



Mandela's Meanings: a Translated and Adapted Life

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Nelson Mandela's death on 5 December 2013, at the age of 95, was not unexpected. He had been ill for many years, and rumours of his imminent death had been circulating for a while. After the announcement of his passing, images of his face appeared on every news platform internationally, and newspaper and magazine editors published special commemorative issues telling the well-known story, and illustrating these accounts with an equally famous and increasingly familiar set of images. In the years since his release, Mandela was perhaps the most photographed and instantly recognisable world leader, posing for photographs that paired him with others, the famous and the not so famous. These photographs often, perhaps typically, would take pride of place on the walls and mantelpieces of homes and offices, reinforcing the sense of reassuring repetition: a seemingly endless series of Mandela's smiling face, bestowing his magic.

It is therefore hard to remember – or even to imagine – a time when Mandela's face was not so visible and so ubiquitous. During the years when he was a banned person, and particularly in the years spent in various prisons in South Africa, it was illegal to display or publish any images of him. The circulation of his image was circumscribed by the South African apartheid government, in an attempt to break the power of the African National Congress. In this long middle period of his life, anything



he wrote or read was similarly controlled and censored, letters were confiscated and destroyed and access to books and newspapers declared illegal or heavily restricted. In addition, his contact with others – even those in prison with him – was regulated and supervised, in order to limit his impact. Whereas Mandela's words and iconic image have come to define the decades after 1990 internationally, it is worth reflecting on the meanings of their absence, both in the past and in the present.

I explore here the tension between the years of silence and facelessness, and the seeming fullness of the decades lived so very much in the public eye. My attention is focused in particular on the hidden years that have entered the mythological sphere, namely the 18 years spent on Robben Island. In this article, I analyse some of the literary and photographic fragments of that era, which was the time when Mandela was cut off from the world and it from him. The period when he (through text or image) circulated the least, has now in fact become the centrepiece of the narrative of his life. Entering what is in the present day a museum, visitors to Robben Island are frequently photographed in the (now empty) cell in which prisoner 466/64 was held. The staging of the body in the empty cell in which Mandela lived, the act of looking through the window through which he saw the courtyard, provides an uncanny opportunity to imagine *being* Mandela. But at the same time it empties out the man, turning him instead into a blank screen onto which our fantasies of him are projected. The cell is empty now, which it was not when he (or the unknown and uncelebrated prisoners who lived there after and before him) lived in it. It is empty of the artefacts of the time spent there; there is thus an *inaccurate* and literally emptied out re-creation of the room that is so central to our imaginings of that time.

There are two tropes that allow us to understand this empty/full archive. These tropes are drawn from the themes dominant in the period, as described by Mandela himself. These tropes are the buried fragment and the recycled, adapted (and lost) original. In Mandela's extremely well-known life story, anecdotes and moments are endlessly repeated and recycled, and many have commented on the almost rehearsed nature of these narratives, especially in the book that has come to be known as *Long Walk to Freedom*. The various biographies (Lodge and Sampson are generally held to be definitive accounts, but there are countless others) are strikingly similar, and agree on a canonical set of moments and periods. But what is now commonly known as the story of his life, and the photographic archive that illustrates this life, is made up of and marked by lost originals and censored, confiscated or literally buried and burnt remains.

The most sustained commentary on this series of rehearsed repetitions comes from South African journalist and writer Antjie Krog. Since the publication in 1998 of *Country of My Skull*, Krog has established herself internationally as the foremost journalistic commentator on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). In the second book from the trilogy on the South African transition, *A Change of Tongue*, Krog recounts a conversation with a close friend of Mandela, who tells her:



Someone who had visited him asked me afterwards why he repeats some of his stories, word for word, just as if they've been written down in *Long Walk to Freedom*. Could it be old age? I discussed it with Mandela's right-hand man, and he says Mandela does it only with certain stories. It has nothing to do with old age, it's very deliberate. Mandela is doing it very intentionally, he believes, to undermine what he calls the whole postmodernist notion of ever-changing texts or something. As if Mandela wants to say that there are certain truths which should always exist as truths, and that these important truth should continue to exist in precisely the same way. (Krog 2003: 256-7)

The passage is striking in that it reflects on, but also perpetuates, the cycles of repetition that keep in place the mythic and unassailable figure of Mandela.

The Robben Island incarceration is best understood as a concrete attempt by the Apartheid government to prevent Mandela and his fellow political prisoners from circulating. What is now the extremely well known set of images and anecdotes about these years, which exist in the fullness of mythological narrative, was negotiated through a series of difficult and sometimes violent encounters. The argument here is made on two levels. In the first stage, I discuss the artefacts created by and about Mandela during the Robben Island imprisonment (letters, photographs, notes) and the complex processes of their regulation. In common understanding, the prison services were the censors and controllers of what was allowed to leave or to enter the prison; it is clear, however, that Mandela was deeply interested in being himself an agent in this process, refusing access or denying permissions. In creative and imaginative ways he claimed agency in defiance of his jailers' intentions to deny him such options.

I then move on to a rather more metaphoric understanding of the concepts of *circulation* and *non-circulation*, and pay attention to one particular incident from Nelson Mandela's prison life, namely the performance the prisoners put on of *Antigone*, and the many accounts of this performance. The incident is included in each and every biography, and I show how formulaic the descriptions are; but also show that this recycled anecdote is in fact based on a misidentification of the play. The misidentification reinforces the pattern of endless repetition and recycling; the original has been lost and over-inscribed with the incorrect anecdote which takes over, and feeds into and perpetuates the mythologised understanding of the event.

The play is often (even typically) ascribed to Sophocles, whereas it was based instead on an adaptation of Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. In fact, it is not even that: it is an English (language) *translation* of the French (language) play, a play which is itself an adaptation of the Greek original. The misattribution has been solidified in no small part by the play *The Island*, by Athol Fugard. In this play, a two-hander, set in a prison on an unidentified island (clearly Robben Island) prisoners are shown rehearsing for a production of Sophocles's *Antigone*. Fugard's play within a play means to alert the audience to the political significance of Antigone's revolt. The play is about burial,



about the contested meanings of what should be above or below ground, what and who should be given access to a particular symbolic ritual, and who should not. In this textualised and staged adaptation of a (misidentified) translation of an adaptation, we see perhaps a cypher of the meanings of Mandela's life. What seems to be a clear political allegory is, in fact, a much more complex palimpsest of fragments and incorrect facts.

There are two striking things about the photographic archive of the Robben Island years: there are very few images from these years, and the images that do exist circulated in extremely limited ways. This period has in fact come to be memorialised most clearly in the image of the now freed man and distinguished world leader, *returning* to Robben Island to be photographed. In these images of Mandela taken in the 1990s, he is sometimes shown benignly looking out through the bars, smiling; at other times staring pensively – a stance much emulated by those who come to be photographed imitating (recycling even) the iconic image.

Contrasted with the abundance of photographs of this window and cell from the period after 1990, is the extremely small selection of images now in the public domain, published and republished to commemorate the years actually spent on Robben Island. There are photographs from two separate occasions only, both sets taken during the visits by foreign journalists and neither set published in South Africa at the time, since the South African authorities banned any and all images of Mandela, and it was a criminal offence to be found in possession of such an image. Prisoners did not have cameras, and there are no intimate portraits of the friendship groups formed in and sustained during the Robben Island years. The circulation of Mandela's image was restricted by the South African government, but Mandela himself also refused to have his photograph taken. Mandela's insistence on agency and control is evident in a fascinating incident related to photographs and the experience of being photographed.

During his time in prison, Mandela famously protested against the clothing handed to prisoners, as well as the food. In particular, his complaints were directed at the rules that delivered different clothing and food to prisoners classified by apartheid law as coloured, white or black. While remaining a prisoner, Mandela found ways of insisting on self-representation and retaining a degree of control over the care of his body. Refusing to be photographed was one such avenue he chose to pursue.

The prison authorities had allowed a visit by foreign journalists in 1965, and Mandela and his fellow prisoners were choreographed in a series of activities that misrepresented their lives. Whereas the men were habitually made to perform hard labour, in this image Mandela is shown with his head bent down over what looks like a jacket, a very hardy string dangling down as he seems to be trying to thread a needle. In a second image, in which Mandela is wearing the same ill-fitting jacket, he is seen talking to Walter Sisulu, a similar piece of string pulled tight from his left hand while



his right hand is shaped in the gesture so familiar to those listening to and watching the elder statesman in later life.

In his official autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he describes noticing a warder with a camera, who intended to photograph the men after a routine fingerprint taking procedure. Familiar with the regulations, Mandela challenged the warder to produce authorization for taking the pictures: "As a rule, we objected to having our pictures taken in prison on the ground that it is generally demeaning to be seen as a prisoner. But there is one photograph I did consent to, the only one I ever agreed to while on Robben Island" (Mandela 1994: 469). Mandela writes:

One morning a few weeks later, the chief warder, instead of handing us hammers for our work in the courtyard, gave us each needles and thread and a pile of work prison jerseys. We were instructed to repair the garments, but we discovered that most of the jerseys were frayed beyond repair. This struck us as a curious task, and we wondered what had provoked the change. Later that morning, at about eleven o'clock, the front gate swung open to reveal the commanding officer with two men in suits. The C. O. announced that the two visitors were a reporter and a photographer from the Daily Telegraph in London. He related this as if visiting members of the international press were a regular diversion for us. (Mandela 1994: 469-70)

Mandela was ordered to talk to the reporter, whom he describes as "an agreeable fellow" (Mandela 1994: 470). On being asked permission to have his photograph taken (a victory to Mandela as it is now *his* permission that is requested, rather than that of the prison authorities – who had given their permission already), Mandela recalls: "I told him I would agree, provided Mr Sisulu could join me. The image shows the two of us talking in the courtyard about some matter that I can no longer remember." (Mandela 1994: 471). It is not the content of the conversation that is significant, but the representation of the two men engaged in conversation, an image which in later years has come to stand in for the teaching and learning and discussions that formed the political culture of Robben Island. What is striking in this narrative is Mandela's counter-choreography of the event. The prison authorities mis-represent conditions in prison by making the men perform a task they do not normally perform, but Mandela finds a way of self-representing – not only himself, but himself in relation to a valued colleague.

The second set of photographs of the Robben Island years is taken in 1977, during another tour by journalists. These photographs, now very familiar and showing Mandela wearing a hat and sunglasses, his slender frame erect and one hand holding a spade, were not released for publication by the authorities. In this case, too, the prison authorities created a false and inaccurate set of tasks to be performed. Instead of the quarry work they normally performed, the men were set to do light gardening work on the day the journalists came to see the prison. The men were photographed against



their will on this day, and it is striking that all of them make an effort not to meet the photographer's gaze. The photographs were intended to portray conditions as gentler, and better, than they were; they are in fact photographs of the prison system's self-representation rather than images through which Mandela is able to represent himself. It is striking that he does not meet the gaze of the photographer, resistantly and defiantly.

In the early 1970s, regulations changed and Mandela and his fellow Rivonia trial prisoners were allowed to receive and to keep a few private photographs in their rooms. Mandela had a photograph album containing images of his family. These photographs, he recalls, would be carefully pasted into his cherished album. It is significant how even this most private of artefacts takes on symbolic and political meanings in Mandela's remembrance of it:

I do not remember who first asked to borrow my photo album, but it was undoubtedly someone in my section. I happily lent it, and someone else asked, and then someone else. Soon it became so widely know that I possessed a photo album that I was receiving requests from men in F and G. The men in F and G rarely received visitors or even letters, and it would have been ungenerous to deny them this window on the world. But before long I found that my precious photo album was in tatters, and that many of my irreplaceable photographs had been removed. These men were desperate to have something personal in their cells and could not help themselves. Each time this happened, I resolved to build up my album once more. (Mandela 1994: 593)

This depletion of the album inside prison is paralleled by the depletion of the album outside prison. Mandela writes: "We had lost invaluable family records, photographs and keepsakes – even the slice of wedding cake Winnie was saving for my release. I had always thought that some day when I left prison I would be able to recapture the past when looking over the pictures and letters, and now they were gone" (Mandela 1994: 645). The formulaic and repetitive nature of the visual archive has this dark and destructive force shaping it. What to our eyes now seems so familiar, to the eyes of Mandela himself is an archive destroyed and threatened. The familiarity of the few images of Mandela on Robben Island, together with the many images of him and others in the cell of prisoner 466/64, create a sense of fullness and completeness. The small archive, read differently, in fact speaks of depletion and lack of circulation.

In prison, Mandela's access to writing and reading material was at times severely restricted. About a period spent in solitary confinement, he writes in *Long Walk to Freedom*: "I had nothing to read, nothing to write on or with, no one to talk to" (Mandela 1994: 401). There were times of studying and reading, but the Robben Island period of incarceration saw many changes and shifts in the attitude of the prison authorities and these sometimes small changes made a big difference to the quality of



life. The texts that were in an individual's possession circulated (like the photographs) among the men, and formed the subject of their conversations.

It was with regard to newspapers that the prison authorities were most vigilant.

We regarded it as our duty to keep ourselves up to date with the politics of the country and fought long and hard for the right to have newspapers. Over the years we devised many ways of obtaining them, but at the time we were not so adept. One of the advantages of going to the quarry was that warders' sandwiches were wrapped in newspaper and they would often discard these newsprint wrappers in the rubbish, where we secretly retrieved them. (Mandela 1994: 492)

Mandela describes how he once picked up what seemed like a discarded newspaper, only to be punished for having it in his possession. Even newspapers that had been discarded (re-used as food packaging, or left abandoned somewhere) were not to be recycled into the prisoners' circumscribed space.

During the 1960s and most of the 1970s, no newspapers or radios were allowed. From 1978 onwards prisoners were allowed to listen to heavily censored news bulletins, which were broadcast throughout the prison. Such a limited news broadcast could tell them something, but nothing of what they really wanted to know – how the liberation movement fared. In Tom Lodge's biography of Mandela, he reports that Mac Maharaj was allowed to subscribe to the *Economist* until the authorities discovered it contained news articles (Lodge 2006: 125). From 1968 onwards, the men in section B were allowed to subscribe to a range of magazines but the list is hardly what they would have chosen, and is almost comically inappropriate. Included is *Reader's Digest*, *Huisgenoot* (a popular Afrikaans family magazine, which aimed to reflect and instil Afrikaner values), and *Farmer's Weekly* – an unusual choice against the background of South African politics, and the realities of land distribution in South Africa. Even so, Neville Alexander writes that the *Huisgenoot* and *Reader's Digest* often arrived heavily censored; it is hard to imagine what a censor could have found inappropriate (Alexander 1994: 65). These magazines seem to have been selected with the purpose of divesting the men of any opportunity to learn about worlds that might be significant to them. Instead, the choice aims to insert them as readers in a world that is explicitly not theirs.

The men were not only prevented from reading current periodicals or newspapers, but also from writing about their political ideals and beliefs. In Mandela's autobiography, and in other accounts of life on Robben Island, we read of extraordinary attempts to record and preserve communications and other documents. Mandela writes about how the men would write notes to one another which they then wrapped in plastic and taped to the rim of a toilet bowl (Mandela 1994: 500), and in another account, how they would write in milk – invisible until sprayed with



disinfectant. There are also accounts of men writing in tiny coded script on toilet paper, a task clearly as difficult as it is doomed to failure.

The prison authorities seem to have regarded the category of “literature” as more neutral and unpolitical than they regarded news of any form. Much attention has been devoted to the *Robben Island Bible*, the name given to a *Collected Works of Shakespeare* owned by Sonny Venkatratham. The text is often celebrated as a collective document, memorialising the literary and political life of the Island. David Schalkwyk in his book *Hamlet’s Dreams: The Robben Island Shakespeare* provides a demythologising and nuanced reading of this material, showing how what *seems* like an origin moment often is something more complex. Many of the prisoners who signed their names next to passages in the book have no memory if it, nor do they recognise the passages marked with their names as particularly meaningful.

Viewed as an object in fact absent from the memories of Robben Island prisoners as they are presented in published memoirs or interviews before it became the object of intense scrutiny, enquiry and fascination, Shakespeare represented by Venkatratham’s copy thus constitutes something of a blank: it is a repressed presence that has been forgotten, transformed, removed and now returned in unpredictable ways. (Schalkwyk 2012: 18)

Apart from the Shakespeare, about which a great deal has been written, two other literary texts stand out in the narrative of Nelson Mandela’s prison life. The first of these is the much discussed poem “Invictus”, to which Mandela makes a rather fleeting reference but which has gathered a great deal of biographical moss. The film of the same name directed by Clint Eastwood has done much to fix a certain version of Mandela in our minds, and the treatment of the cell is emblematic of the argument I make above about emptying out. In a chapter called “Mandela in Film and Television”, Litheko Modisane offers an intelligent analysis of this film, arguing that the film constitutes Mandela through a collection of “signifiers of a signifier” (Modisane 2014: 236), ultimately emptied of political meanings and recycling endlessly the kind old gentleman waving to the world.

It is the third literary reference that is recycled in all accounts of Robben Island that interests me the most here. It is a story which mirrors so neatly the concern with inside/outside, legal/illegal dichotomies that it seems hardly to need interpretation or analysis. The anecdote concerns a prison performance of *Antigone*, a story about a hero who is refused a respectful and dignified burial, and the sister who loves him enough to risk all to give him the burial he deserves. The themes of the play – tyrants and their unjust rules, and the recognition of the value of blood and community – are atmospherically and ideologically clearly linked to the notion of island imprisonment. My argument is less intent on finding and mapping these rather obvious congruencies. I want to look instead at how this recycled and repeated anecdote can be used to read the fragmented and scattered archive of Mandela’s life.



The often repeated anecdote about the performance of *Antigone* typically rests on a misrecognition of the play. In Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, he provides what has become the definitive version, the version that most others copy and repeat: "Our productions were what might now be called minimalist: no stage, no scenery, no costumes. All we had was the text of the play" (Mandela 1994: 540). He continues: "I performed in only a few dramas, but I had one memorable role: that of Creon, the king of Thebes, in Sophocles's *Antigone*. I had read some of the classic Greek plays in prison, and found them enormously elevating" (Mandela 1994: 540). He offers his own interpretation of the play:

Creon deals with his enemies mercilessly. He has decreed that the body of Polynices, Antigone's brother, who had rebelled against the city, does not deserve a proper burial. Antigone rebels, on the grounds that there is a higher law than that of the state. Creon will not listen to Antigone, neither does he listen to anyone but his own inner demons. His inflexibility and blindness will become a leader, for a leader must temper justice with mercy. It was Antigone who symbolized our struggle; she was, in her own way, a freedom fighter, for she defied the law on the ground that it was unjust. (Mandela 1994: 541)

His description of this performance takes up little more than a paragraph. This incident is small in its autobiographical narration, but it has been projected onto the vast empty screen that is our collective understanding of Mandela.

Ahmed Kathrada (the owner of the copy of *Antigone*) writes about this performance in his *Memoirs*:

One of the best Christmases we spent in prison was [when...] our section staged a respectable production of Jean Anouilh's play, *Antigone*, in which the main characters reject any tampering with their ideals. Madiba played Creon, and his performance more than compensated for his dethronement as the dominoes champion a year before. (Kathrada 2004: 259)

Tom Lodge accepts the version as told by Mandela, and ties his analysis of it to classical drama:

The links between political leadership and theatrical performance are emphasised in a reference to his role as Creon in Orestes' version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, as enacted by the prisoners on Robben Island. Significantly, several commentaries have used the metaphors of masks and masking in their analysis of Mandela's personality, a term that Mandela himself used in describing the way in which in prison he concealed his anguished longing for his family. (Lodge 2006: 189).



Anthony Sampson writes that

[c]lassical drama gained a new intensity in the prison; Sophocles's *Antigone* was seen as especially relevant to the struggle. The playwright Athol Fugard wrote a short play, *The Island*, based on reports from the prison, which was performed in Cape Town in 1973, and after in London and on Broadway, in which two prisoners perform a minimal version of *Antigone*. On the actual island Mandela played the part of Creon in a full-length production of *Antigone*. He saw Creon as a leader who was originally wise and patriotic, but who showed himself merciless and inflexible in refusing to let *Antigone* bury her dead brother, while *Antigone* was a freedom fighter 'who defied the law on the ground that it was unjust'. (Sampson 2012: 234-5)

Striking in both biographies is how rapidly the small anecdote takes on mythical proportions, and acts as a hook on which to hang large and allegorical interpretations.

The performance of the play is obliquely referenced in Athol Fugard's *The Island*. The play does not name Mandela, and was written in a period when his name was a banned word. Many critics identify the play in *The Island* as a play by Sophocles (see for example Raji, Durbach, McDonald and Steiner). The play is clearly informed by narratives of life on Robben Island, handed down either through mythology or first-hand accounts of men who had returned to the outside world. Neville Alexander in his book *Robben Island Dossier* writes: "It was an unspoken injunction understood by all prisoners who were released from the island that one of the most important contributions they could make to the well-being of those they left behind was to let in the light of public scrutiny on the goings-on in that prison" (Alexander 1994: vii). In the notes to *The Island*, we read that the "letters and reminiscences of imprisoned Serpent Players such as (mainly) Norman Ntshinga provided Fugard, Kani, and Ntshona with their inspiration, and the detail for most scenes" (Fugard 1993: 232). The play opens with a memorable scene of two prisoners doing meaningless work, literally recycling matter endlessly. The stage notes describe the action as "back-breaking and grotesquely futile labour", each of the two men "fills a wheelbarrow and then with great effort pushes it to where the other man is digging, and empties it. As a result, the piles of sand never diminish. Their labour is interminable" (Fugard 1993: 195). This description of meaningless labour is echoed in Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, where it is made clear that the tasks were *deliberately* pointless to rob the men of any sense of meaning:

The first week we began the work that would occupy us for the next few weeks. Each morning, a load of stones about the size of volleyballs was dumped by the entrance to the courtyard. Using wheelbarrows, we moved the stones to the centre of the yard. We were given either four-pound hammers, or fourteen-pound hammers for the larger stones. Our job was to crush the stones into gravel. (Mandela 1994: 458)



Neville Alexander in his *Robben Island Dossier, 1964-1974* writes that it is worth remembering that

there is not much work to be done on Robben Island. Relatively little lime or stone is required for local use and there is no profit in transporting it to the mainland. Hence the pointlessness of the whole thing weighs heavily on the prisoners who are, of course, treated as automata, never being told what the ultimate practical goal of the work is. Often mountains of stone, and lime, quarried by antediluvian methods and with the most primitive instruments have lain literally for years, blown away by the wind and washed away by the rain without any use being made of them. (Alexander 1994: 31)

The description is evocative of loss and decay, of men's lives being recycled into dust which itself is washed away, leaving no trace.

What has become the heavy and best-selling *Long Walk to Freedom* started its life as a secret, encrypted, smuggled and in fact lost manuscript. The written archive around Mandela's life similarly has an emptiness at its centre. Many have remarked on the lack of vitality in his autobiography, the curious absencing of the person in what is meant to be a genre of self-revelation. Both David Schalkwyk and Daniel Roux have written about the complex routes through which the original, lost, manuscript is displaced by the published and much celebrated autobiography (Roux 2014: 207). It is yet another instance of the contradictions inherent in the remembered and commemorated life of Mandela – an endless recycling which creates the illusion of fullness.

The motivation behind the writing of the first (the lost original) autobiography is very familiar from the many anecdotes. Lodge writes in a definitive version:

On his fifty-seventh birthday, in his fifteenth year in prison, Sisulu and Kathrada suggested that Mandela should write his memoirs in time for Maharaj to take out a manuscript a year later, when his release was due. Working first at night and then during the daytime, when he convinced the warders that he was too unwell to labour in the quarry, Mandela produced a 500-page manuscript. This was condensed into tiny script by Chiba. Maharaj succeeded in hiding Chiba's version in his belongings when he left the island, and when he travelled to London subsequently he took the manuscript with him, hidden in the covers of a photograph album. (Lodge 2006: 139)

This manuscript was taken out, and accounts describe it being read in London and Lusaka, where it is said to have disappeared. The "original" manuscript was buried in the section B courtyard where it was discovered by the authorities when the courtyard was dug up for maintenance. On the hidden manuscript was visible the clearly legible handwriting of Mandela, as well as of Kathrada and Sisulu, who were punished by



having their access to study materials limited for a period of four years. A fascinating coda to this discovery, and one that illustrates the changing status of the fragments of this time, is the fact that this very same manuscript is now preserved in the national archives of South Africa, in Mandela's prison files (Lodge 2006: 139).

The version in the archives is a fragment of the "original". But when we read how this text was produced, it is clear that fragmentation was at the heart of its very creation. Mandela would work at night, under the blankets, and would pass the ten pages produced each night to Mac Maharaj. The author could not read his *own* text, in an extreme instance of lack of circulation. Maharaj would take the pages and then he would work, under cover of his blanket, to copy out these pages onto rice paper, "in tiny writing – less than half a millimetre high – and concealed the small pages among his study books" (Lodge 2006: 243). The original was then put into limited circulation, handed to Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu for their comments and corrections. It is this collectively produced original that was buried in the courtyard, to be discovered in fragments by prison guards and later exhibited as one of the origin documents of the new order.

The original version of Mandela's autobiography, the version that circulated in such a limited way, and was copied in near illegible writing before being buried, is a document that reveals as much as it conceals. In the reconstruction of this buried document, Mandela narrates a life that was all along characterised by versions of absence. Over the years he had various alter egos and secret identities, living at times as the Black Pimpernel and at others disguised as a labourer. The romance and family plot also consists of a series of absences, as husband to his two first wives and as a parent to the children from both marriages.

Mandela was himself aware of the metaphoric richness of the term "underground":

Living underground requires a seismic psychological shift. One has to plan every action, however small and seemingly insignificant. Nothing is innocent. Everything is questioned. You cannot be yourself; you must fully inhabit whatever role you have assumed. In some ways, this was not much of an adaptation for a black man in South Africa. Under apartheid, a black man lived a shadowy life between legality and illegality, between openness and concealment. To be a black man in South Africa meant not to trust anything, which was not unlike living underground for one's entire life. (Mandela 1994: 315)

Mandela's "underground" identity has now, in this time after his death, taken on a literal meaning, with his physical body interred in a family grave in Qunu, his birthplace. Many have commented on the intrigue and plotting around the burial, and the disputed claims to the remains (see for example Lee); that is not what this paper wants to do, although how this material could be integrated in the argument is both clear and disturbing.



With his life so bracketed and interrupted, the life story so depleted of its middle years, how are we to understand the life of Mandela? With his death and funeral so fresh in memory, what are the meanings of the interment of his final remains? Or to ask the question in another way, what is it that has come to an end with the death of Mandela's physical body? How are we to understand the interment, either as a final fragmentation or as a reconstitution?

Recent years have seen a growing interest in scholarship on burial and death. A central question in this work is the duality between the corpse as material object on the one hand, and what Posel and Gupta call "a signifier of wider political, economic, cultural, ideological and theological endeavours", on the other (2009: 299). It would be hard to find a body for which this duality is more pronounced than the body of Mandela, in South African and international terms the *über*-signifier. The moment of death, write Posel and Gupta, "produces a decaying body, an item of waste that requires disposal – simultaneous with an opportunity, sometimes an imperative – to recuperate the meanings of spent life, symbolically effacing the material extinction that death represents" (2009: 299). While Mandela is thus, as Posel and Gupta argue, the *über*-signifier, I have shown that this signifier is often empty, encrypted, encoded and fragmented. Perhaps he is instead, as Modisane writes too, the *über*-signified, elusive and translated, always already recycled and reconstituted.

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