Exhuming Apartheid: Photography, Disappearance and Return

Exhumer l’apartheid: la photographie, la disparition et le retour.

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“In a photograph a person’s history is buried, as if under a layer of snow”
(Kracauer 1927: 426).

Siegfried Kracauer’s seemingly paradoxical statement about how photographs bury history does not oppose the notion that photographs can make history visible, but it certainly complicates conventional understandings of how photographs work and of their evidentiary force. Kracauer draws our attention to how photographs do not transmit history but contain it, turning history into something that is tangible, but that remains out of reach, requiring that we seek ways to excavate through the frozen layers of time. In this paper, I argue for engaging with photographs in order to bring buried histories into the light in the context of post-apartheid South Africa where, in spite of the evidence that emerged during the hearings held between 1996 and 1998 at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), so much about the past remains unknown and unresolved.

When the TRC hearings drew to a close there were approximately 550 unsolved cases of activists who were “disappeared” under apartheid.¹ In 2005, the Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT), which forms part of the National Prosecuting Authority, under the leadership of former TRC-researcher Madeleine Fullard, began investigations into these cases, and that year located the remains of four of the dead (Rousseau 2009: 351). Since that time, the work

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¹. The term “disappeared,” or desaparecidos, was used to refer to the thousands of people who were abducted and killed by the Argentine military regime between 1976 and 1983. The Missing Persons Task Team initially worked closely with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, <http://eaaf.typepad.com/cr_south_africa/>.

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of the Missing Persons Task Team has not ceased. While the painstaking task of locating the gravesites of the missing dead and of exhuming their remains has proceeded all too slowly for those family members who long to be able to bury their missing children, parents and lovers, the ongoing nature of the work of the Task Team has meant that the stories of the missing remain alive in the public sphere. In this way, the investigations and exhumations carried out by the mptt have formed a critical counter-measure to the closure signalled by the end of the TRC hearings.

In this article, I focus on the case of Siphiwo Mtimkulu, an anti-apartheid student activist who was abducted and murdered, together with his comrade, Tobekile “Topsy” Madaka, by the security police in April 1982. The remains of Mtimkulu and Madaka were located by the mptt in 2007, ten years after the security police who murdered them lied at the TRC about the facts concerning how they were tortured and killed. Although the story of Mtimkulu’s disappearance forms the subject of a documentary film (Kaplan 2004), the details of his murder are not widely known and although the version of events told at the TRC by the members of the security police who killed him were untrue, it is this version that is documented in the TRC report and, as a result, continues to circulate as the authoritative account. For this reason, it is important that the findings of the mptt, in this case and in others where new information has surfaced regarding those who were killed under apartheid, become more widely known.

In the present study, I examine three photographs of Siphiwo Mtimkulu and one photograph of his mother, Joyce Mtimkulu, in order to consider how reading photographs can be understood as a form of exhumation. I invoke the different, but related, meanings of exhumation (the process of disintering a body, of unburying remains; to bring back from neglect or obscurity; to reveal or to bring to light) to argue for how the stories buried in photographs, like the remains of those who have been exhumed, provide a means to return to the lives and deaths of those who were “disappeared”. During the time of the negotiated transition, the need to know the truth was bound to what was described as the need to “bury the past” (Du Toit 2017: 3). While this desire may have been politically expedient at the time, I argue here that it has had profound consequences that continue to negatively impact upon the present. In conclusion, I argue for the importance of returning to images that assist us in unearthing and understanding events that occurred under apartheid in order

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2. There are several different spellings of Siphiwo Mtimkulu’s surname and more than one version is used in the TRC report. I have elected to use the spelling that appears on the posters made to draw attention to Mtimkulu’s disappearance and that I have included herein.
to better understand the post-apartheid condition. I relate the significance of these images in the context of the Marikana massacre of 2012 and the violent response of the post-apartheid state to the 2015-2016 student protests in South Africa.³

“More Reminders than Remainders”⁴

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was premised on the idea that the full disclosure of the truth concerning the atrocities of the past would enable perpetrators and victims to live alongside one another. The aim of the TRC was to bring closure not only to the victims who experienced human rights violations but to the society as a whole. The decision to grant amnesty to people who had committed terrible deeds and disclosed the truth about their actions at the hearings remains a point of controversy in the country to this day.

Although the commission has been widely criticised for what it failed to consider or address, the testimonies that were collected and the publicly accessible seven-volume report on the proceedings provide an invaluable resource that makes it possible to return to the past and refuse its disavowal in the present.⁵ If being consigned to the archive of the TRC, like being portrayed in a photograph, can be understood as a form of burial, then the work required of historians of apartheid is not dissimilar to that of forensic archaeologists. The return of remains can provide closure, but returning to remains can also re-animate traumatic experiences and can serve as painful reminders that open difficult questions, not only about the past, but also about the present. In her article about the work of the Missing Persons Task Team and the work of exhumation, Nicky Rousseau (2016), South African historian, former researcher at the TRC and co-investigator with the MPTT in the Mtimkulu and Madaka cases, writes of the significance of remains, and cautions against the idea that the exhumed body delivers up its buried history whole. Rousseau (2016: 204) alerts us to the limits of the practices of historical recovery:

In exhumations, bodies or skeletal remains are retrieved from formal or informal graves. Thereafter they are forensically examined to establish identity. Similarly, we could think of the body as archive and exhumation as a recovery project. Are exhumations also a

³. For insight into the events of the Marikana massacre see Rehad Desai’s documentary film, Miners Shot Down (Johannesburg: Uhuru Productions, 2014); on state responses to the student movements and police violence, see Langa (2017).
⁵. On the significance of the visual archive of the TRC and its “potential as a participatory archive,” see Bester (2002).
recovery project, not dissimilar to recording and writing “hidden histories,” recuperating “silenced voices”? Would a scrutiny of the practice of exhumation replicate the well-worn critiques of recovery and social history?

Rousseau (ibid.) argues for understanding the exhumed body as “less recovered than produced” and the questions she raises draw attention to the multiple meanings of recovery in the case of the exhumations of activists killed under apartheid. To recover is to heal physically and psychologically; it is to reclaim what has been lost; it is to return to previously traversed terrain; to close up again something that has been opened. I will return to the significance of this last meaning in relation to the current political order in contemporary South Africa at the end of this article. I argue that it is critical to mark the distinction between the forms of closure that come about as a result of psychic recovery and attempts to prematurely cover over painful and unresolved historical events and to disavow their weight on the present.

**Fig. 1. — Joyce Mtikulu, Port Elizabeth, 1997**

Photograph by Jillian Edelstein. Courtesy of the artist and Special Collections, University of Cape Town Libraries.
One of the most powerful moments at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings occurred when Joyce Mtimkulu held up the remains of her son’s hair and scalp, which she had kept for fifteen years as evidence of his torture at the hands of the Security Police, hoping, in spite of everything, for a time when justice would be served. Images of Mtimkulu, her hand raised, showing the dark clump of Siphiwo’s hair, were widely circulated in the media at the time of the TRC hearings (Miller 2005: 41). Joyce Mtimkulu was photographed by Jillian Edelstein at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Port Elizabeth in 1997. The photograph forms part of Edelstein’s series of black and white portraits taken at the hearings and is included in her book, *Truth and Lies* (Edelstein 2001: 129). In her essay on ethics in post-apartheid photographic practice, Paula Horta (2013: 73) describes Edelstein’s book as “the only conceptually unified photographic study of the experience of suffering brought to the fore by the TRC published to date.” Edelstein’s powerful work, like that of George Hallett, who was appointed as the official photographer of the TRC in 1997, deserves greater scholarly attention. Thus far, it is Edelstein’s compelling portrait of the grieving but resolute mother of Siphiwo Mtimkulu that, for several reasons that I discuss herein, remains the most well-known image from her book.

The densely-layered image contains not only the story of Mtimkulu’s abduction, torture and death as well as the way in which Joyce Mtimkulu was affected by the loss of her son, but can also be read as revealing the “truth and lies” of Edelstein’s title. The description of the photograph in the University of Cape Town archival collection reads: “Joyce Mtimkulu holding a piece of her late son, Siphiwo’s hair, that had fallen out after he was poisoned by security police in 1981.” A year later, he was kidnapped, tortured, drugged, shot execution-style and burned on a wood pyre, as revealed by security police at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the photograph, Joyce Mtimkulu is shown staring directly at the viewer and her eyes attest to the suffering she has endured. Yet the photograph does not only convey the pain and exhaustion of a mother who has lost her child and her determination to know the truth of how he was killed. The photograph also holds the suffering of Siphiwo Mtimkulu and makes visible his disappearance through the representation of the unburied remains of his body. In Edelstein’s photograph, which re-stages the events that took place at the hearing, Joyce Mtimkulu’s hand is raised—her posture

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6. G. Hallett produced a significant body of work documenting the hearings. Some of his images can be viewed on the University of Cape Town Library Special Collections’ webpage: <http://www.specialcollections.uct.ac.za/20-years/truth-reconciliation-commission>. On the effects of photography and other forms of media at the TRC hearings, see Cole (2010).
resembles that of a freedom fighter, those whose clenched fists became a symbol of black power, resistance and African nationalism. Yet her fist cannot close for, at its centre, is a dark mound—a large clump of Siphiwo’s hair and scalp—that fell from his head after he was subjected to thallium poisoning by the security police in 1981. After his disappearance in 1982, Siphiwo’s hair was the only evidence of his torture by the police and the only physical remains that his family had of his body. Joyce Mtimkulu’s gesture evokes his torture and disappearance and is both an accusation levelled at those who murdered him and an insistent refusal to allow the story of his life and death to be forgotten.

Joyce Mtimkulu’s insistence that the evidence of her son’s torture at the hands of the police who murdered him be made publicly visible can be compared to Mamie Till-Mobley’s refusal to allow her son’s brutalised body to be buried without first being seen. The men who murdered 14-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, in the United States in 1955, like those who murdered Siphiwo Mtimkulu, lied about the circumstances of his death and were acquitted of murder. In both cases, the tortured bodies of Till and Mtimkulu were seen and photographed, and these images, along with the accounts given by their family members, despite the verdicts of the courts, continue to indict their murderers.

The Mtikulu family was twice blocked from telling the story of their son’s murder at the TRC by the security policemen who killed him—in the first instance, because the lawyers representing the police officers claimed they required more time to assess the allegations made against them, and in the second instance, because the officers implicated in his death obtained an interdict preventing the family from naming them as the murderers. It was only in June 1996 that the case of Mtimkulu and Madaka was finally heard at the TRC. The report (TRC 1998: 76) includes the following description of the way in which their families were silenced and of the hearing that eventually took place:

The cases were scheduled to be heard at the first hearings of the Commission in East London on 15 April 1996. An interdict brought by Brigadier Jan du Preez and Major General

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7. On the photographs of Emmett Till, see Harold & Deluca (2005) and Mark (2008). See also “Afterimages,” a poem by A. Lorde, available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42582/afterimages>. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper for suggesting that I consider the connections between the murders and photographs of Siphiwo Mtimkulu and Emmett Till and how Mamie Till’s decision to have an open coffin at Emmett Till’s funeral changed the course of the Civil Rights movement. Steve Biko’s family also chose to have an open casket at his funeral and images of his corpse circulated in the media both inside and outside of South Africa. For a consideration of the meanings, uses and display of photographs of lynchings, see also Apel & Smith (2007).
Nick van Rensburg in the Cape Town Supreme Court ruled that the Commission should not hear the matter before these officers had been given time to study the allegations against them. At the second Eastern Cape hearings of the Commission in Port Elizabeth on 22 May 1996, Ms Mthimkulu collapsed when she was informed that once again a court interdict prevented her from telling the story of her son’s disappearance. A crisis situation was defused when thousands of demonstrating COSAS [Council of South African Students] members were allowed into the Centenary Hall in New Brighton and given an assurance that Mthimkulu’s case would be heard at a special hearing of the Commission in the same venue on 26 June. An additional interdict brought by Mr Gideon Nieuwoudt also specified that Ms Mthimkulu could not name him as one of her son’s torturers. The ANC organised demonstrations and marches in Port Elizabeth protesting against the silencing of the Mthimkulus. The Mthimkulu and Madaka cases were finally heard at a special hearing of the Commission’s Human Rights Violation Committee on 26 June 1996 at the Centenary Hall, New Brighton. On the day before the hearing, a Cape Town Supreme Court ruling overturned the previous decisions and ensured that the evidence of Ms Mthimkulu could be heard. Various COSAS activists also gave evidence, handing in a list of COSAS activists who had died in this period and naming a number of Security Branch officers as torturers.

The photograph of Joyce Mtumkulu holding her son’s hair can be read as a metaphor for the TRC itself. The image conveys Joyce Mtumkulu’s refusal to be silenced and her insistence that those who murdered her son be confronted with the evidence she holds. Horta (2013: 74) reads Joyce Mtumkulu’s stance as mirroring that “of a witness who takes the stand and, sworn under oath, holds up an exhibit while giving evidence” and argues that it is this dark matter that draws our eyes. Indeed, Edelstein’s photograph itself restages the images of Joyce Mtumkulu testifying at the hearings, which can be read as a form of evidence that testifies to Siphiwo Mtumkulu’s murder after the end of the TRC hearings and even after the burial of his remains. Looking at this photograph returns those who view this image to the story of Siphiwo Mtumkulu and re-opens the question of how he was killed and of who is responsible for his murder.

It is significant that this photograph was used on the cover of the first South African and British editions of *Country of My Skull* (Krog 1998), Antjie Krog’s well-known account of the hearings and perhaps the most widely read

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8. The Congress of South African Students (COSAS) was formed in 1979 in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto student uprising. It was a national movement of secondary school students that opposed apartheid. For an account of student movements in South Africa, see Badat (1999).

9. The Security Branch of the South African Police Force was also known as the “Special Branch.” From the 1960s onwards, this branch was granted wide-ranging powers by the apartheid state, which effectively authorized the use of detention without trial, torture and assassinations.
and circulated book about this period of South African history. The hardcover version of the book showed Edelstein’s photograph without a caption and with the title of the book and the author’s name immediately below the image. The cover of the edition published by Vintage in 1999 also included Edelstein’s photograph, in this version framed by a caption, “Photograph, Joyce Mtimkulu holding her son’s hair,” the title and author’s name in bold font, and excerpts from reviews of the book (fig. 2). In 2006, the photograph of Joyce Mtimkulu was replaced by a portrait of Antjie Krog (fig. 3), as if the publishers recognised that there was something amiss in instrumentalising the fragments of Siphiwo Mtimkulu’s skull so that they came to stand in for the country of Krog’s pained reckoning and sought to compensate for this blunder by replacing the long-suffering face of his mother with that of the traumatised visage of the author. The inclusion of the assertion on the cover by a reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph* that Krog’s book and the events it describes is no less than “a redemption” of the souls of Afrikaners is particularly appalling when it is positioned alongside the image of Joyce Mtimkulu.

**FIG. 2 -3.— 1999 BOOK COVER VS. 2006 BOOK COVER**

Fig. 2: *Country of My Skull* Vintage paperback edition (London: Vintage/Random, 1999), showing Jillian Edelstein’s photograph of Joyce Mtimkulu. Fig. 3: *Country of My Skull* Vintage paperback edition (London: Vintage/Random, 2006), in which Edelstein’s portrait of Joyce Mtimkulu has been replaced with an image of the author, Antjie Krog.

At the Human Rights Violations Hearings Joyce Mtikulu stated, “Probably if I cry, it won’t be due to the pain, it would be due to the hatred, it would be due to the fact that there is no honesty amongst our people” (TRC 1996: n. p.). The families were led to believe that the remains of Mtikulu and Madaka had been thrown into the Fish River and they visited this site in order to attain closure. However, the true story of the murder of Mtikulu and Madaka did not emerge at the trc hearings as those who killed them lied about how they had disposed of their bodies. Edelstein’s portrait directs us back to the earlier photographs of Joyce Mtikulu, to the archive of the TRC, as well as to the work of the MPTT, and before that, to the traces that remain of the time before Siphiwo Mtikulu disappeared.

Visualising Disappearance

**Fig. 4. — Siphiwo Mtikulu in 1982 on the day of his release from hospital after treatment for thallium poisoning administered to him by security policy while held in detention**

In the image above (fig. 4), Siphiwo Mtimkulu is shown in a wheelchair on the day of his release from Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town where he had been treated for thallium poisoning. Although he is shown on the far left of the image, Siphiwo is the focus of the photograph—the viewer’s eye is drawn to his face and then to the wheelchair and the sign he is holding. The photograph seems to hold two separate, yet connected, worlds. Siphiwo is virtually encircled by his comrades and by people who appear to be hospital workers, perhaps nurses, who all seem to be protecting him with their upright bodies. No one is looking at the police officer who stands at the foreground of the image and dominates the right-hand side of the frame. It is a strange feature of the photograph that the policeman and the large weapon he is holding are almost invisible while our attention is focused on Mtimkulu and the group of people around him, and when one looks directly at the policeman, it is difficult to keep Siphiwo Mtimkulu in sight. In this way, the image reinforces the fact that those who are under threat are in immediate danger and yet they cannot see the gun that the policeman holds behind his back. Whether intentionally or not, the photographer conjures the terrible foreboding of violence and the constant terror that characterised the lives of black South Africans at that time.

The image appears in a short film made just before the start of the hearings that includes footage of Joyce Mtimkulu speaking about her son at her home. The photograph contains the signs of Mtimkulu’s certain death at the hands of the Special Branch—he holds a handwritten placard that reads: “Poisoning people won’t stop us,” made so that the fact that he was poisoned could be photographed and circulated in the media, yet the text on the sign cannot be easily deciphered in this image. At the time of his disappearance, on the 14th of April 1982, Mtimkulu had instituted two cases against the Minister of Police, the first for assault and torture and the second for poisoning (TRC 1998: 75). The miracle of his survival and his refusal to give up the struggle for freedom is contaminated here by the presence of the policeman and his gun. It is not clear who took the photograph, but in the brief film in which this image appears, it is followed by a shot of a black and white photograph of Siphiwo seated in a wheelchair, with Brian Bishop and Di Oliver, the activists who visited him in hospital in Cape Town and took care of him when he was released. Both images seem to form part of Joyce Mtimkulu’s collection of images that provide evidence of the events preceding his disappearance and murder.11

11. The same photograph of Mtimkulu with Brian Bishop and Di Oliver appeared in the newsletter of the anti-apartheid organization, The Black Sash (Pollecutt 1986: 6) accompanying an article about the deaths of Bishop and Molly Blackburn, who were killed in a car accident that many people believe was caused by the Special Branch.
Bishop, Oliver, Blackburn and Judy Chalmers were travelling together after collecting affidavits about human rights abuses in rural areas as part of their work with The Black Sash when the accident occurred.
Two posters that contain photographs of Siphiwo Mtikulu were circulated at the time of his disappearance to draw attention to his case. The poster issued by the “Young Progs. for International Year of the Youth” shows a close up of Mtikulu’s face framed by his name and the words “Detained May 1981-October 1981” and “Missing April 1982.” Mtikulu has an open expression and an unblemished face—he rests his head on his hand, his beautiful fingers and smooth skin, signs of his youth. He wears a collared shirt and a delicate line of beads around his neck. In this photograph, Mtikulu’s woolen hat conceals the fact that his hair and parts of his scalp have fallen out in bleeding clumps. It is also not possible to see that, since being tortured by the Security Police, Siphiwo Mtikulu can barely walk.

The second photograph (fig. 6), was almost certainly taken on the same day as the image used on the poster above, and so closely resembles the first image that the second image seems to be a close-up version of the first. However, the beads around Mtikulu’s neck can hardly be seen in the second image and his face is positioned at a slightly different angle. In both portraits, Mtikulu’s expression is sombre, but his resolute, intense gaze is softened in the second image in which he appears more vulnerable, not simply because this image shows him to be seated in a wheelchair, but also because he is shown at a greater distance and as a result, appears smaller. In this poster, Mtikulu is identified as a student leader and between the words “Detained” and “Missing” is the assertion that he was poisoned. Like the hair that his mother kept and showed as evidence at the TRC, this image of Mtikulu provides evidence of the torture to which he was subjected at the hands of the Security police. At the hearings, Joyce Mtikulu related how, after he was released from detention, her son suffered from excruciating pain in his stomach and in his limbs.

Nicky Rousseau (2009: 351) argues that the confessions of the security police who testified at the public amnesty hearings between 1996 and 1999 “evoked an imaginary of extreme violence, yet one that resided in the world of the everyday.” She explains that: “Prior to the TRC, the key public images of state repression were predominantly constructed around police shootings

12. Both posters are held in the DISA archive “a freely accessible online scholarly resource focusing on the socio-political history of South Africa, particularly the struggle for freedom during the period from 1950 to the first democratic elections in 1994, providing a wealth of material on this fascinating period of the country’s history,” <http://disa.ukzn.ac.za>.

13. “Young Progs” refers to the Young Progressives, the youth league of the Progressive Party, which, formed in 1959, became the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) in 1977. The PFP, initially held only one seat in parliament and was represented by Helen Suzman, who opposed the National Party’s policy of apartheid. Some of the Young Progressives were members of the End Conscription Campaign, which was formed in 1983.
Fig. 6. — Poster drawing attention to the detention, poisoning and disappearance of Siphiwo Mtikulu: Student Leader detained, poisoned, missing.

Media Committee, University of Cape Town, c. 1982. Image courtesy of University of Cape Town and Digital Innovation South Africa.
of civilian protestors (for example, Sharpeville in 1960 and Soweto in 1976), and deaths in detentions (for example, Steve Biko and Neil Aggett). The TRC superseded this with a newer image—horrific accounts of abductions and secret, brutal killings. Rousseau’s (2009: 364) argument, that new images of violence under apartheid entered public consciousness as a result of the TRC, is a compelling one, and her use of the term “imaginary” is apposite, for these images did not, for the most part, take material form. In other words, photographs did not accompany the acts described by perpetrators. We do not know the extent to which the apartheid-era security police documented their own misdeeds through photography, for, if such images do exist, they have not come to light, and if they did exist during the apartheid regime, they may well have been destroyed. Photographs like those of Siphiwo Mtikulu before his abduction by officers of the Security Branch of the police and of Joyce Mtikulu holding her son’s hair thus come to stand in for the event of his torture and murder that we cannot see. These portraits insist on Mtikulu’s physical being, and, like the exhumations performed by the Missing Persons Task Team, affirm Mbuyisela Madaka’s view that “There is no one that will turn into some air” (TRC 1996: n. p.). The TRC report contains a summary of the outcome of the amnesty applications of those responsible for the murder of Mtikulu and Madaka and notes that “audience and families did not feel that the whole truth had been revealed”:

In January 1997, amnesty applications regarding the deaths of Mtikulu and Madaka were received from Port Elizabeth Security Branch officer Gideon Nieuwoudt, Colonel Nick Van Rensburg, Major Hermanus Barend Du Plessis and Colonel Gerrit Erasmus. At a press conference in Port Elizabeth on 28 January 1997, it was revealed that the bodies of Mtikulu and Madaka had been burnt and their remains thrown into the Fish River near the disused Post Charmers police station near Cradock. The Commission took the families to the site of the killings and disposal of the bodies. At the amnesty hearings later, the security police admitted to having abducted and killed the two activists, but they denied all knowledge of torture and poisoning. Because the audience and families did not feel that the whole truth had been revealed, and because of the attempts by the security police to prevent the case from being heard on previous occasions, the amnesty hearings were fraught with tension and anger. At one point, a part of the crowd obstructed the armoured vehicle in which the amnesty applicants were being transported from the hall. The Commission finds that the SAP were responsible for the abduction and killing of political activists in the Eastern Cape—including Mr Gcinisizwe Kondile who was abducted and killed by Mr Dirk Johannes Coetzee, Mr Nicholas Janse Van Rensburg, Mr Gerrit Erasmus, Mr Hermanus Barend Du Plessis and Mr Johannes Raath on 26 June 1981; and Mr Siphiwe Mtikulu and Mr Topsy Madaka who were abducted and killed by Mr Gideon Nieuwoudt, Mr Nicholas Janse Van Rensburg, Mr Gerrit Erasmus, Mr Hermanus
Barend Du Plessis, Mr Jan Van Den Hoven and Mr Jan Du Preez.
The Commission finds that the actions of the SAP and the named police officers amount
to gross Human Rights Violations for which the SAP and the named police officers are
held responsible (TRC 1998: 77).

In 2000, the murderers of Mtimkulu and Madaka were granted amnesty.
The commission found that they had disclosed the whole truth of the story of
the deaths of the two activists. In 2007, ten years after the hearings took place,
the Missing Persons Task Team found the remains of Mtimkulu and Madaka
at Post Chalmers, the isolated site in the Eastern Cape province at which they
were killed. The investigators believed that the security policemen had lied
to the TRC. The security police claimed that they had executed Madaka and
Mtimkulu and then burnt their bodies on a wooden pyre and that the following
morning they had collected the ashes and transported them in plastic bags to
the Fish River. In her article about the exhumations of murdered activists in
South Africa, journalist Stephanie Nolen notes the response of Claudia Bisso,
the Argentinian forensic expert working with the TRC, to the account given
by the murderers. Nolen writes:

As soon as Ms. Bisso read the TRC transcripts, she was suspicious of that claim: “I read
the testimony and I said, ‘No, you would not have ashes.’ It takes a long time to burn a
body and overnight you don't get just ashes, you have chunks of bone. And it would be
too hot to put it in plastic bags the next morning” (NOLEN 2008: n. p.).

For this reason, the task team decided to search the site where the murders
had taken place. After many hours of searching, a decision was taken to check
the septic tank on the site. Nolen describes the gruesome discovery of the fact
that the remains of those who were murdered at Post Chalmers were dumped
in the septic tank on the farm and describes how the team:

scooped out 20,000 liters of raw sewage in buckets, sieved through it for solid matter
and dried the material. […] They invited the victims’ families to come and see the work,
and soon the elderly mothers and now-grown children of the five dead men had joined
in, gently fingering through the dried sewage to find the teeth and bones of their sons and
fathers. In the end, the team amassed more than 250 kilograms of burnt material, and Ms.
Bisso began the long, painstaking process of separating it into charcoal, metal, soil and
human remains. She could tell from the shape of the vertebrae that most of the remains
are those of young people; she could not tell, yet, how many. “There are definitely three,
and very probably more” (ibid.).

See also FLANAGAN (2007) and THOMAS (2012).
For those whose relatives disappeared under apartheid, the return of their physical remains is of critical importance so that burial rites can be performed and so that the dead can be mourned. For many of the family members of people who were murdered under apartheid it was as important, if not more important, to know where the remains of the missing were situated as it was to know the truth about what happened to them. Testifying at the TRC, Mbuyisela Madaka, Topsy Madaka’s brother, articulated his refusal to accept that his brother “disappeared”:

As far as the bones are concerned, we would like to have them. We would like to have those remains and have a funeral ceremony, because there is something that I always say at home, I don’t like the word disappearance. I don’t like it at all, because if we were to accept that, then we would never get the remains. There is no one that will turn into some air, that is a myth, you can’t even tell the children that someone has turned into some air, we need those remains. I believe that the people who did what they did to them, know where the bones are (TRC 1996: n. p.).

For Madaka, the uncertainty surrounding the whereabouts of his brother’s remains is bound to the fact that those who murdered him had not disclosed the truth about his murder and the return of the remains would make possible a funeral ceremony and would allow the family to mourn his death. Exhuming the dead and returning the remains of those who were missing to their families so that they can be buried can thus be understood as a partial form of restorative justice. At the same time, photographic and physical remains also make it possible to exhume buried histories and to re-open the question of the accountability of apartheid-era killers. Photographs of the missing serve as a way of making these cases visible and provide evidence of their lives. Through the processes of exhumation, the dead return to accuse and condemn their murderers and their reappearance raises the question of why it is that justice in the post-apartheid order has been deferred, not only for the dead, but also for the living.

Memorialisation and Erasure

The stories of political activists who were killed under apartheid have a particular resonance in the present in the wake of the protests against the persistence of colonialism and apartheid that South African students have held at universities across the country in 2015-2016. At the University of Cape Town, the Rhodes Must Fall movement led to the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, the British colonist, mining magnate, and Prime Minister of the Cape Colony.
(1890-1896) whose massive stone figure had previously loomed over the steps that led to the centre of the campus. The Open Stellenbosch collective called for the remnants of apartheid to be purged from the university that, until 1994, was reserved for white Afrikaans speakers; and the Black Students Movement at the “University Currently Known as Rhodes” called for the institution to be decolonised and renamed. Students occupied and renamed campus buildings and the names of colonists and apartheid-era ideologues were replaced by those of the well-known heroes and leaders of the struggle—Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe, Winnie Mandela and Lilian Ngoyi. It is significant that none of these figures, other than Winnie Mandela, have held positions of power in the post-apartheid government, either because they did not live to see the transition to democracy or because their relationship with the African National Congress was strained. This can be read as a sign of how the majority of students involved in the protests dis-identify themselves from the ruling party in its current form. At the protests, which by the end of 2015 focused on access to education and a national campaign to abolish university fees, students sang songs that characterised resistance to apartheid and frequently sung “Iyo Solomon,” a song that resurrects the memory of Umkhonto we Sizwe fighter Solomon Mahlangu, who was 23 years old when he was executed for treason in 1979. Pontsho Pilane and Kwanele Sosibo describe the song as “a rallying cry: a link to the defiance of a bygone era” for the students at the University of the Witwatersrand who formed part of the #FeesMustFall protests and renamed the university’s administration buildings Solomon Mahlangu House (Pilane & Sosibo 2016).

As I have argued elsewhere (Thomas 2018), the protests were certainly infused with the spirit of 1976 and with black consciousness philosophy, but


16. S. Biko was the leader of the Black People’s Convention and the most important thinker in the black consciousness movement in South Africa before his murder by the Security Branch of the police in 1977. R. Sobukwe was the founder and leader of the Pan-Africanist Congress, which was formed in 1959 when Africanist members of the ANC opposed the adoption of the Freedom Charter and broke away from what was to become the ruling party at the end of apartheid. W. Mandela is an icon of the struggle against apartheid and was imprisoned and tortured by the police. In the 1980s, she founded the Mandela United Football Club, which also became a vigilante group and she was implicated in the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy. Due to this case and other allegations made against her, W. Mandela was forced to resign from her positions in the ANC in 1992. She was appointed Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in 1994 but was expelled from her position in 1995. L. Ngoyi led the women’s anti-pass march on 9 August 1956 and was subsequently arrested and was one of the accused in the four-year Treason Trial. She was banned and detained by the apartheid state and died in 1980.

17. Umkhonto we Sizwe was the armed wing of the African National Congress.
the names of student activists who had protested against apartheid and who were detained, tortured and murdered by the regime were, for the most part, conspicuously absent. It is also striking that other than images of Steve Biko, very few photographs of political activists who were killed under apartheid have circulated in the public sphere during the recent student protests, which were nonetheless often compared to the 1976 student uprising. In my view, the protests did not re-stage those of an earlier generation, but rather sought to re-call the activists of the past and to summon their revolutionary spirit in the present, signalling a desire to know the stories of those activists who have been largely forgotten.

The absence of the names, stories and images of so many of the people killed under apartheid in South African public memory is, in part, due to the fact that, in numerous cases, there are very few existing images of those who were “disappeared”. Those photographs that do exist have never circulated widely within the post-apartheid public sphere and it is necessary to search them out in libraries and archives. In her analysis of films that focus on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Martha Evans notes that the forgetting of the names and stories of most of those who testified at the TRC began even while the commission was still in progress. Evans (2007: 268-269) points out that when the perpetrator hearings began, the media’s attention shifted away from the testimonies of people who had been subject to human rights violations: “The consequences of this are only being realised now perhaps; while the spectacular and high-profile amnesty trials have taken root in national memory, the names of victims have frequently been subsumed into anonymous titles like the Cradock Four or Gugulethu Seven.” Although there have been documentary films made about the Cradock Four—Matthew Goniwe, Sparrow Mkonto, Fort Calata, Sicelo Mhlalali—anti-apartheid activists who worked in the Eastern Cape and who were murdered by the Civil Co-operation Bureau (an apartheid death squad) on the 27 June 1985, and about the Gugulethu Seven—Jabulani Godfrey Miya, Zandisile Zenith Mjobo, Zola Alfred Swelani, Mandla Simon Mxinwa, Themba Mlifi, Zabonke, John Konile and Christopher Piet—members of Umkhonto we Sizwe who were killed on 3 March 1986 by apartheid security forces led by a Vlakplaas-based death squad of the South African police, the widespread lack of knowledge about those who were killed by the security police under apartheid, as well as of those who were responsible for their deaths, is a disturbing sign of how the apartheid state effectively sought to erase the history of the struggle for freedom.18 It also indicates that photographs and narratives of activists who

18. See The Cradock Four, a film by anti-apartheid activist David Forbes in 2010 (SA/France). The film’s website contains information about the activists as well as about their killers;
were killed in their fight for liberation can also trouble the current state. Photographs of student activists like Siphiwo Mtimkulu not only return us to the atrocities committed under apartheid, but also serve as a reminder of the desire for a just new political order for which they died.

In 2009, the government held a ceremony for the reburial (technically, the first burial) of the remains of the five activists who were killed at Post Chalmers in the 1980s. The speech delivered by President Jacob Zuma on this occasion made it clear that memorialisation can redouble the oblivion the apartheid state sought to confer on those it killed:

In paying tribute to our illustrious heroes, we also celebrate the fact that we are a nation that continues to draw its strength from its history, from its heroes, and from the countless sons and daughters who laid down their lives for freedom, democracy and justice. Today all of us, black and white, live that dream of freedom in a non-racial, democratic South Africa. The tragedy of the PEBCO 3, COSAS 2 and others places certain responsibilities on the new democratic State. They suffered because there was a brutal apartheid State that had absolute power. The State had a security apparatus that was beyond control, and a police force that was a law unto itself. The apartheid police force kidnapped, tortured and murdered people at will. That is the horror we emerged from in 1994. […]

Today, in a free and democratic South Africa, as government we declare that never again should the state apparatus be used to maltreat and violate the human rights of our people as it happened during the apartheid era. […] Our security forces know that their duty is to protect South Africans and all within our borders, and not to torture or harass them. Our police force knows that its duty is to fight crime and help us build safer communities. We must point out that when we call for the police to be allowed to use deadly force, it is only in defence of civilians or to protect their own lives. Our police force will never be allowed to take away the lives of innocent people. Given the lessons of the past, we also declare our commitment to ensure that our police force is never used to fight political battles, as it happened during the apartheid era. Citizens are not the enemy. The enemy is crime, poverty, homelessness, disease and hunger (Zuma 2009: n. p.).

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19. The PEBCO 3—Sipho Hashe, Champion Galela and Qaqawuli Godozoli—were anti-apartheid activists and members of the Port Elizabeth Black Civics Organisation. They were abducted on 8 May 1985 and subsequently tortured and murdered by the Security Police. The COSAS 2 refers to Siphiwo Mtimkulu and Topsy Madaka, who were both members of the Congress of South African Students, a national movement for democratic education founded in South Africa in 1979.

Zuma’s words confer heroism on the murdered activists and at the same time his whitewashing of police violence in the post-apartheid context insults their memory. The remains of the activists were exhumed from the septic tank only to be reburied in the rhetorical equivalent of excrement. The 2012 Marikana Massacre, in which 34 striking miners were murdered by South African police officers, acting on the orders of the ANC government, exposes as hyperbole Zuma’s claim that: “Today, in a free and democratic South Africa, as government we declare that never again should the state apparatus be used to maltreat and violate the human rights of our people as it happened during the apartheid era.”

The 2015-2016 student protests and their turn to the dead to guide them into the future have to be understood in the light of the aftermath of the Marikana Massacre, the first since the end of apartheid. While many read the protests that have been led by young South Africans as a positive sign in an otherwise catastrophic political landscape, it is a terrible moment when the hopes of a generation, vested in the promises of the dead, are crushed by the living.

I have argued here that engaging with photographs to exhume the histories they contain offers a way to challenge how the struggle has been instrumentalised to serve the agenda of the state. The way in which photographs can serve to expose events that those who hold power wish to conceal, meant that the medium played a critical role in the struggle for freedom in South Africa and continues to be linked to struggles for justice in the present.

For instance, Leon Sadiki’s powerful photograph of one of the leaders of the miners’ strike, Mgcineni “Mambush” Noki, has become a symbol of the massacre at Marikana. Sadiki’s photograph, first published in City Press, shows Noki standing with his fist raised in the air just a short while before

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20. Zuma’s claim is also undone by the large number of charges of murder, rape, torture and deaths in detention that have been laid against the police officers since the end of apartheid. In 2015-2016, there were 216 reported cases of deaths in police custody—the causes of death include suicide, natural causes, assaults prior to detention, and injuries sustained during detention. Of these, 29 deaths in police custody occurred in the Eastern Cape Province where Siphiwo Mtshweni was killed. See the Independent Police Investigative Directorate Annual Report 2015/16 (IPID 2016: 51).

21. The review essay by H. Mokoena (2014) provides an excellent, concise overview of the history of photography in South Africa as presented in the book, Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Bureaucracy of Everyday Life, which accompanied the exhibition by the same name, curated by Rory Bester and Okwui Enwezor at the International Center for Photography in New York in 2013. Digital media has democratised both the production and circulation of images, however, the work of social documentary photographers remains central in the South African mediascape.
he was murdered by the police. The Tokolos Stencils Collective produced a stencil of this image and reproductions of Noki’s resurrected figure, along with the words, “Remember Marikana,” began to appear on city walls in Cape Town in 2013 and later, in places across the country.

The student movements took up the call to remember Marikana and recognised the disavowal of the history of apartheid as a key element in maintaining inequality in the present. The protests can be read as signalling the desire on the part of the “born-free” generation to remember, rather than forget, and to resist the forms of power that make it possible for past iniquities to be repeated in the present and the future. Learning about the racist ideologies

22. Sadiki is a photographer with City Press newspaper and is also the co-author of We are Going to Kill Each Other Today: The Marikana Story (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2013) and of Broke and Broken: The Shameful Legacy of Gold Mining in South Africa (Johannesburg: Blackbird, 2016).

23. For a more comprehensive reading of the “Remember Marikana” stencils see Thomas (forthcoming).
of the apartheid state and the policies that accompanied the violence of the regime, as well as the stories of those who opposed it, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for bringing about social justice in the aftermath of apartheid. However, refusing historical amnesia would at least make it possible to begin the work of creating a just society at a different point, one that acknowledges, rather than obfuscates, the wrongs of the past and how they bear down on the present. The fact that the stories of those like Madaka and Mtimkulu are not widely known raises a question about the place of the past in the post-apartheid present and, in particular, the animating force of the struggle and its relation to the current state.

The task of returning to the lives of those who were killed under apartheid and attempting to exhume them from the photographs in which they lie embalmed is to ask what these images mean in the present. The image of Joyce Mtimkulu testifying at the TRC was at first widely circulated, but it was quickly replaced by Edelstein’s iconic portrait which, in turn, was covered over by the face of Antjie Krog and then buried by the passage of time and wilful political amnesia. Joyce Mtimkulu died in 2014: her calls for an ambulance to take her to hospital were ignored and she was taken by her neighbour to the casualty ward and then “left on a stretcher for 12 hours, complaining of severe pain” (Barron 2014). She died of a heart attack four hours after being moved to a bed in the hospital. The photograph taken of her at the TRC hearings (fig. 7) re-appeared alongside her obituary notice. To return to this image is to recall Joyce Mtimkulu’s defiant gesture at the TRC where her raised fist held at its centre the remains of her son, refusing to allow the horror of his torture and death to be covered over by lies. To read the image of Joyce Mtimkulu alongside that of Sadiki’s photograph of Noki is to recognise how the struggle to overcome the systemic injustice of apartheid continues in the present. It is to return to the vision of a different and more just future for which Siphiwo Mtimkulu, Topsy Madaka, and thousands of other young people who were killed in political violence under apartheid died. It is to begin the work that is necessary to be, as Hari Ziyad (2017) writes, “a little more careful when we exhume our dead,” so that when we bury them again, they can finally rest in peace. Resistance now takes the form of refusing to leave the dead to lie in unmarked graves, or to have them exhumed only to be claimed as a means to efface the violence of the present.

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for thinking about the relation between photography and exhumation as well as the potential for photographs to bring buried histories into the light. After the close of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there were still hundreds of unresolved cases of people who had been killed under apartheid. The Missing Persons Task Team was established to investigate these cases and has subsequently located and exhumed the remains of many activists. This article examines the case of Siphiwo Mtimkulu, an anti-apartheid student activist who was abducted and murdered by the security police in April 1982, together with his comrade, Tobekile “Topsy” Madaka. The remains of Mtimkulu and Madaka were located in 2007, ten years after the security police who murdered them lied at the Truth Commission about the facts concerning how they were tortured and killed. Engaging with photographs of Mtimkulu taken before his disappearance and those of his mother Joyce Mtimkulu, I argue that both physical and photographic remains have a particular resonance in the wake of the Marikana massacre of 2012 and the protests against the persistence of colonialism and apartheid that young South Africans held at universities across the country in 2015-2016.

Keywords: South Africa, Marikana, Siphiwo Mtimkulu, apartheid, exhumation, photography, protest, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, student activism.

RéSUMÉ

Exhumer l’apartheid: la photographie, la disparition et le retour. — Cet article vise à penser la relation entre la photographie et l’exhumation ainsi que le potentiel qu’ont les photographies à éclaircir des histoires enfouies. Après la clôture de la Commission pour la vérité et la réconciliation (the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission), il y avait encore des centaines de cas des gens tués sous l’apartheid. L’équipe de recherche des personnes disparues (Missing Persons Task Team) fut créée afin d’enquêter et, par la suite, put localiser et exhumer les corps de nombreux militants. Cet article se penche sur le cas de Siphiwo Mtimkulu, un étudiant militant anti-apartheid, qui fut enlevé et assassiné en avril 1982 par la police, avec son camarade, Tobekile « Topsy » Madaka. Les restes de Mtimkulu et de Madaka furent identifiés en 2007, dix ans après que les policiers qui les avaient tués mentirent à la Commission sur la manière ils avaient été torturés et tués. En s’engageant avec les photographies de Mtimkulu prises avant sa disparition et celles de sa mère, Joyce Mtimkulu, je soutiens que les restes physiques et photographiques acquièrent une résonance particulière suite au massacre de Marikana de 2012 et les manifestations contre la persistance du colonialisme et l’apartheid que les jeunes Africains du Sud ont organisées dans les universités à travers le pays en 2015-2016.