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“Students find corporate reforms absurd”: Bryn Mawr Student’s Mobilization for Divestment from Apartheid South Africa

Madeline R. Kessler
Bryn Mawr College

In 1986, Bryn Mawr College’s endowment held \$8 million or 8.33% of its \$96 million endowment in investments tied to Apartheid in South Africa. In line with other major US institutions who believed they must act moral in the face of violent and exploitative system of racial discrimination, the Board of Trustees, the governing body that oversees college operations and finances, proposed a plan in 1985 to divest from subsidiaries of their stock in South Africa if Apartheid was still in place 24 months later in 1987. This came at the tail end of the international movement to oppose and end Apartheid through economic pressures. Bryn Mawr students would reject this plan, occupying buildings and mobilizing campus to disrupt Board meetings. Students said they would not rest until full divestment. Their movement held a shared commitment to ending Apartheid in South Africa and to ending racism in the United States.

This paper narrates how the social and economic movements against Apartheid panned out at Bryn Mawr College in the 1980s. Based on my original primary source research at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges’ special collections, I uncover the tactics and frameworks of the student movement to divest as well as the college’s response. Inevitably, the administration took partial measures to accommodate some of the demands of the student movement for divestment. The nexus between the student movement for divestment and the college administration took new heights in 1986. In this year, the students rejected the college’s newly presented plan for divestment, as they understood it as a mere palliative measure in the face of the violence and racism of Apartheid. To understand the student zeitgeist at the time, I illuminate the historical context of the movement against Apartheid by situating it in relation to the preceding anti-War and Civil Rights movements. The later era of activism precipitated into the New Left movement, which was a radical student movement grounded in ideas of political and economic democracy. I provide readers with a primer on the foundations of ethical investment in South Africa. The college’s plan embodied the corporate responsibility ethos of the 80s, which sought to maintain capitalism and pacify very popular alternatives through modest reforms. These principles undergirded Bryn Mawr College’s eventual divestment strategy, which sought to maintain profit and to make a statement about their opposition to the political system of Apartheid. To make this argument, I draw on archival discussions of corporate responsibility politics and the theory of change they espouse which forwarded reform through pressuring the companies they held stock in. I engage in an analysis of discourses emerging from a school-sponsored trip to South Africa in the winter of 1986, which was dubbed a “Peace Mission Fact Finding Trip.” This analysis is essential to understanding student and faculty perspectives, as there was not a consensus on the subject. In the end, Bryn Mawr adopted a divestment plan that was in the name of corporate responsibility. They wrote letters to the corporations they held stock in who had subsidiaries in South Africa, and asked what they were going to do to end Apartheid. The school sold \$651,558 in 1986 of stock from the 5 companies, a mere 0.67% of the total endowment.

Introduction

In 1986, Bryn Mawr College's endowment held \$8 million or 8.33% of its \$96 million endowment in investments tied to Apartheid in South Africa. In line with other major US institutions who believed they must act moral in the face of violent and exploitative system of racial discrimination, the Board of Trustees, the governing body that oversees college operations and finances, proposed a plan in 1985 to divest from subsidiaries of their stock in South Africa if Apartheid was still in place 24 months later in 1987. This came at the tail end of the international movement to oppose and end Apartheid through economic pressures. Bryn Mawr students would reject this plan, occupying buildings and mobilizing campus to disrupt Board meetings. Students said they would not rest until full divestment. Their movement held a shared commitment to ending Apartheid in South Africa and to ending racism in the United States.



“Apartheid KILLS” poster from February 1986 Protests at Bryn Mawr’s Administrative Building.¹

¹ BMC SpecCol. 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Divestment S. Africa.

This paper narrates how the social and economic movements against Apartheid panned out at Bryn Mawr College in the 1980s. Based on my original primary source research at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges' special collections, I uncover the tactics and frameworks of the student movement to divest as well as the college's response. Inevitably, the administration took partial measures to accommodate some of the demands of the student movement for divestment. The nexus between the student movement for divestment and the college administration took new heights in 1986. In this year, the students rejected the college's newly presented plan for divestment, as they understood it as a mere palliative measure in the face of the violence and racism of Apartheid. To understand the student zeitgeist at the time, I illuminate the historical context of the movement against Apartheid by situating it in relation to the preceding anti-War and Civil Rights movements. The later era of activism precipitated into the New Left movement, which was a radical student movement grounded in ideas of political and economic democracy. I provide readers with a primer on the foundations of ethical investment in South Africa. The college's plan embodied the corporate responsibility ethos of the 80s, which sought to maintain capitalism and pacify very popular alternatives through modest reforms. These principles undergirded Bryn Mawr College's eventual divestment strategy, which sought to maintain profit and to make a statement about their opposition to the political system of Apartheid. To make this argument, I draw on archival discussions of corporate responsibility politics and the theory of change they espouse which forwarded reform through pressuring the companies they held stock in. I engage in an analysis of discourses emerging from a school-sponsored trip to South Africa in the winter of 1986, which was dubbed a "Peace Mission Fact Finding Trip." This analysis is essential to understanding student and faculty perspectives, as there was not a consensus on the subject. In the end, Bryn Mawr adopted a divestment plan that was in the name of corporate

responsibility. They wrote letters to the corporations they held stock in who had subsidiaries in South Africa, and asked what they were going to do to end Apartheid. The school sold \$651,558 in 1986 of stock from the 5 companies, a mere 0.67% of the total endowment.

What is Apartheid?

Apartheid, meaning separateness in Afrikaans, was the state policy of maintaining separate and unequal conditions through racial division in South Africa. This was a chief policy of the white supremacist Afrikaner National Party (NP), which ascended to power in 1948. The NP enacted several laws to institutionalize Apartheid, the first major law of which being the Popular Registration Act of 1950 that required all residents of the country to be registered by one of four races: 'white', 'Asian', 'coloured', and 'native'. The NP also banned interracial marriages the same year. Indigenous Africans, under influx control laws, were only permitted in cities if they had employment. Their status was recorded in a dreaded government-issued document, called a passbook, which required a signature from a white employer and the government to validate an African's status. This restricted Black people's freedom of movement and precipitated passbook burning protests and demonstrations. Women led many of the demonstrations, refusing to have their movement restricted. The Apartheid government created multiple Group Areas Acts which confined Native Africans to 'Bantustans' or 'Black homelands' in order for more land to be available for the white minority.

The African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912. Their famous Freedom Charter was written in 1950 following the NP takeover, sending out 50,000 people to collect the people's demands across the country and in remote areas. On scraps of paper, responses were collected, such as: "Land to be given to all landless people," "Living wages and shorter hours of

work,” “Free and compulsory education, irrespective of colour, race or nationality,” and “The right to reside and move about freely.” The Freedom Charter was announced in English, Sesotho and Xhosa.² The ANC’s organizing included non-violent tactics like strikes, civil disobedience, and boycotts. In 1960, a massive nonviolent protest against pass laws in Sharpeville became a massacre when police opened fire on Black demonstrators outside a police station, killing 69 people.³ After Sharpeville, the UN declared apartheid a violation of its charter. In retaliation, the NP banned the ANC from 1960 until the 1990, when the parties began a negotiation process to end Apartheid. The ANC would have to go underground and in exile abroad. Many of its leaders and lawyers were incarcerated as political prisoners. The ANC, and other emergent Black nationalist parties, would increasingly take up an armed struggle that escalated in the 1980s.

Student Activism History

The Vietnam protest generation across US college campuses forwarded a culture of student solidarity with transnational liberation struggles. These students criticized US intervention and lack of economic democracy amidst the Cold War, forming the New Left movement. The New Left also criticized the USSR for its political totalitarianism. This framework was embraced by groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which spearheaded early anti-Apartheid campaigns. SDS was a major New Left organization that called for a popular democratic government and a just democratic economy.⁴ My discussion of the New Left will look at the transnational and intersectional currents in the student movement from the 1960s-70s. In 1964 *The Bi-College News* sympathetically covered an event at Georgetown

² Klein, Naomi. 2008. *The Shock Doctrine*. Harlow, England: Penguin Books. Chap 10, “Democracy Born in Chains”.

³ Canadian Museum of Human Rights. “The Sharpeville Massacre,” March 19, 2019.

⁴ Students for a Democratic Society. *The Port Huron Statement* (1962).

University raising awareness about Apartheid. The author called attention to the fact that atrocities like Sharpeville were happening with support from the US and Europe, calling on Americans to continue to agitate for an end to Apartheid.⁵



"Sixty-two Students Picketers Stand So That All May Sit." 1960.⁶

As early as 1965, Swarthmore students wrote an open letter to the college to end investment in Chase Manhattan Bank, as part of a SDS call to put pressure on the Bank for its investments and policy of lending in Apartheid South Africa. This movement was simultaneous with the movement for Civil Rights in the US, taking down a similarly racist segregation system. At Bryn Mawr, student activists participated in the Civil Rights movement, holding fundraisers and participating in the Freedom Rides, a voter registration effort organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The student movement was global, and many of such were met with brutal crackdown. May 1968 is notorious for hundreds of student demonstrations across the world demanding worker and civil rights, an end to militarism, and for many different freedoms; From Paris, France to Orangeburg, South Carolina to Mexico City. Police responded to protesters with brutality, and in some cases massacres.

⁵ BMC SpecCol. The College News, 1964-04-17, Vol. 50, No. 19.

⁶ "Social Action – Who Built Bryn Mawr?," Digital Exhibit.

The South African student movement precipitated in June of 1976, when secondary school students resisted the introduction of the Afrikaans language into ‘Bantu schools’. This event is called the Soweto Uprisings. Police opened fire and tear gassed the 20,000 students who were peacefully protesting, murdering over 176 people.⁷ In the wake of Soweto, the student movement increased its efforts to protest Western governments’ policies of arming Apartheid, as well as corporations who were profiting from the Apartheid regime. This emerging movement called for Divestment from South Africa. This strategy sought to challenge US complacency and cut ties with corporations profiting off of Apartheid. Divestment within the anti-Apartheid movement would come to mean “individuals and institutions selling their stock in companies that have subsidiaries in South Africa,” defined here by Haverford student Howard Snipes.⁸ Student activists would pressure their college’s executive boardrooms to divest their endowment holdings in South Africa. Hampshire College was the first US school to divest, in 1977. By 1988, 155 schools divested.⁹



Poster graphic of an iconic photo from Soweto depicting a murdered 12-year-old boy named Hector Pieterse being carried by a student. Pieterse’s sister holds her palm up in defiance, on the left.¹⁰

⁷ Zinn Education Project. “June 16, 1976: Soweto Uprising - Zinn Education Project,” June 17, 2023.

⁸ HC SpecCol. Pres Stevens Papers 1985-1986. B-Co Box 16 Folder: Bryn Mawr- South Africa, 1986 Snipes, Howard. “Statement On Divestment”.

⁹ “Divestment from South Africa,” Amherst Online Exhibit.

¹⁰ Zinn Education Project. “June 16, 1976: Soweto Uprising – Zinn Education Project,” June 17, 2023.

Corporate Responsibility

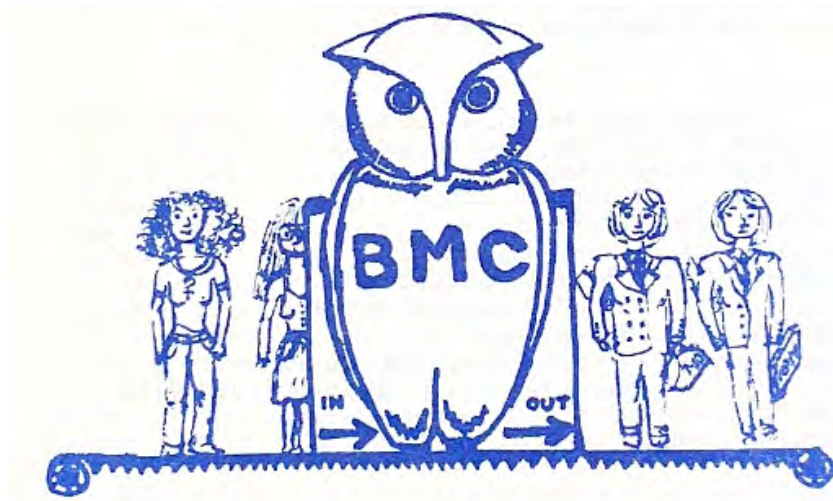
In 1977, Leon Sullivan of the Philadelphia Zion Baptist Church established a set of guidelines to improve workplace conditions and structures to uplift Black workers in South Africa. Called the Sullivan Principles after the minister, the principles were a voluntary business code, which companies could pay into to receive a compliance rating to signal their workplace equity to consumers and investors abroad. They had to fill out a questionnaire and allow inspectors into their factories for review. The Principles were celebrated by the business world as a means of signaling their commitment to end the increasingly unpopular Apartheid regime without sacrificing their profits. Zeb Larson argues, “Business leaders saw social responsibility as a way to protect free-market capitalism from communism by addressing certain communist criticisms, such as poverty.”¹¹ Through educating and uplifting destitute Black workers, the Principles would effectively maintain capitalism as the ANC was calling for redistribution and democratization. In *Decoding Corporate Camouflage* (1980), Elizabeth Schmidt investigated the effectiveness of the Sullivan Principles, finding that they advanced “gradualism and utility— as a tool of corporate propaganda.” The Principles' strategy neglected to stop US investment in key sectors of Apartheid like computers and energy. Further, in addressing workplace segregation, corporations maintained de facto segregation by “changing black-only cafeterias to spaces for “hourly workers”.”¹²

In the same vein as the principles, in 1978, Bryn Mawr co-sponsored a resolution by local churches to demand “Eastman Kodak halt sales of aerial surveillance film to the South African Military.” This resolution was a petition to the corporation itself. The College felt as a shareholder they had the power to demand policy changes. They saw petition as more effective

¹¹ Larson, Zeb. “The Sullivan Principles: South Africa, Apartheid, and Globalization.” *Diplomatic History* 44:3 (2020): 479-503.

¹² Larson, 495.

than divestment. Bryn Mawr's presidential assistant Joseph Johnston stated Divestment "is an ineffective response.. It's dramatic, and it's a gesture that cleanses an institution of its previous involvement, but you lose your leverage to influence the behavior of corporations."¹³ Casting off divestment as a strategy and then holding out for gradual change through established and profitable channels was a strategy that sought to present Bryn Mawr's complacency on positive pro-democracy terms, despite Apartheid's fundamentally undemocratic groundings. In 1987, Wellesley's president invited Bryn Mawr's president to hear Sullivan speak at the college in Middletown, Connecticut.¹⁴ Sullivan himself was initially in favor of full economic disengagement with South Africa, and after the Sullivan Principles weren't entirely effective walked back to his initial values of disengagement. Bryn Mawr, however, was staunchly committed to the principles' doctrine of corporate responsibility. They saw their stockholder status as a form of corporate constituency, a vote in the company's proceedings.



Owlification! Bryn Mawr can turn Feminist scaries who burned their bras into girl bosses pant-suited up, ready to run a board room.¹⁵

¹³ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Divestment S. Africa. *The Bulletin* Sunday, December 3, 1978. "Colleges rapped for S. African ties" Sam W. Pressley.

¹⁴ McPherson Papers. Correspondence, Subjects 9/10, Se-Sw. Box 59 of 82. Folder: South African 1984-88 Campbell, Colin. Letter from Wellesley college president to Bryn Mawr President Pat McPherson. March 12, 1987.

¹⁵ HC SpecCol. Social Action Caucus records (HCQ.003.034)

Bryn Mawr was deeply embedded in the neoliberal ethos of the late 70s and 80s, which sought efficient strategies and leadership on the new expanding frontiers of the free market. The Bi-Co Social Action Caucus, an anti-racist, feminist, internationalist, and intersectional student group, criticized Bryn Mawr's production of docile neoliberal subjects. They saw Bryn Mawr as a deradicalizing and professionalizing space, as cartoonishly depicted in the organization's 1976 pamphlet, "Alive and Kicking" (Above). Bryn Mawr's 'mission' of education was not grounded in human solidarity, but rather was to create better leaders to reinforce global capitalism under kinder smiles. Bryn Mawr, as well as many other colleges, would engage in such "shareholder activism." "During the 1980s, over 350 U.S. Companies had direct investment in South Africa. 176 of these firms received at least one shareholder resolution concerning its involvement in South Africa."¹⁶ To the tune of their passive stance on Eastman Kodak in 1978, Bryn Mawr would adopt an equally slow moving reform strategy in 1985. That year, it was estimated Bryn Mawr had \$8 million of investments in South Africa, within 21 corporations. The Board of Trustees proposed a watered down divestment plan, spanning over 24 months into 1987 based off of a company's compliance with the Sullivan Principles. With this decision, the trustees established a set of social responsibility targets, the chief concern of course being "a corporation's fair employment practices for women and minorities."¹⁷ The Owlification of Divestment would not be accepted by students.

¹⁶ Broyles, Philip A. "The Impact Of Shareholder Activism On Corporate Involvement In South Africa During The Reagan Era." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 28, no. 1 (1998): 1–19.

¹⁷ HCV: President's Papers Harry C Payne 1987-1988 So-U Box 6. Folder: South Africa: Wesleyan University South Africa Research Consortium, 1985-1988.

The Anti-Apartheid Student Movement at Bryn Mawr

Bryn Mawr had \$8 million invested in South Africa in the fall of 1985. Students did not accept the college's proposed gradual and strategic partial divestment. South African senior Binafer Nowrojee told *The Mainline Times*, "The students want completely severed ties with the 21 corporations dealing with the oppressive government in place in South Africa."¹⁸ A Kenyan first year told *The Inquirer* "I hope to shake things up on campus... [it] is so complacent, and there is so much ignorance of international issues." Students formed the Coalition for Divestment which held a massive day of action Friday, February 28th, 1986. 200 students took over the administrative office hallway on the second floor of Taylor Hall, beginning at 6am. Two administrators, attempting to get into their offices, were turned away.¹⁹ The takeover had 3 clear demands: Total and immediate divestment; The institution of a diversity requirement; The observation of the end of Black History Month.

Total divestment went against Bryn Mawr's entire modus operandi of slow and gradual decisions to protect profit. "Students find corporate reforms absurd," reads one headline.²⁰ Becky Young wrote how the trustees position that the US government was the best vehicle to achieve change in South Africa was hypocritical. If Bryn Mawr wouldn't divest how could they call for the US to put sanctions on South Africa? The coalition felt the college's trust in corporations to reform Apartheid was misguided. Paraphrasing Archbishop Desmond Tutu, they wrote how "we do not wish to make the chains of Apartheid more comfortable; we wish to see them broken." The coalition argued all money in South Africa bolstered Apartheid, as the state had the ability to

¹⁸ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Divestment S. Africa *Mainline Times* Thursday, March 6, 1986. 35.

¹⁹ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Divestment S. Africa. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Saturday, March 1, 1986. 3-B.

²⁰ From a Bi-Co News Headline. Stevens Papers 1985-1986 B-Co. Box 16. Folder: Bryn Mawr-South Africa, 1986.

appropriate any corporation. South Africa under the NP actually had the most nationalized businesses outside the Communist Bloc, but only whites benefited from this.²¹



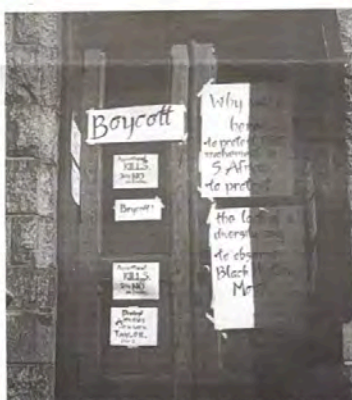
8. People for the Coalition for Divestment explain to Channel 29 that they took administrative floor of Taylor on Friday to protest Bryn Mawr's stand on divestment.



9. Trustees walk past a candlelight vigil for divestment on their way into the Campus Center on Friday.



10. Seemi Ghazi, and Marian Urquille speak to the press to explain divestment's sit-in in Taylor Hall on Friday.



11. The front door of Taylor Hall on Friday when over 100 students look over the second floor in protest of the College's holdings in South Africa.



12. Bryn Mawr College President Mary Patterson McPerson outlines the trustees at a 1 p.m. news conference last Friday.

Archival newspaper clippings of the 1986 demonstration.²²

The Coalition made a deliberate decision to forward women of color as leaders, as these issues impacted them the most. Linking international solidarity with a system of segregation to racism at Bryn Mawr and in the US was central to the anti-Apartheid struggle on campus. Affinity groups such as Sisterhood, the Asian Students Association, International Students Association, and Color held a poetry reading and had a “speak out” about racism on campus. These organizers noted how they faced pushback from apathetic people telling them to “Fight

²¹ Sparks, Allister, *The Mind of South Africa* “The Great Trek Inward”, 2016. 134.

²² 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Divestment S. Africa. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Saturday, March 1, 1986. 3-B.

racism here first” — a suggestion that anti-Apartheid activism was unrelated to the US and insinuation that nothing could be done about it. The women of color organizers saw their expression of solidarity as fighting racism everywhere and creating community across racial boundaries in the process.

The protests were successful, despite the fact that they took place during midterm season. The students received vocal support from professors. Major news outlets covered the events. The college even cut phone service on the second floor of Taylor where protesters were mobilized. Students set up in nearby dorms and classrooms to contact students outside the building. 100 students participated in a vigil at Campus Center at 6pm that evening. The sit-in was slated to end at then, but 30 students decided to spend the night in Taylor until the Board of Trustees met the next day to discuss divestment. The campers made cardboard coffins to hold up during a protest in the morning. During the trustees meeting, 60 students laid down in the lobby of Wyndham Alumni House to block the trustees from exiting. Student protesters saw this as representing their powerless position. Some trustees crawled out of the window, while the stragglers spoke with students.



Cartoon (left) of one of the two trustees who took a window exit, as to avoid students obstructing exits with their bodies to demand divestment.²³

²³ Pres Stevens Papers 1985-1986 B-Co Box 16 Folder: Bryn Mawr- South Africa, 1986. *Bi-College News*. March 6, 1986. 8.

College Peace Mission Trip

Bryn Mawr's response to student protests was informed by a "Fact Finding Mission" sent to South Africa as a part of College President McPherson's "Peace Studies" program. The "Peace Studies" program was launched in 1981, which sent students on Fact Finding Mission trips around the world. It sent students to Canada, West Germany, and Britain; Another went to Costa Rica and Nicaragua amidst the US' ongoing involvement in arming Central American anti-communist militants; and to Northern Ireland and Philly to observe the impact of violence on youth development.²⁴ This program captures the interests of the college at the tail end of two decades of the Cold War as well as Global decolonial uprisings. The "Peace Mission" is almost the marriage of two generations of international soft power, religious missionaries, then the Peace Corps. Through sending student "missionaries" to engage in global education trips, Bryn Mawr was on the forefront of globalization's new iteration of white saviorism. However, students and professors took advantage of these trips to better understand decolonization and expressed genuine sentiments of solidarity.

In January 1986, Bryn Mawr sent 4 Bi-Co students, a Bryn Mawr alum, and a sociology professor on a Peace Studies Mission to South Africa. Their trip was initially slated for the summer of 1985, but their requests for visas were initially rejected by the South African government. The Presidents of Bryn Mawr and Haverford went to the NYC consulate to make the trip happen. In the spring of 1985, they met with Leon Sullivan, the drafter of the Sullivan Principles, as well the American Friends Service Committee, members of the African National Congress, and the director of the United States-South African leader Exchange Program.²⁵

²⁴ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder Peace studies: Mission, Forum. Memo: "Peace Studies Mission". 1984"

²⁵ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder Peace studies: Mission, Forum. "Peace Studies Goes to South Africa". Audrey Silverman.

The “Peace Missionaries” did a two week trip, visiting Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, the Bophuthatswana homeland, and a final stop in Harare, Zimbabwe. On the second day of the trip, the missionaries were detained by armed police in the Black township of Tembisa, after Bryn Mawr alumni Penny Chang ‘85 took photos of military transport trucks.²⁶



A white South African guide, Bryan Bench, shows the group the front of the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



These aluminum shacks of Kahayelitsha, outside Capetown, are built on sand dunes and house the overflow from the nearby crossroads community.

Photos printed in a Bi-College News spread about the Peace Mission.²⁷

They met with “advisors in government, resistance workers, businesspeople, teachers, the American Chamber of Commerce, and Bayers Naude, head of the South African Council of Churches”. They visited the lavish Johannesburg estate of Helen Sussman, the founder of the white liberal Progressive Federal Party, which revealed to the missionaries the racial-class stratification of the country.

Bryn Mawr senior economics student Elizabeth Edwards commented how 74% of the wealth is owned by whites who make up 18% of the population. She observed the spatial topography of Apartheid when traveling city to city, passing through radial zones, with Black

²⁶ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. . Folder: Peace studies: Mission, Forum. *Main Line Times*. Thursday, February 6, 1986. “Haverford, Bryn Mawr Students Spend Break in A. Africa.” Lisa Greene. 16.

²⁷ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder Peace studies: Mission, Forum. Newspaper clippings.

townships on the outside, then a “band of Indian then colored homes.” She called this a “buffer zone” between whites and Blacks. The majority of Black people in townships lived in what Edwards compared to “Sears metal toolsheds”. Edwards noted how Apartheid created a class of Black people who wanted to maintain the status quo and lived in the “Black Beverly Hills” of the townships.²⁸ Edwards was dismayed to see a reflection of something familiar in South Africa: “Johannasburg looked like a typical American city. I had hoped we would see something at least different from my culture.”²⁹

Senior Rachel Baker noticed a culture of resistance from the grassroots. She noted the presence of political organizations, but also politicized student and church groups.³⁰ Haverford senior Michael Paulson similarly was attune to the politics of resistance, located in education as a radicalizing force.³¹ The Soweto Parents organization described their mission to Paulson, “Education under apartheid divides people into classes and ethnic groups, produces subservience, docile people, indoctrinates and dominates, and is intended to entrench apartheid and capitalism.”³² Upon returning to campus, the students reported their findings to the campus community at a forum [pictured] and were even interviewed in local papers. Most crucially, they were to report their facts and opinions on divestment to the Board of Trustees. Three of the participants advocated immediate total divestment, one strong sanctions and conditional divestment, and the last opposed divestment.

²⁸ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Peace studies: Mission, Forum. *Main Line Times*. Thursday, February 6, 1986. “Haverford, Bryn Mawr Students Spend Break in A. Africa.” Lisa Greene. 16; *The Inquirer* undated “Seeing apartheid firsthand: Group reports on its trip to S. Africa”. Maura C. Circcarelli

²⁹ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder Peace studies: Mission, Forum. *The Inquirer* undated “Seeing apartheid firsthand: Group reports on its trip to S. Africa”. Maura C. Circcarelli.

³⁰ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. . Folder: Peace studies: Mission, Forum. *Main Line Times*. Thursday, February 6, 1986. “Haverford, Bryn Mawr Students Spend Break in A. Africa.” Lisa Greene. 16.

³¹ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. . Folder: Peace studies: Mission, Forum. *Main Line Times*. Thursday, February 6, 1986. “Haverford, Bryn Mawr Students Spend Break in A. Africa.” Lisa Greene. 16.

³² Pres Stevens Papers 1985-1986 B-Co Box 16 Folder: Bryn Mawr- South Africa, 1986 Paulson, Michael. The Bryn Mawr-Haverford College News, Friday February 7, 1986. Pg 10.

Baker and Paulson strongly supported divestment. Baker argued that corporate reforms failed to improve the lives of Black South Africans. Paulson wrote “It is our responsibility to assist in bringing down apartheid as rapidly as possible.”³³ Another Haverford member of the mission wrote in his statement about the support for divestment he saw on the ground in the resistance movement, saying, “they said it was helpful for several reasons, including keeping pressure on those companies to reform; keeping international attention focused on South Africa: and making a symbolic statement against apartheid. South Africans told us that symbolic gestures give encouragement and strength to apartheid's opponents and embarrass and anger government supporters.”³⁴



Bryn Mawr senior Rachel Baker, Haverford senior Michael Paulson and three South Africans look around a black township school in Tembisa, outside Johannesburg.

Newspaper clipping of the Peace Mission's visit to a Township School.³⁵

³³ Pres Stevens Papers 1985-1986 B-Co Box 16. Folder: Bryn Mawr-South Africa. Paulson, Micheal. “Haverford 86 Peace Studies Fact-Finding Mission to South Personal Statement on Divestment Africa Submitted to Bryn Mawr College Board of Trustees February 11, 1986.”

³⁴ Pres Stevens Papers. 1985-1986. B-Co Box 16 Folder: Bryn Mawr- South Africa, 1986 Snipes, Howard. “Statement on Divestment”.

³⁵ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder Peace studies: Mission, Forum. Newspaper clippings.

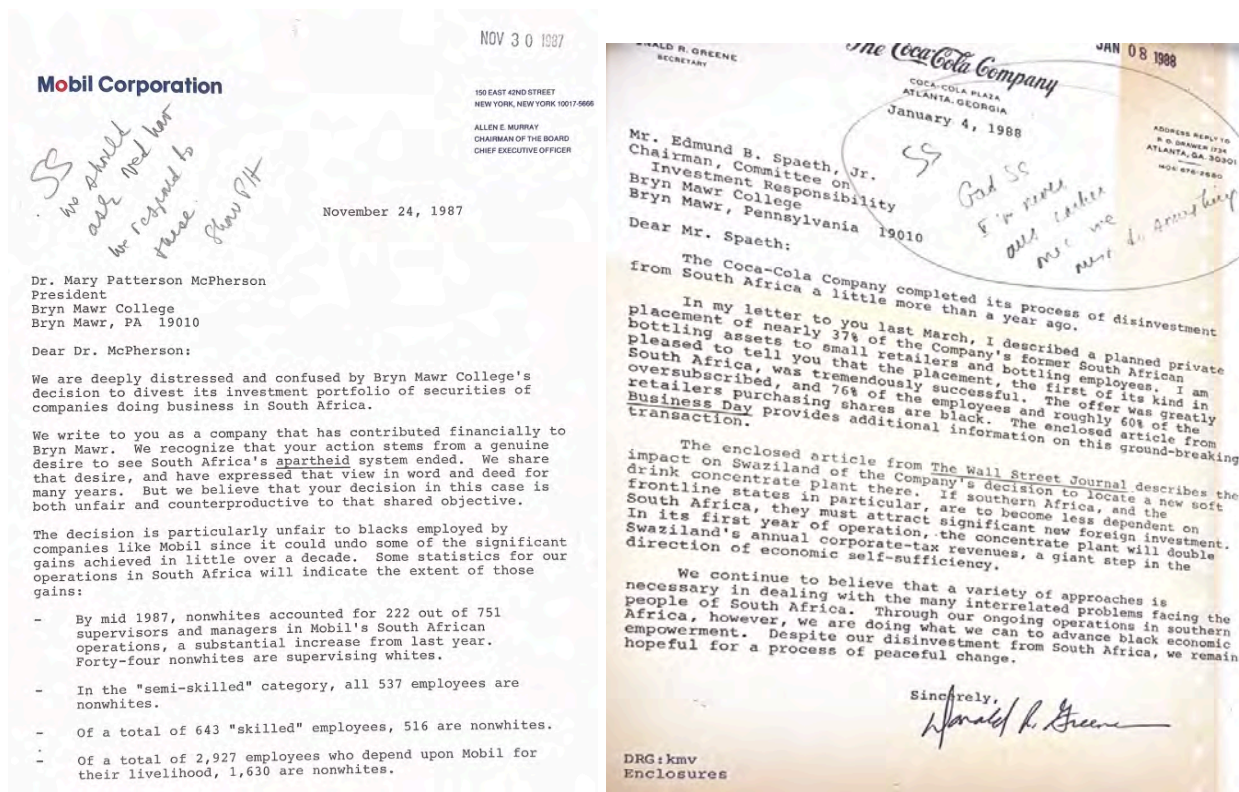
Edwards was very attuned to the modes of Apartheid, however she felt divestment “outlived its usefulness.” She was the dissenting voice of the trip, opting for the college to focus on its power to pressure corporations and the government of South Africa. She proposed a strategy aligned with the college’s goals of leadership and corporate responsibility, writing “Instead of working against corporations which have the influence necessary to bring about meaningful change in South Africa, I believe the College should take advantage of its leadership ability, brain power and alumnae network to work with such corporations to hasten reform and find and implement solutions to the nation’s deeply rooted problems.”³⁶ This emphasis on the alumnae network is fundamental to Bryn Mawr’s identity as a women’s college, creating girl bosses who could end Apartheid aka Owlification.

Bryn Mawr’s Divestment Strategy

President McPherson proposed three potential divestment strategies to the board of trustees, grounded in corporate responsibility but also informed by student protesters and the facts and opinions of the peace missionaries. McPherson proposed, 1) Full divestment as a symbol of solidarity; 2) Divest from companies not committed to confronting apartheid, full divest in December 1986 if apartheid continued; 3) Strategic divestment using Sullivan principles and by writing to corporations they held stock in with poor ratings, eventually divesting based on their responses. The Board of Trustees ended up going with the most moderate response, an adaptation of option 3, which recognized the shortcomings of the Sullivan Principles. They wanted to see corporations actively advocate the government of South Africa to

³⁶ Pres Stevens Papers 1985-1986 B-Co Box 16. Folder: Bryn Mawr- South Africa, 1986. Edwards, Elizabeth “Bryn Mawr College and Divestment Issue: An Opportunity for Leadership.”

end Apartheid.³⁷ They finally divested from 5 corporations who did not write back to their inquiry about the company's commitment to ending apartheid. They sold \$651,558 of stock in Air Products, American Brands, Ashland Oil, Crown Cork and Seal, and Goodyear Tire. Bryn Mawr kept stock in the 16 companies who wrote letters expressing their commitment to a non racial society. This is indicative of Bryn Mawr's corporate reform strategy which believed companies could be forced to effect nonviolent change.



Corporations responses to Bryn Mawr³⁸

The Board would forward political action outside the arena of its investments through “[inviting] interested members of the Bryn Mawr College community to join with it in an organized effort of this and other colleges and universities to urge Congress and the President to take leadership

³⁷ Pres Stevens Papers 1985-1986 B-Co Box 16. Folder: Bryn Mawr-South Africa. Mary Patterson McPherson “Report on Investment Responsibility and Our Recommendations”.

³⁸ McPherson Papers. Correspondence, Subjects 9/10, Se-Sw. Box 59 of 82. Folder: South African 1984-88

with regard to South African affairs much as they have recently managed in Haiti and the Philippines.”³⁹ They also committed to “giving financial aid to South African students, forming a committee which will deal with constructive proposals from students and meeting with other colleges to draw up proposals about timeliness for divestment.”⁴⁰

Bryn Mawr’s divestment strategy held out hope that corporations, who wrote they were committed to ending Apartheid, would make do on their promises. Following the 1986 day of actions, Binafer Nowrojee firmly told the *New York Times*, “we will not rest until we have full divestment.”⁴¹ In the fall semester following the spring protests, Bryn Mawr Coalition for Divestment leader Diba Siddiqi wrote, “Bryn Mawr’s imminent divestment is by no means a signal for sitting back complacently. Apartheid still kills. South Africans still have urgent stories to tell.”⁴² Siddiqi called on her peers to not to accept a partial divestment and fall victim to being sedated by the college’s prescription of corporate responsibility. This disregarded student’s concerns about the ethics of profiting from a country with fundamental human rights abuses. The college’s reformist divestment strategy was in line with its neoliberal ethos. President Mary Patterson McPherson was interviewed in a June 1986 *Newsweek* article titled “Divisions over Divestment: Balancing social conscience with fiscal prudence.” She spoke about the difficulties divesting at a small college like Bryn Mawr as opposed to a larger institution, stating that “each institution would suffer proportionally.” The article details the financial costs of divestment, including fees on liquidating stocks and the “opportunity costs” of limiting investment opportunities.⁴³ This position dismissed student activists’ contestation of the premise that any

³⁹ McPherson Papers. Correspondence, Subjects 9/10, Se-Sw. Box 59 of 82. Folder: South African 1984-88

⁴⁰ Bryn Mawr College Publications, Special Collections, Digitized Books. *The College News*. 1986-10-8 Vol. 8 No. 2 Students of Bryn Mawr College.

⁴¹ Swarthmore To Sell Stocks Linked To South Africa. *New York Times*. March 2, 1986, Sect 1, Page 23.

⁴² Bryn Mawr College News 1986 Bryn Mawr College Publications, Special Collections, Digitized Books. *The College News* 1986-10-8 Vol. 8 No. 2. Students of Bryn Mawr College.

⁴³ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: Divestment S. Africa.

financial engagement in South Africa was complacent in maintaining Apartheid. In the end, a third strategy that neither endorsed or declined divestment was embraced by the college. This strategy was similar to the suggestion by sociology professor who led the Peace Mission trip to South Africa, Robert Washington. He argued for corporations to engage in a pressure campaign by threatening to leave the country if the government of South Africa did not end the three pillars of Apartheid. It is important to note that Washington was the college's first Black professor, hired in 1971 by the college's fifth president.⁴⁴



Bryn Mawr Sociology professor
Robert Washington tours an Indian
community of Durban.

Newspaper clipping of Professor Washington.⁴⁵

Bryn Mawr is a part of a consortium of Quaker founded institutions in Pennsylvania. Its partner schools also engaged in successful divestment campaigns. Students at Haverford College locked administration out as a part of this coordinated movement in the consortium. Four Black members of the faculty and administration at Haverford wrote that the College must “Live up to its principles and divest”. The institution's Quaker values informed its investments for over 100 years; the college did not invest in tobacco or military holdings. Haverford also only divested

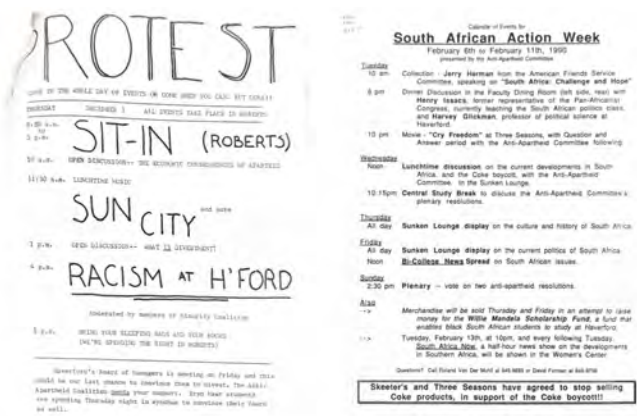
⁴⁴ Garrison, Amell. “Bryn Mawr History: The Silencing Of BIPOC Voices”. Timeline. 2021.

⁴⁵ 9I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder Peace studies: Mission, Forum. Newspaper clippings.

from 5 companies in 1986, selling \$1,214,480 of stock.⁴⁶ Swarthmore College began divestment in 1978, and by 1986 it divested \$3 million. However, dissatisfied and dedicated students pushed the administration to fully divest through a mass action of around 100 students breaching a closed board meeting.

Viewing the Links

Despite Bryn Mawr’s self image as a place that protects women and minorities, it was an explicitly racist environment. In 1988, a coalition of students published an open letter about racism and classism in *The College News*. The letter cited examples, a major instance being some racist positions on South Africa on campus. One student wrote how someone posted anti-Black signs on their door saying things such as: “What’s wrong with apartheid” and “[n-word] lover.” Another student shared in the same open letter they “heard a former president of Bryn Mawr College inform a South African woman that he knew more about that situation; after all, he’d been on a fact finding mission in South Africa.”⁴⁷



Education posters which host Apartheid and US Racism Educational Events.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ HC SpecCol. PRES STEVENS PAPERS 1985-1986 B-Co Box 16 Folder: Bryn Mawr- South Africa, 1986.
⁴⁷ BMC SpecCol, Digitized Books The College News 1988. 4-13 Vol. 9 No. 11.
⁴⁸ PRES STEVENS PAPERS 1985-1986 Pr-So Box 20 Folder: South African April-October (scan left) HCQ.003.059 STUDENT GROUPS ANTI-APARTHEID COMMITTEE COLLECTION, 1990 (scan right).

During Black History month, anti-Apartheid activism was central to student organizations. In 1988, Sia Nowrojee wrote an article titled “Apartheid Continues” in *The College News* which highlighted Bryn Mawr’s Black affinity group and Sisterhood’s continued educational events about South Africa. Sisterhood’s co-president Jackie McGriff, in a speech introducing South African speaker Victor Mokoena, made clear connections between the US and South Africa, naming racism at BMC as tantamount to apartheid.⁴⁹ Sisterhood would hold several anti-Apartheid and anti-racism educational events at their affinity house called Perry House. The House closed in 2012 “due to lack of maintenance”. This was very upsetting to residents, who believed that “the college had let the building fall into disrepair.”⁵⁰ The fall of the cherished and active affinity house is indicative of the college’s institutional racism.

Gina Dorcely, a Black student in the class of 1988, wrote an article for the DSA newsletter in 1985 titled “Racism and apartheid: Viewing the links.” She newsletter how activists must make ties between the US and South Africa, not just economically, but in social structures. She called on the student movement to confront structural and internal racism. Her peers at a DSA roundtable discussed the importance of movements forwarding Black leadership rather than tokenizing it. The anti-racist struggle could not be complete without self-reflection and confronting how even well-intentioned activists can perpetuate racism in the movement. She noted how at primarily white institutions it was essential to confront paternalism, and further, to not allow international solidarity organizing to distract activists from issues within and around them at home. Dorcely argues that comparing the racism of both the US and South Africa not only fosters solidarity, it provides insight into how those located in the US can confront racism.

⁴⁹ Nowrojee, Sia. “Apartheid Continues”. *College News*. Feb 17. (1988). Pg 7.

⁵⁰ Mulhere, Kaitlin. “Confederate Flag Causes Controversy at Bryn Mawr.” *Inside Higher Ed*. October 6, 2014.

She writes, “The anti-apartheid movement's power to transform the landscape of American student politics lies partially in the moral intensity and urgency of its aim, to eradicate the evil of racism in South Africa. This aim evokes compelling images of a more just world in which people of all races work together, images that at once jar and stimulate the national consciousness.”



Gina Dorcely, Bryn Mawr DSA

Photo of Dorcely.⁵¹

The New Left student movement, despite its global solidarity, was held back by racism and sexism, as Kathie Sheldon wrote in *The Radical Teacher* about her experience in anti-Apartheid groups at UCLA.⁵² Sheldon proposed radical coalition building as a way to be more inclusive in the movement. Linking racism to Apartheid was a crucial component of the struggle for divestment on campus. The vision of building an anti-racist society was transnational and embraced solidarity across causes. As Audre Lorde said: “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.”⁵³

Divest into the 21st century: Learning from South Africa Solidarity

⁵¹ I Issues On Campus/Student Activism. Folder: apartheid. Dorcely, Gina. *Publication of the Youth Section of the Democratic Socialists of America*. Number 16. September 1985. “Racism and apartheid: Viewing the links”.

⁵² Sheldon, Kathie. “Anti-Apartheid Organizing on Campus.” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 21 (1982): 14–16.

⁵³ Lorde, Audre. “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism”. 1981.

Dorcely's argument to "View the Links" provides a framework for intersectional transformation at Bryn Mawr today. The student movement against Apartheid was grounded in emergent intersectional politics, organizing for collective liberation across gender, race, and class. The movement to Divest matters because it is a commitment to humanity, even at a small school such a change reverberates outward. This embodies adrienne marie brown's writing on fractals, which she describes as patterns that repeat themselves regardless of the scale, micro or macro. She writes how the whole is a mirror of the parts. Brown writes: "There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale."⁵⁴ By pressuring the College to be more inclusive and committed to not profiting from exploitation, student activists were waging an anti-racist struggle locally and globally. The efforts of the 1986 Divest movement constituted a predecessor to the contemporary struggles for divestment. In 2013, Bryn Mawr students organized and petitioned for the college to divest from fossil fuels. Their coalition argued divestment was aligned with the college's goals such as its "commitment to "racial justice and to equity" since fossil fuel "industries disproportionately impact vulnerable, minority populations." They argued the college could invest in renewables and still maintain or increase returns on investments.⁵⁵ This climate justice work continues today, as student organizers are continuing to pressure the college to commit to its self-proclaimed principles and transparency in its investments.

The ongoing struggle to divest from Israeli Apartheid and Occupation conjures the spirit of the 1986 movement for divestment. In the wake of Israel's atrocious war on Gaza, which the ICJ decried as a plausible case of "genocide", Bi-Co Students for Justice in Palestine occupied

⁵⁴ brown, adrienne marie. "Fractals: The Relationship between Small and Large." *Earthling Opinion*, March 1, 2019.

⁵⁵ The Bi-College News. "Bryn Mawr College Community Moves towards Divestment – Haverford and Bryn Mawr Bi-College News," February 28, 2020.

Taylor Hall on November 1, 2023 to demand the college to divest from Israeli Apartheid. Similarities and links exist between the struggle for Palestinian rights and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa. In both cases, the regimes in power formalize the ethnic supremacy of one group of people through the disenfranchisement, spatial confinement, and systematic dehumanization of the indigenous peoples.⁵⁶ These similarities between South Africa and Israel/Palestine prompted renowned voices in international law such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem to describe the Israeli regime between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean sea as an Apartheid system.



Students protesting in 2023 using the same die-in and sit-in tactics from 1986. On the right, students occupied Taylor Hall for 12 hours, the same building as 1986.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Chappell, Bill. "Israel Is an Apartheid State, Amnesty International Says." *NPR*, February 1, 2022.

⁵⁷ Author's photos.

The movement to Divest from Israel intensified in the spring of 2024, following violent police crackdowns at Columbia University. The Tri-College consortium joined the emergent student encampment movement in solidarity with Gaza. Haverford launched a weekend long encampment during a Board of Managers meeting weekend, Bryn Mawr had an eighteen-day long encampment, and Swarthmore students camped in front of the college’s main building for more than a month . Across the consortium, students were successful in disrupting board meetings⁵⁸ and starting negotiations with the administration. Both Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore took disciplinary action. At the three schools, students mainly demanded the colleges divest from Israeli Apartheid and the war machine. Bryn Mawr also sought to pressure the college to call for a ceasefire, which 89.7% of the voting student body was in favor of. Bryn Mawr’s endowment is larger than ever, at \$1 billion. Students’ demands for disclosure pressured the college to reveal that 0.5% of the endowment is invested in Israeli tech startups. The movement to oppose brutal racial capitalism waged in 1986 continues in 2024.



Bryn Mawr College Gaza Solidarity Encampment, known as the People’s College for the Liberation of Palestine.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Bryn Mawr and Swarthmore forced the boards to meet off campus and on Zoom.

⁵⁹ Epstein, Hannah. April 30, 2024. “Bryn Mawr Encampment Continues to Grow as it Enters Day Three: “The People’s College for the Liberation of Palestine” Bi-College News.

On December 4, 1997, in observation of the International Day of Solidarity with Palestinian People, post-apartheid South Africa's first president Nelson Mandela articulated the deep linkage between South Africa and Palestine and committed to peace. Mandela said: "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians."⁶⁰ It is no wonder that a post-Apartheid South African delegation to the International Court of Justice would charge Apartheid Israel of the crime of genocide.⁶¹ Throughout the course of the 2024-2024 school year, student groups and faculty held talks, many of which made the links between the movement for South African freedom to the movement for Palestinian freedom, recognizing the shared threads of settler colonialism, apartheid, and an exploitative capitalist economy. I even presented the contents of this paper at the Bryn Mawr encampment at a teach-in one afternoon.

The student movement remains in steadfast solidarity with the Global South, many students at the encampment revisiting the works of 20th century radicals, learning from their triumphs and mistakes. The writer Sarah Aziza, in her letters from the apocalypse to her friend George Abraham wrote:

To align with those at the margins of empire and capital, to rebel by simply refusing to participate in the necrotic norm, is to risk immense violence and loss. And yet, such refusals are necessary, if we are to begin building the world we need. Indeed, as a popular chant proclaims—we have discovered Palestine is everywhere. And it is making us more free.

Aziza and Abraham conclude that "Solidarity, we conclude, must be a verb. We need more than words. We need our bodies in each others' homes, and in the streets."⁶² The encampment movement is the embodiment of this radical solidarity, the sacrifices from the heart of Empire to

⁶⁰ Mandela, Nelson. "Address by President Nelson Mandela at International Day of Solidarity with Palestinian People, Pretoria". December 4, 1997.

⁶¹ Cocks, Tim. "South Africa's Genocide Case Is Diplomatic Win Whatever Verdict." Reuters, January 26, 2024.

⁶² George Abraham and Sarah Aziza. "Palestine Is Everywhere, and It Is Making Us More Free". *The Nation*. 2024.

take a principled stand against the crimes of Apartheid and Genocide. Campaigns for Divestment are our principled stance to assert the Palestinian right to return, to remain, and to resist. The intersectional struggle for the end to South African Apartheid has proved much of the grammar and structure for this movement. At Bryn Mawr, we strategically planned with parents who organized against Apartheid when they were in college in the 80s. From inside the movement and inside the archive, it was made clear to me as a young historian that accounts of social history must draw the links with related struggles. As the great freedom fighter Assata Shakur wrote in her autobiography, spinning a classic Karl Marx quote, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”⁶³

⁶³ Shakur, Assata. *Assata : an Autobiography*. 1988. Chicago, Illinois :Lawrence Hill Books, 2001.

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