Authoring Justice

Capstone Projects 2025

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Right Livelihood

Co-funded by the European Union

Coming to terms with uncomfortable truths: The Phoenix riots.

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It came as a dreadful shock to South Africans to find themselves, all of a sudden, engulfed in the devastation the looting and rioting had been causing come July 2021. Nothing but wreckage was left with buildings brought down in flames and shops and other ventures looted leaving behind towns in ashes and completely trashed. Tensions had risen high while chaos ensued. 340 lives were lost amidst the frenzy. It is alleged that the fuse that sparked these crimes and set the streets ablaze was the arrest of the country's former president Jacob Zuma for contempt of court. Was this catastrophe haphazard or was it rather orchestrated, as it may as well have been? How else could crimes so grave prolong into weeks.

The mayhem it produced in the country turned indescribably tragic, remarkably quickly, in the township known as Phoenix taking on, to make matters worse, the unsavoury trait of racial profiling which led to acts of extreme violence against Black Africans. The stories of its survivors come together speaking of a much-needed healing process for South Africans and for South Africa alike.

Phoenix has been known for being a predominantly Indian area as it had been assigned to the Indian indentured labourers during Apartheid. At present its population is mixed accounting the Indian community to be the majority in comparison to Black Africans and other groups. As of the relations of the ones with the

others, these have been described “not to be bad” (SABC News), for the most part amicable though far from idyllic. So, how did these relations turn sour so fast? After all, peaceful resolutions had been reached prior 2021 or better after the massacre of Cato Manor in 1949, event which seemed to be echoing over and again during the aggressions perpetrated at the population passing through Phoenix and the neighbouring KwaMashu and Inanda in July 2021.

These onslaughts were being committed on behalf of members of the Indian community who whilst assaulting the first of the survivors, smashing his car and manhandling him, were spuing racial slurs and remarking “what Black people did in 1949, it’s their turn… they [the Indians] do it to Black people!” (SABC News) as Chris B. describes his experience. Chris B. was making his way as any other day unaware of what awaited ahead calmly approaching Phoenix. It was then that he noticed two vehicles being torched whose suffocating flames and smoke rendered the air unbreathable. One of these was a Toyota Corolla also teasingly called ‘a cockroach’. The other a small truck, possibly a bakkie. Chris B. continued on his journey only to be stopped in his tracks and for the brutal assault to commence with the assailants approaching him from the driver’s side of his car. Viciously dragged out of his car the torment was underway until the moment of his escape, as he recalls it, by a fluke.

The incident recalled in the unrest refers to the massacre of the Indian community in 1949 on behalf of some members of the Black communities of which Chris B. confesses having no prior knowledge. He even had to look it up to make sense of what they we’re vindicating. It became clear to him that he had borne the brunt of an unhealed wound that resurfaced the day he drove through Phoenix. Clippings from back then show a scenario not dissimilar to that of the unrest of 2021, that of desolation. However, reputable authors have discussed by far and large the occurrence of Cato Manor pondering a query that holds true to this day though roles have been reverted: are these “a symbol of African antagonism against Indians or an abnormal eruption

symbolic of a frustrated and abnormal society" (Ramamurthi, 1994, 543).

Despite making it out alive and virtually unscathed, Chris B.'s neighbours, unfortunately, met a different fate. Lokishi, for instance, was left to fend for himself lacking the support of the local police the day of the incident and plainly told to bugger off and "go die in hospital" (SABC News). He suffered facial abrasions and lacerations. Mr Mokubung, instead, had an arm and leg broken and was bed ridden. He also mentioned how this angered his son and how, as a concerned father, he had taken him out of school in Phoenix so as to prevent him from redirecting his anger and retaliating against his Indian classmates. There is a serious need to face racism head on or "it cannot be rooted out" (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2024, 101), in his view.

The ideal of non-racialism and colour-blindness has not been achieved. As noted by the Collective, a group of community leaders, "we have to confront painful truths but [also] rely on the overwhelming goodness of the vast majority of the people" (SAHRC, 2024, 133). The clear need for greater social cohesion has been cast aside, it would appear, also by the government which has seemingly been leaving "the sores festering" (Ramamurthi, 1994, 546) and distrust to grow, in this specific instance, between Indian Africans and Black Africans, contrary to what had been stipulated in the interim Constitution of 1993 which, in short, advocates:

"*to transcend the divisions and strife of the past [calling for] a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimisation" (114)*.

The impression drawn from Chris B.'s experience is that there is still trauma around the massacre of Cato Manor which is made even more significant when considering "the narrative around those events had been communicated either directly or indirectly

across generations and this has formed a distorted view of reality of the present situation that led into a violent reaction" (SAHRC, 2024, 140); testament to the fact that it is the social process that is also the focus and that, despite classical judicial responses, a more comprehensive and holistic approach needs to be taken on.

The lacklustre approach of the national police had people forming community neighbourhood watches including community policing forums to safeguard their properties and their lives and to prevent looters and rioters from entering. Convener Maharaj also warranted against the role played by social media in aggravating the situation as it contributed to "instilling the fear of God" (SABC News) amidst the Indian communities, he exclaims. For the most part, these posts were functional and peaceful. Sadly, though, the same cannot be said for Phoenix where the violence took on racial connotations and the end result was gruesome, to say the least.

Ntethelelo carries the scars not just on his body, but has been deeply emotionally affected. Ntethelelo was out with nine of his friends, some of which acquaintances, after having enjoyed some game they were invited to eat. That day, the 12th July, Ntethelelo with his friends decided to take a short cut on their way home through Phoenix only to be stopped at a roadblock, one of those patrol blocks set up independently from those informally formed by the community. Here his vehicle was searched: "The way they requested to search [...] was laced with insults and anger, that's how I viewed it. There were comments like 'Zuma's people', 'monkeys'. They checked the vehicle, didn't find anything, and told us to proceed" (SAHRC, 2024, 105). As he was making his way, a member of the patrol axed his car, and the group then started to throw stones. Some chose to fight back, but got hit on the head, instead. Armed as these groups were, Nzuza was then shot while Magwaza was assaulted. All of this occurred in a matter of a heartbeat. In fact, Ntethelelo tried to drive away whilst some of his friends attempted to flee on foot only to be assaulted. As he drove shots were fired against the vehicle. "There was another group approaching me as I was fleeing [...] Then the man

who shot at Nsele, shot at me, two bullets. They entered the left-hand side of my back. One exited from my front [...] It was like a game, some [...] were laughing and shouting at us. They were taking photos and videos as this was happening." (Daily Maverick, 2021). By the time Ntethelelo was able to escape, he lost consciousness only to wake up in a clinic a few hours later and to be transported to Addington hospital but by the following day. The nightmare was not over, though: "I was discharged on 24th August and went to my home in Eshowe. That's when I was told that Nzuza, Nsele and Jiyani, who had been in my company [...] had died" (Ibid.), and his car torched for the sake of it.

The platform provided by the South African Human Rights Commission plays a pivotal role in the healing process as it unveils horrid truths that need to be spoken and heard first in its diagnostic of a troubled country. Thulile Ngcobo, for instance, lost her son in the most gruesome manner she recounts "He was attacked in his vehicle and his body was charred beyond recognition" (Daily Maverick, 2022). It is true that South Africa is a State, but it is also true that is not yet a nation as it has been pointed out by professor Zulu during his statement of the unrest. (SAHRC, 2024, 138). Just as in 1949 opposing parts had come to an understanding to unify against the Apartheid regime, could this be considered as another occasion for people to unite so as to support and sustain nation-building? Is this not the will of the people? Are the people ready for change? The unrest and the brutality of Phoenix are an important example of the ungovernability of the nation, showcasing, at the same time, similar patterns arising from the country's past illnesses that come to haunt the present again and this time under a different tune, that of 'kill the farmer, kill the Boer' no longer in resistance to Apartheid, but in retaliation to it.

Therefore, concerns raised by the South African Human Rights Commission on the unrest being the wake up call the country needed marks the urgency and necessity of the people

coming together, but also of facing the uncomfortable truths as we piece the many stories together. This is the case for all South Africans irrespective of colour, race, creed.

Past grievances still appear to manifest with bitterness. Reconciliation knows alternative avenues as those that derive from the communal life in finding ways locally to be able to cope. At the grassroot level means of healing can emerge locally, for example, in forging bonds and, in the aftermath of the riots, bonds were forged and the Phoenix Ubuntu Forum was created from the people of Phoenix and led by Convener Maharaj, to sustain and support those affected by the violence. This took on many forms of local contribution whether this meant providing food supplies or arranging sport initiatives, but one of the major concerns was for their youths fearful of going back to school and the efforts made in collaborating with the department of education to overcome this. Similar peace committees to those of Convener Maharaj began to emerge. It goes farther than that. Known by its acronym PINK (Phoenix, Inanda, Ntuzuma, KwaMashu), this agglomeration, comprised of 15 members belonging to a range of organisations, has developed into a peace and development committee, mostly to avert the furthering of violence, but also to rebuild trust between communities. It is understandable how informal forms of relief are just as important to help healing in the comfort they provide in their quest, among things, for justice. There is, nonetheless, a general sense of dissatisfaction in the lack of meaningful assistance received by some. It runs deeper Bishop Paul Verryn asserts “I think there is a deep, deep sense of pain among the victims, pain that has not been recognised by society at large” (Daily Maverick, 2022).

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From 12 May to 20 July 2025 the Global Campus of Human Rights ran the second edition of its online course called "Authoring Justice". The course focused on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about human rights and social justice issues – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers and affect change around the world. The second iteration included lessons from award-winning authors, activists and publishers, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Kao Kalia Yang, Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Shahram Khosravi, Jemma Neville, Casey Gerald, and Joel Rickett.

The cohort of students included human rights experts, journalists, climate activists, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from migration to racial justice, from youth-led social movements to climate advocacy and beyond. The following pages feature a few selected examples of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.

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Co-funded by the European Union

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