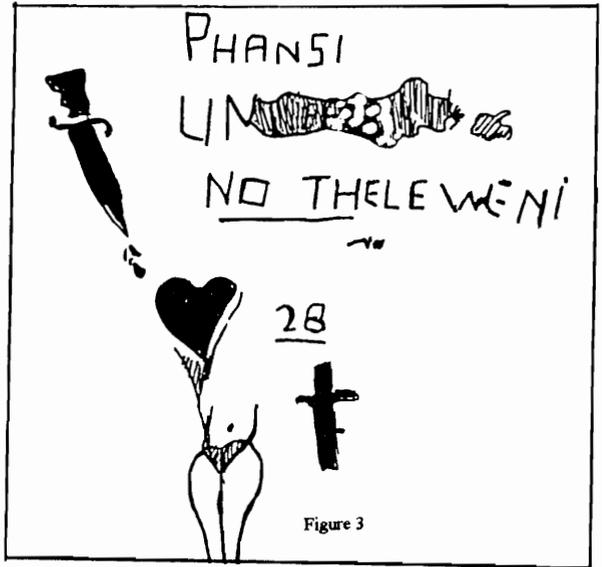


Figure 3

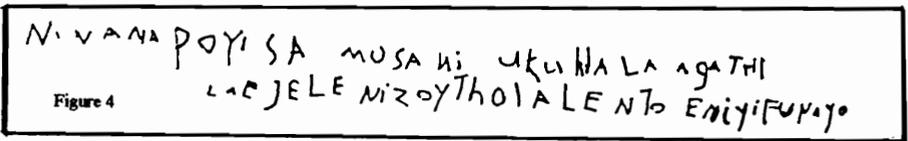


Figure 4

fell, but in the case of this group of Christians ... the result was the ... handing over of the institution by the government ... free of charge. [Mthembu, pp. 3–4]

Mthembu goes on to point out the intentions of Project Gateway towards community self-help: the development of job skills, creches, basic and computer literacy classes, sewing classes, and using some of the cell-blocks for accommodating homeless people. Mthembu sees the project as '... what was once hell, with hell gates, ... now becoming a paradise; what was once a wilderness, ... now a place where streams of bright future flow.'

When I first visited it in 1993, after it had ceased to be a prison, but well before the renovators had moved in, the place still had an air of gloom and despondency. This feeling has been brilliantly captured by Stephen Coan in an article in *The Natal Witness* of 21 May 1993. The following extract gives some idea, not only of how powerful Coan found the atmosphere of the empty prison, but also of how much the graffiti contributed to his perceptions of the erstwhile presence of the prisoners:

Walking up though the gate at the back of the prison, the horizon shrinks and comes uncomfortably close. Now the hills have vanished. You are surrounded by high white walls ... Sight thus frustrated, eyes are forced to look up, to the sky ... In a landscape shrunk and confined by walls the sky becomes an omnipresent force. In one of the cells a graffito proclaims: 'Lord is Jesus God Him all sky moon' [Fig. 1] The [doors of the] cells on the ground floor are of solid thick steel. Each with a spyhole in a depression at eye level – each covered with thick glass to prevent any observer or warder getting his eye poked out. The cell walls are covered with graffiti and drawings; scratched prison calendars like domino scores – columns of four with a stroke across. Obscenities and pornographic drawings are few, and those few more like final gestures of defiance.

The phenomenon of graffiti

The Italian noun *graffiti* is the plural form of *graffito* ('a scratching' from *graffire* 'to etch, make a scratch'). The word 'graffiti' is used in English to refer to 'wall-writing' in public places, for reasons often regarded as anti-social. They may be found on the walls of culverts, the outside walls of public buildings, inside bus shelters, and in various other such public places. A sub-genre of graffiti is common on the interior walls of public toilets². Graffiti are usually anonymous, unless the purpose of the inscription is deliberately to express the identity of the writer: 'Charles George Smith was here 25/9/85'. They may be executed in any medium which will stick to the surface of a painted, plastered or tiled wall, so pen and pencil frequently give way to more modern media such as felt-tipped pens and aerosol spray-paint.

The content of graffiti varies from one venue to another – political outside public buildings such as law courts, police stations, and political campaign offices; obscene in public toilets, love-messages on the trunks of trees in parks, and so on.

Graffiti, in common with other forms of written communication, need three things in order to be executed: firstly, an alphabet (whether something as widely known and used as a standard alphabet, or something as rare and esoteric as the

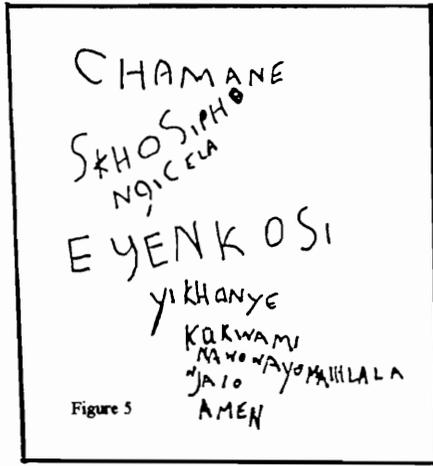


Figure 5

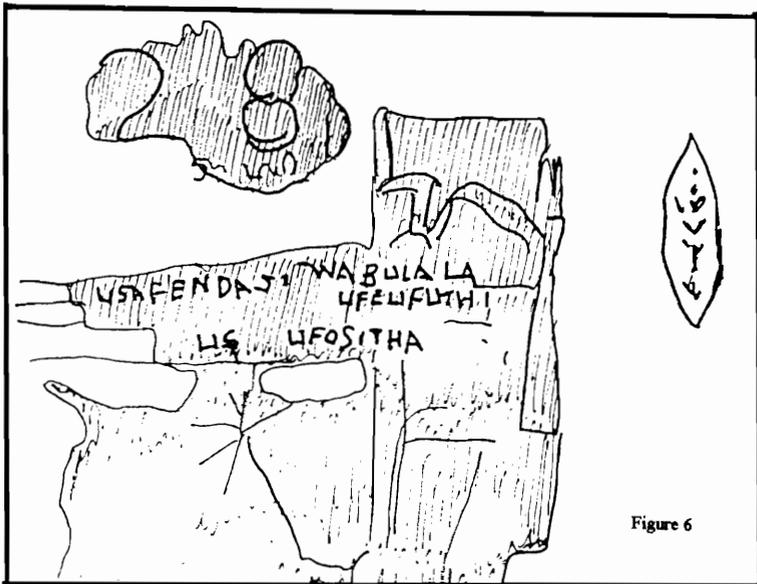


Figure 6

secret writing of a single small group of urban youths); secondly, a surface (which could vary from a cave wall to a computer screen!); and thirdly, an implement or other means of making the inscription.

Prison graffiti

The prison graffiti studied use, as one might expect, the Roman alphabet, almost invariably restricted to block letters, i.e. unjoined capitals. These very often have a runic appearance, angular and unrounded, and the reason obviously relates to surface and implement. [Fig. 2] The writing surface consisted entirely of the plastered and painted walls of the cells, the paint usually being a hard, glossy type, probably chosen to be graffiti resistant. Ordinary pens and pencils were of no avail here.

The graffiti were almost invariably engraved into the surface of the plaster with some hard, sharpened implement. Without any detailed information from ex-inmates or prison authorities, I would imagine that the commonest implement would be of metal – a large nail being most likely – which could be easily hidden, as well as easily kept sharp, and perhaps useful as a weapon as well as a writing implement³.

Writing conditions

One notices on a visit to the old prison that even on a bright sunny day, the light in the cells is muted. Without any artificial lights, illumination most of the time must have been of a low level which is not conducive to writing. One would assume that graffiti-writing was strictly forbidden, and I imagine that the writer had to work under the strain of possible discovery. Perhaps he had to write in an uncomfortable hunched-up position, using his body to shield his activities from the little spyhole in each door, and remembering always to sweep up the fine dust from the engraving, and perhaps to wipe it into the inscription to disguise its newness. The free and easy joy of the New York subway graffiti artist, flourishing spray-can as he rides the coaches through the night, has little in common with the cautious pecking away in the monotonous grey cube of the prison cell that is the studio of the prison artist.

It is these very conditions, however, that make the prison statements true graffiti. 'Little scratchings' is a much more accurate description of prison cell inscriptions than of those found on troilet and subway walls the world over.

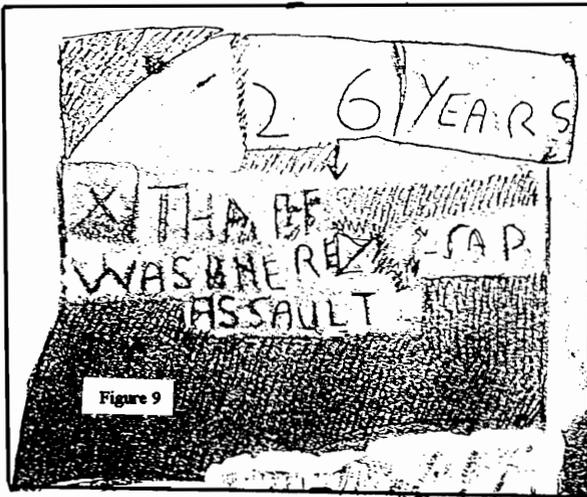
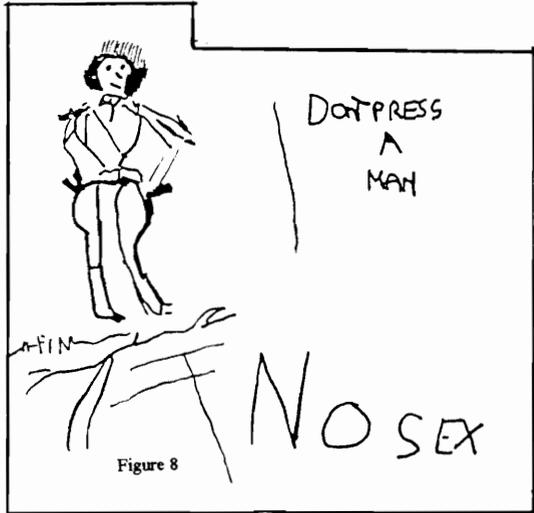
Emotional conditions

These perhaps more than anything else lead to the uniqueness of the graffiti which I have recorded in this article. Prison life generally is designed to be depressing. It is, after all, a punishment, and the life is so ordered that no normal person would wish to return to it. Bare accommodation, drab clothing, monotonous food, boredom and continual debasement – these are not features to encourage a visitor to come back again if he can help it. And yet there is always the long-distant but ever-closer date of release, not just a hope, but a definite date when the doors will open, and the prisoner will become a human being again.

Not so for the prisoners in the condemned cells. For them there is perhaps the slender hope that they will get a reprieve, and have their death sentence commuted

Let Africans Get Equal Rights, C A S T L E, L I O N
 L A G E R A F T O O U E N W O
 N R I L U R T D N T
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Figure 7



to a term of years. But otherwise, the only way they will leave the prison is when they are released from life itself. And not for them the certainty of the date of release. It might be in a few years; it might be in a few days. For the prisoners in the condemned cells, contemplating the start of a comprehensive work of art or literature on the wall of their cell, there is always the cruel paradox that of all people, they have all the time in the world to work on the walls of their cell, but they have no way of knowing exactly when that time is going to run out.

The language of the condemned cells graffiti constitutes a very narrow genre of socio-linguistic phenomenon. The writers of the graffiti are confined in a sense that no other writer can be confined, in space as well as in time. The conditions under which the work is completed could not be much more oppressive. The language used is heavily coloured with prison jargon and slang. It is perhaps not surprising that the main themes appear again and again from cell to cell: an obsession with time, and approaching doom; prayers to God; recounting the anguish of arrest; and wry comments on prison life, especially the gang system.

And yet, within these predictable and conformist themes, there are rare flashes of individuality, such as the reggae fan of cell three, and the architect/designer of the dream house in the cell opposite.

Analysing the prison graffiti

When I looked at the original graffiti with my students Mthembu and Dladla, we agreed that the major sub-division should be the written and the drawn forms. Although the written graffiti constitute formal language, the drawings could not possibly be ignored in the context of the emotions expressed by the prisoners in the condemned cells, and drawings and writings should be integrated in the analysis. In the case of numbers such as 26 and 28, it is difficult to know whether these should be regarded as written or non-written. As they are symbols for prison gangs, it is perhaps best to deal with them as non-written graffiti. Each of these two primary sub-divisions could be further sub-divided into six areas of content: prison experience, religious messages, statements of identity, political statements, obscenities, and enigmatic statements.

Prison experience

These graffiti relate to arrests, judgments, sentences, opinions regarding policemen and informers, prison conditions, and the short time left to the prisoners in the condemned cells. Examples include 'So-and-so is an informer', 'It's hell in here', 'Condemned for murder', 'Only six days left', and so on. The graphic equivalent of this would be the number of calendars drawn on the walls, most with dates marked off. There are also a remarkable number of drawings of unmistakable police vans, complete with grilles, radio aerials and the like.

Dladla includes: 'Ukubopha umuntu nihaya ngaye' ('to arrest a person with whom you break the law') and 'I never thought I still I hungle', which Dladla interprets, correctly in my opinion, as 'I always thought you got sufficient and free food in prison'. There is a definite threat in: 'Nina maphoyisa, musani ukuhlala ngathi lae jele nizothola lento enifunayo' ('You policemen, don't sit on us here in jail [or] you will get what's coming to you.') [Fig. 4]

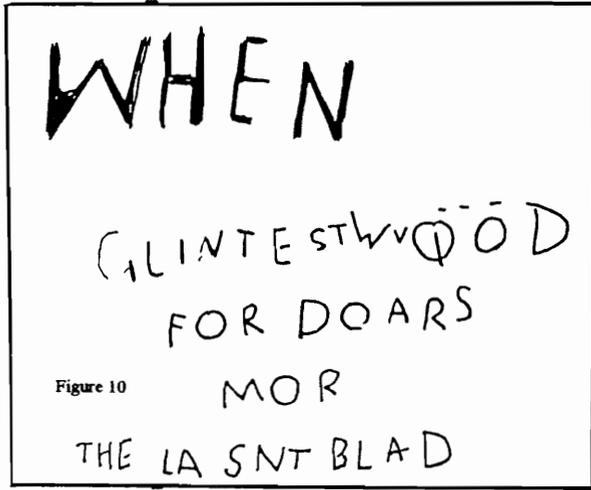


Figure 10

S	M	T	W	Th	F	S
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

Figure 11(a)

M

M T W Th FR SAT SUN

	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

Figure 11(b)

D

Religious messages

My original notes include: 'Only six days left, but God's gonna save me', 'Put your trust in Jesus', and 'Remember this prayer [followed by a prayer]' The pictorial equivalents are a number of crosses drawn on the walls. To these Dladla adds: 'I trust Jesus only', 'I lay my body down to sleep, I pray to God. My soul to keep, and if I die before I wake I pray to God to take my soul.' The latter is obviously an attempt to reproduce the very old bedtime prayer 'Now I lay me down to sleep/ I pray the Lord my soul to keep/ And if I die before I wake/ I pray the Lord my soul to take.' Mthembu also gives 'I trust the Lord to set me free', 'God is love, do not forget wherever you are' and 'Chamane Skhosiphi [not clear] Ngicela eyenkosi yikhanye kokwami nawe nayo maihlala njalo. Amen' ('Chamane [surname] Skhosiphi [personal name] I ask God that He should shine on me and you, and may it be so always. Amen'.) [Fig. 5] This last is possibly an echo from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer in Zulu ('The Lord make his face to shine upon thee ... and give thee peace, now and evermore.')

Statements of identity

Prison life reduces the inmates to numbers, rather than names. Herman Charles Bosman, in his classic work on prison life *Cold Stone Jug*, makes a number of pertinent comments about loss of identity:

'Well I dunno, Gair,' the head-screw would say, and Jimmy Gair would look more perked than ever, because the head-screw had twice called him by his name and not by his number, which was easy enough for the head-screw to read on Jimmy Gair's suit. It's always flattering for a convict to find himself addressed by his name, by a warder, instead of by his number. [Bosman, p.106]

'Slangvel bonked his head on the wheel-barrow when he fell over his feet,' another convict volunteered.

'You musn't call a convict by his name,' the warder announced pontifically. 'Don't you know your regulations? You must call him by his number.'

[Bosman, p.124]

Nevertheless, there was one honour that, in my heart's secret recesses, I treasured as a possibility...and that was that one day a warder, in addressing me ... would call me by my name and not my numberTo have a warder address you by your name instead of your number, was an honour that a convict never forgot: even if it happened to him only once, during a long period of imprisonment ...

[Bosman, p.157]

Only when Bosman is released from prison, does this wonderful thing happen to him:

And I was free. The guard at the gate shook hands with me. And he called me by my name instead of by my number.

[Bosman, p.219]

There can be little doubt that the same feelings prevailed in the Pietermaritzburg Prison.

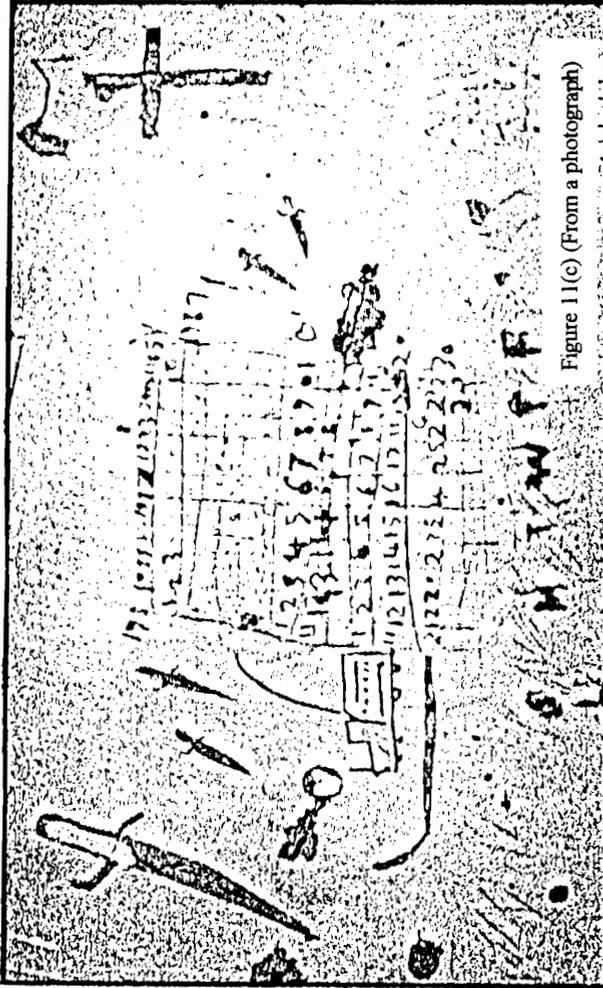


Figure 11(c) (From a photograph)

To retain a sense of personal identity, the prisoner records either his name [Fig. 2], or name with additions, such as 'Bhi Mchunu was here' or 'Bhi Mchunu was here for 30 days, convicted of murder'. Graphic equivalents include portraits, and in one unusual version, a detailed depiction of a very specific house, repeated twice.

Mthembu's examples include: 'Velaphi Khanyile [ANC] endi (and) Boy Gumede – 28 (anti-women)'⁴. 'Mbhekeni Mavundla was make⁵ 30 days, 1989/10/01', 'Mbo Mdluli was here in 1988, on 28/10 with the case of hunger strike', and 'Biggs Ronald Biggs was here for rape.'

The last-mentioned meant nothing to my students. To me this name – of Britain's most famous 'Great Train Robber' of the 1960s who escaped to spend the remainder of his life in self-imposed exile in Brazil – is an enigma. I can only assume that this inscription dates from the time of the greatest fame of Ronald Biggs, and the inmate of the Pietermaritzburg cell is getting some gratuitous feelings of fame and renown by identifying himself with 'Biggs Ronald Biggs'. On the other hand, the combination of names would not be uncommon, and it may well have been a real identity.

Dladla adds the simple 'Snothi Mbelu' recorded on one wall of a cell, with the following enlargement on the opposite wall: 'Sinothi Mbelu was here in 1983', and 'Skhevi was here for politics from November to December in 1987'. Dladla's comment on this category of graffiti is worth noting: 'The condemned prisoners knew very well that they were going to be executed and they wanted to be remembered not by their numbers but by their proper names ... Writing on the wall is the form of recognising oneself as self.' [Dladla, p.6]

Political statements

I am not sure whether the Pietermaritzburg prison was specifically for, or specifically not for, political prisoners. However, it is inevitable that some prisoners would hold political opinions and express them on the walls of their cells.

References to 'ANC', 'UDF', 'Theleweni' [Inkatha], and political figures such as 'Nelsin [sic] Mandela' can be found on most of the walls. One of the most fascinating is 'USAFENDIS WABULALA UFELEFUTHI ... [illegible] ... UFOSITHA' ('Tsafendas killed Verwoerd ... (illegible) ... Vorster.') [Fig. 6] There seem to be no graphic versions of these statements.

Mthembu includes: 'Viva Azapo', 'Archie uyimpimpi uyinja' ('Archie is an informer and a spy.') 'Phansi notheleweni' ('Down with Inkatha'⁶) 'Let black people be free again', 'Nkosi ngisize - Mandela' ('Lord help me – Mandela') 'Skhevi was here for politics', 'We are suffering in our land' and 'Give people what they want'.

In one cell there was an ingenious acrostic inscription [Fig. 7] based on the words LAGER, CASTLE, LION⁷, which gives the messages: 'Let Africans Get Equal Rights', 'Can Africans Still Tolerate Lousy Europeans' and 'Let Indians Own Nothing'.

Obscenities

Abel and Buckley state [p.73] that

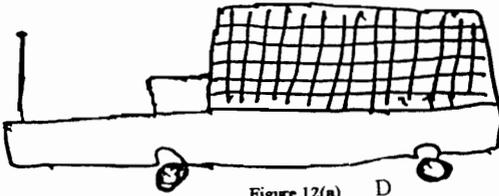


Figure 12(a) D

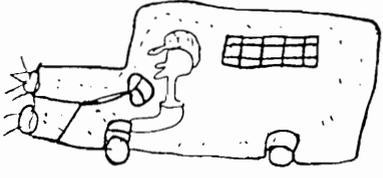


Figure 12(b) M

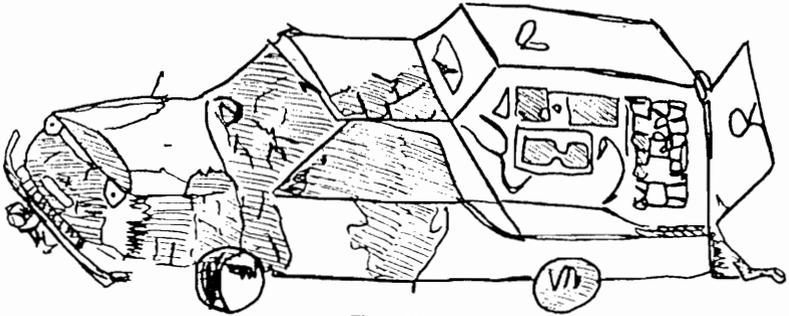


Figure 12(c) K



Figure 12(d) D



Figure 12(e) M

Graffiti are saturated with taboo words, and one might expect that those who use them probably derive a great emotional release from merely writing them. But in addition to this they allow the graffitist to deface a wall and hence add to his aggressive discharge. The combination of antisocial thought, antisocial language to express it, and antisocial disfigurement of someone else's property enables the graffitist to discharge in one 'emotional orgasm', any of the deep-seated emotions he may be harbouring and thus help him to regain his composure.

These ideas make a great deal of sense. They do not explain, however, why there are so few taboo words and obscenities generally on the walls of the condemned cells. We recorded no more than two or three mildly obscene statements, as against scores or more political comments, statements of identity, and so on.

At least two reasons occur to me why there are not as many obscenities as Abel and Buckley imply in their work to be the norm in occurrences of graffiti. Firstly, their work is restricted to examples found in public toilets (what they call 'private graffiti', having rejected Dundes' delightful term 'latrinalia'), and as they point out [p.17], 'the two themes common to private graffiti [are] sex and excretion'. While prison cells are certainly 'private' (apart from the warder's peephole), they are not privies. I understand (though I cannot confirm this) that the condemned block had separate toilets, and one would need to investigate the proportion of obscenities on those walls to see if there was any significant increase. Secondly, the linking of obscenity to 'antisocial thought' and 'aggressive discharge' seems somehow out of place in a prison where *everything* is related to antisocial thoughts, acts of aggression, antisocial language, and so on. The thought of a condemned convict needing to unburden himself of aggression in the quiet of his cell seems rather strange.

These are possible reasons why so few obscene graffiti were found, but there is another reason why so few have been given as examples in this article. That is the reluctance of my two research students actually to record obscenities, to discuss them with me later, and then to enter them in their research reports. The latter particularly is relevant: neither student wanted later readers to find a piece of research containing obscene statements which had *their* names on the cover. Some obscene graffiti which I vaguely remembered from my first two visits to the prison had been plastered over by the time of my last visit, without being recorded by the students.

A few examples of obscenities were, however, included. Mthembu lists the following under his heading of obscenities: 'Awe! Thandi ngafa!' ('Oh! Thandi I am dying') — expressing the wish to have his lover, Thandi, for sexual intercourse — followed by the drawn sexual organs. 'Hayi! yise kaVukani kubi' ('No! Vukani's father, it is bad') — followed by [a drawing of] people in sexual intercourse)⁸.

[Mthembu, p.8]

If these seem rather mild obscenities, compare them to his first example: 'No sex, kiss only', 'Tshela uNontobeko Mthethwa aphone etilongweni' ('Tell Nontobeko Mthethwa to phone the prison'). This statement is accompanied by a

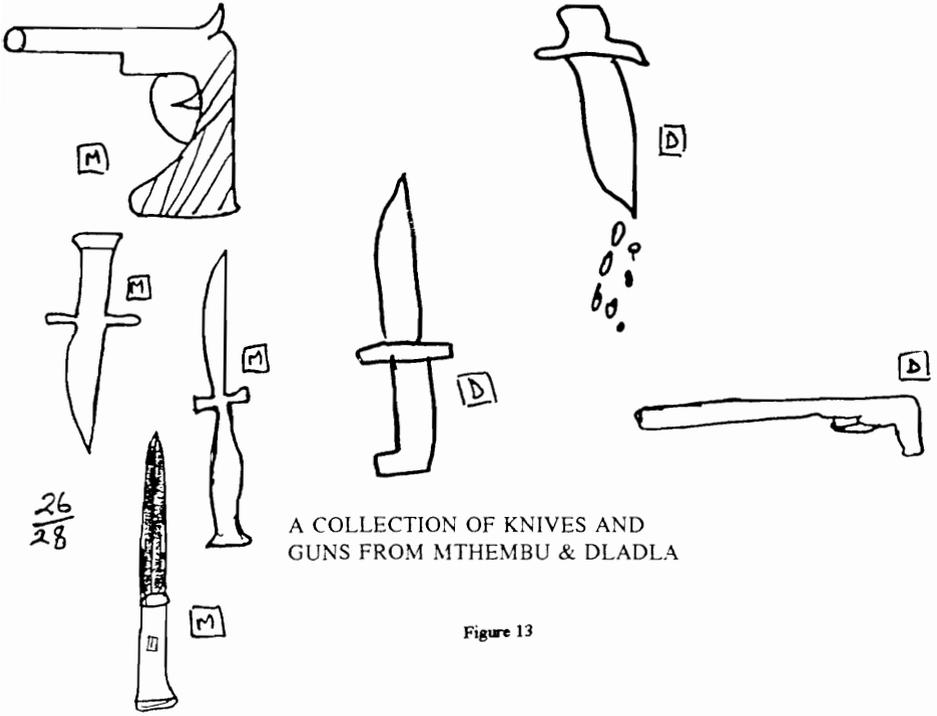


Figure 13

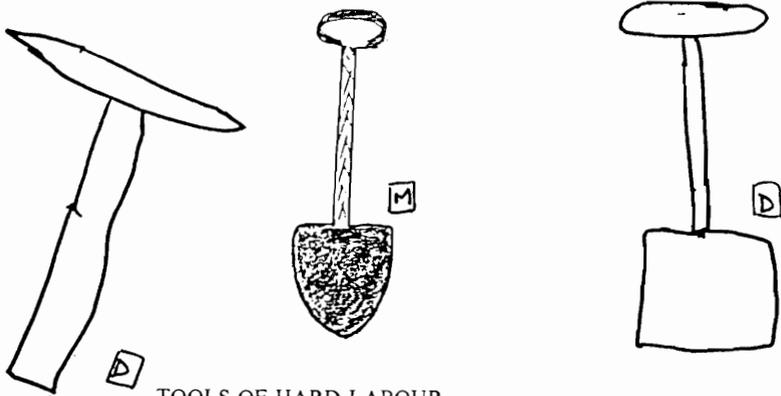


Figure 14

drawing of a couple kissing each other. For sure he is missing his loved one. [Mthembu, p.7]

Dladla includes the latter message under the heading 'Highly Individual Statements', rather than 'Obscenities'. Under his heading for obscenities, he includes 'Hayi! yise kaVukani kubi', which he translates as 'Uh! Vukani's father, it's painful'. It is not clear whether the word 'Msunu' (a vulgar word for a part of the female genitals) was written next to the 'Vukani's father' graffiti, or whether it occurs separately. Dladla adds: 'Hawu! Thanitha uyisifebe', which translates to 'Hey! Thanitha, you are a bitch'. Next to these written graffiti [is a drawing of] .. two people making love. [Dladla, p.5]

Fig. 8 suggests that a particular inmate is tired of homosexual sex.

Enigmatic statements

Some graffiti pose interesting conundrums. At first glance Fig. 9 seems a straightforward identity graffiti 'Thabe (?) was here'. But then the questions start: Was he here for assault? Assault on a member of the South African Police (SAP)? Or was he assaulted *by* a member of the SAP? Was he identified as a member of the SAP in prison, and subsequently assaulted? Surely he didn't get 26 years for assault? Surely '26' refers to his gang? In that case what is the word 'years' doing there? Do the crosses on either side of 'Thabe was here' have any significance?

In Figure 10, with some effort we can identify the word(s) after the large 'WHEN' as 'GLINTESTWWOOD' or 'CLINT EASTWOOD'. The letters which follow are quite legible ('FOR DOARS MOR THE LA SNT BLAD'), but to interpret or understand them is difficult. Did Clint Eastwood perhaps make a film called 'Four Doors More'? 'A Few Dollars More'?. If so, we are halfway, but with a long way to go!

Drawn graffiti

The more pictorial graffiti include graphics of time measurement, of prison experience, the symbolic numbers 26 and 28, self-portraits, religious symbols, obscenities and highly individual drawings. The drawings and sketches referred to in this section are accompanied by the letters M, D, and K to indicate the respective sources Mthembu, Dladla, and Koopman.

Graphics of time

Most cells exhibited drawings which helped the prisoner to measure time. Some are of the simple 'groups of strokes' type; some are proper grids simulating the appearance of a calendar, some even with letters to indicate the days of the week. It is significant of the death cell graffiti that no calendar shows more than one month. [Figures 11 (a), (b) & (c)]

Prison experience

Part of the process of being imprisoned is the arrest, and this has been depicted very dramatically with policemen and police vans. [Figures 12(a), (b) & (c)] Another part of the prison experience is the role played by guns and knives, symbolic here of prison violence, and picks and shovels, symbols of hard labour. A selection of these



Figure 15 D

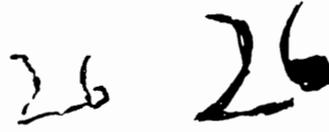
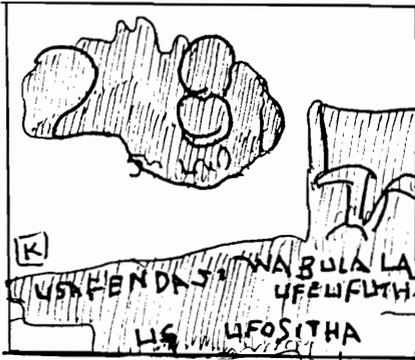


Figure 16(a) K



A "28" IDENTIFYING HIMSELF WITH THE ASSASSINATION OF VERWOERD?

Figure 16(b) K

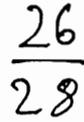


Figure 16(c) D



Figure 16(d) K

is shown in Figures 13 and 14. The role played by the prison gangs, symbolised by the numerals 26 and 28, is discussed in a separate section below.

26 and 28, and other numerals

When I first visited the prison, I did not even notice the way in which the numerals '26' and '28' were incised on every wall in every cell. Once it had been explained to me that these numerals referred to the two major gangs operating not only in this prison, but nationwide, the numerals sprang from obscurity and became startlingly obvious. Various sources explain their significance.

Zungu, in her doctoral thesis on contemporary codes and registers in the greater Durban area, has some intriguing, if somewhat conflicting, comments to make about 'cryptographic numerals' in her section on prison cant: 'A prison cell is known as a *klob*. Thus we get *klob* number 1, 2, 3, 14, 25, 26, 27, and 28. A 27 is sometimes known as a "Hollander" ... the 27s are a notorious group ... known for stabbing other people even within prison premises.'

'"unyana" ... adopted from the Xhosa word *unyana* meaning a baby ... means a boy friend who takes the place of a girl friend ... and takes all the instructions from his partner who is a 26 ...' [Zungu, pp. 119 – 120]. ' "Unginike" ... This word refers to a 26 prisoner who usually claims other people's possessions ... "nginike" means "give it to me" '.

'Prisoners are categorised according to the offences they have committed. For instance, a prisoner who is serving a short-term sentence of less than three months, is known as a "fourteen". This refers to the cell number of such a prisoner and has nothing to do with his age. For instance, a prisoner who resides in *klob* number 26 is called a "twenty-six" "i-16" refers to a policeman. It originates from the 16th letter of the alphabet. [Zungu, p.121]

Zungu's section on these numerals ends with the following intriguing dialogue:

A: Ungaphakama ngani? (How can you prove to me [that you are a 26]?)

B: Ngingaphakama ngemibilijisi yami. (I can prove it with my prison trousers.)

[Zungu, p.122]

There seem to be two different suppositions here: one that such numbers refer to the cell in which a particular prisoner is kept, and the other that they refer to the characteristic behaviour group or gang.

While Mthembu has nothing to say about numerals and gangs, Dladla explains the numbers 26 and 28 as follows: 'The numbers 26 and 28 are found on the walls of each and every cell, These are the code names of the prison gangs. According to Michelle (*i.e. Ms Wilter, involved with Project Gateway at the time*), "28" stands for the dominating knife-wielding gang and "26" stands for their homosexual [partners]. However, further explanation was given by Zephaniah (an ex-prisoner). He explained that "28" stands for the gang which is anti-women, sodomists. He agreed with Michelle that 28s were bloodthirsty. On the other hand, "26" stands for the gang which was concerned about money, and its graphic equivalent is a dollar sign [Fig. 15]. The prisoners joined these gangs for security reasons.' [Dladla, p.7]

De Villiers echoes Dladla's last statement: 'There is a brutally simple law in prison: join a gang or suffer the consequences. Gangs mean protection and favours.' He identifies three main prison gangs: 'Prison gangs are organised into three main



Figure 17(a) D

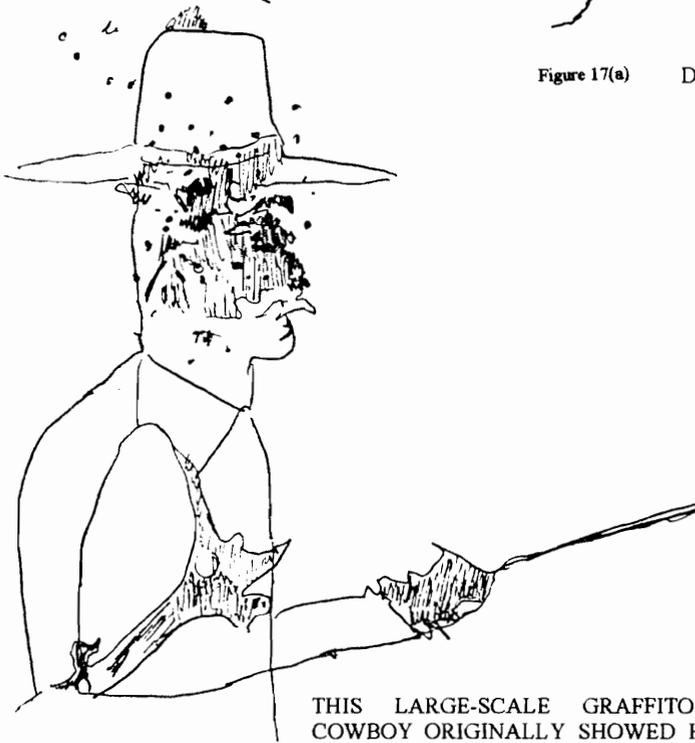


Figure 17(b) K

THIS LARGE-SCALE GRAFFITO OF A COWBOY ORIGINALLY SHOWED HIM WITH HIS HORSE (ALSO HEAD ONLY). BY THE TIME IT WAS PHOTOGRAPHED THE HORSE HAD BEEN PLASTERED OVER. COULD THIS BE THE 'CLINT EASTWOOD' OF FIG. 10, AND ARE THOSE BULLET-HOLES PEPPERING HIS HEAD?

areas of influence and operation ... Each gangster is tattooed with an identification number, or *tjappie*, linking him to the “twenty-sixes”, “twenty-sevens” or “twenty-eights” ... The 26s are into dealing in drugs or money. They're called *son-op* because, in prison lore, they work under the rising sun ... The 27s resource and organise escapes. They're known as the “airforce”. The 28s, *nongoloz*i, believe in sodomy as punishment. They also make and provide *wyfes* (wives). They're *son-af* because they work after dark.’ [De Villiers]

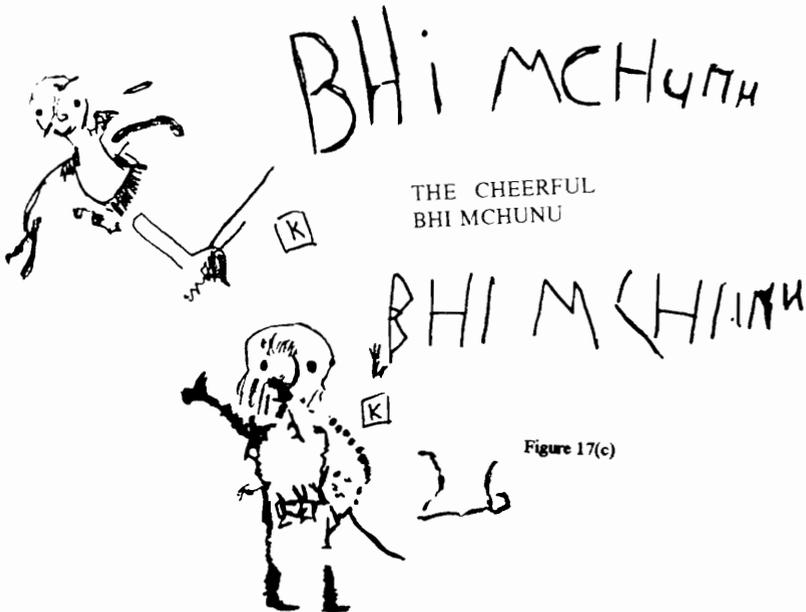
Both Zungu (working in the Durban area), and De Villiers (referring to prisons in the Cape Town area) mention the ‘27’ gang. This gang is unquestionably missing from the graffiti in the Pietermaritzburg prison. Examples of the 26 and 28 numerals from Pietermaritzburg can be seen in Figures 16(a) to (d).

Faces

There are few of these, and one can only guess whether they are self-portraits in the line of the ‘identity comments’ mentioned above, or whether they represent other people. The dreadlocks on the faces of ‘music-lover’s’ cell suggest Rastafarian musicians. Examples of various portraits are given in Figures 17 (a) to (c).

Religious symbols

The traditional Christian cross is usually found in proximity to religious messages and prayers, but may occur on its own. It is possible that the various suns and stars found on the walls are also symbolic of faith and hope, although Dladla [p.10] quotes ex-prisoner Zephaniah as explaining that a star symbolises a ‘trusty’, a prisoner who can be sent anywhere without any fear he would escape. For a variety of crosses and stars, see Fig. 18.



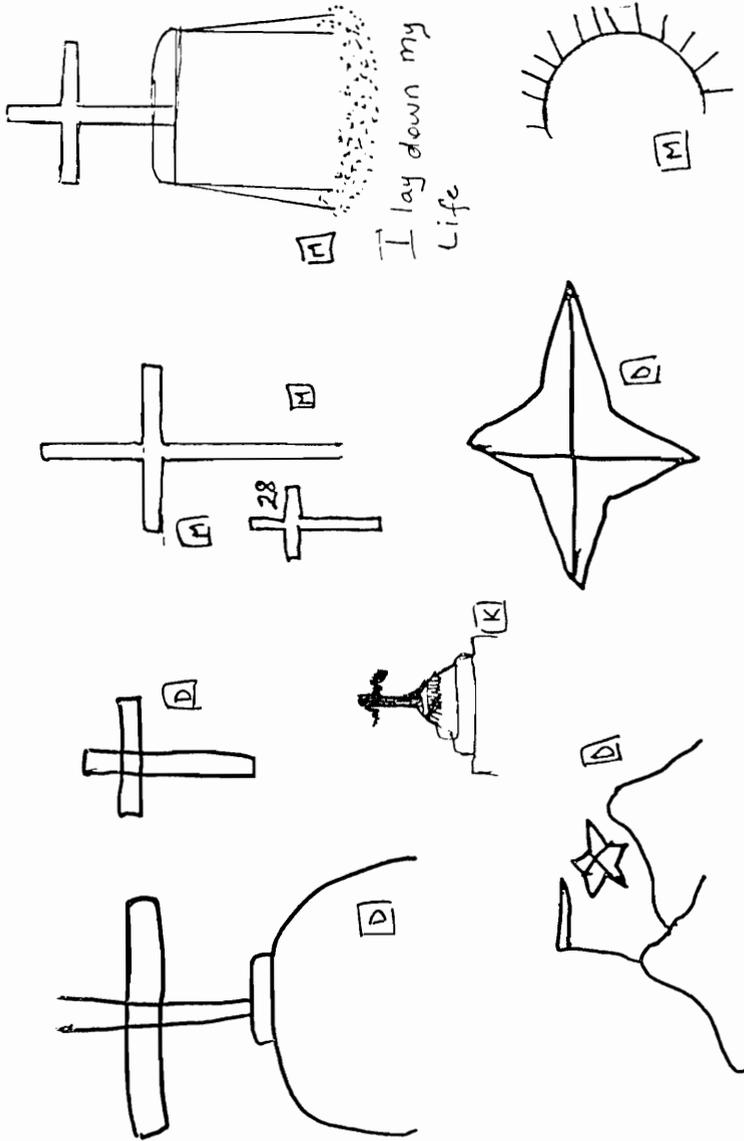


Figure 18

Obscene drawings

Drawings depicting either copulation or masturbation were originally found in close proximity to the obscene statements mentioned above. It is noteworthy that these occur far less frequently than the other types of drawing. Following the extensive replastering which took place after the Mthembu/Dladla visits and my last visit, I was only able to find one example. The message inscribed above the drawing is indecipherable. The damaged plaster around the area of genital contact suggests that censorship has taken place by a later inmate of the cell. [Fig. 19]

Highly individual

There are some drawings which defy classification. I think here of the cell which has two very distinct drawings of a particular house, each with a symbolic half-sun above it. How can we interpret these? In the same cell, and apparently drawn by the same hand, are several representations of a vaguely cross-like symbol, but bearing no relation to any known cross shape. Figures 20 (a) to (d) and 21 (e) include a number of houses, and various other drawings which are not easily explained.

Conclusion

Jacobs, writing on self-identification and naming in South African prison memoirs, concentrates on the works of Ruth First⁹ and Albie Sachs¹⁰. He finds certain similarities in their works, specifically that both these writers found that detention, solitary confinement, and degrading interrogation made them lose contact with self-identification, becoming anonymous, nameless non-persons. We find phrases like: '... her fear that ... she might become "one of those colourless insects that slither under a world of flat, grey stones" '. 'As the protagonist Ruth First becomes emptied of self, so her name is voided of meaning. She becomes as detached from it as from her selfhood'

[Jacobs, p.10]



Figure 19

K

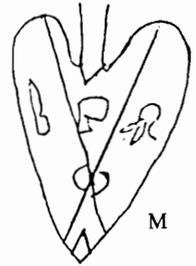
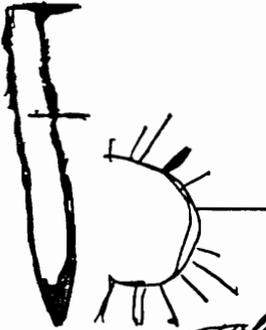
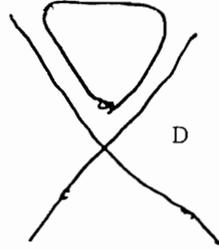
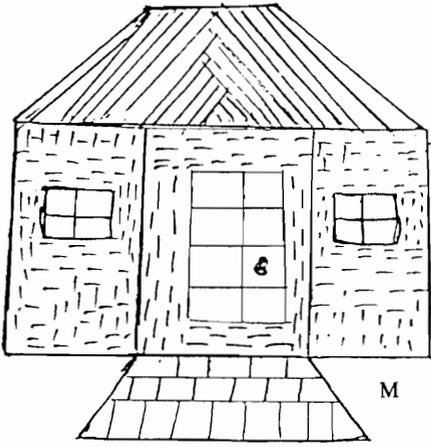


Figure 20

'[Albie Sachs's] record of 168 days of solitary confinement ... charts a similar process of personality disintegration, of insidious adaptation to the prison environment ...[he] becomes depersonalised and anonymous ...The disintegrative processes in his mind result finally in a frightening sense of detachment from his body ...' [Jacobs, p.12]

It is possible that these perceptions eventually led to people like Ruth First and Albie Sachs writing autobiographies after they were released, instead of writing on the walls while they were still detained. I say so because it is my strong feeling, having looked at, recorded and analysed the graffiti on the walls of the old Pietermaritzburg prison, that nowhere have I felt that these were the thoughts of people detached from themselves, of 'colourless insects slithering under flat stones', of disintegrated and depersonalised souls.

The cells of the old prison are empty now, and as I write most of the cells in the old condemned block have been replastered and painted, electric lights installed, and the graffiti now only exist in memory or in records such as this. But when I first visited the prison in 1993, the prisoners may well have been absent in body, but their personalities were still very evident. There may well have been anguished prayers, vain hopes of reprieve, and comments on the harshness of prison life. But these were certainly not the comments of people 'emptied of self'. Condemned cells or not, the lively personalities of the authors of the graffiti lived as long as the graffiti themselves.

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NOTES

1. It turned out that less than twenty-five percent were in Zulu.
2. The term *latrinalia* has been proposed for this sub-genre.
3. The validity of the proverb 'The pen is mightier than the sword' seems somewhat diminished when they are one and the same thing!
4. It is not clear how much of the parenthesised material appeared in the actual inscription.
5. At this point Mthembu includes a footnote to explain that 'make' in this context means 'was sentenced to' or 'was imprisoned for'
6. 'Theleweni' is a slang term for the Inkatha National Freedom Party of the late 1970s. It would appear to refer to the habit of Shaka (and perhaps later chiefs) of throwing enemies over cliff faces (*uku-thel(a) eweni*).
7. Lion and Castle lager are two well-known brands of South African beer.
8. Mthembu inserts a footnote at this point suggesting that this was said by a man who recalled what his wife normally said during sexual intercourse.
9. Ruth First (1988) *117 Days: An account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law, 1965*. London: Bloomsbury, 1988.
10. Albie Sachs: (1990) *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs 1966*. London: Paladin, Grafton, 1990.