

Graphic history and style: Dada Khanyisa's drawings for *The Widow of Marabastad*

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, South African comics have explored resistance history, with organisations like the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED) producing works to counter apartheid education. Muziwakhe Nhlabatsi's *Down Second Avenue* (1981), a comic adaptation of Es'kia Mphahlele's autobiography for SACHED's *Upbeat* magazine, is a key example. More recently, Richard Conyngham's *All rise: Resistance and rebellion in South Africa 1910-1948* (2021) has continued this tradition, highlighting working-class resistance. One chapter, *The widow of Marabastad*, illustrated by Dada Khanyisa, recounts Helena Detody's defiance of the 1925 night passes law, leading to a legal victory for black women's freedom of movement. Both *The widow of Marabastad* and *Down Second Avenue* depict Marabastad, emphasise women's roles in resisting injustice, and reflect the distinct styles of their illustrators. The analysis of drawing styles in graphic histories is often overlooked despite their importance in historical narratives (Ahmed 2012). In this article, we focus on Khanyisa's portrayal of the characters and Marabastad, using Mikkonen's (2017) writing on narratology in comics. We specifically examine graphic style and subjectivity, and following an interview with Khanyisa, we argue that their approach challenges the notion of "objective history", explicitly acknowledging their own subjectivity, and encouraging readers to critically engage with how history is presented.

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Stairways and Ruins

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in historians engaging with the creation of graphic histories, often emphasising marginalised voices (Barrett 2022:37). Graphic history refers to ‘non-fiction, historical accounts, narratives, or studies that use original drawings or a graphical component’ (Barrett 2022:35). Rather than simplifying history, Rob Kristofferson and Simon Orpana (2018:193) argue that graphic histories offer innovative methods for utilising primary sources, enhancing accessibility, and fostering critical awareness among broader audiences. The authors highlight that graphic histories amplify the voices of represented communities through an engaging medium.

Maheen Ahmed (2012:187) observes that ‘writing history has always sat more or less uncomfortably on the fence between factual reporting and somewhat fictional, subjectively-tinged narration.’ The genre of graphic history is often met with questions regarding its efficacy and legitimacy within academic history (Barrett 2022:38). Despite some potential shortcomings in historical interpretation, Trevor Getz (2019) contends that some graphic histories can indeed exert significant societal influence.

Getz (2019) acknowledges that critiques of comics as oversimplifying discourse are longstanding, yet he also notes the well-established global recognition of historical comics’ value. He asserts that graphic histories are particularly effective in illustrating individual experiences that shed light on broader social issues, trauma, or transformation, combining art and text to address complex historical interpretations. Despite the challenges of balancing historical accuracy with artistic expression, successful historical comics manage to use the medium’s strengths to convey engaging narratives (Getz 2019).

In South Africa, the potential and value of comics as a tool to ‘popularise history’ (cf. SACHED 1990:9) was explored during the 1980s by organisations such as the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), an educational non-governmental organisation (Mason 2010:105), which offered alternative education that opposed apartheid state education (Aitchison 2003:133). In 1981, *Down Second Avenue*, the memoir of the South African writer, educationist, artist, and activist Es’kia Mphahlele, was serialised in comic format for the youth magazine *Upbeat*, published by SACHED. This comic book adaption was drawn by Mzwakhe (Muziwakhe Nhlabatsi), a Sowetan-born graphic artist who would draw three further serialised comics for *Upbeat*, including one based on oral history interviews by historian Peter Delius, titled *Taxi driver* (Perlman & Borraine 1991:15). In 1988, the serialised strips of *Down Second Avenue* were compiled into a single volume, with some adapted and additional panels, into the 12-page *Down Second Avenue* the comic, with an additional 12 page supplement of educational materials.¹

More recently, Richard Conyngham's (2021) graphic history *All rise: Resistance and rebellion in South Africa 1910-1948* brought to light six forgotten stories of working-class resistance drawn from the archives of the South African Supreme Court of Appeals with the aim of making them broadly accessible (Etges 2023:57). Chapter Four of this publication, *The widow of Marabastad*, drawn by Dada Khanyisa, recounts washerwoman, widow, and Marabastad resident Helena Detody's 1925 defiance against the government's imposition of night passes² for black women. Detody volunteered to provoke arrest by going out at night without a pass, and her subsequent legal battle resulted in a landmark victory at the Appellate Division, securing black women's unrestricted movement at night for the following three decades.

The widow of Marabastad harks back to the practice of presenting historical narratives of resistance in graphic format, a practice that started appearing in the 1980s in South Africa, which shows some similarities to *Down Second Avenue* the comic in that both reference Mphahlele's Marabastad and highlight the role of women in challenging injustice. The drawings for both also reflect the signature graphic styles of the artists who created them.

Ahmed (2012:195) argues that the different styles of drawing – ranging from exaggerated caricatures to lifelike images – are rarely analysed as broad categories within graphic histories. This gap in the ongoing discussion is important, especially since historians often face challenges with how the past is portrayed in visual media. Therefore, understanding how drawing relates to reality is crucial for interpreting how history is depicted in graphic novels and the significance thereof (Ahmed 2012:195). Similarly, Hillary Chute (2010:198) emphasises the importance of drawing in comics, stating that:

Because comic texts are conspicuously drawn by hand and thus inherently reject transparency, instead foregrounding their situatedness, nonfiction comics demand attention to history's discursivity. The question of the nature of the visual—the work that it does, and how—is critical to texts that claim historicity, and that operate within, and are expressive of, the landscape of the traumatic.

In this article, we³ focus on the drawings for *The widow of Marabastad* by Dada Khanyisa⁴ to explore the graphic style in which the characters and Marabastad are represented. Our analysis makes use of Kai Mikkonen's (2017) writing on narratology in comics, particularly his examination of graphic style and subjectivity. Mikkonen (2017:109) notes that

[a] cartoonist's subjectivity can be detected in the use and combination of stylistic conventions such as the graphic line, lettering, colour, or the spatial organisation of the page. Traditionally, graphic style, the way of drawing comics, has been seen as a kind of signature of the story's creation, the image bearing the signs of its making.

The cartoonist's graphic style in a comic can function to communicate their 'tone, approach, and perception of the world', and can reflect their unique approach, linking it more to personal expression than to the subject being depicted (Mikkonen 2017:111). Similarly, Chute (2016:34) asserts that style is not a 'mere representational register but a narrative and political choice'. Before proceeding with the analysis of the comic, we provide some context on the process of creating *The widow of Marabastad* and on the background of Dada Khanyisa by drawing on secondary literature and an interview with the artist.⁵

Creating *The Widow of Marabastad*

The widow of Marabastad is one of six historical narratives researched and written by Richard Conyngham and drawn by different South African artists. Conyngham intentionally collaborated with illustrators 'with different backgrounds and identities' to ensure the inclusion of different styles and perspectives (Etges 2023:58). In an interview with Andreas Etges (2023:58), Conyngham discusses the process of creating *All rise*, which started with extensive research on the court records in the archives of the South African Supreme Court of Appeals in Bloemfontein, after which he 'developed a detailed, annotated script for each story'. He wrote the script in a way that 'matched the page layout', using frames to organise dialogue and third-person narration, while also providing notes to the artist on how he envisioned each scene. Each story is followed by an account of the research and drawing process by providing examples of the primary sources used, including photographs and preparatory sketches by the artist. This was done to provide a 'reality check' and to show the intertwined nature of the research and artistic process (Conyngham in Etges 2023:66-67).

Khanyisa collaborated with Conyngham to visually interpret his script for *The widow of Marabastad*. Khanyisa studied at the National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA) in Johannesburg and continued their visual art studies at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town (Chiya 2018). Central to Khanyisa's artwork is the human portrait, whether drawn, painted or sculpted in relief, featuring 'droopy eyelids, exaggerated button noses, and defined jaws' (Hlalethwa 2020). This highly exaggerated signature style (Hlalethwa 2020) originated in Khanyisa's animation studies at NEMISA, where the importance of developing 'a distinct style that distinguishes one from everyone else' was emphasised. Subsequently, they used this style when studying visual art in Cape Town and also consistently thereafter as part of their artistic practice. While the style's origins were apolitical and rather based on exaggeration or caricature, it has been interpreted 'in a political way' (Khanyisa 2024).

Khanyisa has participated in numerous group and solo exhibitions (Hlaethwa 2020), and their work was included in the *Heroes: Principles of African greatness* exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. Khanyisa's diverse body of work – including sneakers, graphic art, and paintings – is rooted in South African politics and popular culture (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, 2024). Arts writer Sinazo Chiya (2018:14) notes that Khanyisa's 'multi-dimensional materiality reckons with the prismatic nature of the Black South African experience', whereas Conyngham (2021:248) describes their work as exploring 'the intersection of technology and contemporary social culture with respect to the Black Experience'.

Khanyisa's work has been compared to that of South African artist Dumile Feni (1942-1991) (Joja 2020), a comparison which they find 'very flattering, because Dumile is one of the people I studied, and whose practice resonates in a way that ... I cannot put into words' (Khanyisa 2024). Khanyisa (2024) cites South African painters Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993) and George Pemba (1912-2001) and sculptor Eduardo Villa (1915-2011), along with Shona soapstone sculptors from Tengenenge Sculpture Village in Zimbabwe as 'people that I kind of aligned my visual aspirations with'.

Zaza Hlaethwa (2020) explains that to 'make a Dada Khanyisa', they follow an intuitive creative process they call 'nakanjani', meaning 'by any means' in Zulu. Ray Maota (2019) quotes Khanyisa as explaining, 'I usually refer to my craft form or style as "nakanjani", as it allows for the use of different materials and it accommodates multiple outcomes. The craft is not limited to certain subject matters and materials.' A parallel can be found in the way Conyngham (in Etges 2023:65) explains his process of writing history as creating 'composite characters' 'based on scattered facts', or finding 'very remote fragments, just enough to pull together a reliable picture of the events that took place'.

Khanyisa (2024) explains that collaborating with Conyngham involved working together through the outline of the story and adding 'a bit of my voice to kind of localise it ... bring it closer to reality ... that particular chapter ... relied a lot on some understanding of ... the environment these people were in, and like understanding the temperaments ... of the characters'. Khanyisa (2024) worked on establishing a consistent visual language and spent much time finding historical photographic references, relying in particular on books by photographers who captured township life in the past, such as Peter Magubane (1932-2024).

While some of the illustrators for *All rise* were fortunate to have access to a range of primary textual and visual sources to support their visual execution, this was unfortunately not the case for *The widow of Marabastad*, for which there was 'almost nothing' available (Etges 2023:62). Faced with very few primary sources, Conyngham (2021:148) drew

inspiration from Es'kia Mphahlele's memoir *Down Second Avenue* (1959) for the story's social setting and the everyday experiences of the characters. Khanyisa (2024) felt strongly about not representing the characters by focusing on their difficult circumstances, but rather depicting them as people going about their daily lives aiming 'to focus on the human as opposed to the circumstance' and situating 'them in an environment that was as dignified as we can get for that time'. The following sections explore how this was done by first considering the representation of the characters, followed by that of Marabastad.

Representing characters

The widow of Marabastad features a cast of historical characters supplemented by fictional characters, including the narrator addressed as 'Ma' by her son Mpho. The primary protagonist, Helena Detody, is known only through the short court transcription of the words she spoke during her first court appearance in July 1925. She was a washerwoman and widow who lived in Marabastad (Conyngham 2021:148). Of her friend 'Annie' who joined her in the pass protest, nothing is known but her name. The three historical figures who make an appearance during the course of the narrative are Peter Matseke, the chairman of the Transvaal National Congress Pretoria branch, Sefako Makgatho, the second president of the African National Congress and a preacher, and Charlotte Maxeke, an activist and leader in women's resistance against passes (Conyngham 2021:150).

All these characters, whether real or fictional, are depicted in the same graphic style comprising heavily outlined, simplified shapes accentuated with sharp, bright white highlights, their faces depicted with the heavy eyelids and sculptural noses typical of Khanyisa's character style. The figures have a solid, sculptural quality and appear to be coloured with watercolours. Warm tones reminiscent of Gerard Sekoto's paintings of Sophiatown in the 1940s are used to depict present events, while more desaturated colours are used to present past events. Khanyisa (2024) observes that Sekoto's paintings, such as the *Yellow houses: District Six* (1942), 'brings colour to the past', which we tend to think of as being in black and white due to the use of black and white photography. Khanyisa (2024) notes that paintings of the past can 'render the feeling of being in that space' in a vivid and realistic way. The human figures are distinguishable through differences in clothing, including clothing colour and pattern, as some clothes are filled with collaged fabric. This is seen in the Shweshwe patterns in Helena and Annie's dresses (Figure 1) and the check-patterned shirt worn by Annie's husband. A variety of hairstyles and accessories serve to further individualise the characters. However, despite these differences, the figures are characterised by a sameness due to the strong graphic style.



FIGURE N° 1



Richard Conyngham & Dada Khanyisa, *The widow of Marabastad*, page 130. 2021. Mixed media. 184 x 250 mm. Courtesy Catalyst Press LLC and Richard Conyngham.

This distinct style is used even when reference photographs of individuals were available, as is the case with Matseke, Makgatho and Maxeke, whose photographs are reprinted in the chapter's afterword alongside Khanyisa's preparatory sketches of them. These show that other than slight similarities in hair styling, there is little resemblance between the photographs and the final drawings. Khanyisa (2024) explains that the inclusion of these characters 'grounded our fictitious approach'. Therefore, it is their presence, rather than their realistic depiction, that enhances the truth value of the narrative. In a 2024 interview with Doug Gillen of Juxtapose magazine, Khanyisa spoke about the challenges of referencing real people in their work, noting that their stylised approach often results in unintentional caricature. They highlighted the difficulty of capturing a person's complete essence, leading them to rely more on imagination, allowing viewers to interpret the figures in their own way.

As there were no existing portraits of Helena or Annie available, it is expected that the artist would take some creative license in their representation. However, by avoiding a mimetic representation of the other characters, Khanyisa also creates a sense of distance that underscores the interpretive nature of the work. Khanyisa (2024) explains that:

these eyes that have big lids and, you know the broad nose with the tiny openings, that's something I can copy-paste across many faces, many shapes. So it helps me break away from having to ... render ... an accurate representation of a person... It's like, okay, I just have the idea of the face and the hair and everything else ...I can easily make that up...

In her book *Illustration and heritage*, British-based scholar Rachel Emily Taylor (2024:109) explores the ethical and moral challenges illustrators face in representing real individuals and imagined historical characters. She questions whether illustrators can bypass constraints on presenting historical 'truth' and examines how factors like historical context, the subject portrayed, and the motivations of the illustrator influence their approach. Catrin Morgan (2014:18) highlights that while illustration is often linked to the concept of "illumination", implying its role in clarifying and making narratives accessible, it does not need to be strictly mimetic or entirely truthful to be enlightening. Both illustration and heritage involve representation, which is inherently interpretive and not wholly objective. Illustration, like heritage, can highlight absences and act as a space for interpretation, rather than merely depicting the visible (Taylor 2024:39).

The selection of Khanyisa, who, as Gillen (2024) notes, depicts people who 'aren't specific' but have been 'altered' in a way that they could be anyone, circumvented the issue of speculating on an individual's features and character that results from the lack of reference material and primary sources. Due to limited available sources, Conyngham (in Etges 2023:64-65) expresses hesitation in speculating about Helena's inner character. He states, 'If only we could somehow get into the mind of Helena Detody, to understand what factors motivated her to step forward' (Etges 2023:63). Khanyisa (2024) also acknowledges that it was not possible to step 'into the shoes of the characters ... because of the time we live in and because of the people we are'.

Therefore, while Mikkonen (2017:120) notes that graphic style can be used to convey a character's personality and emotional state, Khanyisa's style does not serve such an individualising function. One notable aspect of the chapter is the variation in depicting characters from different racial groups. While the 'maker's mark' (Mikkonen 2017:109) is clearly evident in the highly stylised drawings of the black characters, Khanyisa (2024) deliberately chooses to depict the white characters more realistically.

Such a shift in style in a single comic is a key area of interest when considering graphic style. Mikkonen (2017:110) explains that these variations are important because they draw

attention to stylistic contrasts and can emphasise narrative functions such as changes in perspective, time, or storyline. Devices for presenting character, and character subjectivity in comics, as well as the interaction of these techniques, can significantly impact the story, particularly when different styles are used for different characters or when the writer and cartoonist are distinct individuals, creating varied verbal and visual narratives (Mikkonen 2017:110).

A move to a more realistic style becomes evident in the drawing of the white policeman who arrests Helena. He is drawn with a sharp nose and more realistic, less exaggerated features, his eyes clearly showing focus and eye contact. The same style is used for Helena's lawyer and the judges who rule on her case (Figure 2). While no reference images for these characters are provided in the supplementary information, Conyngham did provide photographic references for all the judges to Khanyisa (2024), and their portrayal of Judge Curlewis does resemble photographs of him.



FIGURE N° 2



Richard Conyngham and Dada Khanyisa, *The widow of Marabastad*, page 146. 2021. Mixed media. 184 x 250 mm. Courtesy Catalyst Press LLC and Richard Conyngham.

The different drawing styles with which black and white characters are represented in the chapter were chosen by Khanyisa (2024) to indicate the clear distinctions made between black and white during the time, and it was also a decision based on the politics of representation. Khanyisa (2024) notes that ‘there’s something about ... speaking for a demographic you don’t belong to that ... made me shy about attaching caricature like-features to a demographic I don’t belong to’.

The stylistic contrast between the depictions of those in power at the time (white men) and the more generalised portrayal of marginalised groups—particularly black women—in the context of this comic potentially serves as a visual commentary on the shared experience between Helena and other black women of the time. The judicial decision to focus on Helena’s case, as representing a broader struggle for black women, is perhaps mirrored by Khanyisa’s exploration of collective identity and empowerment through the unifying use of their distinct graphic style.

Just as Khanyisa’s artworks explore the nuances of the “Black Experience”, this stylistic contrast between black and white characters in *The widow of Marabastad* may symbolise how society often diminishes or generalises marginalised identities. These visual strategies highlight resistance against social fragmentation, conveying the resilience and unity of marginalised groups while critiquing societal oversimplifications of their identities. By representing all the black characters in the same graphic style, Khanyisa gives voice to their shared struggle, which is exemplified in an exchange between Peter Maseke and Annie when she asks, ‘But it only affects us women, why do you care?’ and he responds, ‘What affects you affects all of us’ (Conyngham 2021:132).

Another rupture in style occurs through integrating historical photographs into Khanyisa’s illustrations at two points in the narrative, with the change in style acting as a reminder of the non-fiction, documentary nature of the comic. The first instance occurs when the narrator gives Mpho a newspaper clipping documenting a pass protest in the Orange Free State (Figure 3). However, the source of the image is unclear as it is too blurry. The chapter concludes with the inclusion of Jürgen Schadeberg’s photograph of the Women’s March to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956 (Getty Images 2024). Khanyisa’s illustrations are collaged into the photo, which helps the reader link a character seen gossiping with the narrator earlier in the comic to her later participation in the march, identified through a recurring dress pattern. This connection integrates the historical event into the narrative, linking the past and present and placing the event within the story’s timeline. Including photographs in comics draws attention to perspective and the use of multiple viewpoints, prompting consideration of how the medium uniquely represents visual experiences (Mikkonen 2017:161). In *The widow of Marabastad*, the photographs seem to be included as evidence of the truth of the story. Together with the evidence presented in the afterword

of the chapter, they show how Helena's story has been pieced together and is located in the women's resistance against the night passes.



FIGURE N° 3



Richard Conyngham and Dada Khanyisa, *The widow of Marabastad*, page 136. 2021. Mixed media. 184 x 250 mm. Courtesy Catalyst Press LLC and Richard Conyngham.

Representing Marabastad

Marie Ryan (2014) writes that '[r]epresentations of space are not necessarily narratives—think of geographical maps, landscape paintings, etc. – but all narratives imply a world with spatial extension, even when spatial information is withheld'. The representation of space in graphic history is an important part of its positioning because the design of spaces and the buildings that inhabit them play a large part in how people and societies interact. South Africa's apartheid history included geographic segregation, a practice in which people of colour were forced to live in demarcated areas, often on the outskirts

of main cities. The apartheid policy of geographic segregation has shaped the country's history and continues to have an impact on the daily lives of South Africans over thirty years after the advent of democracy. Marabastad remains an important historical site of resistance to the apartheid government, and the setting is arguably as important as the individual story of Helena Detody. Understanding how this space is represented becomes integral to understanding the chapter under discussion as a graphic history.

Marabastad, much like Johannesburg's Sophiatown, emerged as a centre for political and labour resistance. Its history is deeply intertwined with the development of Tshwane and South Africa, embodying the urban migration patterns that shaped the nation over the past century (Clark 2008:20, 22). Situated on the north-western edge of Pretoria, Marabastad developed into a diverse community, providing a source of cheap labour while simultaneously offering opportunities to individuals from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. Despite its geographical proximity to Pretoria, the area remained marginalised, consistently shaped by discriminatory laws (Clark 2008:18). Residents frequently resisted forced removals, which were justified by overcrowding and racial segregation policies. The 1913 Transvaal Native Land Act and other racially discriminative laws reserved central urban areas like Pretoria for white residents, displacing Marabastad's population to segregated townships such as Atteridgeville and Laudium (Clark 2008:20). Anti-apartheid movements, including protests led by Peter Matseke in the 1920s and the Marabastad Rebellion in the 1940s, further solidified the area's significance in South Africa's liberation struggle (Clark 2008:20). John Frederick Casper Clarke (2008:15) notes that Marabastad's history of migration, urbanisation, and racial segregation reflects the broader struggles that have defined South Africa's social and political landscape.

Ryan (2014) argues that one of the strengths of visual narratives lies in their capacity to convey spatial configurations more clearly and intricately than verbal narratives can achieve. Scott McCloud (2006:167-168) points out that some comics, particularly historical ones, focus significantly on the world where the story unfolds, while others are less dependent on a sense of place. In discussing worldbuilding in comics, he emphasises that thorough research can distinguish between creating generic environments and those that resonate with memoirs and personal experiences, lending them credibility (McCloud 2006:176-177). He (McCloud 2006:180) notes, '[e]ven everyday settings can be visually rich ... even in scenes where the audience is more focused on what characters are saying than on their surroundings, paying attention to the details can evoke a mood, connect with readers' sensory memories, or remind them of the broader context in which the conversation takes place'.

Using an establishing shot in a frame of a graphic novel is a standard technique used to immerse readers in the story world and convey a sense of location (McCloud 2006:160).

The bibliography for the chapter references the 2004 reprint of Mphahlele's memoir (Conyngham 2021:241), which contains no illustrations and is clearly based on chapter four, *Water tap* (Mphahlele 1959:29), which describes community members from Marabastad waiting in a queue for water. This acts as the two opening scenes for the chapter – the first, showing two women in the streets of Marabastad, presumably on their way to collect water and the second, showing the actual queue.

Khanyisa (2024) indicates they could not access the 1981 graphic version commissioned by SACHED and illustrated by Muziwakhe Nhlabatsi. Their visual research of Marabastad included internet image searches and books to understand the 'feeling' of Marabastad (Khanyisa 2024).

Khanyisa uses light pencil sketches or silhouettes to depict the buildings and surroundings of Marabastad. They (Khanyisa 2024) explain, '[t]here are a lot of things I suggested but didn't go into detail about because it was also detail I wasn't privy to'. Similarities to photographs of Marabastad in the 1970s and Nhlabatsi's illustrated version of *Down Second Avenue*, featuring peaked corrugated iron roofs and enclosed verandas, are evident. This mirrors what Cornelius van der Westhuizen (2022:14) describes as the 'second vernacular', incorporating Georgian, Victorian (1837-1901), and Edwardian (1901-1914) styles introduced by the British to the Transvaal. These styles, while adapted to local materials and craftsmanship, often included prefabricated elements like corrugated metal and iron or timber columns (Fisher 1998 in van der Westhuizen 2022:14). Examples of the use of prefabricated materials, such as corrugated iron, are evident in Khanyisa's illustrations, as is evidence of Victorian-style wrap-around verandas and broekielace⁶ designs, seen on page 132 of the chapter (Conyngham 2021:132).⁷ Marabastad is described by Es'kia Mphahlele (1959:31-32) as 'an organised rubble of tin cans', and he notes that although the streets were straight, the closely packed together and rusting houses appeared to be slowly falling apart. Khanyisa's hazy illustrations of Marabastad in the morning appear to echo Mphahlele's depiction of daily life, where smoke from coal braziers would cover the area in the mornings and afternoons (Mphahlele 1959:32).

In *Visualizing the spaces of childhood in graphic memoirs*, Mary Jo Maynes (2021:64) discusses how Mogorosi Motshumi's graphic memoir portrays black townships under apartheid as childhood landscapes that cannot be separated from their political context. Instead of evoking nostalgia, they are spaces to escape, representing collective trauma rather than individual experiences. Andy Mason and Su Opperman (2018:52) also reflect on graphic memoirs, noting that 'the cumulative effect [of the memoir] is of a voice that speaks not just for the individual, but for the community, for all who share the experience of living an unhappy, disadvantaged life because of an oppressive social and political system'.

Khanyisa's representation of the township lacks the graphic details of neglect and poor service delivery seen in Nhlabatsi's (1981) renderings, which depict deteriorating houses, a dead dog in the street, sewage and water running along the road, litter, and overturned bins. Similarly, it differs from Clark's (2007) historical photographs that show the deteriorating state of the buildings. The sagging fences that Mphahlele (1959:32) described as 'wires that hung limp, standards always swaying in drunken fashion' are absent in Khanyisa's version. Instead, two chicken wire fences stand tall and tightly strung, with others drawn as straight lines. Though the interiors lack detail, they still convey the characters' socioeconomic state: for example, in Annie's house (Figure 3), there is no dining room table, and the family eats on a bench against the wall. The dim light suggests a lack of interior lighting or electricity. Khanyisa (2024) notes, 'It wasn't... an attempt to present these people as having outlandish lifestyles, or lives. Particularly in Annie's house ... the furniture was very modest, like a bench and a table, which is closer to the truth. And also ... the space is relatively dark, with just a small window'. Annie's house does, however, include a coal stove, which Mphahlele's (1959) memoir noted that only one family in Marabastad was reported to have, while others used messier coal braziers.

Khanyisa's illustrations include a dirt road, cracked and peeling paint, and an exposed brick wall and the opening frame suggests water – or perhaps sewage – running alongside a house (Figure 4). The presence of a communal street tap, where people gather to collect water, indicates the lack of internal plumbing, with poorly maintained infrastructure. They have, however, deliberately avoided the representation of the township as a space that is in disrepair (Khanyisa 2024). Khanyisa (2024) notes that details introduced in one part of a narrative can be subtly referenced elsewhere, allowing readers to recognise and connect them more easily. They also mention that the small details in the illustrations suggest that the characters have concerns that extend beyond the limitations of their time, that '[t]hey can sit down and have a conversation, and there are teachable moments from time to time'. Khanyisa (2024) refers specifically to the inclusion of a jacaranda tree as a detail that lends credibility to the representation of the space, highlighting not only the time of year, but also the location. Pretoria has the nickname 'Jacaranda City', with the recognisable purple flowers of the trees that bloom around October of every year (Van Vollenhoven 2020:76, 84)

When asked about their depiction of Marabastad, Khanyisa (2024) reiterates their commitment to portraying the dignity of township life as something they 'felt strongly about'. The visual portrayal reflects their optimism and a personal understanding of life in the townships, which they set up as a 'counter-argument', challenging the notion that people in the townships are in a state of 'helplessness ... and despair', according to (Khanyisa 2024), They continue (2024):



FIGURE N° 4



Richard Conyngham and Dada Khanyisa, *The widow of Marabastad*, page 129. 2021. Mixed media. 184 x 250 mm. Courtesy Catalyst Press LLC and Richard Conyngham.

I tried to work us out of that, that position of these people are so like, burdened by, you know, their circumstances. Yes, they were, but it's like they were in between... Let's also talk about the in between where people have to eat. You can be sad, but you have to eat. And what are you eating? You have to see people around you, and what are you doing when you see each other? ... We had to fit in all the stuff that kind of, like, keep people alive... While highlighting the complexities of the time, without also taking away from the fact that, okay, people were living through these circumstances until they were too tired of them.

In this way, Marabastad, as represented by Khanyisa, is not necessarily a place that needs to be escaped from, but a place that presents the reader with a representation of lives lived, despite their difficulties. The memoir and legal court documents combine personal, emotional experiences with official, factual records. Mphahlele's memoir provides *The widow of Marabastad* with a subjective, lived perspective that is not reflected

in the formal language of court documents, and arguably blurs the line between fact, memory and fiction. Scot French (1995:10) argues that some historians draw a clear line between history and memory, viewing history as evidence-based and memory as flexible. However, history can be seen as a form of memory – it is not severed from memory. While historians often prioritise their discipline over less formal types of memory, history is also shaped by new sources, methods, and societal changes. The relationship between history and other forms of memory is interconnected, with each influencing the other. *The widow of Marabastad* exemplifies this, using separate but interconnected sources to visualise the setting for Helena’s story. In this way, Marabastad is not just a setting, but an active narrative space that reflects the struggles and resistance of its inhabitants in a broader narrative.

Conclusion

In this article, we positioned *The widow of Marabastad* as a contribution to the expanding collection of South African graphic histories. We also interpreted the visual style employed by illustrator Dada Khanyisa in their depiction of the characters and the comic’s setting. Like other graphic histories, *All Rise*, and specifically *The widow of Marabastad*, provides an opportunity to present multiple perspectives on a historical event. Khanyisa’s style adds more than just a ‘touch of fun’ to the narrative; it encourages readers to critically engage with how history is portrayed and to contemplate deeper questions surrounding ‘representation, truth, presentism, and perspective’ (Barrett 2020:33).

The stylistic shift in this chapter, compared to others in the book, suggests a conscious departure, not merely as a result of limited access to references, but as a broader critique of history that transcends any single narrative. As Taylor (2023) notes, illustrators can give voice to overlooked histories through their craft. Viewing Khanyisa’s work through the lens of the ‘artist as historian’ aligns with the idea that such works invite readers to contemplate the past, connect events, characters, and objects, and reconsider how history is represented in broader culture (Taylor 2023:154). However, Khanyisa (2024) remains acutely aware of the ‘in-betweens’ of the past, balancing history, memory, and fiction. The constructed nature of their retelling of Helena’s story is evident in the stylistic choices that create a distance between the illustrator’s voice, those of the characters, and the story setting. The illustrations do not claim historical accuracy; rather, they provide readers with details that invite them to contribute to piecing together Helena’s story.

Ultimately, we believe that through the stylistic approach to *The widow of Marabastad*, Khanyisa explicitly acknowledges their own subjectivity. The chapter moves away from an objective history and situates itself in relation to other historical texts, images, and

the illustrator's insights. By engaging readers in this reflection, the comic not only presents a historical narrative but also encourages a critical examination of how history is constructed and interpreted, reinforcing the role of graphic style in shaping our understanding of the past.

Notes

1. SACHED considered its publication to be the first in a series of People's College Comics (Mason 2010:105). *Equiano: The slave who fought to be free*, illustrated by Rick Andrew, was also published in 1988, and thereafter *Mhudi*, adapted from Sol Plaatje's novel, appeared. It was drawn by Grant Cresswell and co-published with the Storyteller Group (Mason 2010:105).
2. Night passes were documents required under apartheid laws for Black South Africans to be outside of their designated areas after dark. These passes were a component of the broader pass laws that enforced strict racial segregation and restricted the movement of the non-white population (Clark & Worger 2011:21; 23; 50).
3. The authors acknowledge their use of ChatGPT [<https://chat.openai.com/>] and Grammarly for reviewing grammar and shortening texts in the final stages of this article.
4. In official gallery representations and in media articles, Dada Khanyisa is referred to using they/them pronouns. In this article, we refer to them accordingly.
5. Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the University of Pretoria's Research Ethics Committee on 3 October 2024 (HUM 005 / 1024).
6. Broekielace is defined as 'Victorian-style ornamental wrought-iron work, used on verandahs, or as fencing; decorative woodwork' (Dictionary for South African English 2023).
7. Similarities can be found in historical photos of Marabastad from 1970-1973 in JFC Clark's 2007 book *A glimpse into Marabastad*. Notably, photos of the intersections of Grand Street and 6th Street (8), the view east along Grand Street (51), the corner of Grand and 7th Streets (40, 41), and Bloed Street (36) show the 'architectural style typical of many houses built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Asiatic Bazaar and Cape Location sections of Marabastad' (Clark, 2007:40).

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