

We can't lose Dulcie again

Dulcie September was the highest ranking ANC operative to be assassinated abroad which is a strange epitaph. Nobody should be remembered for their stature in dying but if and when they are not attributed the stature they deserve while living we are left to appreciate them posthumously. Personally, I remain extremely grateful to have worked on a podcast series that was a partnership between Sound Africa and Open Secrets called *They Killed Dulcie*, or else I would never have encountered the maverick that was Dulcie September.

Meeting Dulcie September has been critically important to my own growth and learning. Not only have I been inspired, moved and fortified by her incorruptible indefatigable persona, but through her legacy and the retelling of her story I have also come to learn nuances and complexities around South African history that have shaped the way I understand both the dynamics of Apartheid and some of the inconvenient truths around the democratic transition.

I am therefore thrilled that Enver Samuel's documentary *Murder in Paris*, a film that does great justice to a woman who dedicated her life to great justice has been released for public broadcasting at perhaps a more timely moment than ever. I am confident that Dulcie's life and legacy will inspire similar feelings of pride and vigour as well as staggering learnings in the ears and imaginations of many, many more South Africans.

Arguably, my generation (I was born just shy of free) has come into adulthood under the unanswered promises of the rainbow nation, imagining and along with a necessary critical inquiry into the narrative and framing of our history. Dulcie September counteracts and complicates some of the dominant narratives around what we view as a struggle cadre. She was a woman, she was coloured, she was in her early 50's at the time of her death, there was no man she was intimately attached to and therefore could not be framed as an appendage to a man bearing the status of "struggle hero".

Dulcie's life reflected

Dulcie was a teacher, Dulcie did yoga, Dulcie wrote humorous, intimate and heart rending postcards and letters to her family back home as often as she could. Dulcie did not abide to patriarchy, Dulcie loved to dance, Dulcie was scared for her life. She was a full and beautiful person and an ardently committed activist who thankfully kept enough of a record of herself, her voice and her experiences, so that she could not be reduced, sanitised or otherwise cast into a convenient archetype. Dulcie was a full and beautiful person forced into martyrdom by a premature and arguably highly preventable death.

We cannot afford to lose the memory of Dulcie, not when we have already lost the prowess of her life, not when she paid the ultimate price to carry out the work she believed would help us build a just, equal and incorrupt society. Remembering Dulcie September is our collective responsibility, and not because of the kind of heroism that so often over-simplifies our nuanced,

complex histories, but because through her work and legacy Dulcie September had a lot to teach us.

Her activism showed no bounds

Dulcie September committed her life to the anti-Apartheid struggle and was hugely impactful in her work. For very brief context she grew up in Athlone where she studied as a teacher and joined the Cape Peninsula Student union after being recruited by her neighbour, long-time friend and comrade Elizabeth Van der Heyden. I would like to note that Elizabeth van der Heyden, a struggle stalwart in her own regard is still alive today and like Dulcie, should be regarded with far more status and appreciation for her role in the struggle. After spending some time with APDUSA and the Unity Movement, Dulcie became frustrated with the movement particularly after the tragedy of the Sharpeville massacre, longing for a political home more oriented around militant action. Along with Elizabeth she became one of the founding members of the Yu Chi Chan Club - the phrase Yu Chi Chan was popularised by Mao Zedong and translates to "*guerrilla warfare*".

The Yu Chi Chan club eventually became the National Liberation Front (NLF) and in 1963 after NLF reading materials were found in Neville Alexander's home, Dulcie and her comrades were arrested and charged under the Criminal Procedure Act. Dulcie spent five years in prison along with her comrades Betty van Der Heyden, Doris van der Heyden and Dorothea Alexander. This group of womxn became influential among their fellow prisoners leading covert political education groups with womxn who had been incarcerated for various reasons, as a result the group were transferred to Kroonstad, a prison demarcated only for political prisoners.

"She would of course never return home."

Upon her release Dulcie was placed under a banning order, this meant of course that she could not engage in any kind of political action but also heartbreakingly that she could not teach. Being under a banning order was like being in exile in her own country. Dulcie could not survive under these circumstance and is known for being as passionate and committed a teacher as she was an activist, with her love and care for South Africa forming an essential part of both her life at home and what would become her work as a sanctions and divestment lobbyist abroad. Dulcie, who was barely offered the opportunity to say goodbye to her family boarded the ship that would carry her to her new life and political career with the ANC. She would of course never return home.

After many years occupying varying roles within the movement and with a specific interest in exposing the international community to the horrors of Bantu Education and the plight of children and women under the Apartheid regime, Dulcie was awarded the role of ANC Chief Representative in France. Her responsibilities in this position were mainly to lead the boycott and divestment campaigns, securing economic sanctions from France, Switzerland and Luxembourg. When reflecting on the current urgent need for our country to instate boycotts, divestments and sanctions toward Israel, inflicting Apartheid reminiscent horror among

Palestinian citizens, it becomes clear how critically important this kind of work would have been. She worked with vehement commitment and thoroughness and was very successful in her role, perhaps so successful that she was killed for it.

Dulcie wrote copious independent notes around what she understood as a network of covert international relations, and corporate entities that ranged from bankers to shipping companies involved in a web of sanctions defying weapons smuggling being run from a covert floor of the South African embassy. What is clear is that what Dulcie was uncovering was a massively important story. A tangled network of underworld dealings aptly described as the Apartheid arms money machine, a term coined by Open Secrets that refers to the various machinations of arms smuggling operations occurring between Europe and South Africa between 1974 and 1994. This was in contravention of UN sanctions and estimated to be worth R500 billion rand, a deadly racket that can be said to have claimed an inestimable number of South African lives, including Dulcie September's.

Dulcie worked with her strong trade union networks to uncover shipping arrangements, she made notes on the comings and goings of the South African embassy, she boldly made public callouts to the French Government demanding that they crack down on these illicit dealings and took on this independent investigation on top of all her other responsibilities. However, despite the importance and inherent risk of this work, was not "taken seriously", a phrase lifted verbatim from her own writing and the testimonies of her colleagues - mostly women both French and South African who supported her and worried for her is an idea that I think is worth further exploration.

Resisting the socialised constructions of the limitations placed on womxn

The continued experience that her work was not "taken seriously" by her superiors. When she started worrying that she was being followed and expressed fears for her life, she was yet again gaslit. She was labelled as paranoid and in suffering this treatment becomes part of the uneasy trajectory of women reduced to the monikers of "hysterical" or "emotional" when expressing valid fears and experiences. As a result of the gaslighting she encountered within her own movement Dulcie became what is known as a soft-target, someone who has no security measures protecting them, somebody who could be easily hit.

In as much as she called out the French government Dulcie was known to call out malfeasance, patriarchy, gendered discrimination and toxic masculinity in her own movement. She was unafraid to criticise and demand accountability from her superiors, some of whom bear names that have come to be eponymous with the anti-Apartheid struggle. Dulcie September became a contentious and "inconvenient" figure both to the French government and to some of those in her own movement.

The question remains, who murdered Dulcie?

We still don't know who murdered Dulcie. Her murder has been met with botched investigation attempts and an inquiry into the case by the French government that is so sparse that it could be considered purposefully inept. There are various threads of speculation that Dulcie's death could have been a result of collusion, or the activities of spies and double agents within her movement. While the lack of support for her personal investigations, the murkiness around the investigations of her murder and the lack of concern for her safety make it easy to believe that there is not enough evidence to support these ideas on political complicity.

However, I think it is fair to say that had Dulcie been "taken seriously", supported, listened to and protected by those with power in her movement perhaps she wouldn't have been as vulnerable, perhaps she would have received the kind of allyship that would have escalated and validated her work, perhaps this would have saved her life.

Now in 2021 we are slowly coming into the knowledge that womxn who have experienced abuse or violence, who stand up to patriarchal power structures, who blow the whistle and who make themselves vulnerable in the assertion of their experiences and opinions must be believed, supported and protected. We have learned the hard won lesson that when women are "taken seriously" the world changes. While it is so important to name and acknowledge Dulcie September's gendered experience, it would also be a reduction to say that the dismissal of Dulcie's critically important claims, her death and the commensurate lack of justice was simply because she was a womxn. Dulcie in her life took on two of the mammoth's that get activists killed and hold society in the vice grip of injustice, patriarchy and racialised capitalism in what is probably it's most essential and most decrepit form, war profiteering.

Dulcie lived a life that was a testament to justice, and in her death has been deprived of it. Those involved in her assassination walk freely and operate with impunity. Speaking at her funeral service in 1988, Oliver Tambo declared that "The ANC makes this solemn vow that these murderers, who today arrogantly strut the globe, will be brought to justice. It might be tomorrow, it might be next year, but they will be brought to justice."

Justice for Dulcie September will most probably not ever be meted out by the movement to which she offered her life, given the ANC's desolate decline into a deluge of corruption and dishonour that would most likely have both OR Tambo and Dulcie September turning in their graves. However, as a direct result of the documentary and it's assertions, because of the work of Enver Samuels, journalists that have doggedly pursued the case, Dulcie's own family, the work of Open Secrets French lawyers acting on behalf of the September family and with the support of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the French judicial authorities have been petitioned to reopen the case into September's assassination.

It is my ardent hope that this reopening will be a long delayed expression of gratitude and appreciation, and bear testament to a beautiful hope and timorous belief that to me Dulcie's life and legacy represents that people when working as a collective, when fuelled with passion, when committed to a greater principle, can change the course of history.

