



# Recurating Robben Island: cultural objects, digital memory, and the entropic afterlives of national heritage

Matthew Coetzee<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 10 April 2025  
© The Author(s) 2025

## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of cultural sociology, heritage management, and national identity through an analysis of visitor-generated Instagram posts at Robben Island Museum in post-Apartheid South Africa. Drawing on a dataset of 500 Instagram posts by South African visitors, it examines how digital cultural objects created by tourists reframe the museum's curated narrative of resilience and reconciliation. Employing theoretical frameworks of cultural trauma and cultural entropy, this study investigates how embodied experiences at the museum are transformed into visual and textual artifacts that contest, amplify, or reimagine its intended message. While the museum positions itself as a symbol of democratic triumph, visitor posts reveal divergent, recurated interpretations, ranging from reflections on Apartheid's brutality to aesthetic appreciations of the island's natural beauty. Furthermore, this research has broader implications for heritage sites globally, including those with contested histories, where digital platforms similarly mediate diverse visitor perspectives. By analyzing these digital artifacts, this research highlights the multivocality of public memory and the need for inclusive, participatory approaches to heritage management in post-conflict societies.

**Keywords** Cultural trauma · Heritage management · Digital memory · Instagram · Cultural objects · Post-Apartheid South Africa

## Introduction

State-led heritage initiatives play a pivotal role in shaping collective narratives of national identity, particularly in post-conflict societies. These initiatives aim to foster unity, resilience, and reconciliation by transforming sites of historical significance into spaces of collective memory. The Robben Island Museum, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and former Apartheid-era prison, epitomizes South Africa's efforts

---

✉ Matthew Coetzee  
mcoetze2@nd.edu

<sup>1</sup> University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, USA



to confront its traumatic history while advancing a vision of post-Apartheid unity. Once synonymous with isolation and oppression, Robben Island has become a foundational cultural object imbued with symbolic meanings. These meanings are tied to its association with figures like Nelson Mandela and Ahmed Kathrada, who championed the preservation of the site as a testament to “the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil” rather than allowing it to succumb to commercial redevelopment pressures (Director Odendaal 1999; Committee Chair Kathrada et al. 1999). This transformation reflects broader processes of heritage management aimed at producing and disseminating collective memories that align with national identity-building goals.

Through its curated exhibits, guided tours, and memorial spaces, the Robben Island Museum seeks to convey a narrative of resilience, reconciliation, and democratic triumph. It occupies a dual role: as a monument to the enduring strength of the human spirit and as a memorial to the injustices and trauma of Apartheid. This dual purpose complicates its role as a cultural object, creating tensions between the site’s past, present, and future meanings. These tensions are particularly evident in South Africa’s ongoing reconciliation efforts, where collective memory remains deeply entangled with histories of racial exclusion, economic inequality, and social division. As Wendy Griswold (1987a, p. 4) conceptualizes, cultural objects are “shared significance embodied in form,” and Robben Island’s transformation into a national heritage site underscores the complexities of embedding such shared significance within spaces that simultaneously commemorate suffering and celebrate resilience.

However, heritage narratives are not static. The meanings of cultural objects evolve as they interact with diverse audiences, whose interpretations are shaped by their personal identities, historical contexts, and sociopolitical positions. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in the participatory digital age, where platforms like Instagram have emerged as powerful spaces for memory-making and meaning negotiation. Visitors to Robben Island do not merely absorb the museum’s curated narrative; they actively engage with it, reinterpret it, and share their experiences in digital form. Through photographs, captions, and hashtags, visitors create digital cultural objects that mediate between their embodied experiences of the site and broader public discourses about memory and identity. These reinterpretations often diverge from the state’s intended narrative, reflecting what McDonnell (2016) describes as “cultural entropy.” Cultural entropy refers to the process by which the coherence of a cultural object’s intended meaning unravels as it is reinterpreted, adapted, or contested by diverse audiences. In the case of Robben Island, this manifests in how visitors use Instagram to highlight themes such as resilience, oppression, or aesthetic beauty—often complicating or reframing the museum’s narrative.

This paper explores the digital afterlives of Robben Island’s cultural narrative by analyzing 500 Instagram posts geotagged at the site and created by South African visitors. These posts, comprising photographs and captions, serve as cultural objects that illuminate the interplay between state-sponsored heritage narratives and user-generated reinterpretations. By treating these posts as sites of cultural production, the study investigates how visitors engage with the museum’s message of unity and reconciliation, negotiating its significance in light of their individual and collective identities. Specifically, this analysis examines three dimensions of memory



production: (1) the museum as a curated physical space promoting post-Apartheid narratives of unity and resilience (Kathrada et al. 1999; Strange and Kempa 2003), (2) visitor engagement as a performative act of embodied memory-making and digital cultural production (MacCannell 1973; Spillman and Conway 2007), and (3) Instagram as a platform where state-sponsored narratives are contested, amplified, or reframed by the affordances of digital curation (McDonnell 2016; Griswold 1987a).

The theoretical foundation of this study draws on key concepts from cultural sociology, particularly Alexander et al.'s (2004) work on cultural trauma and collective identity. Alexander posits that collective suffering becomes integrated into a shared identity through symbolic representation and public meaning-making. Robben Island exemplifies this process, as its state-curated narrative seeks to transform the trauma of Apartheid into a story of resilience, democratic triumph, and reconciliation. However, as McDonnell's concept of cultural entropy illustrates, these narratives are fragile and subject to fragmentation as they circulate in participatory digital spaces. Instagram posts, as modern cultural objects, exemplify this dynamic, functioning as both extensions and reinterpretations of the museum's intended message. This study also incorporates Spillman and Conway's (2007) framework on embodied versus textual memory, emphasizing how visitors' physical encounters with the site—walking through prison cells, observing artifacts, and participating in guided tours—shape the meanings they inscribe in their digital representations. By bridging embodied memory and digital curation, the study highlights how Instagram posts mediate between the personal and the collective, the physical and the symbolic, and the past and the present.

As South Africa continues to grapple with the enduring legacies of Apartheid, the Robben Island Museum operates at the nexus of collective memory and cultural trauma. Its significance lies not only in its role as a site of remembrance but also in its ability to foster dialogue about the complexities of national unity in a deeply divided society. Yet, as this paper argues, the images and captions shared by visitors do more than extend the museum's narrative into digital spaces. They complicate it, revealing a diversity of interpretations shaped by race, history, and identity. For example, some visitors use Instagram to emphasize themes of resilience and triumph, aligning with the museum's narrative of reconciliation. Others foreground the physical and emotional weight of Apartheid's legacy, using their posts to critique contemporary social and economic inequalities. Still others aestheticize the island's natural landscapes, creating cultural objects that detach the site from its historical significance. These divergent interpretations underscore the need to understand heritage sites not as static repositories of meaning but as dynamic cultural objects shaped by continuous interaction, negotiation, and reinterpretation.

By analyzing how visitor-generated Instagram posts mediate and reframe the cultural narrative of Robben Island, this paper contributes to broader discussions about the role of digital platforms in reshaping public memory and heritage management. In an era where digital technologies increasingly mediate our interactions with history, this study underscores the importance of embracing participatory approaches to memory-making. Recognizing visitors as active producers of cultural objects offers valuable insights into how national narratives are experienced, contested, and transformed in practice. Through this lens, Robben Island emerges not only as a site



of historical significance but also as a living cultural object that continues to evolve in response to the performances and interpretations of its visitors.

## **Apartheid and the curation of Robben Island as a narrative symbol of hope**

Apartheid policies systematically oppressed people of color in South Africa for nearly half a century. While the formal introduction of Apartheid began in 1948, its roots extend back to the arrival of the first White settlers, beginning with Jan Van Riebeck's landing at what would become Cape Town in 1652, and the British colonial policies, such as the Glen Grey Act of 1894. The term "Apartheid," meaning "separateness" in Afrikaans, described a system that imposed strict racial divisions across all areas of life. After the National Party's election in 1948, laws like the Group Areas Act and Population Registration Act (1950) further institutionalized racial discrimination. Non-White South Africans were systematically excluded from land ownership outside the Bantustans—economically disadvantaged territories created under Apartheid to confine and segregate Black communities—and denied access to skilled jobs, educational opportunities, and political representation (Goodman 2009; Marback 2012; Teeger 2015). As Seidman (2006) explains, racial classification dictated where individuals could live, study, work, and marry. The system's architects aimed to enforce racial hierarchy, with leaders like H. F. Verwoerd declaring that "natives will be taught from childhood that equality with Europeans is not for them" (Christie 1986:12).

The 1994 democratic elections marked the end of Apartheid, ushering in a new national narrative of unity and reconciliation. Led by Black intellectuals and former political prisoners from Robben Island, the African National Congress (ANC) promoted a vision of a "Rainbow Nation," celebrated during the post-Apartheid years and especially during national events like the 1995 Rugby World Cup and 2010 FIFA World Cup (Baines 1998; Goodman 2009; Smith 2010; Rannstad 2010). Central to this reconciliation was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which offered amnesty to individuals who confessed to crimes committed during Apartheid (Goodman 2009). Yet, the legacy of Apartheid endures, reflected in spatial and social inequalities that continue to influence racial identities. Cultural trauma (Alexander et al. 2004) and the ongoing struggles of historically oppressed groups remain embedded in South Africa's collective memory, underscoring the nation's enduring journey toward healing and unity.

### **Robben Island Museum: from incarceration to liberation**

Central to my argument is the assertion that the Robben Island Museum's intended message to visitors is one of national unity and reconciliation, both when it was established and in its present-day function. I support this claim with evidence from official museum documents, accounts from former political



prisoners and post-Apartheid national leaders, the physical space of the museum, UNESCO World Heritage Site archives, press releases, and the island's portrayal in popular culture.

Politicians and former political prisoners championed the establishment of Robben Island Museum as one of two flagship initiatives, alongside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), to promote democratic values in the new South Africa (Deegan 2001; Tutu 2000; Rioufol 1999). The museum's mission aligns with its aim to offer an accurate account of the injustices experienced by prisoners, while inspiring hope for a democratic future. The UNESCO application submitted by the South African government in 1997 begins with: "Robben Island—from incarceration to liberation. From the punishment of the human body to the freedom of the spirit." The application further states:

Throughout documented history, Robben Island has been associated with banishment, suffering, and the subjugation of the human spirit... What has transformed it and bestowed a uniqueness differing from other similar places of imprisonment has been the miracle of triumph of the human spirit over such conditions, leading onto the rebirth of a nation in terms of freedom and democracy.

-UNESCO, Nomination File for Robben Island Museum

The World Heritage Committee's justification for Robben Island's inscription emphasized the triumph of democracy and freedom over oppression. Specifically, Criterion (iii) noted that "The buildings of Robben Island bear eloquent witness to its somber history," while Criterion (vi) affirmed that the island and its prison "symbolize the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom, and of democracy over oppression" (UNESCO 1999a, 1999b:11). The committee celebrated Robben Island as a symbol of national reconciliation, with many members expressing emotion and congratulating South Africa for proposing this site, which they noted "symbolizes the fight against oppression, the victory of democracy, as well as the process of national reconciliation" (UNESCO 1999a, 1999b).

The museum's physical space embodies its narrative of triumph, structured to emphasize the journey of South African heroes from incarceration to liberation. Tours culminate in a courtyard with 4-meter-high murals depicting struggle icons and liberation heroes, visually conveying the theme of hope and triumph over adversity (Strange and Kempa 2003; Welch 2015). This message is reinforced by the mural's progression from "repression," through "release," to "resurrection," underlined by the phrase: "Freedom cannot be manacled." Contemporary museum documents (2007–2021) affirm this vision, stating a commitment to "preserve and promote Robben Island as an inspirational national treasure and World Heritage Site that symbolizes the triumph of the human spirit over extreme adversity and injustice." Press releases from 2015 to 2020, including the 2020 Heritage Day statement,



similarly underscore the museum's role in celebrating the "living heritage" of guides who are former political prisoners. RIM spokesperson Morongoa Ramaboa described these guides as "our living human treasures," highlighting their invaluable contributions to democracy and heritage.<sup>1</sup>

Robben Island's symbolic power has been further cemented by global events. After spending eighteen years on the island as a political prisoner before becoming South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela returned to light the "flame for freedom" on New Year's Eve 1999. Mandela declared: "There are good men and women around the world that will always keep that flame burning... It symbolizes that the freedom flame can never be put down by anybody" (BBC 2000). Additionally, the island gained renewed attention in popular culture through 2009 film *Invictus*, in which Morgan Freeman playing Mandela recited William Ernest Henley's poem (1888), focusing on the theme of the indomitable human spirit (Eastwood and Lorenz 2009). And, former U.S. President Barack Obama, during his 2013 visit, expressed gratitude in Mandela's former prison cell, saying, "The world is grateful for the heroes of Robben Island, who remind us that no shackles or cells can match the strength of the human spirit."

While the museum aims to communicate a cohesive narrative of hope and reconciliation, visitors' interpretations often fragment this message when shared on platforms like Instagram, where the intended nuances can be diluted or lost. As the Chair of the Future of Robben Island Committee emphasized, the island should not stand as a "monument to our hardship and suffering" but as a symbol of South Africa's democratic ideals (Kathrada interview, 1999). Robben Island's dual identity—as both a place of natural beauty and profound historical significance—creates interpretive challenges for visitors. In the digital realm, particularly on Instagram, this duality complicates how meaning is conveyed, with the original narrative potentially simplified, reframed, or even distorted. Serena Nanda (2004) describes visits to Robben Island as "pilgrimages," while Shearing and Kempa (2004) highlight its role in South African nation-building. However, limited research has focused on how visitors interpret and share their experiences on social media, where the narrative's nuances can easily be altered. This project examines how visitors recurate the museum's intended narrative as an institutionalized cultural space and assesses whether this narrative is faithfully represented in the images and captions shared online.

In summary, Robben Island Museum is intended to represent the triumph of the human spirit and the hope for national unity, rooted in a painful history. With its symbolic weight underscored by global recognition, Robben Island remains a significant site for post-A reconciliation. However, as visitors engage with and share their experiences—particularly on digital platforms—the museum's narrative of hope and unity is often refracted into diverse themes.

<sup>1</sup> These documents are on the Robben Island Museum Website (2020, 2024).



## Cultural objects as products of the tourist gaze

This paper adopts a sociological perspective to analyze tourism and the navigation of culturally and nationally significant spaces. Wendy Griswold emphasizes the importance of taking meaning seriously in sociology, arguing that cultural analysis begins at the point where individuals interact with a cultural object (Griswold 1987a, b). Following this approach, I examine the tourist experience of historically situated spaces, and the cultural objects tourists produce through these interactions. Griswold defines a cultural object as “shared significance embodied in form” (Griswold 1987a, p. 5; 1987a, p. 4; 2012: 11). These objects are constituted by both meaning and material, binding significance to a material form that is engaged through people’s sensory perceptions. According to Griswold (1987a) and Zubrzycki (2017), cultural objects are ‘shared significance embodied in form’ and function as tangible representations of abstract ideas, influencing processes like socialization, marketing, and propaganda. In this study, I apply Griswold’s definition of cultural objects to Instagram posts created by South African visitors at Robben Island, treating these digital artifacts as modern cultural objects that capture personal and collective interpretations of the museum space.

Almost all contemporary societies have undertaken state-led efforts to foster a sense of shared identity, particularly in post-conflict periods (Alexander et al. 2004; Giesen 1998; Spillman 1997; Ringmar 1996). Additionally, many states have shaped national identities in contrast to perceived “others” or external threats, constructing unity in opposition (Jacobs 2003; Ku 1999; Chan 1999). The significance of cultural objects extends to memorials and monuments, as highlighted by Doss (2012) and Simko et al. (2022). These scholars stress the importance of examining how people feel about and react to memorials, particularly how these reactions shift over time and in different national contexts. Such studies underscore the evolving nature of public memory and the role of cultural objects in shaping and reflecting national identity.

Two cultural objects at the center of this analysis are Robben Island Museum and the Instagram photos shared by those who visit the space itself. These objects convey meaning to those who encounter them and reflect public reception to a spatially curated experience intended to promote national solidarity and triumph. However, it is not always clear whether visitors internalize or share the museum’s intended narrative. Much of the literature on Robben Island has focused on its role as an educational institution, yet there has been limited investigation into how visitors actually experience and share their time there (Marback 2012; Strange and Kempa 2003; Welch 2015). While post-tour surveys have been conducted, these often prioritize visitor satisfaction and experience over a deeper exploration of how the museum’s message is absorbed and disseminated (Phaswana-Mafuya and Haydam 2005). This study, however, introduces an alternative methodological approach that focuses on the digital artifacts visitors create—Instagram posts—to analyze how the museum’s narrative is interpreted, recontextualized, and shared.

While my primary focus is on the cultural objects created by visitors—the Instagram posts—it is crucial to recognize that these objects emerge from an embodied, corporeally situated experience of the museum space. I engage with Spillman





and Conway's (2007) framework of embodied memory, which considers how bodily experience shapes interactions with cultural objects. Spillman and Conway's (2007) exploration of embodied versus textual memory provides a valuable framework for understanding how visitors to sites of cultural trauma, such as the Robben Island Museum, produce and share memories. Their study of the collective memory of Bloody Sunday emphasizes that social memory involves both physical, sensory experiences and interpretive, discursive practices. They argue that embodied memory—felt and enacted within the body—is a powerful site of collective memory, often capturing historical trauma and identity in ways that textual memory alone cannot. However, they strongly emphasize that embodied memories are inevitably intertwined with and influenced by textual forms, such as narratives, symbols, and representations. This duality of memory as both embodied and textual allows for a deeper understanding of how spaces like Robben Island are experienced and reinterpreted by visitors, who bring their personal histories and perspectives into dialogue with state-curated narratives of unity and reconciliation. The study highlights the importance of embodied memory in commemorative practices but notes its limitations when isolated from textual and organizational dimensions. I advocate for a nuanced approach to understand the dynamic relationship between embodied experiences and cultural representations in collective memory.

By positioning tourists as co-creators of these memory spaces, Spillman and Conway's framework illuminates the multivocal and contested meanings that emerge in national heritage sites like Robben Island. I engage with their work by investigating how the experiences of White and non-White visitors to Robben Island differ, as reflected in the cultural objects they choose to share after their tours. This approach acknowledges both the embodied, sensory experiences of visitors and the interpretive nature of memory as mediated by cultural objects, reinforcing Spillman and Conway's emphasis on the intertwined nature of embodied and textual memory. Spillman and Conway (2007, p. 81) emphasize that bodily memories are always inscribed, organized, and symbolized, cautioning against a strict separation between embodied and textual memory (Connerton 1989; Stoller 1994). Despite these limitations, embodiment plays a vital role in our understanding of collective memory, particularly in situations where narratives are communicated through embodied experiences, as Frank (1991, p. 81) and Collins (2004) suggest.

In this context, I analyze the Instagram posts as cultural objects shaped by the embodied experience of the tourist-photographer, rather than focusing solely on embodiment itself. This perspective underscores that the images are both products of and reflections on the tourist's corporeal interaction with Robben Island. I draw attention to how cultural objects, like photographs, are shaped by the embodied position from which they are captured. Nonhumans, including objects and technologies, play active roles in shaping social interactions, identities, and meaning-making. Recent work demonstrates how nonhumans mediate group affiliations (Jerolmack and Tavorly 2014), co-create social dynamics (Cerulo 2009), and guide interpretation through materiality and spatial positioning (Griswold et al. 2013). The corporeally situated experience of the tourist-photographer shapes both their interpretation of the cultural object encountered (Robben Island Museum), and the cultural object they, in turn, produce (the Instagram post). These self-produced objects emerge





from interactions with specific places, facilitated through various technologies, one of which is Instagram. Therefore, this study frames the Instagram posts not as mere records of a visit but as dynamic cultural objects that embody the visitor's interpretive engagement with the space.

The act of photographing and sharing images on Instagram transforms these physical interactions into a digital presence, extending the embodied experience beyond the initial visit. Through photography, tourists transform the physical act of visiting Robben Island into a curated visual account of their experience, capturing moments that reflect their personal interpretations and emotional responses to the site. When visitors upload these images to Instagram, they participate in a digital recuration of the embodied experience, transforming it into a publicly shared cultural object that others can engage with, interpret, and recontextualize. This digital sharing represents an interaction between human and non-human entities, in line with a growing body of literature that focuses on human–object interactions (Cerulo 2009). Each shared image, thus, is not merely a static representation of the museum space; it is a new cultural object shaped by the initial embodied experience but evolving through layers of interpretation and interaction in the digital realm. In this way, the Instagram posts function as secondary “galleries” that enable further interpretation and engagement beyond the physical museum environment.

### **Dark tourism, memory, monuments, and memorials**

Dark tourism, defined as travel to sites associated with death, suffering, or incarceration, provides a framework for understanding the visitor experience at Robben Island (Foley and Lennon 1996, 2000). As a former prison where anti-Apartheid leaders like Nelson Mandela were held, Robben Island fits within this category, drawing tourists interested in confronting a painful historical reality. The island embodies both resilience and suffering, presenting a unique intersection of memory, trauma, and national identity. Visitors are often drawn to Robben Island not only to witness a site of past oppression but also to engage with the narrative of overcoming adversity, making it a powerful example of dark tourism within the context of post-Apartheid reconciliation (Strange and Kempa 2003). By examining how visitors interpret and share their experiences of this space through digital posts, this study connects the themes of resilience and remembrance central to dark tourism with the ongoing formation of national identity.

Alexander et al. (2004) deepens this understanding by emphasizing how societies reconstruct their identities through the processing of collective suffering. Alexander argues that cultural trauma arises not from the event itself but from the collective meaning-making that transforms an experience into a shared cultural narrative. In the case of Robben Island, its transformation from a site of Apartheid's brutality into a symbol of resilience and unity aligns with Alexander's framework. The narrative constructed by the museum curators and the digital storytelling of visitors both contribute to embedding Robben Island into South Africa's collective identity, positioning it as a site where trauma is remembered, reconciled, and repurposed for national healing.



The visual component of a tourist destination is central to any sightseer's experience. Museums curate spaces and, in doing so, wield visual power to emphasize core messages about their exhibits (Urry 1990; Urry and Larsen 2011; Strange and Kempa 2003). However, curating an island as a monument to new beginnings, like Robben Island, presents unique challenges. Danto (1983) distinguishes between two types of commemoration: monuments and memorials. Monuments embody myths of beginning, aiming to celebrate heroes, triumphs, and victories, while memorials focus on commemorating ends. Robben Island's founders aim to curate a monumental experience, but the physical and historical landscape complicates this task. As Zubrzycki (2011, 2013) emphasizes, analyzing the creation and dissolution of visual and material cultures provides valuable insights into the conflicts surrounding and shifts in a nation's political ideologies.

Stone (2006, p.146) positions dark tourism experiences along a "fluid and dynamic spectrum of intensity." The growing literature addresses interpretation (Lennon 2001), selective commemoration (Lennon 2009; Wight and Lennon 2007), and intersects with death studies (Mitchell and Lennon 2007). Robben Island, as a dark tourism site, serves as a platform where collective trauma is mediated and reinterpreted, resonating with Alexander's (2004) notion of collective identity being constructed and reconstructed through narratives of past suffering. This project integrates dark tourism insights with nation-building efforts, exploring how the cultural objects created by visitors, such as Instagram posts, serve to navigate and sometimes reinterpret the intended narratives of resilience and unity at Robben Island.

Tourists, driven by a search for authenticity, navigate these curated spaces to experience something beyond their everyday lives. MacCannell (1973), drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, argues that tourists seek authenticity through "front" and "back" stage experiences. MacCannell suggests that while tourists are aware of staged exhibitions, they yearn to witness what they perceive as the "backstage"—the real, authentic life behind the facade. It is in these intimate, participatory spaces that tourists find true authenticity, often captured through photography. For tourists, photographing and sharing images from Robben Island can serve as a form of authentic engagement with its history, allowing them to participate in a personal, yet publicly shared, experience of the site's themes. By analyzing Instagram uploads from Robben Island, this study examines how tourists negotiate authenticity and the "tourist gaze," providing insights into how personal and collective memory are mediated through digital representations

## Methods

This study leverages Instagram to analyze South African tourist perspectives on Robben Island Museum (RIM). With over a billion users worldwide, Instagram has become an essential platform for visual sociology, providing publicly shared photos and captions that reflect subjective experiences in culturally significant spaces (Araujo et al. 2014; Gibbs et al. 2015; Hochman and Schwartz 2012). By examining user-generated content associated with the geo-tag "#RobbenIslandMuseum" and hashtag "#RobbenIslandMuseum," this research seeks



to understand how visitors visually and textually engage with the museum's narratives. I conduct a visual content analysis that includes four steps: (1) finding images, (2) creating coding categories, (3) coding images, and (4) analyzing results (Rose 2016). This framework was systematically applied to Instagram posts, combining visual and textual elements to form a comprehensive understanding of tourists' engagement with RIM through user-generated content.

## Data collection and sampling

The dataset was collected during a previous project conducted in the fall of 2017, before Instagram introduced multi-image uploads per post, which allowed for a streamlined analysis of single images. The initial sample included 100 images, expanded to 500 to assess coding saturation. Images were selected systematically using a prime-number sequence to ensure randomness. User profiles allowed a systematic approach to select South African accounts, and code for the race of the uploader—I expand upon this in an upcoming section. Posts unrelated to Robben Island, such as promotional content or images violating park regulations, were excluded to ensure the analysis focused solely on visitor-generated content.

The primary coding categories were designed to assess tourists' focus within the images and captions, incorporating Barthes' (1964) concept of the linguistic message as an anchor that shapes the interpretation of the visual. Categories included landscape (e.g., Table Mountain), prison infrastructure, and other dark tourism elements, such as barbed wire. Captions were analyzed for their orientation toward triumphalist or dark narratives, allowing for the classification of posts as either aligning with or diverging from the museum's intended messaging. In cases where the visual and textual elements diverged (e.g., an image of natural beauty accompanied by a text emphasizing loss and suffering), both components were factored into the overall coding process. A more detailed account of categorizing each image and the coded element within each post is provided in Table 1.

## Coding categories

To code images and captions, a simple yes/no methodology was used to assess the presence of specific characteristics. Table 1 outlines the specific categories used for coding prior to the post being further categorized in relation to the museum's official narrative. This was the initial coding strategy that I applied to all 500 images ensuring a consistent account of the post's image content and textual captions.

The following four categories emerged after the binary coding process. They were used to categorize each post based on the alignment of visual and textual elements with the museum's intended narratives or alternative perspectives. Here is a detailed account of my coding procedures for each image and how they fit into one of the four following categories:



**Table 1** Coding categories

| Characteristic                                  | Coded for the presence of  |
|---|--|
| Race of Instagrammer                            |  |
| White   | A record of White Instagram Uploaders  |
| Non-White                                       | A record of Non-White Instagram Uploaders  |
| Elements of dark tourism                        |  |
| Dark tourism                                    | Coding of uploaded images and captions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Images with a focus on specific prison infrastructure - Mandela's cell which is coded independently in 46664</li> <li>2. Captions specifically mentioned suffering, futility and/or purposelessness. Robustness Check: sentiment analysis is negative.</li> </ol> <i>*Images can have both dark elements and align with the museum narrative; this is the museum's objective: triumph despite the dark</i> |
| Past focus                                      | Captions explicitly mentioned the past, Apartheid era or historical events, etc.   |
| Mandela's cell "46664"                          | Image of Nelson Mandela's Cell   |
| Prison bars, cell, prison corridor              | Visual image features these specific elements  |
| Barbed wire                                     | Visual image features these specific elements  |
| Prison entrance                                 | Visual image of the entrance to the Prison   |
| Tour guide – former political prisoner          | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Images show a group tour guide</li> <li>2. Captions that reference a tour guide</li> </ol>   |
| Time Mandela spent in prison – eighteen years   | Mentioned the exact number of years Mandela spent on the island  |
| Landscape or natural beauty                     |  |
| Landscape – table mountain                      | Image was centered on Table Mountain   |
| Landscape – framed                              | framed within the Robben Island UNESCO-designated frame  |
| Triumph narrative – Robben Island as a monument |  |
| Nelson Mandela                                  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. An image of Nelson Mandela</li> <li>2. A caption that references Nelson Mandela</li> </ol>   |
| Freedom/democracy/hope/triumph                  | Any Caption or image that championed the official narrative of triumph. Overcoming Apartheid, freedom, hope, a productive future were all coded for under this category. Robustness check: sentiment analysis of the captions is positive.   |
| Future of South Africa                          | Captions that explicitly referenced the future of South Africa – and were positive. Robustness check: sentiment analysis of the captions is positive.  |
| People/person in photo                          | Any people present in the photo – marked yes/no. The number of people was recorded   |
| Smile   | Marked whether people smiled in the photos they were in  |
| Average likes                                   | The number of likes each image received was recorded – these can be further analyzed to indicate what images are best received   |

\*codes are not mutually exclusive given the interplay between text and image



## **Resonant: aligned with hope or triumph narrative**

*Definition:* Posts that echo or reinforce the museum's intended themes of hope, resilience, and triumph over adversity, aligning closely with RIM's curated narrative.

*Criteria:* Captions and imagery that emphasize positive aspects, using language related to hope, freedom, resilience, triumph, or democratic ideals. Visual elements, such as images of Mandela's cell or prison bars, were included in this category only when accompanied by supportive textual framing.

*Examples:* A post of Mandela's cell with the caption, "From this cell to freedom—a symbol of resilience and hope," was categorized as *Resonant* because of its positive framing and resonance with the intended narrative of the museum.

*Process:* Posts were reviewed for keywords and language that aligned with themes of hope, freedom, or resilience. Visual elements alone were not deemed sufficient for categorization without supportive textual content.

## **Reframed: two types of reframing dark reflection or aesthetic appreciation**

### ***a. Dark reflection***

*Definition:* Posts that emphasize the darker aspects of Robben Island's history, focusing on themes of suffering, oppression, or injustice without reference to resilience or hope.

*Criteria:* Captions focused on suffering, hardship, injustice, or confinement, particularly when these themes were not balanced by references to resilience or hope. Visual elements such as prison cells, bars, and isolation were only included in this category when the text was consistent with a focus on hardship.

*Examples:* A post with an image of Mandela's cell captioned "Nelson Mandela suffered for eighteen years in this cell" was categorized *Dark Reflection* due to its emphasis on unjust suffering.

*Process:* Posts were examined for words and phrases that underscored the hardships of imprisonment. Posts that lacked any hopeful elements were categorized as *Dark Reflection* to capture their alternative framing.

### ***b. Aesthetic appreciation***

*Definition:* Posts that primarily focus on the natural or scenic beauty of Robben Island, emphasizing landscape or aesthetic qualities without engagement with its historical or thematic significance.

*Criteria:* Visual content that highlights the island's natural environment, such as views of the coastline, Table Mountain, or wildlife. Captions in this category centered on landscape appreciation, with no reference to historical significance or themes of hope, resilience, or suffering.



*Examples:* A post of Robben Island's coastline captioned, "Breathtaking scenery," was categorized as *Aesthetic Appreciation* due to its exclusive focus on the aesthetic.

*Process:* Posts were examined to ensure the content highlighted landscape or natural elements without historical references. Posts focused solely on visual beauty were placed in this category.

### **Ambivalent: mixed or ambiguous theme**

*Definition:* Posts where the theme remains unclear due to ambiguous or neutral language, or because the visual and textual elements do not clearly convey a specific narrative of hope or oppression.

*Criteria:* Ambiguous captions, such as "Nelson Mandela spent eighteen years in this cell," which may imply multiple interpretations including both oppression and resilience. Posts in this category typically included visual content related to imprisonment without clear thematic framing in the caption.

*Examples:* A post of Mandela's cell with the caption, "Nelson Mandela's cell," was categorized as *Ambivalent* because the theme could not be reliably interpreted without further context.

*Process:* Posts with ambiguous language or neutral statements were evaluated and placed in the *Ambivalent* category to recognize their interpretive openness. This category acknowledges posts that defy clear classification.

### **Binary classification**

The binary classification was developed to simplify the analysis of Instagram posts by dividing them into two distinct categories: *Aligned* and *Non-Aligned*. Posts categorized as *Aligned* were those explicitly reflecting the museum's intended narrative, focusing on themes such as hope, resilience, and the triumph of democracy, represented by the "Resonant - Triumph Narrative" theme. Posts categorized as *Non-Aligned* included those falling under "Reframed - Dark Reflection," which emphasizes Apartheid-era oppression, and "Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation," which prioritizes the site's natural beauty over its historical significance. Posts labeled as "Ambivalent" were excluded from the binary classification to ensure the focus remained on clear thematic engagements. This classification allowed for a high-level comparison of visitor alignment with the museum's intended narrative, while preserving insights from the original thematic categories.

### **Race and the tourist gaze**

A secondary focus of the analysis was the race of Instagram users, broadly categorized into White and Non-White groups. This binary distinction reflects the historically privileged versus systematically oppressed populations in South Africa, although it is recognized that racial identity in the country is complex and multifaceted. To infer race and South African nationality, I reviewed additional images



from users' profiles and used linguistic cues such as names and language patterns in captions, distinguishing between native South African languages (e.g., Bantu languages) and Germanic languages like English and Afrikaans. I also relied on the geographic location of the majority of images created by posters as a proxy for nationality. Although this coding strategy is imperfect, it draws on South Africa's entrenched racial classifications, mirroring the way race functions as an embodied and socialized experience in the country.

This approach aligns with Omi and Winant's (1994, p. 105–106) perspective on race as a socially constructed marker of inequality. They observe that "one of the first things we note when we meet someone (apart from sex) is their race ... it becomes our common sense understanding of the world." This underscores race's role in shaping tourists' engagement with and interpretation of spaces like Robben Island, with perceptions of identity likely influencing individual experiences of its narrative. It also highlights the importance of researchers acknowledging race and finding ways to incorporate it into visual methods. Although not definitive, this categorization allows for exploration of how racialized perspectives may color the tourist gaze on RIM.<sup>2</sup>

## Analytical approach

The coding process was conducted in two stages. First, an initial sample of 100 images was analyzed to identify emerging trends and ensure coding saturation. Then, the full dataset of 500 images was analyzed to confirm these patterns. Images were initially sorted into four categories, which were later grouped into two broad classifications for parts of the analysis: posts that aligned with the museum's triumphalist messaging and those that did not. The four original categories were retained for more detailed analysis. Posts that reinterpreted the museum's intended message by focusing on themes of oppression or aesthetic appreciation were coded separately to capture alternative meanings attributed to the site. Additionally, sentiment analysis software was used to validate the emotional tone of captions. Captions associated with dark themes were expected to show negative sentiment, while those reflecting

---

<sup>2</sup> Additional work in sociology, race, and qualitative methodology: The use and acknowledgement of racial presentation is widespread in sociology and this research follows best practices in social research. Scholars such as Saperstein and Penner (2012), Waters (1999), Lacy (2004), Morris and Perry (2017) all acknowledge racial perceptions and Eberhardt (2005) notes racially profiling someone to be an automatic cognitive process. In a prominent research paper, Wouters and Walgrave (2017) use visual experimental designs that utilize visually "diverse" representations of people in their investigation of how protests persuade political representatives. Qualitative researchers writing ethnographies, in-depth interviews, and within focus groups racially code their subjects. In Small and Calarco's (2022) book on evaluating qualitative research, they explicitly use examples of ethnographic work being better when researchers include descriptions of subject's race among various other characteristics. Visual methodologies can account for a valid account of a subject's perceived race—as understood within their social structure and social context if they have been socialized, or fully immersed, into the specific culture. As the primary investigator I was socialized and educated in South Africa exclusively for 20 years before moving abroad and continue to return to conduct research. In addition, I have formal language training in English, Afrikaans, and Zulu—three out of four of the most spoken languages in South Africa. The racial coding is no doubt imperfect and potentially accounts for instances when the race code is not in line with the subject's race.





triumphalist themes were expected to show positive sentiment. This served as a robustness check to ensure consistency in the manual coding process. My research is distinct in its use of visitor-generated digital content to analyze public interpretations. Unlike previous studies, which primarily relied on observational or interview-based methods (Strange and Kempa 2003; Welch 2015), this study leverages Instagram as a platform for examining real-time, self-curated representations of the site. This approach not only provides a broader, more immediate view of visitor interpretations but also allows for the identification of alternative themes, such as oppression or aesthetic appreciation, that emerge organically in digital spaces (see Table 2).

Findings

The simple binary coded analysis of 500 Instagram posts geotagged at Robben Island highlights the limited presence of the museum’s intended themes of hope and triumph. Coding saturation was achieved with an initial analysis of 100 images, and consistent patterns were observed across the full 500-image dataset. To provide balanced insights, the images were analyzed by racial identity, with White visitors representing 63.6% of the sample and Non-White visitors 36.4%. This approach allows for distinctions in how visitors from different backgrounds interpret and share their experiences, with further analysis planned to explore these variations in depth. The table below presents the breakdown of the initial binary coding analysis, indicating the presence of specific features in each Instagram post (see Table 3).

From binary coding table to categorization

This part of the analysis evaluates the extent to which Instagram posts geotagged at Robben Island Museum align with the museum’s intended narrative. The data consist of 500 Instagram posts categorized into one of four themes—*Resonant - Triumph Narrative*, *Reframed - Dark Reflection*, *Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation*, and *Ambivalent*—with an additional binary classification contrasting *Aligned* versus *Non-Aligned* posts. The museum’s official narrative falls under the *Resonant - Triumph Narrative* theme, emphasizing post-Apartheid unity, national reconciliation, and the triumph of democracy over oppression. However, as the data demonstrate, a majority of visitor-generated posts deviate from this intended message.

Four categories breakdown

The classification of Instagram posts, displayed on the left in Fig. 1, illustrates the distribution of visitor engagement across the four classifications. Each post was categorized by evaluating both textual and visual elements, capturing how visitors interact with and interpret the Robben Island Museum experience:

Footnote 2 (continued)

However, given the above practices and considerations, the perceived race of subjects is robust and follows the best practices of sociological research.



**Table 2** Summary of category criteria

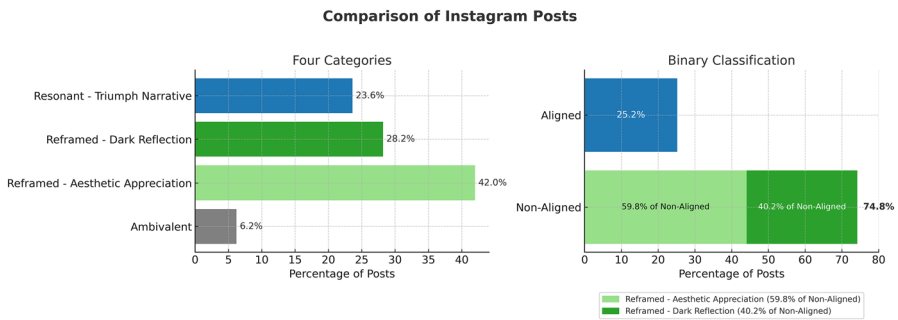
| Four categories museum alignment | Criteria  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Resonant: triumph narrative      | Text and images explicitly referencing resilience, hope, freedom, or triumph.   |
| Reframed: dark reflection        | Text and images emphasizing suffering, injustice, or confinement without any hopeful elements.                                |
| Reframed: aesthetic appreciation | Focuses on scenic or natural aspects of the island without reference to history, hope, or suffering.                          |
| Ambivalent                       | Lacks clear alignment due to neutral or ambiguous language and/or visual; theme cannot be determined without further context. |
| Binary alignment                 |   |
| Aligned                          | Resonant: Triumph Narrative + No Ambivalent   |
| Non-aligned                      | Reframed: Dark Reflection + Reframed: Aesthetic Appreciation + No Ambivalent  |

**Table 3** Coded results of instagram uploads geotagged Robben Island

| Characteristic                                | N=100 (%)* | N=500 (%)* |
|---|------------|------------|
| Race of Instagrammer (N=500)                  |            |            |
| White   | 67 (67)    | 318 (63.6) |
| Non-White                                     | 33 (33)    | 182 (36.4) |
| Elements of dark tourism                      |            |            |
| Dark tourism focus                            | 51 (51)    | 273 (54.6) |
| Past focus                                    | 49 (49)    | 273 (54.6) |
| Mandela's cell – 46664                        | 28 (28)    | 102 (20.4) |
| Prison bars, cell, prison corridor            | 38 (38)    | 195 (39)   |
| Barbed wire                                   | 9 (9)      | 65 (13)    |
| Prison entrance                               | 11 (11)    | 50 (10)    |
| Tour guide – former political prisoner        | 15 (15)    | 48 (9.6)   |
| Time Mandela spent in prison – eighteen years | 19 (19)    | 93 (18.6)  |
| Landscape or natural beauty                   |            |            |
| Landscape – table mountain                    | 48 (48)    | 249 (49.8) |
| Landscape – framed                            | 20 (20)    | 112 (22.4) |
| Triumph narrative                             |            |            |
| Nelson Mandela                                | 49 (49)    | 200 (40)   |
| Freedom/democracy/hope/triumph                | 22 (22)    | 82 (16.4)  |
| Future of South Africa                        | 18 (18)    | 70 (14)    |
| People  |            |            |
| Person in photo                               | 41 (41)    | 130 (26)   |
| Smile   | 20 (20)    | 89 (17.8)  |
| Average likes                                 | (57.49)    | (49.9)     |

\*Percentages may not sum due to the possibility of multiple coding in each image as categorization of images and text are not mutually exclusive





**Fig. 1** Comparison of four categories and binary breakdown of museum alignment

*1. Resonant - triumph narrative (23.6%)*

These posts align with the museum’s intended themes of resilience, democracy, and unity, often referencing ideas like “freedom” and “triumph” and featuring symbols such as Mandela’s cell. However, this category accounts for only about a quarter of the dataset, showing limited adoption of the museum’s narrative.

*2. Reframed - dark reflection (28.2%)*

This category focuses on themes of suffering and oppression, with captions highlighting Apartheid-era hardships, particularly those faced by Nelson Mandela. Posts in this category engage with the darker aspects of Robben Island’s history but omit connections to hope or reconciliation.

*3. Reframed - aesthetic appreciation (42.0%)*

The majority of posts emphasize the island’s scenic beauty, such as views of Table Mountain and sunsets, over its historical or cultural significance. This trend suggests that many visitors approach Robben Island as a tourist destination rather than a memorial site.

*4. Ambivalent (6.2%)*

A small subset of posts feature neutral or vague language, such as brief mentions of “Nelson Mandela’s cell” without further context. These posts lack clear thematic alignment, representing a minimal but distinct category.

This distribution highlights the tendency of visitors to engage more with reframed accounts rather than the museum’s intended triumphalist message.

**Binary classification breakdown**

To simplify the analysis, a binary classification was developed, grouping posts into two categories: *Aligned* (those reflecting the museum’s intended narrative) and *Non-Aligned* (those deviating from it). As illustrated on the right in Fig. 1, *Aligned* posts exclusively comprise the “Resonant - Triumph Narrative” category, while *Non-Aligned* posts include both “Reframed - Dark Reflection” and “Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation.” Ambivalent posts were excluded from this breakdown to ensure clarity and avoid misrepresentation due to their interpretive openness.



### ***Aligned (25.2%)***

A quarter of posts reflect the museum's intended themes of hope, resilience, and triumph over Apartheid oppression. This limited alignment underscores the challenges in conveying the museum's narrative of post-Apartheid unity and reconciliation.

### ***Non-aligned (74.8%)***

The majority of posts focus on either the darker historical aspects of Robben Island or its aesthetic appeal, with minimal reference to the museum's intended themes. This highlights visitors' preference for personal interpretations or aesthetic engagement over the institutional narrative.

This binary classification underscores a significant gap between the museum's narrative intent and visitor engagement, with the vast majority of posts reflecting alternative perspectives or interests.

## **Extending the analysis by race**

This second stage of the analysis examines how racial identities influence visitors' engagement with Robben Island Museum as documented through 500 geotagged Instagram posts. By breaking down thematic engagement into two levels—detailed thematic categories and a simplified binary classification—this analysis reveals significant racial differences in how the museum is experienced and represented. The findings demonstrate varied cultural and historical interpretations among White and Non-White visitors, reflecting the complexities of memory and identity.

## **Thematic engagement across four categories by race**

Figure 2 presents the distribution of Instagram posts across four thematic categories—Resonant - Triumph Narrative, Reframed - Dark Reflection, Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation, and Ambivalent—with a further breakdown by race. The results highlight how visitors engage with the museum space in nuanced ways:

### ***1. Resonant - triumph narrative***

Posts in this category align with the museum's intended narrative, emphasizing hope, resilience, and triumph. White visitors contributed 21.6% of posts, while Non-White visitors represented a slightly higher proportion at 27.1%. These posts often referenced iconic elements, such as Nelson Mandela's cell, and used captions celebrating resilience and democratic ideals.

### ***2. Reframed - dark reflection***

Posts in this category focused on the suffering and oppression associated with Apartheid, without invoking hope or resilience. Non-White visitors contributed 34.8% of posts in this category, compared to 24.5% by White visitors. This suggests that Non-White visitors more frequently interpret Robben Island as a site of somber historical reflection.

### ***3. Reframed - aesthetic appreciation***

This category captures posts centered on the natural beauty of Robben Island, often detached from its historical significance. White visitors dominated this cat-



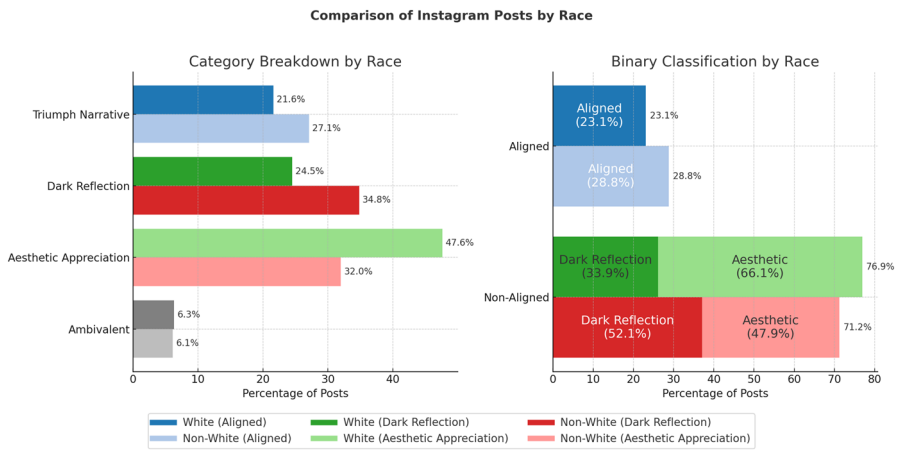


Fig. 2 Comparison of four categories and binary breakdown of museum alignment by race

egory, contributing 47.6% of posts, compared to 32.0% from Non-White visitors. These findings suggest that White visitors more often frame Robben Island as a picturesque landscape, reflecting an aesthetic, rather than historical, focus.

4. Ambivalent

Representing ambiguous or neutral posts with no clear thematic focus, this category had low representation. White visitors contributed 6.3% of posts, compared to 6.1% by Non-White visitors, showing minimal engagement with ambiguous interpretations across both groups.

Chi-square test: four categories by race

To evaluate whether these differences were statistically significant, a chi-square test was conducted. The null hypothesis posited that thematic engagement is independent of race. The test yielded a chi-square statistic of 9.03 ( $p = 0.029$ ), leading to a rejection of the null hypothesis. These results indicate a statistically significant difference across the four categories by race ( $\chi^2 = 9.03$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The findings underscore distinct thematic lenses through which White and Non-White visitors engage with the museum, revealing varied interpretations of its cultural and historical meanings.

**Binary classification breakdown by race** To streamline the analysis, posts were grouped into two overarching categories by race: *Aligned* (posts that reflect the museum’s intended narrative of resilience and triumph) and *Non-Aligned* (posts that deviate from this narrative). The *Aligned* category includes posts exclusively categorized under “Resonant - Triumph Narrative,” while the *Non-Aligned* category encompasses posts identified as “Reframed - Dark Reflection” and “Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation.” Posts classified as “Ambivalent” were excluded from this analysis to maintain clarity and avoid overinterpretation of their neutrality.



***Aligned Posts (24.4%):***

*White visitors:* 23.1% of posts aligned with the museum's intended themes of hope, resilience, and triumph over oppression.

*Non-White visitors:* 28.8% of posts aligned with these themes.

These findings suggest that Non-White visitors are slightly more likely to align their posts with the museum's narrative of unity and reconciliation.

***Non-Aligned Posts (75.6%):***

Non-Aligned posts represent the majority of posts across both racial groups, reflecting diverse interpretations of the museum's significance:

*White visitors:* 76.9% of posts were non-aligned. Of these:

- 33.9% emphasized *Reframed - Dark Reflection*, focusing on themes of suffering and oppression.
- 66.1% emphasized *Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation*, prioritizing the island's natural beauty over its historical narrative.

*Non-White visitors:* 71.2% of posts were non-aligned. Of these:

- 52.1% emphasized *Reframed - Dark Reflection*, centering on Apartheid's legacies of hardship.
- 47.9% emphasized *Reframed - Aesthetic Appreciation*, highlighting the site's aesthetic appeal without historical focus.

This binary classification underscores a notable divide between the museum's narrative intent and how visitors engage with the space. While a minority of posts align with the institution's themes of triumph and reconciliation, the majority reveal alternative perspectives, either focusing on Robben Island's aesthetic qualities or its historical oppression. This trend highlights the diverse ways in which visitors reinterpret heritage narratives through their own lenses, shaped by identity, memory, and personal priorities.

**Chi-square test: binary classification by race**

A chi-square test assessed whether binary alignment is independent of race. The results showed a chi-square statistic of 3.04 ( $p = 0.081$ ), indicating no statistically significant difference ( $\chi^2 = 3.04$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). While the binary analysis reveals no major racial differences, the detailed four-category framework highlights meaningful distinctions in thematic engagement, emphasizing the value of nuanced analysis in uncovering diverse patterns of cultural interpretation.

**Caption analysis by race**

Below is a summary of the four categories with example captions, organized by race. This overview captures how White and Non-White visitors express their



engagement with Robben Island on social media, reflecting differences in focus and emphasis across categories. These are the text captions that help curate the cultural objects shared by visitors on Instagram:

#### A. Resonant - triumph narrative

*Non-White visitors:* Captions from Non-White visitors often emphasize pride, resilience, and a personal connection to the themes of freedom and hope that Robben Island represents.

- Examples:

“As I walked the grounds and saw the prison cells, I felt both sorrow and pride.”

“11 Feb 1990; 28 years ago, Madiba walked free after 27 years of imprisonment. A moment of triumph and resilience.”

*White visitors:* White visitors in this category tend to focus on admiration for Nelson Mandela and respect for the struggle against Apartheid, often highlighting Mandela’s legacy as a symbol of hope.

- Examples:

“We couldn’t leave Cape Town without visiting Robben Island. A place of deep history and resilience.”

“Tribute to those who fought for freedom.”

#### B. Reframed - dark reflection

*Non-White visitors:* Non-White visitors frequently highlight the hardships and injustices experienced on the island, connecting them to broader themes of oppression and remembrance.

- Examples:

“Tour of Robben Island yesterday. That tour guide was a former prisoner. The stories of hardship are haunting.”

“Inhumanity - mourning for all who suffered here.”

*White visitors:* White visitors in the Dark Reflection category also reflect on the injustices of Apartheid but often with a more historical or observational tone, focusing on the somber aspects of the prison experience.

- Examples:

“A sobering visit to Mandela’s cell. It’s a powerful reminder of the injustices of Apartheid that must never be forgotten.”

“Hard to believe that people endured this place. Robben Island is a dark chapter in history, one that should never repeat.”





C. Reframed - aesthetic appreciation

*Non-White visitors:* Non-White visitors in this category often note the beauty of the island's natural scenery while acknowledging its historical significance, creating a juxtaposition between the island's painful past and its peaceful present.

- Examples:

"The contrast of natural beauty with such a painful history is striking."

"A place of both history and breathtaking views."

*White visitors:* White visitors are more likely to focus on the scenic beauty itself, often mentioning sunsets, landscapes, and views without as much reference to the historical context.

- Examples:

"At Robben Island, world heritage site, during sunset. The view is breathtaking."

"Stunning views of Cape Town and a riveting and emotional history lesson at Robben Island."

D. Ambivalent

*Non-White visitors:* Ambivalent captions from Non-White visitors tend to express a mix of reflection and neutrality, often mentioning Nelson Mandela's cell or prison corridors without a clear positive or negative framing.

- Examples:

"Mandela's cell. A place with so much history. Words can't describe the feeling."

"Eighteen years spent here. Reflecting on how far we've come and what's left to achieve."

*White visitors:* White visitors in this category often reflect a general sense of awe or contemplation, with brief statements that are open to multiple interpretations.

- Examples:

"Walking through these halls is a surreal experience. So much to think about."

"A quiet moment in Mandela's cell. Just... wow."

The findings suggest that *Non-White visitors* often interpret Robben Island through a deeply personal and collective lens, emphasizing resilience, oppression, and remembrance tied to their identity and heritage. Their captions reflect active engagement with both the historical and symbolic aspects of the site, showcasing a connection to the struggles and triumphs associated with Apartheid. In contrast,



*White visitors* tend to adopt a more observational approach, focusing on historical suffering or the island's scenic qualities, with less emphasis on personal or collective memory. Their captions highlight historical reflection or admiration for the site's aesthetic appeal but demonstrate limited engagement with its symbolic significance.

This interpretive plurality at Robben Island underscores how personal and collective histories shape visitor engagement with heritage sites. These differences highlight the need for a more nuanced approach to heritage management that embraces diverse reinterpretations of historical messages, fostering an inclusive understanding of the site's cultural and historical importance.

## Discussion

This study reveals that Robben Island Museum, a UNESCO World Heritage site and symbol of South Africa's post-Apartheid nation-building, elicits varied engagement with its intended narrative of triumph, resilience, and unity.

### Narrative entropy: from narrative coherence to fragmented themes

Visitors' interactions, as mediated through Instagram, demonstrate fragmented and multifaceted interpretations that reflect a complex interplay of personal identities, social histories, and the affordances of digital platforms. Employing McDonnell's (2016) concept of cultural entropy, which describes how the intended meanings and uses of cultural objects fracture into alternative meanings, new practices, failed interactions, and blatant disregard, the findings reveal how the museum's state-sponsored message is reshaped within the digital space. This entropy, evident in the Instagram posts, shifts Robben Island from a unified narrative of reconciliation to a spectrum of individual interpretations. This entropic process is particularly pronounced among South African tourists, whose Instagram posts reveal the ways in which local and national historical narratives are reinterpreted in digital spaces. Such reinterpretations highlight the museum's transformation through digital recursion, where visitors contribute new layers of meaning, diverging from the original narrative's intent.

Alexander's framework of cultural trauma emphasizes how collective suffering becomes embedded in a group's identity through the construction of shared narratives. Alexander et al. (2004) argues that for trauma to become cultural, it requires symbolic representation, institutional endorsement, and public acceptance. In the case of Robben Island Museum, the state-curated narrative seeks to transform the trauma of Apartheid into a story of resilience and reconciliation, positioning the site as a symbolic locus of national healing.

However, as McDonnell's (2016) concept of cultural entropy suggests, once these symbolic narratives enter the public domain they are subject to reinterpretation and fragmentation. Instagram posts documenting visits to Robben Island exemplify this process, as users curate and disseminate their own cultural objects, reframing the museum's narrative into themes that align with individual and group identities. For



instance, Non-White visitors' posts often evoke embodied and textual memories that reflect lived experiences of Apartheid's lingering inequalities, resonating with Alexander's notion that cultural trauma involves ongoing negotiation of past injustices within a contemporary framework. Conversely, White visitors' posts frequently aestheticize the site or adopt a distanced, observational stance, demonstrating a divergence from collective trauma narratives into more individualized or depoliticized engagements.

This interplay underscores how digital platforms function as sites, where cultural trauma narratives are contested, reshaped, and mediated. Instagram, as a participatory digital space, democratizes memory-making but also disperses the coherence of state-sponsored cultural objects, allowing for "recuration." By integrating cultural trauma with the mechanics of digital curation, we can better understand the multivocality of heritage sites like Robben Island and the sociological implications of their digital afterlives.

McDonnell's framework of cultural entropy is particularly useful for understanding "entropic recuration," how Robben Island's narrative fractures when mediated through Instagram. While the museum curates its exhibits to promote resilience and reconciliation, visitor-generated Instagram posts demonstrate how these messages evolve and diversify as they interact with broader audiences. For instance, many posts highlight the island's natural beauty—its coastlines, sunsets, or wildlife—without referencing its historical significance. Such aestheticization reflects Instagram's visual culture but also represents a dilution of the museum's intended narrative. Other posts reinterpret the site through the lens of personal histories, political reflections, or even contemporary struggles, creating alternative narratives that challenge the state-curated message. This entropic process underscores the limitations of heritage institutions in controlling the meanings of their cultural objects once they enter digital spheres.

### **The role of embodied and collective memory in dark tourism**

Unlike conventional dark tourism sites focused solely on reflection upon trauma and suffering, Robben Island holds a dual narrative of historical hardship and post-Apartheid resilience. Guided tours, led by former political prisoners, emphasize embodied memory, urging visitors to physically and emotionally engage with the site's historical artifacts and spaces, such as Mandela's cell, in an effort to embody and witness the past. For South African visitors, these embodied experiences are deeply shaped by personal and collective connections to the history of Apartheid, with Non-White tourists often emphasizing resilience and lived historical ties. Spillman and Conway's (2007) theoretical framework on embodied memory elucidates how physical presence in a space can create unique, sensory-based memories that differ from textual memories. Visitors to Robben Island, especially in spaces imbued with intense historical symbolism, experience a profound, bodily engagement that impacts how they later document and interpret the site through digital media. However, these embodied experiences are represented differently along racial lines, demonstrating varied interpretations of the same historical space.



The study results show that photographs of key physical features, such as prison cells and the limestone quarry, often serve as conduits for embodied memory, reflecting the emotional and sensory engagement visitors experience during their tours. Captions accompanying these images often articulate visitors' physical responses to these spaces—descriptions of their emotional heaviness or reflections on the significance of standing in spaces inhabited by anti-Apartheid heroes. For Non-White visitors, these captions frequently highlight themes of resilience, connecting the physical space to broader narratives of resistance and triumph. White visitors, by contrast, often focus on the oppressive atmosphere of the site, with captions that emphasize its starkness or its role as a symbol of human suffering, aligning more closely with traditional dark tourism narratives.

### **Racialized patterns of engagement and the digital tourist gaze**

The digital platform of Instagram introduces a complex layer to the ways visitors interpret and share their experiences at Robben Island. By allowing users to recurate their own visual and textual narratives, Instagram enables visitors to create digital cultural objects that both preserve and transform the memory of the site. The cultural entropy framework explains how Instagram posts allow individuals to reshape the museum's narrative, as these user-generated posts, ranging from reflective to aesthetic, represent personalized reinterpretations that dilute the museum's control over its own story. The concept of cultural power (Mohr et al. 2020) is also applicable, suggesting that an object's power is not solely in its intended meaning but in the meanings attributed to it through public interaction and reinterpretation. On Instagram, visitors frequently recurate the museum's narrative, producing interpretations that extend and challenge the official narrative.

Results highlight the prevalence of posts focused on the natural beauty of Robben Island, often at the expense of the site's historical narrative. These posts—featuring images of the coastline, wildlife, or sunset views—reflect Instagram's visual culture, where aesthetic appeal often drives content creation. This phenomenon highlights a tension between the museum's intended narrative and the affordances of the digital platform, which prioritizes visually engaging content. However, the racial dynamics in these posts remain significant. Non-White visitors were far more likely to incorporate captions that tied aesthetic images to the museum's themes of resilience, referencing the strength required to transform the island from a place of suffering to one of national importance. These posts stand in contrast to White visitors' more frequent depictions of the site as a historical backdrop rather than a living narrative of South Africa's ongoing struggles with inequality and reconciliation.

The results also demonstrate how the captions accompanying these Instagram posts often serve as textual extensions of embodied memory. For example, captions referencing the weight of Apartheid history or the emotional impact of touring Mandela's cell suggest that many visitors use Instagram as a platform to process and articulate their experiences. However, these captions reveal a divergence in how different groups frame their interpretations. Non-White visitors often integrate personal or familial connections to Apartheid history, framing their posts as part of a



collective memory of resilience. In contrast, White visitors' captions often maintain a more distanced perspective, reflecting on the site's significance as a historical lesson rather than as a living narrative with contemporary relevance.

## **Heritage management and digital memory in post-conflict societies**

This study has significant implications for both heritage management and digital sociology, particularly in the context of post-conflict societies. Heritage sites, as argued by Alexander et al. (2004) and Giesen (1998), play a pivotal role in crafting national identity narratives, particularly in societies grappling with collective trauma and reconciliation. However, the findings of this study highlight the limitations of state-curated narratives in effectively promoting unity. The divergent interpretations observed in visitor-generated Instagram posts reveal the multiplicity of meanings attached to heritage sites, challenging the notion of a singular, cohesive narrative. This is especially relevant in post-conflict contexts, where state-led heritage sites often struggle to preserve their intended narratives against the backdrop of digital reinterpretations by diverse publics.

For example, Robben Island Museum's effort to project a narrative of resilience and triumph is frequently undermined by visitors' focus on themes of suffering or the site's aesthetic qualities. This divergence underscores the need for heritage managers to adopt more inclusive approaches that engage with the multivocality of visitor interpretations. By analyzing and responding to visitor-generated content, heritage institutions can better understand how their narratives are received and adapted in digital spaces, creating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. Digital platforms provide a participatory medium through which public memory is actively reshaped, offering heritage managers a chance to connect with their audiences in more meaningful ways.

This study's examination of Instagram posts as cultural artifacts also contributes to the field of digital sociology. By applying Griswold's (1987a) concept of cultural objects as "shared significance embodied in form," it illustrates how user-generated, recurated content on social media serves as both an extension and a reinterpretation of heritage narratives. Digital media challenges traditional views of heritage sites as static, authoritative spaces, instead emphasizing their fluid, performative, and participatory dimensions. The analysis of 500 Instagram uploads, which collectively garnered 24,853 "likes," demonstrates the reach and influence of digital cultural objects. On average, each user shared their narrative with nearly 50 individuals who actively engaged with the post, in addition to countless others who viewed it passively. These digital artifacts are central to how collective memory is reshaped in contemporary society, showing that the digital representation of heritage sites is as integral to public memory as the physical experience of visiting them.

Instagram posts that incorporate visual elements alongside reflective captions further demonstrate how visitors engage with heritage narratives on digital platforms. Some posts amplify the museum's intended message of resilience and unity, while others reshape it to reflect personal interpretations and priorities. These findings emphasize the interplay between embodied experiences and digital representations



in shaping public memory, suggesting that digital spaces are not merely secondary to physical heritage sites but are key arenas where memory, identity, and meaning are contested and renegotiated. By embracing the participatory nature of digital media, heritage institutions can foster a more inclusive approach to managing cultural narratives in post-conflict societies.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates how South African tourists' Instagram posts reinterpret and challenge the Robben Island Museum's intended narrative of resilience and unity. The findings highlight the dynamic interaction between the museum's curated message and the diverse ways visitors engage with the site, mediated by race, personal identity, and the affordances of social media. Posts often diverge from the museum's narrative, emphasizing themes of aesthetic appreciation or historical suffering. This multivocality reflects a broader entropic process, wherein digital platforms democratize memory-making, allowing alternative, recurated and sometimes conflicting accounts of the museum to flourish. Racialized dynamics further illuminate the complexity of collective memory in post-conflict contexts, with Non-White visitors frequently framing their posts through personal and collective connections to Apartheid's legacy, while White visitors often adopt a distanced or aestheticized perspective.

The implications of these findings extend beyond Robben Island, offering a framework for understanding how digital platforms mediate heritage narratives globally. Sites with contested histories face similar challenges in reconciling state-curated narratives with the democratizing impact of digital media. For instance, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial in Poland encounters reinterpretations of its solemn message through personal documentation, while the 9/11 Memorial in New York reflects narratives of national resilience alongside personal grief and political critique. Similarly, Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum highlights the complexities of commemoration when viewed through the varied lenses of global tourists. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Japan, with its anti-nuclear message, sees digital reflections ranging from advocacy to personal loss, while Alcatraz Island in the United States blends narratives of incarceration with natural beauty, inviting diverse interpretations. These examples reinforce the centrality of social media in reshaping collective memory and cultural narratives, underscoring the potentially broad relevance of this study.

However, this research is inherently limited by its focus on Instagram posts, which capture only the cultural objects visitors choose to share publicly. The performative nature of these posts may not fully represent visitors' internal interpretations or embodied experiences of the site. As such, the analysis provides a mediated view of memory-making, leaving unexplored the private reflections and interactions that also shape engagement with heritage spaces.

Future research aims to address these limitations by examining the genres and trends of images taken on the island, providing a deeper understanding of visual



and narrative patterns. Additionally, qualitative approaches, such as interviews and ethnographic studies, could further investigate how visitors internalize and embody their experiences before translating them into digital artifacts. These efforts would expand on the findings of this study, providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between embodied memory, digital representation, and heritage narratives. Exploring these dynamics can inform future strategies for heritage management that embrace multivocality and foster inclusive approaches to contested histories and their representation in the digital age.

Appendix

Table 4 presents the detailed coding results of Instagram posts geotagged at Robben Island, disaggregated by the race of the uploader. The table reports the percentage of posts by White and Non-White visitors that featured specific visual or textual elements, including references to dark tourism, landscape aesthetics, the triumph narrative, and indicators of embodied experience. Percentages reflect the proportion

Table 4 Coded results of Robben Island by race of uploaded

| Characteristic                                | White N=318 (%)* | Non-White N=182 (%)* |
|---|------------------|----------------------|
| Elements of dark tourism                      |                  |                      |
| Dark tourism focus                            | 153 (48.1)       | 119 (65.4)           |
| Past focus                                    | 154 (48.4)       | 118 (64.8)           |
| Mandela's cell – 46664                        | 64 (20.1)*       | 37 (20.3)*           |
| Prison bars, cell, prison corridor            | 114 (35.8)       | 80 (44)              |
| Barbed wire                                   | 35 (11)          | 29 (15.9)            |
| Prison entrance                               | 26 (8.2)         | 23 (12.6)            |
| Tour guide – former political prisoner        | 25 (7.8)         | 22 (12.1)            |
| Time Mandela spent in prison – eighteen years | 52 (16.4)        | 40 (22)              |
| Landscape or natural beauty                   |                  |                      |
| Landscape – table mountain                    | 174 (54.7)       | 74 (40.7)            |
| Landscape – framed                            | 72 (22.6)*       | 39 (21.4)*           |
| Triumph narrative                             |                  |                      |
| Nelson Mandela                                | 115 (36.2)       | 84 (46.2)            |
| Freedom/democracy/hope/triumph                | 39 (12.3)        | 42 (23)              |
| Future of South Africa                        | 33 (10.4)        | 36 (19.8)            |
| People  |                  |                      |
| Person in photo                               | 65 (20.1)        | 65 (35.7)            |
| Smile   | 44 (13.8)        | 44 (24.2)            |
| Average likes                                 | 52               | 46                   |

Percentages may not sum due to the possibility of multiple coding in each image

\*Percentages are consistent across race groups where noted





of posts within each racial group that contained the coded characteristic. Note that images could be coded for multiple features simultaneously.

**Acknowledgments** Special thanks to Professor Philip Smith, who first encouraged me to explore this project during my undergraduate years. I am especially grateful to Professors Terry McDonnell and Lyn Spillman for their guidance and support in helping me develop this work. I also want to thank the Notre Dame Cultural Sociology Workshop for their thoughtful feedback and advice on earlier drafts of this article. Thanks to Jim Collins and the Visual Cultures Workshop for their support and engagement.

**Data availability** Data is publically available as sourced from public profiles on Instagram.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Alexander, J. C., R. Eyerman, B. Giesen, N. J. Smelser, and Sztompka, P. 2004. *Cultural trauma and collective identity*, 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9nb>
- Araujo, Camila Souza, Luiz Paulo Damilton Correa, Ana Paula Couto Da Silva, Raquel Oliveira Prates, and Wagner Meira. 2014. It Is Not Just a Picture: Revealing Some User Practices in Instagram. *2014 9th Latin American Web Congress*, 19–23. <https://doi.org/10.1109/LAWeb.2014.12>.
- Baines, Gary. 1998. The Rainbow Nation? Identity and Nation Building in Post-Apartheid South-Africa. Retrieved November 25, 2024 (<https://motspluriels.arts.uwa.edu.au/MP798gb.html>).
- Barthes, Roland. 1964. Rhétorique de l'image. *Communications* 4 (1): 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1964.1027>.
- BBC News. 2000. Robben Island to Host Africa's Leaders. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/586479.stm>.
- Cerulo, Karen A. 2009. Nonhumans in Social Interaction. *Annual Review of Sociology* 35: 531–552. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-120008>.
- Chan, E. 1999. Structural and Symbolic Centers: Center Displacement in the 1989 Chinese Student Movement. In *Democratic Culture: Ethnos and Demos in Global Perspective*, ed. M. Berezin, and J. C. Alexander, special issue, 337–354. *International Sociology*.
- Christie, Pamela. 1986. *The Right to Learn: The Struggle for Education in South Africa*, 1st ed. Braamfontein: Ravan Press of South Africa.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danto, Arthur C. 1983. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Deegan, Heather. 2001. *The Politics of the New South Africa: Apartheid and After*, 1st ed. New York: Pearson.
- Doss, Erika. 2012. *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. Paperback. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eastwood, C. (Director), and Lorenz, R. (Producer). 2009. *Invictus* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Eberhardt, Jennifer L. 2005. Imaging Race. *American Psychologist* 60 (2): 181–190. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.181>.



- Foley, Malcolm, and J. John Lennon. 1996. JFK and Dark Tourism: A Fascination with Assassination. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2 (4): 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527259608722175>.
- Foley, Malcolm, and John Lennon. 2000. *Dark Tourism*, 1st ed. Andover: Cengage Learning EMEA.
- France 24. 2013, June 30. Obama Visits Nelson Mandela's Prison on Robben Island. *France 24*. Retrieved from <https://www.france24.com/en/20130630-south-africa-obama-visits-nelson-mandela-prison-robben-island-africa-speech>.
- Frank, Arthur. 1991. For a Sociology of the Body: An Analytical Review. In *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*.
- Gibbs, Martin, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Marcus Carter. 2015. #Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (3): 255–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152>.
- Giesen, Bernhard. 1998. *Triumph and Trauma: Images of Political Power in Postwar Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Goodman, Tanya. 2009. *Staging Solidarity: Truth and Reconciliation in a New South Africa*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Griswold, Wendy. 1987a. A Methodological Framework for the Sociology of Culture. *Sociological Methodology* 17: 1–35.
- Griswold, Wendy. 1987b. The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies. *American Journal of Sociology* 92 (5): 1077–1117.
- Griswold, Wendy. 2012. *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Griswold, Wendy, Gemma Mangione, and Terence E. McDonnell. 2013. Objects, Words, and Bodies in Space: Bringing Materiality into Cultural Analysis. *Qualitative Sociology* 36 (4): 343–364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-013-9264-6>.
- Henley, W.E. 1888. Invictus. In *A Book of Verses*. London: D. Nutt.
- Hochman, Nadav, and Raz Schwartz. 2012. Visualizing Instagram: Tracing Cultural Visual Rhythms. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 6 (4): 6–9. <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v6i4.14361>.
- Jacobs, Ronald N. 2003. *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King*. Reprint. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jerolmack, Colin, and Iddo Tavory. 2014. Molds and Totems: Nonhumans and the Constitution of the Social Self. *Sociological Theory* 32 (1): 64–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275114523604>.
- Kathrada, A. M., Harriet Deacon, South African Museum, and A. Odendaal. 1999. Opening Address: The Robben Island Exhibition, Esiqithini. In *Robben Island Timeline*, 5–11. Cape Town: Mayibuye Books.
- Ku, Shuk-Mei Agnes. 1999. *Narratives, Politics, and the Public Sphere: Struggles over Political Reform in the Final Transitional Years in Hong Kong, 1992–1994*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Lacy, Karyn R. 2004. Black Spaces, Black Places: Strategic Assimilation and Identity Construction in Middle-Class Suburbia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27 (6): 908–930. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000268521>.
- Lennon, J. John. 2009. Tragedy and Heritage: The Case of Cambodia. *Tourism Recreation Research* 34 (1): 35–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2009.11081573>.
- MacCannell, Dean. 1973. Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings. *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (3): 589–603.
- Marback, Richard. 2012. *Managing Vulnerability: South Africa's Struggle for a Democratic Rhetoric*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- McDonnell, Terence E. 2016. *Best Laid Plans: Cultural Entropy and the Unraveling of AIDS Media Campaigns*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mitchell, Margaret, and John J. Lennon, eds. 2007. *Remember Me: Constructing Immortality—Beliefs on Immortality, Life, and Death*. New York: Routledge.
- Mohr, John W., Christopher A. Bail, Margaret Frye, Jennifer C. Lena, Omar Lizardo, Terence E. McDonnell, Ann Mische, Iddo Tavory, and Frederick F. Wherry. 2020. *Measuring Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.



- Morris, Edward W., and Brea L. Perry. 2017. Girls Behaving Badly? Race, Gender, and Subjective Evaluation in the Discipline of African American Girls. *Sociology of Education* 90 (2): 127–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040717694876>.
- Nanda, Serena. 2004. South African Museums and the Creation of a New National Identity. *American Anthropologist* 106 (2): 379–385. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2004.106.2.379>.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. London: Psychology Press.
- Phaswana-Mafuya, Nancy, and Norbert Haydam. 2005. Tourists' Expectations and Perceptions of the Robben Island Museum—a World Heritage Site. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20 (2): 149–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770500502002>.
- Stone, Philip. 2006. A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions. *TOURISM: An Interdisciplinary International Journal* 54 (2).
- Rannstad, Linn. n.d. The 2010 Football World Cup and the Rainbow Nation: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Upcoming Football World Cup 2010 in South Africa. Retrieved November 25, 2024 (<https://9pdf.net/document/yd7x4nxe-football-rainbow-nation-critical-discourse-analysis-upcoming-football.html>).
- Ringmar, Erik. 1996. *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rioufol, Veronique. 1999. The Making of a New Past for a 'New' South Africa: The Commemoration of Robben Island.
- Robben Island Museum. 2024. Publications. *Robben Island Museum*. Accessed November 05, 2024. <https://www.robben-island.org.za/publications/>.
- Robben Island Museum. 2020. Press Releases 2020. *Robben Island Museum*. Accessed November 05, 2024. <https://www.robben-island.org.za/press-releases-2020/>.
- Rose, Gillian. 2016. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th ed. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Saperstein, Aliya, and Andrew M. Penner. 2012. Racial Fluidity and Inequality in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology* 118 (3): 676–727. <https://doi.org/10.1086/667722>.
- Seidman, Gay. 2006. Guerrillas in Their Midst: Armed Struggle in the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement. *Mobilization: an International Quarterly* 6 (2): 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.6.2.j74432223547114r>.
- Shearing, Clifford, and Michael Kempa. 2004. A Museum of Hope: A Story of Robben Island. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 592 (1): 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203261919>.
- Simko, Christina, David Cunningham, and Nicole Fox. 2022. Contesting Commemorative Landscapes: Confederate Monuments and Trajectories of Change. *Social Problems* 69 (3): 591–611. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaa067>.
- Small, Mario Luis, and Jessica McCrory. Calarco. 2022. *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Smith, Jacob. 2010. *Nelson Mandela: A Biography for Kids About the History & Life Story of Nelson Mandela*.
- Spillman, Lyn. 1997. *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spillman, Lyn, and Brian Conway. 2007. Texts, Bodies, and the Memory of Bloody Sunday. *Symbolic Interaction* 30: 79–103. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2007.30.1.79>.
- Stoller, Paul. 1994. Embodying Colonial Memories. *American Anthropologist* 96 (3): 634–648.
- Strange, Carolyn, and Michael Kempa. 2003. Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30 (2): 386–405. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(02\)00102-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(02)00102-0).
- Teeger, Chana. 2015. 'Both Sides of the Story': History Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *American Sociological Review* 80 (6): 1175–1200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122415613078>.
- Tutu, Desmond. 2000. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Image.
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 1999. *Nomination File for Robben Island Museum as a UNESCO World Heritage Site*. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/916/documents/>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 1999. *Nomination File for Robben Island Museum (World Heritage Site 916)*. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/916.pdf>



- Urry, John. 1990. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, 1st ed. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Urry, John, and Jonas Larsen. 2011. *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, 3rd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Waters, Mary C. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Welch, Sharon. 2015. Authentic Narratives of Historical Atrocities: Remembering Apartheid on Robben Island. *Journal of African History* 56 (2): 289–306.
- Wight, A. Craig., and J. John Lennon. 2007. Selective Interpretation and Eclectic Human Heritage in Lithuania. *Tourism Management* 28 (2): 519–529.
- Wouters, Ruud, and Stefaan Walgrave. 2017. Demonstrating Power: How Protest Persuades Political Representatives. *American Sociological Review* 82 (2): 361–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122417690325>.
- Zubrzycki, Geneviève. 2011. History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish Mythology. *Qualitative Sociology* 34 (1): 21–57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-010-9184-7>.
- Zubrzycki, Geneviève. 2013. Aesthetic Revolt and the Remaking of National Identity in Québec, 1960–1969. *Theory and Society* 42 (5): 423–475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-013-9199-7>.
- Zubrzycki, Geneviève. 2017. *National Matters: Materiality, Culture and Nationalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Matthew Coetzee** is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the University of Notre Dame and a Fellow at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies. His research examines how collective memory, cultural objects, and digital media shape democracy, development, and social cohesion in post-conflict societies. As part of a broader research agenda on civil repair and the dynamics of civil society, his work focuses on community responses to state failure and racial violence in post-Apartheid South Africa, with particular attention to how historical narratives and local civic action mediate crisis and repair.

