Re-Framing SS Mendi

Curating and Commemorating a Missing Memory in South Africa

The sinking of the SS *Mendi* in 1917 remains one of South Africa's greatest war disasters and it was one of the worst maritime losses during the First World War. Yet the memory of the more than 600 black South African troops who died en route to Europe to fight a 'white man's war' was in the racially segregated South Africa soon faded from public memory.

100 years later, in the democratic republic of South Africa which is still battling the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, it has become a national top-priority to commemorate the sinking of the SS *Mendi*. In 2017, the University of Cape Town is both a site for violent student demonstrations and host for the centenary commemoration exhibition *Abantu beMendi* which pays tribute to the men who perished with the *Mendi* but who were never acknowledged or awarded for their service to the war effort. Comprising a plurality of artworks and documentation, *Abantu beMendi* is a space where a diverse curatorial committee in collaboration with artists and stakeholders negotiate what the memory of the *Mendi* is today, and how to decolonise curation and representation.

How do you visually and materially reconstruct a memory from a history that was 'forgotten'? Why, after 100 years of official neglect despite family and community efforts to keep the memory alive, has *Mendi* become a national priority today? Whose memory is commemorated?

Susanne Holm is a photographer and holds an M.A. in Visual Ethnography from Leiden University. This study was carried out in collaboration with the Mendi Centenary Project curatorial committee and the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

Re-Framing SS Mendi A Visual Ethnography by Susanne Holm

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Visual Ethnography as a Method

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Acknowledgements

"*Have you ever heard about the SS Mendi?*" The question came from Paul Weinberg, the curator of the Centre for African Studies gallery, University of Cape Town. We spoke on Skype as I was planning a research project for my M.A. in Visual Ethnography at Leiden University

'No', I confessed, and Paul continued: "*It's no surprise you haven't, the history was surpressed. Now it's become high-profile and we are putting together an art exhibition to commemorate the centenary of the sinking of SS Mendi. It's an interesting project and we could use an extra pair of hands!"*

With those words, my journey began and it is to Paul I owe my first and greatest thank you. Almost a year later and with collaborations spanning over two universities over two continents, there are many more people to whom I am greatly indebted for making this project possible.

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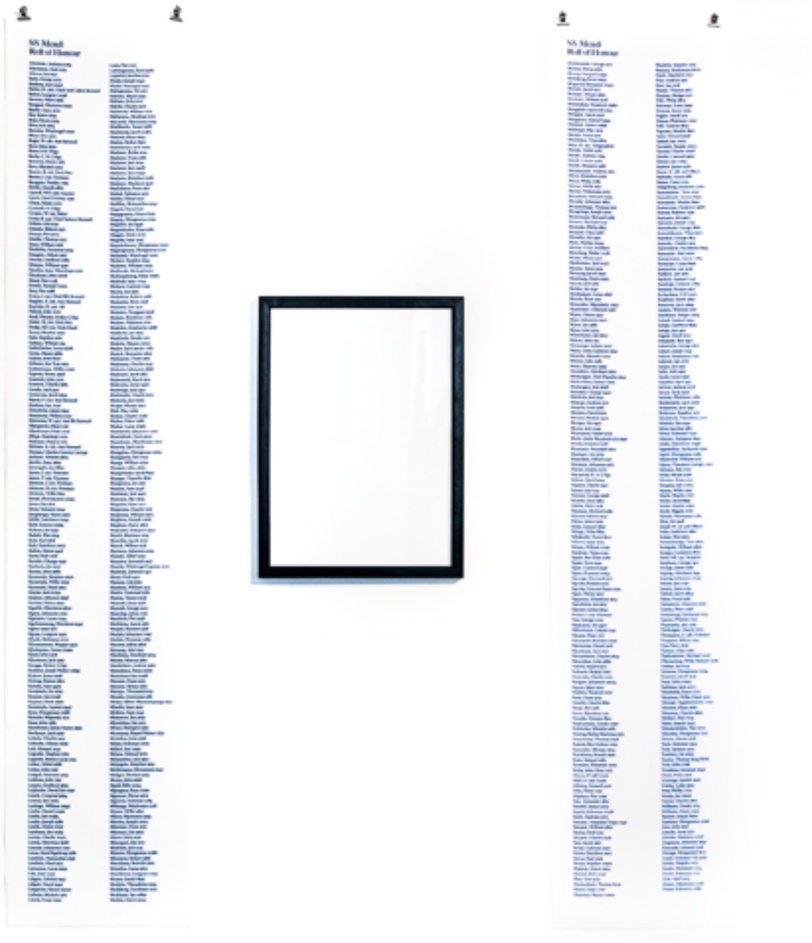
Tillägnad min familj.

Abstract

The strongest presence of the SS *Mendi* is the story of her absence. A symbol for colonial neglect and erasure of history, the most revealing image at the *Abantu beMendi* exhibition, commemorating the centenary of the sinking of the *Mendi*, is an empty frame. The blank space echoes the medals not awarded to the more than 600 black South Africans who drowned with the *Mendi* en route to serve the British Commonwealth in the First World War.

The empty frame materially and conceptually reflects the lack of historical imagery and the constraints of the contemporary context which informs the process of compiling a *Mendi* archive, making the curation thereof a conversation between reconstructed historiographies, novel interpretations, a plurality of artistic agencies, media and modalities. Situated at the University of Cape Town in the wake of the fallen Rhodes statue, *Abantu beMendi* is a critical project not only for commemorating the people of the *Mendi* but for decolonising curation and re-visualising a forgotten history in a new frame.



Contentless Commemoration? *Abantu beMendi,* February 2017.

21 February 1917

On the icy cold morning 21 February 1917, the British troopship SS *Mendi* was slowly ploughing through the thick mist covering the English Channel. She was crossing from Plymouth in England to Le Havre in France; the final stretch of a long journey which started more than five weeks earlier in Cape Town, South Africa. For most of the men on board it was their first encounter with the sea and with the European winter. Of the 912 men on board the *Mendi*, 802 were black troops of the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC). Most of them came from the Union of South Africa, a dominion of the British Empire, though some were from the neighbouring British Protectorates of Basutuland (modern Lesotho), Bechaunaland (Botswana) and Swaziland. These men had been recruited on behalf of the British Commonwealth to serve the Allies as non-combatants in the First World War. They were accompanied by 4 SANLC officers and 17 non-commissioned officers (NCOs), all of them white. The ship crew constituted 89 men from UK and West Africa (Clothier 1987).

Mendi had departed Plymouth the previous afternoon, escorted by the destroyer HMS *Brisk*. As she drove throughout the dark of the night, keeping close to the shore in avoidance of German submarines, the weather conditions grew worse and in the dense fog their visibility was nearly nil. Every few minutes *Mendi* sounded her whistle as dictated the by regulations for such weather.

SS *Darro*, a British passenger ship much larger and heavier than *Mendi*, was crossing the English Channel in the opposite direction. Moving at full speed and with her lanterns switched off, *Darro*'s crossing had been swift and she was about to reach the English shore early in the morning.

Mendi only made it eleven miles south of Isle of Wright. At 04.57 am, *Darro* suddenly appeared out of mist. With engines at full speed, the *Darro* ploughed straight into the starboard side of *Mendi*, almost cutting her in half. The SS *Darro* sailed away, unharmed, and without making any attempts to rescue the drowning men. SS *Mendi* sunk in less than 25 minutes, taking approximately 647 lives with her, most of them black South Africans.

Postcard of the Royal Mail Ship *Mendi,* indicating that she used to carry mail on her regular East Africa tours before becoming a troopship. Her commonly used prefix SS stands for Steam Ship. Courtesy of John Gribble.

21 February 2017

A centenary later, a commemoration is held on the English Channel. It is a beautiful ceremony aboard the South African Navy frigate SAS *Amatola* with a small military parade to the sound of trumpets and bagpipes. Via a news broadcast, we are watching descendants of men who perished with the *Mendi* laying wreaths on the water at the site of the *Mendi* wreck. The descendants were traced by South African Department of Defence (von Zeil 2014) and flown from South Africa to the UK for this special occasion. I look at their faces and wonder if their stern expressions are in sombre honour of the moment, reactions to the cold wind, or disappointment. Next, I look at how steady the camera is held on the rolling deck and how I can cut the different sequences together into a shorter summary of the event to be displayed in the *Mendi* commemoration exhibition about to open a few days later at the University of Cape Town, at the same location where the men spent their last night on African soil before departing for Europe with the SS *Mendi*.

The video from the English Channel ceremony was intended to be shown as part of the commemoration exhibition *Abantu beMendi*, screened next to the Roll of Honour and a copy of the medal the descendants were supposed to be given in delayed recognition of their ancestors. Now, instead, it will be screened next to the Roll of Honour and an empty frame.

The president of South Africa was supposed to award medals to the men who died with the *Mendi* in delayed recognition of their contribution to the war effort. However, the final approval for the medals was never signed. No explanation was given.

At the Centre for African Studies gallery, a prime spot had been allocated for a copy of the medal to be displayed. However, caught by last-minute surprise with regards to the centenary commemoration which suddenly seemed contentless, and with how to proceed with the exhibition, the curatorial committee made the decision to still hang the frame intended for the medal as a statement: this frame should not have been empty.

Preparing the empty frame. 'The Missing Medals' caption hidden inside the frame resonates with the 'missing middle': students who are deemed too rich to qualify for government support, but too poor to afford tuition fees. CAS gallery, February 2017.

"We are all in a state of trying to remember… If the body heals, but the spirit doesn't, you've got a problem… And when it comes to intergenerational traumas that involve loss of identity and memory, it is only art that can help us to excavate lost aspects of history and go beyond the literal, beyond facts. Those men that were swallowed, we do not remember their names. Like it or not, we remember 'Mendi' in the singular. They have become Mendi. So too, Mendi is becoming us. We are Mendi – we are the commemoration of that memory."

– Mandla Mbothwe, artist

The centenary of the sinking of SS *Mendi*, commemorated by the South African Department of Defence. University of Cape Town, 26 February 2017.

The sinking of SS *Mendi* was a tragedy transcending national and political borders in Africa and in Europe. Five *Mendi* casualties were washed ashore on the coast of the Netherlands who were neutral in the First World War. The men were identified and buried, and South Africa is remembered on this war monument. Noordwijk, December 2016.

Simonstown harbours three *Mendi* memorials: a lifebouy statue, the Navy Frigate SAS *Mendi* and the patrole vessel SAS *Isaac Dyobha.* Cape Town, January 2017.

SAS *Mendi* foregrounded by the South African Naval Museum in Simonstown. SAS *Mendi* was launched to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the sinking of SS *Mendi*.
Cape Town, January 2017.

"Being omitted from history has its own dangers, of course, but being inserted into history is no easy matter either."

– Albert Grundlingh (2011:28)

Introduction

The *Mendi* story is about erasure of history, and about re-claiming that history. The *Mendi* disaster was one of South Africa's greatest tragedies of the First World War – second only to the Battle at Delville Wood – and one of the greatest maritime losses in UK waters during the entire 20th century (Swinney 1995). Despite its magnitude, the sinking of the *Mendi* was neglected and even deliberately omitted from public memory (Clothier 1987; Grundlingh 2011).

One hundred years later, in the democratic Republic of South Africa, the centenary of the sinking of the SS *Mendi* offers a timely opportunity to revive history and redeem its wrongs.

'The *Mendi* Centenary Project 2017' is a collaborative commemoration held at the University of Cape Town (UCT). In addition to a military parade by the South African Department of Defence, the commemoration comprises a multidisciplinary conference and a multi-media art exhibition hosted by the Centre for African Studies (CAS) gallery. Together they revive the memory of the *Mendi* and shine a light on histories previously suppressed and forgotten. The name of the exhibition is *Abantu beMendi* – Xhosa for 'the people of the *Mendi*'.

Comprising a broad diversity of artworks, from archival material to novel creations and live performances, *Abantu beMendi* offers a platform to re-think history and heritage, how it is represented today and by whom; a mission of burning importance with regards to the institutional racism still prevalent in South Africa and the ongoing student protests furiously addressing this at universities both nationally and internationally.

To hegemonise representational authority, the exhibition was conducted as an inclusive and collaborative project where the opinions and expertise of the curators is placed in conversation with the historical archives, the interpretations of the participating artists, the expectations of stakeholders, the demands by student protests movements, and the interests of public audiences. The main task of the curatorial committee was thereby to reconcile these often contradictory perspectives into representation which is both aesthetically desirable, politically sensitive and that fulfils the aim of the exhibition: "to pay tribute to the South African Native Labour Contingent, and the men on the *Mendi* who died en route to fight for their dignity and human rights through service to the war effort" (CAS 2016).

Abantu beMendi is an interactive space where the past and present meet in a multidisciplinary artistic conversation. However, the more than a thousand words an image is supposed to 'say' are not embedded in the image itself but added by the artistic agency of the maker, the researchers and curators who use them, by the interpretations of the viewer and the social relations and discourses they participate in.

Therefore is the aim of this project to problematise *how the 'forgotten' memory of the SS Mendi is curated, commemorated and re-framed in negotiation with contemporary socio-political structures and demands for decolonisation?*

The SANLC men have returned to their previous camp at the foot of Table Mountain's eastern peak. CAS gallery, February 2017.

"The curatorial challenge opens a question about the meanings generated by displaying the photographs to twenty-first-century audiences and, perhaps most importantly, returning the photographs to the place that it has now become?"

– Darren Newbury (2015:160)

Photographer as Storyteller

Utilising visual ethnography as a method, primarily by means of still photography but also incorporating other media, I aim to explore art as a site of contestation and means for communication, not only as a topic of study but also as an applied practice to be utilised as a collaborative, problem-solving endeavour whereby anthropological ideas can be 'translated' into a more accessible (thus more accountable) format (Pink 2007). Art and anthropology will be intertwined as a common practice and mutually constituted forms of expression, utilising the qualitative, observatory and creative approaches at the heart of both.

The photographs presented in this book I took during my field research in Cape Town January to March 2017 where I participated in the making of *Abantu beMendi* as a curator intern, photographer and external researcher; a 'complete participant' (Davies 2008). One photograph was taken at the Commonwealth War Grave in Noordwijk, the Netherlands, which I visited as part of my preparatory research. The practical work and participatory position helped me to navigate this novel field and it endowed me with a purpose and a position to counterbalance my outsider-identity; paralleling ethnographic methodology, photographers must enter the social situation in which they are working while still remain distant enough to observe (Sutherland 2016).

Some scenarios are described in first person plural to not disguise my own presence and to emphasise the bias informing my encounter with the *Mendi* story since it was primarily through a curatorial perspective. However, I must not be conflated with the curatorial committee who are the decision-makers. For the purpose of the exhibition, I was a helping hand in actualising those decisions. Collaboration also entails an element of reciprocity (Robben and Sluka 2007) whereby I could contribute work efforts, research insights, and also two photographs to the exhibition.

Even as an inside participant, it is of course extremely problematic as a white European to go to South Africa trying to study a 'black memory', especially with the potentially violent gaze of a camera (Sontag 2003a; Berger 1980). In acknowledgement of this, my point of departure is to admit the widespread ignorance of South Africa past and present that is predominant in Europe, myself included. Secondly, although I cannot identify with a South African history it does not reduce my ability to empathise and to learn from it, which is the reason for this project. Thirdly, me being an outsider also entails an opportunity to spread awareness of the *Mendi* as I go back home.

It must also be noted that the only story I can tell is my own. The photographs in this book represent my engagement with, and response to, the *Mendi* as I encountered her. The photographs maintain an observational distance yet are close enough to be a testimony of involvement: 'Re-Framing SS *Mendi*' thus equally refers to the contemporary making of the *Mendi* memory and to my re-presentation thereof.

My motivation for using a camera is firstly as a method for communication and secondly as means for presentation since due to their multivocality, photographs are not contained by their frames. Visual representations thereby makes the viewer an agent and a participant who can make own observations and interpretations.

Without overseeing the hegemonic imbalances of visual practices, I strive for a transformative and educational 'appropriation' (Schneider 2006) to serve as a mediator across cultural differences, as an act of dialogical understanding.

To preserve the conversational multi-media approach of *Abantu beMendi,* this project comprises in addition to this book also a short film emphasising the voices of people participating in the exhibition, and a website where summaries of the film, text and photographs are made easily accessible via www.shphotography.org or by scanning the QR-code below. Inspired by 'the media is the message' (McLuhan 1994), the different modalities illustrates the exhibition itself and dialectical processes of its curation. They offer different ways of engaging with 'the presence of the photograph' (Azoulay 2012) in order to evoke a conversation that is both sensory and intellectual.

Link to Re-Framing *Mendi* website.

Self-portrait. University of Cape Town, January 2017.

"*When one, anyone, tries to represent someone else, to 'take their picture' or 'tell their story', they run headlong into a minefield of real political problems. The first question is: what right have I to represent you? Every photograph of this kind must be a negotiation, a complex act of communication. As with all such acts, the likelihood of success is extremely remote, but does that mean it shouldn't be attempted?*" (Strauss 2003:8).

Visual Epistemology

Visual methodologies have been discarded by most anthropologists as either 'optic copy' or 'artistic indulgence' (MacDougall 1998:64), neither of which implies useful knowledge. The perceived dangers include photographs being too open to misinterpretation, and too seductive. However, both written ethnographies and works of art alike are creative reconstructions and translations of other realities. The main difference between visual and written lies in the control of meaning; images threaten 'knowledge' itself since they might reveal more than intended and their polyvalence invite multiple interpretations and thereby they also challenge the omnipotence of the sole narrator.

If photographs are restricted by classifications such as 'art' or 'truthful depictions of reality', they will serve a very limited function in anthropology. Instead, they will here be explored as 'meta-art' comprising and devouring other forms of art and being capable of creating a space where sociological, moral and political issues can be illuminated and discussed (Sontag 2003a). Photographs as representation have their own intentionality and can be more persuasive, yet also less explicit and may elicit unintended reactions. The danger of photography is the same as its potency: democratisation of communication and serendipity of meaning.

The making of the *Mendi*: compiling an archive and constructing an exhibition. CAS gallery, February 2017.

'In Memoriam'

The introductory photograph on the cover of this book is a montage. It is not representative of the photographic style inside the book but it introduces us to the location, the University of Cape Town, and the topics of this study: the men who died with SS *Mendi*, the contemporary socio-political tensions at UCT, and how the past is placed in the present through art. It also illustrates key concerns integral to photography, ethnography and curation alike: appropriation, authority, authenticity and ethics of representation.

The merger of one photograph from the Tim Couzens/Fred Cornell collection of photographs from Rosebank Military Camp, ca January 1917, with one of my own photographs of UCT campus, 18 January 2017, illustrates the trans-temporal conversation at the heart of the *Mendi* commemoration and of this project. The two photographs are taken at the same place, the grounds at the root of Table Mountain's eastern peak, yet 100 years apart. The people in the photographs are not known by name but we do know the former are members of SANLC preparing for departure overseas to the First World War, and the latter are students of the university who are experiencing an unusually tranquil campus between semesters.

Since image use and circulation is restricted by image consent and image ownership which are ethically, morally and legally complex issues; and crucial considerations for the curator and visual ethnographer alike. The 1917 photograph in the 'In Memoriam' montage is reprinted with the kind permission from the copyright holder, though from a moral perspective I sincerely hope the photographer – who is unknown – would approve my appropriation of his photograph.

The digital manipulation serves as a visual reminder of the constructed nature of photographs and remembrance alike; both defy the linearity of time, the actualities of historicity and the limitations of being 'truths', while still enjoying a privileged position in imagination and communication, where ideas are shaped and shared. As both photographs are taken out of context and then recontextualised, there is much room for interpretation but also for misrepresentation. A montage is the result of executive choices and decisions, subjectivities and politics, especially with regards to selection, what is included and what is omitted (Suhr and Willerslev 2013).

Further, through montage what is not explicitly stated or directly visible can be allured by disruptions and contrasts; abstractions such as a memory might become perceptible in the narrative gaps, in the absences, whereby the viewer must conjure other sensory impressions to experience it. Through visual juxtapositions and emotional responses evoked by them, montage can render visible human commonalities.

My photographs seek to visualise a contemporary contested space, how the past is created within it and how memories are made a perceptive possibility through materialisation. I explore the layers, the stories embedded within the stories, and the past reflected in the present.

The initial question that sparked this project was how to materially and visually reconstruct a memory from a history that was 'forgotten'; what will be displayed in the Mendi exhibition?

Within a few hours after landing in Cape Town I found out. Coming straight from the airport to the CAS curator's office, my first task was to familiarise myself with and organise a vast collection of images relating to Mendi. These included everything from old postcards, archival photographs, sonar scans of the Mendi wreck, digitisations of historical records and various memorabilia, old artefacts and new artworks. This eclectic digital collection of more than 600 images was awaiting archival care and metadata inscriptions.

In other words, my first encounter with the exhibition material was hours of meticulous work and an incredible journey across time and across the world through images that collected together for the first time revealed previously unseen perspectives of the Mendi story. I was amazed.

"Welcome to curation 101", Paul said with a laugh.

Curation is a multi-disciplinary practice entailing everything from office work, to research, social relations and manual labour.
CAS Gallery. February 2017.

The Art of Framing

"If the collection is to have value within post-apartheid South Africa, beyond an academic audience, then it resides in a return to the images, opening the collection up to memory and to new potential meanings." (Newbury 2015:169).

Archival Passion

Derrida describes 'archival passion' as "a passion for the past, a passion justice and a passion for the future" (Vosloo 2005:399). Similarly, the *Mendi* centenary commemoration is motivated by a desire for justice, both to rectify the past and to ensure a better future. However, the notion of 'archive' suggests a delimited entity, a thing in itself that can be studied and presented; 'archive' presumes there is an archive. Instead Derrida (2010) suggests the objects in an archive are references to something that exists outside the archive which they may inhibit. Mirroring the *Mendi* story itself there is no re-existing archive, it is being created.

Processes of remembering and archiving entail crucial questions about ethical responsibility: the archive as a place is a space for memory though it is also a "body of knowledge produced about the past" that "privileges certain persons, texts, stories or events while neglecting and repressing others" (Vosloo 2005:380). Robins (1998) questions whether South African history will ever be told without privileging certain totalizing, heroic memories, and whether 'abused memory' is better than no memory at all?

Due to the historical neglect and public forgetting of the *Mendi* story, there is almost no 'original' material to be exhibited (Swinney 1995). Compiling an archive or exhibition entails appropriation from a broad variety of sources, taking them out of context and placing them in a new, constructed setting. The making of *Abantu beMendi* is thereby an exercise in (re)creating a memory which reminds us that history and our understanding thereof is continuously re-negotiated in the present, filtered through what information is currently available, what paradigm is currently dominating the intellectual landscape, and what political agendas it might serve.

Compiling a new collection of image material for an exhibition; selecting images from an existing archive and deciding how to reframe and re-present them; or making a painting depicting a historical event; are all artistic interpretations made by someone in his/her time. All three can reveal something about how the event depicted was imagined at the time. The meaning is not contingent on the historical accuracy of the reading but of the personal relationship to the image as interpreted in the present. By this reasoning, artistic renderings are equally valid forms of representations of a historical event for the purpose of a contemporary commemoration.

It is as mediators and social agents (Gell 1998) images acquire meanings as parts of visual systems (Poole 1997). Archives thereby become a vital site for the accumulation of social networks and meanings; are not "historically neutral resting-places, but living collections... shaped by the processes and procedures of the institutions that curate them and the researchers who use them"; the archive is a site for 'small dramas and contestations' (Morton and Edwards 2009:8).

"[M]useums give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory… In making decisions about collecting policy, museum curators determine criteria of significance, define cultural hierarchies, and shape historical consciousness" (Davison 1989:145).

A visual reminder of the constructed nature of any representation: the photographer's agency in framing it and the curatorial authority re-creating it. This is also a reminder of the reader's own hands, holding this book. CAS Gallery, January 2017.

Curation

Curation entails conflicts over what memories to exhibit, what versions of those memories, and how to historically, politically and socially frame them (Nuttall and Coetzee 1998). Curators are not mediators but creators of archives (Morton and Newbury 2015) as the meaning of an image is not merely dependent on its maker but its subsequent curation and dissemination (Farid 2013).

According to Oxford University Press dictionary (2016), the verb to 'curate' is defined as to 'select, organize, and present, typically using professional or expert knowledge'.

This definition entails several anthropologically interesting considerations. Firstly, selecting and organising items implies agency and intentionality. Secondly, to organise and present require material and conceptual framing as images are 'translated' from one context to another; the repurposing and remediation of images. Thirdly, the curator's decisions are legitimised by the authority of being an 'expert'.

Rather than custodians of collective memory, Davison describes museums as institutions for selective memory with the dangerous authority of perceived objectivity, and stereotypes are perpetuated in the name of scientific enquiry whereby the curators institutionalise privileged forms of knowledge and "determine criteria of significance, define cultural hierarchies, and shape colonial consciousness" (1998:145).

However, exhibitions as public spaces can also contest the same power relations they display. Differentiated from the

role the historian whose task is to "recount the event of photography" (Azoulay 2012:263), Newbury (2015) approaches the role of the curator as the one who 'prolongs' it and holds the photograph open to the present as a space to remember and renegotiate the past.

Commemoration

Differentiating between different forms of memory and remembering, Ullberg defines commemoration as "a regular pattern of remembrance; a ritual recall often but not always carried out in public settings" (2013:16) which includes places, objects and practices of commemoration. In other words, commemoration is a performance and manifestation of memory through stylised repetition of acts and reproduction of artefacts as ways of imagining and being in the world.

Approaching commemoration as a performance highlights aspects of doing, of behaviours, actions and agency; it is a live event experienced by engagement, participation and consumption entailing places, objects and practices. History is a constant conversation with the past, shaped by ideas and attitudes in the present (Byrnes 2012); commemoration ceremonies and art exhibitions are means of manifesting, communicating and reproducing them.

Commemorating the *SS Mendi* is about a historical occurrence though the construction of the theory is a contemporary performance.

Re-Framing

Re-framing means to change a frame or part of a frame. Frame is used here in its broadest sense: material, conceptual, contextual and frame of reference: the beliefs and values we use when inferring meaning. As the frame changes, so do the inferred meanings. The external never remains outside the frame since images are constituted by what is around them, how they are enacted upon and reacted to (Morris 2013:212).

Re-framing is used in its present participle form to emphasise the aspect of *doing*: a continuous reconstruction and the agency required to make it happen. Rather than closing in, re-framing as an ongoing process is a promise of, and invite for, novel perspectives.

In order to grasp socially manifested abstractions such as memory, re-framing is not limited to an actual image but also includes imagery.

In the intersection of image and imagination, *imagery* refers to visual representations created in our minds, often based on socially shared ideas and perceptions, vivid enough to appeal to one or more human senses. Whereas imagery is the descriptive idea of something, an *image* is the medium, the reproduced or represented likeness. Part of our current mission is to discern the dialectic processes of curation whereby the imagery of the *Mendi* is negotiated and made manifest through images and how these give shape to new imagery.

The process of *visualising* allows us to perceive a memory. Re-framing thus becomes a tool to problematise, experience and express memory.

SS *Mendi* today: *Amagugu* by Buhlebezwe Siwani. *Abantu beMendi*, February 2017.

SS *Mendi* today: Scale model of SS Mendi by Buddy Bacon. *Abantu beMendi*, February 2017.

SS *Mendi* today: *Izihlangu Zenkohlakalo* by Mandla Mbothwe. *Abantu beMendi*, February 2017.

SS *Mendi* Ship Facts

Type: Single-screw steamship

Tonnage: 4,230 GRT

Length: 370.2 ft. (112.8 m)

Beam: 46.2 ft. (14.1 m)

Depth of hold: 23.3 ft. (7.1 m)

Speed: 11.5 knots (21.3 km/h)

Built: 1905

Builder: Alexander Stephen and Sons

Nationality: United Kingdom

Namesake: Mendi people of West Africa

Owner: British and African Steam Navigation Company Ltd.

Operator: Elder Dempster & Co, Liverpool

Class: Passenger liner

Route: Liverpool – West Africa

Passenger capacity: 100 first class, 70 second class

Requisitioned by British Government 1916

Reclassified: Troopship

Fate: sunk in English Channel after an accidental collision with SS *Darro* at 4.57 am, 21 February 1917.

Wreck location: 11.3 nautical miles (21 km)

off Saint Catherine's Light, Isle of Wright, UK

Wreck coordinates: 50° 27' 59.99" N, -1° 32' 59.99" W

The *Mendi* wreck was declared Protected War Grave 2009.

Advertisement illustrative of its time. Copyright unknown.

SS *Mendi*'s Last Voyage

Departed Cape Town, South Africa, 16 January 1917

via Lagos, Nigeria

via Freetown, Sierra Leone

via Plymouth, England, 19-20 February 1917

Final Destination: Le Havre, France (never reached)

Captain: Henry Arthur Yardley

Crew: 89 men of mixed Britis and West African nationalities

Passengers: 5 SANLC officers, 17 non-commisioned officers and 802 men of the 5th batallion, SANLC

Hold space allocated per man (SANLC troops):

6 x 2 x 1,5 ft. (1,8 x 0,6 x 0,46 m)

The SANLC troops sailing with *Mendi* on her final voyage came from all over southern Africa, primarily from South Africa but also from Basutuland (Lesotho), Bechaunaland (Botswana) and Swaziland. Among the deceased, 292 are known to have come from Transvaal, 77 from Transkei and 26 from Lesotho as their names were listed in a newspaper 11 November 1917 (Clothier 1987).

Mendi's final voyage. Courtesy of Wessex Archaeology.

Mendi as tourist ship. Copyright unknown.

Nigerian brigade in East Africa on board SS *Mendi*. November 1916. Courtesy of Powell (LT) Collection, Imperial War Museums London.

Forgetting SS *Mendi*

Until recently not much was written about *Mendi*. This discussion is largely based on the two primary academic authorities on *Mendi*: Norman Clothier's 1986 book *Black Valour* which was the first comprehensive book published about *Mendi*, and various scholarly publications by Albert Grundlingh who has written extensively about *Mendi* and collective memory.

During the First World War, the British issued a War Medal to everyone who participated in support of the Commonwealth. However, none of the black South African men who served on board the *Mendi*, or as a part of South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) elsewhere, received medals in recognition of their contribution to the war effort (Grundlingh 2014). Their black counterparts from Basutuland, Bechaunaland and Swaziland did receive medals and so did all the white officers (Joubert 2014). The South African government refused to acknowledge them since that would entail acknowledgement of national service, thus of full citizenship and legal rights (Grundlingh 1987; Couzens 2014). Instead, the 'unfortunate' involvement of blacks in a 'white man's war' was deemed detrimental to white interests in South Africa (Grundlingh 1987:140).

In 1917 black people in South Africa were suffering from racial segregation and land displacement[1]. Volunteer recruitment to the Great War in Europe, in service of the British Commonwealth, offered an opportunity to improve their stance in society and strengthen their claims for citizenship and the right to their own land (Grundlingh 2014).

However, members of SANLC[2] were recruited as non-combatant and thereby not considered soldiers nor were they allowed to carry weapons. The SANLC men were primarily occupied with unloading cargo from ships and transferring it onto trains in the French harbours. Even men with due qualifications were not used for work classifiable as skilled or semi-skilled despite some officers testifying that they could have been more valuable if better employed; it was deemed too risky as it might have encouraged further aspirations amongst blacks. Instead, every possible measure was taken to ensure "that the socio-political ramification of black war service in a European country would not be detrimental to white South African interests" (Grundlingh 1987:101). This was accomplished for example by giving them uniforms of such poor quality that they visually confirmed the inferior status of the SANLC in the eyes of other soldiers.

When the news of the disaster reached the South African House of Assembly in Cape Town 9 March 1917, the all-white parliament rose in an unprecedented sign of respect for their deceased countrymen. A motion of sympathy was unanimously passed and the decision was made to compensate the next-of-kin with a gratuity of £50 each.

In August 1917 the Captain of the SS *Darro*, H.W. Stump, was found guilty of gross negligence at sea and his failure to assist the men drowning as sea was deemed inexcusable (Board of Trade 1917). Yet, his punishment was surprisingly lenient: his Captain license was suspended for one year (Clothier 1987). A British Officer wrote in an official protest that Stump was "utterly callous to all sentiments of humanity" and it was said amongst blacks in South Africa that for the "never-to-be-forgotten *Mendi* holocaust, he [Stump] should not be permitted to enjoy liberty for another twenty-four hours" (Grundlingh 1987:95). Yet, no further inquiries were made to discern the reason for Stump's inaction. With that, the case was closed for the South African government.

Over the 100 years that followed, the interest in *Mendi* fluctuated in alignment with changes in the political climate and remembrance of the *Mendi* was (re)constructed accordingly.

The initially promising initiative called *Mendi* Memorial Club funded in 1919 by S.M. Bennet Ncwana with the official aim to keep the *Mendi* memory alive soon proved to be a cover-organisation for the funder's own financial gain (Grundlingh 2011). Although this attempt was soon discontinued, *Mendi* was still prominent in public recollections and considered a national memory of great importance.

In the 1920's, with a new-found 'race consciousness', the *Mendi* disaster was remembered through annual commemorations that firmly placed 'the black man in the history books of the world' (*ibid.*:22). Black petty bourgeoisie and especially clergymen acted as custodians of the *Mendi* memory. A *Mendi* scholarship fund was initiated for promising black

1 The 'Native's Land Act 27 of 1913' restricted black ownership of land to a total of 7.3 percent of the total area of South Africa. It had a profound impact on subsequent developments, including being a main cause for black people enlisting to SANLC: "to create favourable change for blacks, fight for citizen recognition and their land back" (Grundlingh 1987:139).

2 South African Native Labour Contingent was a corps formed in 1916 in response to a British request for workers to serve the Allies in the war. About 25,000 men from South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland joined. 21,000 of them were sent overseas before the SANLC was disbanded by the South African government in January 1918 (Clothier 1987).

pupils, building on the then-fashionable notions of 'self-help' which created a favourable impression in white societies: "casting the *Mendi* message in an educational form had the effect of creating common ground between the so-called 'friends of the natives' and the 'black elite" (*ibid.*:23) as it showed their capability to absorb 'civilising influences'. The *Mendi* memory was thus given shape and associated values curated by an educated black elite.

As apartheid was taking shape under the 1948 Nationalist government, *Mendi* Day commemorations were actively discouraged and it was deemed "inappropriate for blacks to be reminded that they had actually assisted whites in a European war" as that might stimulate integrationist ideas (Grundlingh 1987:140). The apartheid ideology of separation even transformed the previously commended western format of the *Mendi* commemorations into a source of offence from both sides.

The memory of the *Mendi* started to fade and even where there was awareness of the event, the symbolical significance had been lost. However, the political consciousness and awareness of the hypocrisy of white rulers in South Africa that was awakened by the *Mendi* disaster left a permanent mark.

Grundlingh (2011:27) continues: "Indeed, in the deeply polarised South Africa of the 1980's, with unprecedented black resistance and successive states of emergencies, the memory of black troops assisting in a predominately white war had an incredible and dissonant ring to it. This was not a history that could be usefully deployed in the stark black versus white struggle".

To erect memorials in honour of black soldiers was not a priority of the apartheid government, yet in 1986 the SANLC men of the *Mendi* received formal recognition by the South African government and a bronze plaque depicting the sinking of the *Mendi* was installed at the Delville Wood memorial in France (Joubert 2014). Grundlingh argues this was not a sudden change of heart but a political act by "an embattled government desperately casting around for legitimacy in the face of mounting overseas boycotts and sanctions in the 1980s and hence appropriating the *Mendi* event" (*ibid.*:27).

The following year Clothier (1987:177) observed that "in South Africa there is no special memorial, and no place for, nor mention of, the dead of the South African Native Labour Contingent… In that sense, in their own country they are forgotten men".

The participation of black South Africans in the First World War was not ceremoniously commemorated, nor emphasised in history books. This does not necessarily mean the *Mendi* was forgotten, rather that she was not deemed interesting enough by the custodians of official collective memories. Even when safeguarded amongst blacks, *Mendi* curation and commemoration remained a privileged prerogative and carried forth in alignment with their interests. However benign the intentions were, *Mendi* remained a discussion among elites. The public spread of information was limited which would result in a public 'forgetting' of the *Mendi*, which remains the central component of the *Mendi* history today.

The *Mendi* memorial on UCT's lower campus was created by artist Madi Phala in 2006. The Roll of Honour was added in 2014. According to several students and staff members, most people at UCT do not know about the memorial or the history it represents. University of Cape Town, January 2017.

Isaac Wauchope Dyobha

Death Dance

Be quiet and calm, my countrymen.
What is happening now is what you came to do...
you are going to die, but that is what you came to do.
Brothers, we are drilling the death drill.
I, a Xhosa, say you are my brothers...
Swazis, Pondos, Basotho... so let us die like brothers.
We are the sons of Africa. Raise your war-cries,
brothers, for though they made us leave our assegais
in the kraal, our voices are left with our bodies.

Isaac Williams Wauchope Dyobha (1852-1917)
cited in Norman Clothier, Black Valour,
Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 1987

Excerpt from *Abantu be Mendi* exhibition: print on cloth.

Death Dance

During the hundred years that *Mendi* was omitted from history books and public ceremonies, her memory was kept alive through poems and oral histories which remind us there are multiple ways of remembering, and that a selective national memory does not necessarily entail an erasure from people's consciousness.

The *Mendi* has most vividly been remembered through the story of the 'Death Dance' according to which hundreds of the African men gathered on the deck of the sinking ship, took off their boots and fearlessly joined together in a warriors' dance, inspired by a call from Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha:

Be quiet and calm, my countrymen, for what is taking place now is exactly what you came to do. You are going to die, but that is what you came to do. Brothers, we are drilling the drill of death. I, a Xhosa, say you are all my brothers, Zulus, Swazis, Pondos, Basutos, we die like brothers. We are the sons of Africa. Raise your cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our weapons at our home, our voices are left with our bodies. (Clothier 1987:i).

The Death Dance is undoubtedly the most publicised legend about the *Mendi* though it remains uncertain and contested whether the dance actually took place. Its veracity was never confirmed by survivors of the *Mendi* but it was preserved through oral storytelling and is now immortalised by media (Swinney 1995).

It is uncertain when the story of the Death Dance started to circulate but it first appeared in written form early 1930s recorded by S.E.K. Mqhayi (1875-1945), a respected Xhosa poet who knew Wauchope Dyobha personally and it was said that Mqhayi was at the wharf when *Mendi* departed (Grundlingh 1987).

Mqhayi's most prolific poem *Ukuzika kukaMendi* ('The Sinking of the *Mendi*') was until recently the primary source through which people in South Africa encountered *Mendi*. *Ukuzika kukaMendi* was written at a time "when black resistance to white discrimination was at its lowest ebb and is a desperate call that echoes the then political climate of black near-voicelessness… it was Mqhayi's poems that were slowly reassembling the black socio-political corpse through memorizing the dead bodies of the *Mendi* victims" (Genis, in Joubert 2014:5).

Clothier admits there "may be a solid core of truth in the story" (1987:98) and "it has stirred the emotions of all who have heard it" (*ibid*:58). Similarly, Couzens cautions against the often manufactured nature of oral histories for therapeutic or political reasons, yet points out they are "frequently surprisingly accurate." (2011:244). Always the somewhat more cynical voice, Grundlingh counters that "[g]iven the swiftness of the events, the general turmoil in a pitch-black night with a ship rapidly tilting, it is rather fanciful to think of near-desparate men lining up to engage in elaborate grandstanding with nationalist overtures" (2011:30).

In all three accounts, we can infer beyond doubt that the emotional evocation of the story is powerful, and when a memory is *felt*, when there is something one can relate to and is moved by, it ceases to be a historical record and becomes a memory.

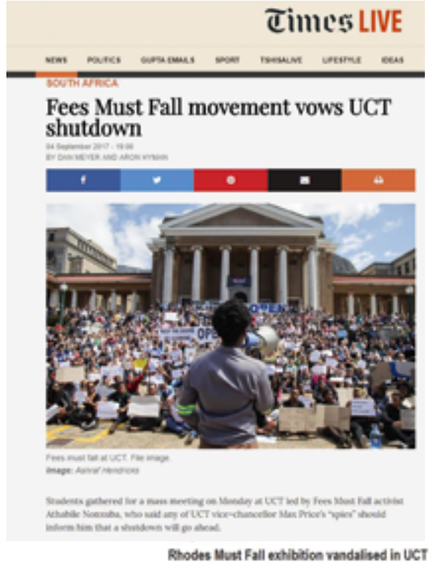
The story of the Death Dance is significant precisely because it was distorted and inflated: it is the source of the rhetoric of bravery that today is a defining feature of the *Mendi* which has endowed it with its mythological status with nationalist overtones in collective South African memory (Grundlingh 1987). Further, the importance of imagination in keeping the *Mendi* memory alive as conventional history books failed to do so confirms the need for multiple approaches to remembering today.

After the first democratic election in 1994, the context in which *Mendi* would re-emerge was vastly different. Davison (1998) describes a shift that took place in the 1990s whereby South African art galleries suddenly desired to 'tell hidden stories' and started collecting African art and apartheid memorabilia. However, this was an expression of curiosity rather than a shift of paradigm: processes of selection and (re)presentation still belonged to a privileged (white) authority.

University of Cape Town, January 2017

"The tricky thing about decolonisation is: where do we start?"

– Zwai Mgijima, actor



Times LIVE

NEWS POLITICS GUPTA EMAILS SPORT TSHISALIVE LIFESTYLE IDEAS

SOUTH AFRICA

Fees Must Fall movement vows UCT shutdown

04 September 2017 - 19:06

BY DAN MEYER AND ARON HYMAN

Fees must fall at UCT. File image.

Image: Ashraf Hendricks

Students gathered for a mass meeting on Monday at UCT led by Fees Must Fall activist Athabile Nonxuba, who said any of UCT vice-chancellor Max Price's "spies" should inform him that a shutdown will go ahead.

Rhodes Must Fall exhibition vandalised in UCT protest

Trans Collective splashes red paint on photos

By Ashraf Hendricks

15 March 2016

The Rhodes Must Fall Exhibition, 'Echoing Voices from Within' was disrupted yesterday by members of the University of Cape Town's Trans Collective, a student led organisation that prioritises the rights of transgender, gender non-conforming and intersex students at the University of Cape Town.

Epistemic Violence

The fall of apartheid brought about significant political changes though more than two decades later it has done surprisingly little to eradicate poverty and inequality; the institutionalised racism and oppression remains the same and is a lived every-day reality for the black majority population (Sardar 2008). This is not least noticeable at South African universities where colonial, apartheid and Western worldviews dominate the curriculum and structural imbalances, inequalities and injustices prevail. This continuously reinforces white privilege and patronising views about Africa and its people: "[d]irect colonial rule may have disappeared; but colonialism, in its many disguises as cultural, economic, political and knowledge-based oppression, lives on" (*ibid.*:x-ix).

Rather than an open road to emancipation, education that follows Eurocentric traditions erases black history and expects people of vastly different worldviews to conform to skills and knowledge that will allow them "to enter the marketplace but not allow them to fundamentally change the status quo in society and the economy" (Heleta 2016:4).

In one of our discussions, Zwai Mgijima, actor and lead character in the *Mendi* documentary *Troopship Tragedy*, summarised this with forceful clarity: "we are still slaves in our own country".

At the time of the *Mendi* centenary, UCT has experienced two years of violent student activism which is part of a nation-wide quest to decolonise education in South Africa in which art has served as a crucial site of contestation. In accordance with Gell's (1988) argument that agency is executed through material objects, the 'Fallist Movement' has made their 'anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles' (Wa Bofelo 2017) manifest through acts of violence performed on art.

The ignitor was a student who, armed with human faeces, attacked the statue of Cecil Rhodes on UCT campus 9 March 2015. The following month saw intense demonstrations and the establishment of student protest movement Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) which rapidly spread to universities across South Africa and Oxford, UK. They swiftly succeeded in their first mission; the statue was taken down 9 April 2015 amongst thousands of students shouting and cheering. Rhodes was the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896 and was a strong proponent for the racial segregation that was to become institutionalised as apartheid. The fall of the statue was thus symbolical of the fall of white supremacy (Rhodes Must Fall Movement 2015).

Also in 2015, Fees Must Fall (FMF) was mobilised in response to increased tuition fees at higher education institutions in South Africa. The main agents behind FMF are black students who fall into the category called 'the missing middle': students whose families are deemed too rich for them to be given state subsidy but in reality are too poor to afford university fees. Their aim is a complete transformation of the education with free, decolonial education as its outcome (Cherry 2017; Cloete 2016).

In March 9, 2016, CAS gallery opened an exhibition curated by RMF called 'Echoing Voices from Within' with the pur-

DAILY MAVERICK

SOUTH AFRICA

#RhodesMustFall: UCT's Day of Mayhem

BY MARELISE VAN DER MERWE - SOUTH AFRICA - 10 FEB 2016 11:54 SOUTH AFRICA

Student protests in Cape Town reached a tense standoff on Tuesday night, with protesters setting a bus alight outside the UCT's Tugwell residence. The university confirmed that nobody was hurt during the incident, but 2016 seems set to continue in much the same vein as 2015 – if not with more vehemence than before. Neither side is backing down. By MARELISE VAN DER MERWE.

OPINION | CAPE TOWN

The problem with art on UCT

And why covering up Diane Victor's 'Pasiphaë' is justified

Diane Victor's 'Pasiphaë' has been covered up at UCT. Photo: Ashleigh Furlong

By Siyavuthuse Sindelo

10 April 2016

This is a reply to an article that appeared on GroundUp on 8 April 2016 about the covering up of a prominent UCT artwork, and the comments by the artist in response.

In 2014 the then UCT SRC member and subsequent president Ramabina Mahapa wrote a series of articles which called into question the identity of UCT as an "Africa university". Mr Mahapa asked "what is African about UCT?". In his arguments showed that a problem exists at UCT: flagrant Eurocentrism dominates campus even though the university publicly proclaims itself to be Afrocentric. This problem, thanks to the likes of Mahapa and the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement, has been put in the spotlight and called into question.

"The whiteness they are trying to disrupt has been imposed since imposed since colonial times as a 'symbol of purity' and has defined 'what it means to be civilised, modern and human'… This whiteness is still engaged in daily open and/or subtle racism and marginalisation of black people."

– Savo Heleta (2016:1)

During my stay in Cape Town, UCT was quiet. Even the protesters were on holidat. What I saw was an empty campus, scarred and burnt.
University of Cape Town. January 2017.

Art as a site for contestation in its most literal sense: what used to be Diane Victor's painting *Pasiphaë* is now a noticeboard with revolutionary messages. University of Cape Town, January 2017.

"What's wrong with disliking a picture?

Go ahead and dislike all you want; just don't say I'm not allowed to see it and make up my own mind.

There is no right not to be offended."

https://doesthisoffendyou.wordpress.com/

pose to capture "the multi-layered and intersectional voice of black bodies – the students, workers and staff who have come together with the aim of subverting white supremacy, institutionalized patriarchy and racism at the University of Cape Town" (Rhodes Must Fall Movement 2016). At the opening, the exhibition was overtaken and vandalised by another student organisation, the Trans Collective, with the message that they "will not have our bodies, faces, names, and voices used as bait for public applause" (Hendricks 2015). Clearly, power relations remains at the centre of curatorial practices (Davison 1998); even when the student protest movement is curated and presented 'from within', there are still others who are subjected to misrepresentation and (mis)appropriation.

In response to the overtaking, the RMF curator stated that although some stories are difficult to tell, how people express themselves cannot be policed and the exhibition was an opportunity for people to see for themselves and form their own understanding (Hendricks 2015). This is in stark contrast with the mass-destruction of publicly displayed art at UCT campus by student protestors.

In two years 75 works of art on campus have been removed or covered up from public view by the university to prevent them causing offence and/or prevent their destruction. An additional 24 artworks were deliberately destroyed by student during protests (Clark-Brown 2017). The struggle to take down the statue is now being remembered through a theatre called 'The Fall' by RMF members at UCT; a performance that serves as advocacy for continued activism and critical questioning of colonial structures (Kayum 2017).

Works of art have thus become sites of contestation by their depicted content, the symbolical destruction of their material form, and – most strikingly – by virtue of their absence. Further, it sets the scene for the *Mendi* commemoration since the CAS gallery is the venue both for the closed-down RMF exhibition and for *Abantu beMendi*.

These few examples barely scratch the surface of a complex plurality of nation-wide student activism movements with the common aim to decolonise education in SA. Fallists acknowledge these internal struggles, stating that "these frictions are symptomatic of unresolved agitations deeply embedded in the genetic constitution of South Africa and its people" (Kayum 2017).

In addition to the difficult history in which *Mendi* is embedded, the reception and uptake of an exhibition such as *Abantu beMendi* is influenced by its immediate surrounding (Hall 1998). Fallism places curatorial practices and representation of black people under extreme (and much needed) scrutiny. A further implication of Fallism is the increased awareness and interest among youths in South Africa to learn about history, and to re-claim it.

To overthrow the Eurocentrism and epistemic violence still predominant at South African universities, Heleta encourages a "non-violent, intellectual, evidence-based, emotional and popular struggle" (2016:2). *Abantu be Mendi* in its attempt to rethink history can be seen as such an endeavour.

What remains of Cecil Rhodes. University of Cape Town, January 2017.

Three student artists came to the gallery as I was placing newly arrived prints in their frames. We had arranged for them to visit since they wanted to familiarise themselves with the space in preparation for their theatre performance at the the *Mendi* conference a few weeks later. Inspired by the art, they shared their perspectives on the *Mendi* story and the ongoing student demonstrations. Sihle Mnqwazana tells us:

"I first learnt about Mendi through a theatre performance, here at UCT. Before I came to university I had never heard of it. We must understand our privilege as black people to be here today; 100 years ago the people here were going to war. Now I am honouring and remembering Mendi through a performance myself; it's a more visceral way to experience to history. We must access our history before we can re-imagine it and move forwards.

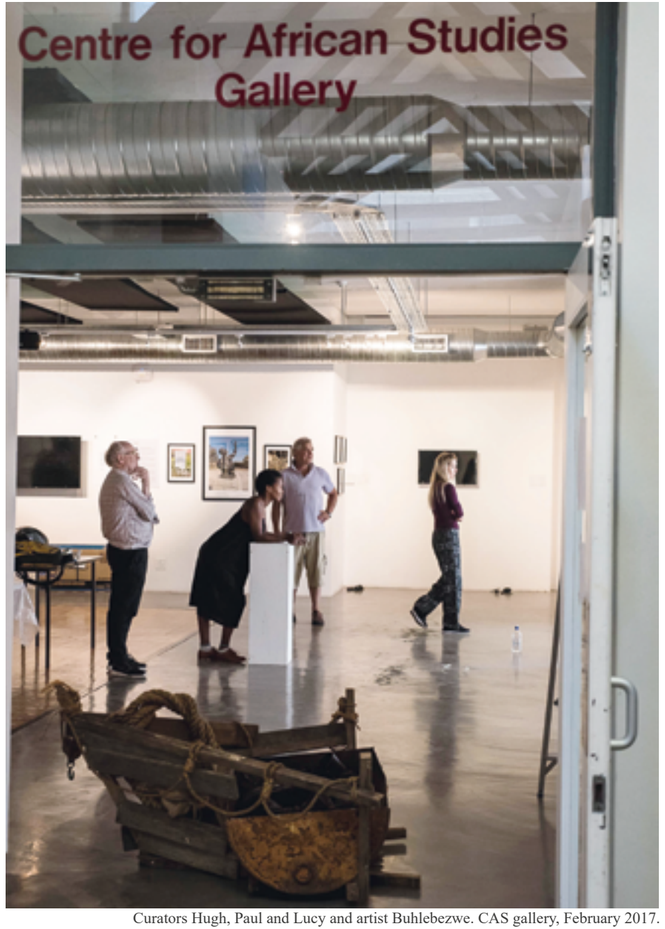
We call ourselves the age of the artists, an idea whose time has come. It is time for us young people to remember, to celebrate and come together. It is our time to claim history and learn more about our own stories."

Sihle Mnqwazana, Thando Mangcu and Sizwesandile Mnisi are students, artists, and creators of the *Mendi* theatre *Delayed Replays*. CAS gallery, February 2017.

CAS gallery, February 2017.

"Curating an exhibition is an open field of possibilities. The archive and interpretations are tools to understand what happened, 100 years later. The historiographies, memories, the past and the present… it's all being brought together; it's all going to happen in that room."

– Paul Weinberg, curator



Curators Hugh, Paul and Lucy and artist Buhlebezwe. CAS gallery, February 2017.

Abantu beMendi

'The people of the *Mendi*' is a conceivably infinite subject matter of which the story of a ship is only a part. In the exhibition, personal stories and political frustrations augmented over 100 years are brought to the surface through combinations of narratives, illustrations and impressions. The inclusive conversation and collaborative approach at the heart of *Abantu beMendi* is what endows the exhibition with value and contemporary significance. The very same aspect is also the main source of conflict and challenges: the legacy of *Mendi* is as sensitive as it is significant.

The exhibition came about as Dr Lucy Graham (Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of the Western Cape) and Prof Hugh MacMillan (Research Associate at Oxford University) decided to curate events around the sinking of the ship, inspired by the iconic paintings by Hilary Graham and the discovery of the Tim Couzens/Fred Cornell collection with previously unknown photographs of South African Native Labour Contingent at Rosebank Military Camp, which today is University of Cape Town campus.

Lucy and Hugh approached the Centre for African Studies at UCT where the *Mendi* commemoration project was warmly welcomed since it perfectly aligns with their agenda of re-thinking Africa in terms of history, memory and cultural heritage. Thus added to the curatorial committee were two CAS research officers - Dr. June Bam-Hutchison and Nkululeko Mabandla – and the curator of the CAS gallery, Paul Weinberg.

June explains that an Africa-centred approach is an agency rather than a victimhood approach which aims to humanise historical events and bring forgotten histories to the fore:

"Decolonial curation is about giving voice to, rather than speaking on behalf of, which is what curation has been in the past. First of all we had to bring in black artists who can identify with the descendant communities and to give them freedom in interpretation. This was a very inclusive process, not without its difficulties, but we all learnt something. We knew we had to listen. I believe that is what curation compels us to do: to listen with the eyes."

Visual Conversations

The artworks were sourced based on the artist's interest in the *Mendi*: Buhlebezwe Siwani and Mandla Mbothwe were commissioned to create installations specifically for the exhibition whereas Hilary Graham already had a significant body of work relating to *Mendi*. Other material was obtained in collaboration with respective maker or copyright holder, a process which was surprisingly smooth as private collectors, media and institutions alike willingly shared their material. They all gave the same motivation: the *Mendi* story is too important to not be told. *Mendi* became a communication bridge through a common cause.

Although *Abantu beMendi* may seem visually slender at first glance as the different parts fits nicely together in the space, the tensions appear as you unravel the layers. Through the diversity of media arranged into narrative clusters, you can at a second glance see how there are not only different ways of telling the story but that there are more than one story to be told. As Suhr and Willerslev write: an exhibition is not a faithful correspondence with reality (2013), but about creating 'atmosphere' by assemblage. Moving and still media, two and three-dimensional, muted or with sound, realistic and artistic: all blended together into a coherent yet diverse representation of *Mendi*.

Buhlebezwe Siwani

As you enter the gallery, you enter Buhlebezwe's art space. Facing each other from opposite walls are large photographs of a woman on a beach fighting the ocean; on one wall as a triptych reaching four meters in width; on the other wall as a diptych with an adjoining video of a woman taking off widow clothes and stepping into the water. In the same video we also see a small boy tugging paper boats along *Mendi* Street in Port Elizabeth.

"I wanted to explore the idea of memory as a tangible thing and also how race works as an instrument. The boy is a stand-in for the colonial meaning of the word boy which black men were called. They weren't men, they were 'just blacks.'"

Both artist and *sangoma*, a Zulu spiritual healer, Buhlebezwe's art evolves around spirituality and her own fear of water. It was a deliberate decision for Buhlebezwe to not use any men in her installation to remember of the families who were left behind and with whom the memory lived on; a refreshing gender perspective to an otherwise male-dominated discussion.

Also by Buhlebezwe is a video of a graveyard in France which is projected onto a piece of metal:

"*It's a very cold place so I needed something cold to project it on to properly capture the feeling. I had a large piece of metal which is used to build ships but it didn't work in the space and the decision was made to take it out.*"

The impressive sheet of solid metal covered a length of more than four meters and one meter width and it was intended to hang from ceiling to floor. After a collaborative effort of five men to transport the heavyweight artwork and bring it inside, it was discovered that the height of the gallery did not accommodate the height of the metal sheet.

A conflict ensued between what is practically possible, the rhythm of the exhibition as a whole, and the artistic integrity of the installation. The curators, the artist and the technical consultant agreed to solve the first issue with a metal cutter. The second issue was more problematic as the large piece obstructed the view of other artworks and the L-shape resting on the floor was a promising stumbling block for visitors.

Project manager Lucy in a hermeneutic dialogue, balancing the integrity of the individual artwork with the coherence of the exhibition as a whole - a process needed for each piece in the exhibition. In a heterogeneous collection the only way forward is to find a conversation between the parts. This is a challenge since the different media speak different languages.
CAS gallery, February 2017.

Art in transit. Cape Town, February 2017.

“There were many different voices entering this and they had to be mediated. It resolved itself over a number of weeks, particularly through the design: there’s only so much you can do in a given space”, Paul says.
CAS gallery, February 2017.

Lulamile and Mandla installing art. CAS gallery, February 2017.

As the visually most interesting part of the painted metal was the part which had been cut off, the answer to the third issue also solved the two former: the large metal sheet was taken down and the remaining piece was placed on its own wall to be seen from the entire gallery.

The outcome was as elegant as it was efficient, and it reconciled Paul's two principles of curation: "*curation is about punctuating a space*" and "*less is more*".

Buhlebezwe seemed pleased: "*It still resembles what I wanted to show, just not scale-wise.*"

In *Abantu beMendi*, the notion of archive is further expanded since the *Mendi* collection, beyond two and three dimensional tangible and digital objects, also includes live performances, music and theatre. This further entails a live agency which cannot be contained by meticulously planned curation. The archive is not only a thing but a performed space.

Mandla Mbothwe

More than the permanent installations of a video, a photograph and two sculptures, Mandla's creative contribution to *Abanu beMendi*, co-curated by Warona Seane, also entailed a dramatic theatre performance. On the day of the opening, to the wonder and amazement of exhibition visitors, Lulamile Bhongo Nikani performed *Ndabamnye So SS Mendi*, 'I became one with SS *Mendi*' with dramatic readings of *Mendi* poems in Xhosa. The interpretations of Lulamile's enactment varied from him cursing to cleansing the space.

When Mandla first learnt about *Mendi* he was shocked that such an important history was not told more. He says the memory was stolen and misappropriated, and must be reclaimed; "*you cannot separate identity from memory*". Since 2011 Mandla has directed theatres about *Mendi*, especially with Warona telling the story from a woman's perspective:

"What was happening was the trap of the story being told from the white perspective: from the Captain, not from the peasant or the victim. We changed that. We we went through villages and spoke to chiefs, we spoke to academics, but mostly to general people and we started engaging students. That is how our involvement with the story became. Since then it has never left us. The actuality or the facts of the story is not the same, it differs, it changes with every performance, and that tells us a lot about what memory is and what storytelling is, and who is telling that story."

Against popular perceptions, Mandla rejects the idea of the heroic last drill by the dying men as a 'dance'. Mandla considers it a misappropriation similar to *Titanic*:

"It is sad that student will sing Celine Dion songs when telling you about Titanic. That will create the image of Titanic; that is what is stuck in their memory. The memory has been stolen and fed by other memories that change its dignity. Memory is the moulder of identity but in the stories that have been told a black person cannot be brave. That is the sad part. We need more stories."

Negotiating space. CAS gallery, February 2017.

"In a society that has fallen into pieces, where people do not know who they are, where a collective memory lacks, remembrance is politicised and people distrust each other, the only solution to answer the question 'why' seems to be that "it may take poets, artists and creative writers of fiction to complete the task."

– Charles Villa-Vincencio (2000:30).

Performance rehersal. CAS gallery, February 2017.

Hilary Graham

Thus far, the artist most closely associated with *Mendi* is Hilary Graham. In *Abantu beMendi*, Hilary's work is represented by a digital reproduction of his iconic oil on canvas triptych called *The Sinking of the Mendi*, inspired by Mqhayi's poem with the same name. Hung directly on the wall without a frame, the re-printed painting is accompanied by two original sketches and Mqhayi's poem printed on cloth.

An artist and scholar from Eastern Cape, Hilary was astonished when he first heard about *Mendi* in the 1980s through the poems by Mqhayi: "as someone who knows a fair bit about South African and military history, I had never heard of the ship". Hilary began painting the *Mendi* story in 1987, at a time when South Africa was experiencing successive state of emergencies. Aware of the violence around him, the initial painting depicted people in larger scale with the ocean as secondary. It took five years for Hilary to complete the painting:

"Over time it had to change because it didn't satisfy me as my conceptual understanding changed: the ocean had to assume more importance. There were lots of paintings, over-paintings, over-layers and paintings. Beneath this oil layer there are many others who have drowned."

In 1994, the year of South Africa's first democratic election, Hilary's series of paintings and sketches about *Mendi* were exhibited in Port Elizabeth where the whole collection was bought by Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum (then called King George VI Art Gallery). The artworks, which were framed, were placed in archival retirement.

For the centenary commemoration, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum re-exhibited Hilary's *Mendi* collection, curated by Emma O'Brian. Her first action was to unframe the oil on canvas triptych.

Contrary to *Abantu beMendi*, Emma describes her curation as an aesthetic rather than political process. Her task was not historical, but to present and preserve the integrity of Hilary's interpretation of the *Mendi* and how to visually communicate it to a contemporary audience.

"*There was very little political interference but I was interested to see whether any of the students would come and be critical of the exhibition, of the fact that this is a male white artist commenting on a black historical event, and that cultural appropriation would be mentioned. The other thought was that in Hilary's visuals there is a lot of violence on the body and if there will be a sense of the white artist making violent images of black men."* – Emma O'Brien

The exhibition at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum and *Abantu beMendi* both remained unharmed and the main critique of Hilary's painting was not about the people but the roaring sea; the surface was still on the morning when *Mendi* sunk. An illustration of the terror rather than a literal depiction of the event, Hilary's painting has changed materially, visually and conceptually over 30 years in dialogue with political changes and the new role of *Mendi*, as emphasised by its lack of frame.

Having followed the journey of *Mendi*'s revival and South Africa's political transformation, Hilary seem excited by the centenary commemoration:

"When coming together in an event like this it is intriguing to see how people respond to the same event at a different time and how this will take another step for Mendi. This is the future of Mendi. We used to only have the colonial history but now there is a different one and in a heterogeneous scenario, they all operate together. In 30 years from now, we can come back to this exhibition and compare: what does it look like now?"

Across the length of the gallery, Hilary's painting of the men drowning is placed in conversation with Buhlebezwe's renderings of the woman on the shore. The space between them is only punctuated by a part of Mandla's performance installation. The adjacent wall on one side tells the historical background with its mirroring wall holding the contemporary memorials.

Historical Photographs

The historical background leading up to *Mendi's* departure from Cape Town is illustrated through maps, documents, poems and old photographs. It is important to not conflate the object nature of a photograph for it being objective (Banks 2001); a representation of old photographs can never be 'authentic' since it necessitates decontextualisation and reappropriation (Morton & Newbury 2015).

The main dilemma is how to present photographs in a manner which does justice to their aesthetic qualities while also acknowledging the difficult conditions under which they were taken (Newbury 2015); and how to represent that to a contemporary audience. Photographs are results of the political relationship between photographer and subject (Byers 1964) though it is only by making images public and rendering them visible they can become a performative space for contestation and re-negotiation.

Photographs have a unique capacity to connect the past with the present. The aesthetic desires of photographs are not constrained by narrow social vision which enables them to exceed the role as documents or records of history. (Newbury 2015). Whereas the beauty of a photograph might distract from its content and diluting the message of the image, it is also by its aesthetic appeal that photographs become 'timeless' and exceed their frames to function as communication across time and space, and as commemoration (Strauss 2003).

The selection of photographs taken at Rosebank Military Camp 1917 from the Couzens' collection was a process over several weeks at both formal and informal meetings whereby all curators carefully reviewed all photographs, individually and together. The main criteria were aesthetic quality, location familiarity, people recognition, political correctness and diversity of content. The space an image occupies signifies its importance and print size can thus be tool for deliberate hegemonising by premiering certain artworks and messages.

"He painted the sea in such a way that actually is terrifying. It has that sense of terror and mysticism that the sea represents to a lot of !Xhosa people. I know the sea was calm that night but this shows how their bodies and their remains will not be discovered, their souls will be never be at rest."

– Young !Xhosa woman visiting the exhibition

Unframing the digital reproduction of Hilary's oil on canvas triptych *The Sinking of the Mendi*. CAS gallery, February 2017.

First we meet men on their way to the diamond fields in 1886. In 1914, we meet members of the South African Natives National Congress on their way to London to object to the Land Act which deprived them of their land. We then glimpse *The Sinking of the Mendi.* At last, we see *Mendi* commemorated with a memorial which was raised 1996 in Atteridgeville, a township near Pretoria.
CAS gallery, February 2017.

Re-printed and re-contextualised, *Abantu beMendi* comprises a rich archive with multiple histories and multiple ways of remembering, such as poems and oral narratives, names, artefacts and artistic renderings
CAS gallery, February 2017.

Different types of representations carry different intentionalities. Wheather an ‘artistic’ contemporary interpretation or a ‘realistic’ historical document, their present form is a construct. Here we see the unveiling of Buhlebezwe Siwani’s diptych *Ilanga Litshonile* and the freshly printed Roll of Honour being introduced to the exhibition. CAS Gallery, February 2017.

“To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice not to transform, not to change or alter what is being represented. It cannot be a pure process, in practice.”

– David Levi Strauss (2003:9)

The first photograph to be selected had the purpose of situating *Mendi* at University of Cape Town through its scenic view of Table Mountain with the easily recognisable Devil's Peak clearly visible. The second photograph selected depicts a man believed to be Reverand Isaac Wauchope Dyobha, the orator behind the Death Dance and the most well-known person related to the *Mendi* story.

A photograph showing a staged group portrait of black troops was selected for the introductory poster at the gallery entrance. More than a technically and aesthetically excellent photograph, it emphasises the persons. Despite Couzens' (2014) commodifying caption: "The final product, ready for service overseas", the photograph both illustrates and challenges the submissive position of the black troops by how they are placed in relation to the white men and the camera, yet with the reciprocal gazes of agents.

One voice advocated for all photographs from the Couzen's collection to be shown. Since that was not practically possible, the next suggestion was to show them as a digital slideshow on a TV screen. However, this would diminish the material affect of the old photographs as 1) old and 2) as photographs.

Material reproduction does not necessarily reduce the value of art: images as objects existing in time and space offer a tangible and perceivable means of sensory engagement with a disembodied history or abstract memory (Edwards 2005). However, a contrast was needed to emphasise the temporal distinction between the military camp in 1917 and, for example, the 2017 commemoration ceremony. Whereas the former is presented as black and white still photographs in wooden frames, the latter is shown as a colourful high-resolution video on a digital screen.

Further, when the time of viewing is predetermined, it reduces the viewer's own agency to interact, and the flow of images might distract from their individual content. The human brain does not process things instantaneously. By reducing the speed and frequency of images we experience them differently; a slower speed of transmission renders them more memorable (Strauss 2003). Also the size of an image the and space it occupies signals its importance; a digital slideshow does not grant the photographs the stature and status that space entails.

Also, to display 'all' photographs of course excluded anything potentially offensive. Remembrance equally much entails omission and forgetting (Ullberg 2012); what is left outside the frame. All photographs showing naked black bodies were immediately discarded: although UCT campus was silent at the time, the student reactions from previous year's exhibition were still fresh in mind.

Out of the twenty-three photographs constituting the Couzens collection, seven were used in the final exhibition.

The man believed to be Wauchope Dyobha addressing SANLC troops at Rosebank Military Camp 1917, today UCT campus. CAS gallery, February 2017.

Behind the scenes of the making of *Abantu beMendi*. CAS gallery, February 2017.

The making of *Abantu beMendi*. CAS gallery, February 2017.

"I don't have any relatives who died with the Mendi but the effects of that tragedy is personal to everyone because we are all South Africans."

– Buhlebezwe Siwani, artist

Buhlebezwe Siwani in her studio. Cape Town, March 2017.

Roll of Honour

Exhibitions are in themselves illustrative of the problematic politics of representation that they often aim to criticise, though by making public and rendering visible, they become a space for contestation and re-negotiation (Robinson 1998). The curatorial negotiations as well as the informational mysticism surrounding the *Mendi* disaster are most tangibly illustrated by the Roll of Honour and the 'simple' questions *how many people died, and how to write a list of their names?* What initially seemed to be straightforward and matter-of-fact proved to be another investigation of the past and a confrontation with the present.

"The exhibition is not just about the beautiful artworks and beautiful photographs. It's about the people who died 100 years ago. For me, the Roll of Honour represents who they were. It is one of the most important aspects of the exhibition: to name the people." – Nkululeko Mbandla, curator

The Deaths

Clothier (1987:98) states that a "matter on which there is little uncertainty is the exact number of men who were lost with the *Mendi*". Supported by extensive research, Clothier argues for a death toll of 647. More recently, Grundlingh (2011:20) writes that "the grim details are easily verifiable; the subsequent afterlife of the incident is more complex". Ironically, Grundlingh supports this by suggesting a death toll vastly different from the sources he references, one of them being Clothier.

In *Abantu beMendi* it was agreed to specify 647 casualties since the exhibition is largely informed by Clothier. However, at military parade on UCT middle campus stones were laid on the *Mendi* memorial 'to represent the 646 men who went down with *Mendi* that icy cold morning'. Less than three hours later at the opening of *Abantu beMendi* on UCT upper campus, the audience was welcomed to 'this special exhibition commemorating the 616 South African men who died so tragically'.

Additional sources – from scholarly research to official publications to mass media – offer a plethora of number varieties. Among the more common death tolls are 616 or 617 which seem to be a conflation of the black SANLC troops and black West African crew members, which can be indicative of how *Mendi* is emphasised as a black disaster. Of the more well-researched writings, most suggest a death toll of 646 men. This is the number concluded by the official investigation (Board of Trade 1917).

For the purpose of this paper, I initially included 647 casualties since I would rather miscalculate by adding one person than omitting one. However, I was even more reluctant to accept one piece of information over another without understanding why they differ, especially as each number is not merely a figure but a reference to *a person*.

My conclusion[1] is that the discrepancies between the different reports are not necessarily due to wrongful information. They might in fact all be correct albeit rigid and not accounting for the circulation of people along the way.

Whereas Clothier suggests a total of 912 men on board *Mendi*, the Board of Trade reports a total of 913 men. The difference is due to Clothier listing four SANLC officers whereas the Board of Trade lists five officers. In agreement with the Board of Trade, Clothier states that five SANLC officers boarded *Mendi* in Cape Town though one of them, Captain McLean, became 'seriously ill' during the journey (1987:44). Captain McLean was included in the initial report of the disaster, though was later revealed that he had disembarked *Mendi* in Plymouth (*ibid*.:99), which concludes a total of 912 men on board *Mendi* at the time of the sinking.

Further, the Board of Trade lists 646 casualties of which 30 were crew. However, in their own report, Elder Dempster lists 31 crew casualties. Adding the two, Clothier concludes a total of 647 casualties. The one crew member listed as deceased by Elder Dempster but who does not appear on official *Mendi* Rolls of Honour is the steward L.J. Adams (Wessex Archaeology 2007).

A closer reading of the official report reveals that en route from South Africa "one of the assistant stewards died, and an additional trimmer was taken on at a West African port" (Board of Trade 1917:2). Clothier also mentions that "one of the assistant stewards died and was buried at sea" (1987:44). Neither source elaborates on this nor mentions the steward by name. To presume this to be Adams is merely a guess. We can however discern that the crew on board remained a constant of 89 men, although 90 crew members had been in circulation with one death before the fatal collision.

The Board of Trade report that 30 crew members died *when Mendi sunk*, and the Elder Dempster reporting to have lost 31 crew members *during Mendi's last voyage*, might thus both be accurate. Although it is important to note this is a non-conclusive discussion, I will for the purpose of this paper suggest that 646 men died during the sinking of the *Mendi* though 'the people of the *Mendi*' extends much further with thousands effected by the tragedy.

Their Names

More than statistics, the more crucial implication of the death toll is the names. With their bodies lost at sea or buried far away from home and no legal recognition, it was for *Abantu beMendi* an ethical imperative to at the very least mention the men who died by name.

How should the names be arranged and printed on a Roll of Honour to be hung in the exhibition? On Roll of Honours printed elsewhere, most commonly the (white) officers are listed first by rank, then (mixed) crew members, then (black) SANLC troops sorted by ID number or surname.

One suggestion was to only list the SANLC troops who did not receive medals. Though since the troops from Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland did receive medals, should they

1 Informed by a comparison of the official investigation by the Board of Trade (1917); the report by the company operating *Mendi*, the Elder Dempster & Co. Ltd. (1921); the aforementioned Clothier (1987) who compares the two former and the South African Defence Force Documentation Service Box number 42; a 135-page assessment by Wessex Archaeology (2007); and the public report by the South African Department of Defence searching for *Mendi* descendants (von Zeil 2014).

be excluded from the list? If black troops with and without medals are listed, should the white officers still be excluded? Is it morally justifiable to commemorate (compensate?) the black men by again committing the same wrong but in reverse?

Further, what about the black crew members: should they be included on basis of skin colour or excluded by profession? If included, then should the crew be divided into blacks and whites, blacks commemorated and whites not?

Ultimately this brings into question what is the desired message of the exhibition: to commemorate the people of the *Mendi*, to commemorate the black people of the *Mendi* or to commemorate the black men who were not acknowledged by the South African government for their service to the war effort?

It was decided that an exhibition commemorating the people of the *Mendi* specifying that 647 died should present a Roll of Honour with 647 names, indiscriminate. Manually all names were listed alphabetically, regardless of colour or rank. The result was a comprehensive list, democratised to include everyone who died with the *Mendi*. This echoes the famous words spoken by Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha as the ship was sinking: "you are all my brothers".

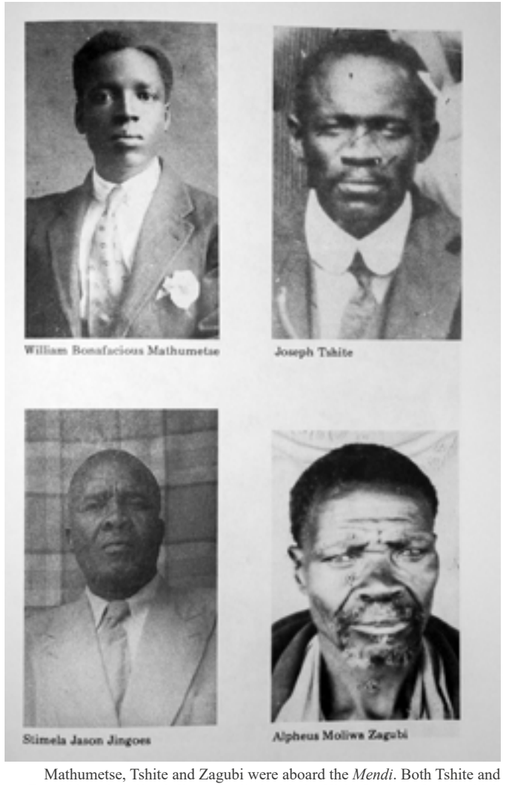
The Roll of Honour debate did not end there. After consulting several versions of the Roll of Honour, several of the SANLC troops had names such as 'Parafin', 'Picannin'[2] and 'Saucepan'. These derogatory names were imposed by colonisers and that it would be politically extremely problematic to present those names in the exhibition. Suggested solutions were to either find another version with corrected names, to only use initials, or to omit the Roll of Honour from the exhibition altogether.

At first, using initials seemed the most respectful option. However, to refer to them by initials would still be an acknowledgement of, or at least a reference to, the imposed names. That would not change the names; they would merely be censured from the public eye and thus protected from spectator contestation. On the other hand: can imposed names be re-printed without reproducing the colonial oppression they symbolise?

The Roll of Honour controversy emphasise the information uncertainties surrounding the *Mendi* disaster whereby even seemingly 'easily verifiable' facts are highly disputed. It further illustrates the problems of representation by emphasising some of the political sensitivities not only specific to the *Mendi* commemoration but also the broader context in South Africa, and how printing a list of names can be an act of reproducing institutional racism.

To re-think and decolonise curation is crucial, but at what cost? Should history be censured and even altered in response to political demands in the present? In order to learn from history we need to respectfully understand it.

2 'Piccanin' is an offensive term for a black African child, in dictionaries today spelled differently from the Roll of Honours.



Mathumetse, Tshite and Zagubi were aboard the *Mendi*. Both Tshite and Zagubi lost their lived. Jingoes sailed with the HMS *Durham Castle* which was the first ship to carry SANLC troops to Europe after the *Mendi* tragedy. This photograph is a digitisation from *Black Valour* (Clothier 1987).

"There was great panic and confusion, and on the deck we were told to get onto lifeboats and leave the ship, as it was sinking. Below there was a sea of darkness, but the men plunged into the rough cold water, singing, praying and crying."

– William Bonafacious Mathumetse, Mendi survivor

Mathumetse was 16 when sailed off to the First World War. When Mendi sunk he was one of the last to abandon the ship. Resting upon the lifebelts of two dead soldiers, he managed to survive in the icy water. We was eventually rescued by HMS Brisk. When Mathumetse returned home he resumed his studies and became a teacher. (Clothier 1987).

The *Mendi* memorial at UCT presents 616 names, a brief history of the sinking and the famous speech by Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha.
University of Cape Town, February 2017.

In the early morning Tuesday 21 February, Paul and I visited the memorial at UCT middle campus to read the names listed there. They were the same as the Roll of Honours we found elsewhere. Instead of their own names, some of the men that drowned will be forever known in official records and engraved in stone as (to mention a few):

Maake, Saucepan 9142

Mahlaba, Whiskey 9629

Mahutu, Canteen 9149

Myamana, Verandah 9622

Ntabeni, Picannin 9716

Quvalele, Parafin 10022

When we reached the gallery June was outside. She walked up to us on the parking lot. After all the meetings, discussions, research and re-writes, it was really as simple and obvious as that, an early-morning comment on the parking lot:

"We should print the Roll of Honours with the full names", June said; *"we can put up a statement acknowledging they are problematic, but it's not up to us to alter history."*

The names were printed in navy blue letters on white cloth and draped on each side of the frame holding the missing medal.

UCT lower campus, at the foot of Table Mountain. University of Cape Town, 26 February 2017.

Rosebank Military Camp, 1917. Courtesy of Tim Couzens/Fred Cornell collection.

Rosebank Military Camp, 1917. Courtesy of Tim Couzens/Fred Cornell collection.

South African Department of Defence *Mendi* centenary parade. University of Cape Town. 26 February 2017.

Making a Memory

Memories in themselves are a perceptual impossibility, they are not directly visible or graspable, but are constituted by visuals and other sense impressions. Works of art have their own biographies and intentionalities that when brought together can generate new, unpredictable understandings (Suhr and Willerslev 2013:241-242). Through their inherent instability and polyvalence, works of art – visual or otherwise alluring a sensory engagement – can encompass conflicting historical, political and social versions of memory beyond the frames imposed upon them (Coetzee and Nuttall 1998; Spyer and Steedly 2013).

This loss of control challenges the power relations in which an image or artwork was created. As novel meanings are added to it by diverse audiences, thus rendering the interactive space of the exhibition a democratic platform for conversation (Newbury 2015). Thus, in theory, by engaging different modalities and temporalities of remembering, a multi-media exhibition offers a means to transfer the *Mendi* conversation from closed doors at privileged institutions to an inclusive, interactive space where multiple histories and historiographies are rendered visible and accessible.

Albeit a collaborative endeavour, curation practices and the archives they produce are not separate from relations of power and culture dominance; rather they tend to reflect, validate and legitimise preferred interpretations and political configuration of the past. As the selection process entails determining what is important and from what perspective it is to be represented, curators are custodians of 'selective' rather than 'collective memory (Davison 1998).

Especially curators at public institutions are in a privileged position to "give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory" (Davison 1988:145). *Abantu beMendi*, taking place at such a 'privileged institution' is therefore particularly interesting in its attempt to re-think history.

Decisions of what to represent is also influenced by stakeholders and consumers as the relevance is dependent on attracting an audience. For public institutions funding policies are testimonies of which projects are allowed to participate in the shaping of national consciousness (Davison 1988).

In South Africa and in Europe, *Mendi* commemorations are initiatives of public institutions, primarily South African navy and military, museums and educational institutions. There are three institutions funding *Abantu beMendi*: South African Government Department of Arts and Culture, Centre for African Studies (University of Cape Town), and the French Consulate General in South Africa[3].

An in-depth analysis of financial interests in *Mendi* commemorations is outside the scope of this paper, though it is noteworthy that more than eight months after the centenary the funding from the Department of Arts and Culture has yet to be received.

3 *Mendi* was en route to Le Havre in France when she sunk. There is a South African National War Memorial in Delville Wood where the *Mendi* is commemorated since 1986 with a bronze plaque. Also one *Mendi* casualty is buried in France.

Ripples on the Water

Internalising the agency of their makers, works of art can in themselves be mediators and social agents (Gell 1998). Further adding the intentionalities by the researchers, curators, museums and others who use them – or destroy them – and interpretations of the audiences receiving them, art becomes a site of contestation and negotiation. The exhibition and the new *Mendi* archive thus offer insights into how the memory is being created today and what attitudes and values are attached to it.

Whereas the initial question guiding this project was how something as abstract as a 'missing memory' is constructed – purposefully materialised, framed and made visible to an outside audience – in the present, and what the implications are for the contemporary significance of that memory, the problem evolved into a more pressing enquiry:

How do you curate an aesthetically appealing and somewhat coherent and comprehensible exhibition (or a visual ethnography thereof) while maintaining inclusivity and doing justice to the plurality of voices and perspectives entering it and the complexities informing it?

The exhibition outcome might be seen as *compromised* as it had to accommodate a plurality of opinions and artworks in a limited space. However, herein lays also the strength of the exhibition: it is *a compromise* whereby complementary and polemic voices were mediated, negotiated and facilitated.

This applies equally to curation practices as well as to the ethnographic endeavour. The anthropologist is also a curator; collector, custodian and selection authority of knowledge. Schneider & Wright (2006) argue for similarities in practices and methodologies of art and anthropology in representing others. Collaborative projects and inclusive processes resonate as the most viable solution though they entail the danger of fake transparency as, ultimately, it inevitably one or a few authoritative voices who have the final say.

The question ultimately became one of authority and appropriation, not specific to the curation of the exhibition but to contemporary reconstructions and uses of the *Mendi* memory more broadly. Is re-constructing the *Mendi* to misappropriate her memory, and who is to decide?

Whether honouring or misusing, these are ways of activating that memory. Even when deliberately framed, viewers still have agency in reception and interpretation of artistic representations. Appropriation can thereby function as a channel for mediation and cultural 'translation'; even through misappropriation new conversations are invented. In this sense, re-framing offers a remedy to forgetting. Further, by facilitating a conversation the commemoration event can become a site to challenge the hegemony of the memory it represents.

As Paul summarised: *Abantu beMendi* is about creating ripples on the water. In time, those ripples will become waves. Hopefully as roaring as Hilary Graham's painted sea, and as unframed.

Reaching a twenty-first-century audience. University of Cape Town, 26 February 2017.

Centenary revival. University of Cape Town. 26 February 2017.

Abantu beMendi exhibition opening. CAS gallery, 26 February 2017.

The South African Department of Defence *Mendi* parade and the opening of *Abantu beMendi* were postponed until the Sunday after the day of the sinking to make the commemoration event more accessible and attractive. University of Cape Town, 26 February 2017.

National Narrative

Grundlingh (2011) writes that through black sacrifice on behalf of white interests, the *Mendi* story symbolises the position of blacks in South Africa, both past and present, whereas Joubert (2014) more optimistically suggests that *Mendi* has come to play a prominent role in South Africa as a symbol of reconciliation. Either way, the revival of the memory of SS *Mendi* cannot be disassociated from political interests.

The national *Mendi* centenary commemorations illustrate the irony of her symbol: the men who were not allowed to go to war armed, because they were not to be recognised as soldiers and consequently were not awarded medals despite dying in service to the war effort, on the 100th anniversary of their deaths, they are commemorated with the same things they were – and still are – denied.

The highest military honour in the South Africa is a medal named 'The Order of *Mendi* for Bravery', "in honour of the fearless men of the SS *Mendi*" (The Presidency 2017a). In 2012 it was declared by president Zuma that 21 February "must be observed and commemorated as Armed Forces Day" (SA News 2017).

In 2014, for the centenary of the First World War, it was announced that "descendants are requested to contact the South African Department of Defence… the intention is to mint a special medal in the men's honour for the centenary ceremony in 2017" (von Zeil 2014). Out of 40 families who came forth, ten were positively identified as descendants and flown to the UK for the centenary commemoration at the site of the *Mendi* wreck where they were surprisingly not given medals on behalf of their ancestors. At the same time in South Africa, Zuma gave the following speech:

"Black people had volunteered to join the First World War in order to fight against fascism. They were ahead of their time. They were internationalists who loved peace and justice…. Unfortunately their sacrifice did not earn them any respect from the rulers of the time. They were not allowed to carry weapons and were to be utilised as labourers rather than as fighting soldiers. They were also never decorated or awarded any medals at the end of the war. That is the painful history we come from, a history of brutal and blatant racism and colonialism" (The Presidency 2017b).

The President laid a wreath in honour of the *Mendi*. The only medals awarded that day were given to "deserving SANDF members" (South African Department of Defence 2017). The *Mendi* celebration continued with an explosive show of military prowess, including more than 300 military tanks and 4000 soldiers.

As for the 'internationalists who loved peace and justice', Grundlingh deflates the bravery-discourse; "it is unlikely that anyone entertained rarefied notions of redeeming the continent when they exchanged civilian clothing for uniforms" (2014:127). The *Mendi* has become a useful symbol in discussions regarding the same recognition the men of the *Mendi* themselves were never given. As such, she also becomes a critique of the same discourse by reminding us of the contentlessness of grand rhetoric if not lived up to.

As a brand name, '*Mendi*' resonates with honour, bravery and national pride. As for the black South African men who perished with the *Mendi*, beyond popular rhetoric, they have yet to be extended the same recognition. Instead of being an opportunity to correct the wrongs of history, the centenary commemoration of the sinking of SS *Mendi* came to emphasise the still ongoing neglect of the black South African troops who served and perished in the First World War.

Missing Medals

Likewise, the meaning and importance of *Abantu beMendi* suddenly changed with the withdrawal of the medals: the exhibition and artworks took on new meaning due to the change of context. Rather than materialising a memory, making it visible and present, the exhibition became a statement of absence: a protest against the continued institutionalised neglect of black history.

Mendi is most 'famous' for being forgotten due to colonial oppression. Today she is therefore a powerful symbol for decolonisation. If the *Mendi* men would have gotten the medals there would have been some closure to the story. Perhaps without the medals and the recognition they entail, as an open wound that still hurts and still causes rage, *Mendi* is strengthened as a symbol for reclaiming black history? This is illustrated by how much more impactful the exhibition as a narrative whole and as a critical event became with the empty frame and the re-contextualisation caused by the medals not being awarded.

The empty frame offers a space of contestation whereby the present meets the past in defiance of political censorship. The omitted climax and display of absence became an open evocation for a continuation of the decolonial project; the black frame being as illustrative of the context of decolonisation as the empty middle is of white neglect.

Printing the Roll of Honours with colonial names is problematic, though when placed next to the empty frame, the names became an emphasis. A censured list next to a medal would be a politically correct engagement with history, all parties permitting, though the colonial names next to an empty frame is an extremely forceful statement.

The change of meaning was remarkably felt within the curatorial committee: whereas the Roll of Honour was one of the most contested parts of the exhibition, the empty frame the most unifying. The expression of grief was unanimously passed.

Forgotten?

"You can try to suppress these things but you can never entirely succeed. There will always be people who remember, and there will be narrators and poets who will tell the story" – Nkululeko Mbandla, curator

In addition to a symbol of black valour and bravery, the imagery of *Mendi* as 'forgotten' is what gives the tragedy its greatest significance today and is her primary selling point. Paul points out:

"*The 'forgotten history' imagery is an attractive idea for historians, researchers, artists and whoever else is curious or nostalgic – even you!*"

However, the more is revealed about the contemporary *Mendi* making, the more the romanticised 'forgotten' myth comes into question.

Is *Mendi* commemorated today as forgotten history as a way to 'erase' previous meaning and implications of *Mendi*, to re-invent the symbol? 'Forgotten' resonates more like a promise of remembrance rather than a burdensome reminder of the reasons for omission. 'Forgotten' allows for new memories to be made. What 'forgotten' actually forgets, however, is the agency of the people who did remember.

Forgetting *Mendi* is more accurately understood as official political channelling, negligence and omission. Whereas *Mendi* was deliberately faded from the national memory, her legacy was kept alive by communities throughout South Africa: amongst Xhosa-speaking communities through poems and songs, and amongst the descendant families through local commemorations.

When making the documentary Troopship Tragedy (2015), actor Zwai Mgijima spoke to many descendants of men who died with the *Mendi*. In our many conversations about the *Mendi* legacy, Zwai tells me especially about Joyce Kalaute, the great-granddaughter of Reverend Isaac Whouchope Dyobha; "she passed away this year, shortly after the centenary. Joyce's granddaughter Nathalia Sifuba attended the commemoration ceremony on the English Channel where she laid a wreath on the water on the site of the *Mendi* wreck. I think that gave her peace."

In Troopship Tragedy, Joyce herself tells about how, as a small child, her father brought her to the NatalSpruit grounds outside Johannesburg where people would gather for a 'memorial ritual' for the *Mendi*. She grew up wanting to know more about what happened: How did the *Mendi* sink? Why did the SS *Darro* not stop to help? At the time, very little was known. Or, rather: what was known was not shared with the people concerned. Today there is some clarity regarding her first question whereas the latter remains a mystery.

Hilary Page, granddaughter of deceased (white) lieutenant Samuel Emslie, also attended *Mendi* commemorations together with black families (Troopship Tragedy 2015). *Mendi* was thus remembered by parts of the population as commemorations among descendant communities continued but *Mendi* was not given national recognition or public attention.

Today's revival of the *Mendi* memory is largely a construction by white institutions. To commemorate *Mendi* brings neglected black history to the fore and places white privilege under scrutiny, though the centenary commemoration is still largely performed in accordance with Western conduct. In addition to colour, remembrance is also a matter of class and access. As Grundlingh observed, there was always a privileged class who curated *Mendi* remembrances.

The past function of *Mendi* commemorations as manifestations of adaptability to 'civilised' traditions and the ritualised performance of the present commemoration might reinforce the same institutionalised whiteness the *Mendi* memory is a critique of. A white institution hosting a commemoration of black history can on the one hand give voice to people otherwise not heard, though on the other hand it runs the risk of 'fake transparency' whereby intellectuals represent themselves as transparent (Spivak 1988) and thus gain a favourable image in accordance with current the political paradigm.

Although this indicates an increased awareness of the decolonial endeavour, there is still a long way to go. The fabric of community commemorations can offer rich insights into what the *Mendi* legacy carries beyond its popular framing, however that is for the people themselves to share, if they so choose.

The South African Department of Defence *Mendi* centenary parade. University of Cape Town, 26 February 2017.

Abantu beMendi exhibition opening, 26 February 2017.

In Retrospect

"When will the scary man come into the film?"

A friend of mine from Swaziland asked when I was showing him the video footage from the exhibition opening, several months later. Although some of the men came from Swaziland he had never heard of *Mendi* before this.

My friend had caught a glimpse of the dramatic theatre performance by Lulamile Bhongo Nikani at the exhibition opening before I fast-forwarded to another sequence but what I wanted to show was off less interest. My friend's attention remained with the white-painted face.

"What is he doing, does he belong to the exhibition? Why does he look like that?"

I replied that he did a theatre performance at the exhibition opening and the costume is probably intended to resemble 100 years in the water.

"Yes, but why does he have to look like that? What does he represent? For me commemoration is about remembering. If I saw him on the street I would have thought he is a madman. When you said it was a performance I saw a modern day slave. I saw someone trying to justify allowing all those people to drown because blacks are just savages who don't even speak properly."

The day of the opening – 26 February 2017 – began with a military parade at the *Mendi* Memorial on UCT middle campus, with Table Mountain in the background; a live, colour version of the Couzens' photograph. In the early afternoon the second act took place at the CAS gallery on upper campus. A dramatic reciting of *Mendi* poems in Xhosa invited the audience into the gallery where they were welcomed by a choir of 60 school children singing. After a minute of silence and official speeches, the exhibition became an open space for exploration and interaction.

The appropriately solemn facial expressions alternated by smiles testified to a successful opening ceremony. Some were enraged by the fact that they never heard about *Mendi* before visiting the exhibition; some thought it was 'too texty' to be an exhibition and some were profoundly moved. Whether positive or negative, at least there were no neutral reactions. June later commented that *"the opening was not as rigid as we would have planned it but it taught us to allow for agency even on the day you open an exhibition"*.

The increasingly dramatic elaborations of *Mendi* – especially the Death Dance which has been referred to as a 'Shakan death chant' and has become subject for many populistic publications – and the popularisation of *Mendi* commemorations whereby people pay money to see exhibitions or plays, necessitates the question whether *Mendi* is a nostalgic means of bolstering nationalism or accomplishing ideological narrative of a new political order, or an event that has been remembered due to its tragedy (Joubert 2014)? Is the contemporary *Mendi* memory a commodification of history?

Buhlebezwe makes a crucial distinction with regards to *Abantu beMendi*:

"It's something that needs to happen but it must happen in a particular kind of way. It can't be celebrated. I don't see it as an exhibition, I see it as us remembering something that is important to remember. Some happens to be art, some is documents, but I go there to learn what happened. Also it's not a commercial space, nothing is for sale. It has a human value beyond the event itself."

As the discussion continued with my friend from Swaziland his attitude softened slightly, especially when he learnt the performance was written and directed by a black artist, Mandla Mbothwe. The fact that it was not staged by a white institution caused a decisive shift in how he perceived it. The critical inquiry, however, did not cease:

"How did the white South Africans react to him? Look at the body language of the man at the entrance and the faces of the people inside the gallery when the performer comes in. White South Africans live with it every day and they see things differently, maybe unconsciously. It takes reconditioning to get rid of ways of reacting and relating to others. Maybe if he did the same thing without the dress and face paint it would give a different impression?"

Analytically, the temporal distinction moment of exposure and the time of editing allows for a dialectical production of knowledge by the possibility of reviewing (and rediscovering) the material (de Lucas 2013). The reactions to Lulamile's performance at the exhibition opening became more apparent later on as I showed the video and photos to people both related and unrelated to the *Mendi* project. The performance became more problematic since it received such vastly different reactions, whether intended or not.

The benefit of photography and other audiovisual media is the possibility for the viewer to observe and experience firsthand what is presented (Schneider & Wright 2006): the photographer is present only in inference and "it is the viewer who discovers connections within a network of possibilities structured by the author" (MacDougall 1998:70). Thereby, viewers are not passive but interactive and integral to an image's meaning. As such, images do not discriminate.

For any kind of knowledge to become relevant, it needs to be engaged with; knowledge production is not only about the knowledge *per se*, but what is even more crucial is the *access* to it. This discussion with my friend is a good example as it raised awareness and curiosity about history and provoked reactions to encourage critical engagement with the past and how it is represented today far beyond the exhibition itself.

Inspired by the diversity of responses, in the Re-Framing *Mendi* film Lulamile's performance is shown in glimpses throughout as a build-up to the exhibition opening and to entice the imagination of the viewer to ask who he is before more context and explanation of his role is given. By alluring imagination and emotion, *Mendi* becomes more forceful as an argument and more attractive as a symbol.

Some time later, I was still wondering why my friend from Swaziland had specifically asked about the reactions of white South Africans. I contacted him again.

"When it is a black person it washes any hands of guilt because it is a self-chosen representation. But the choice of how he did it… I'm not so sure if I agree with that.

I was curious to see how South Africa, having struggled with the racism issue, reacted to a politically tied expression of a black artist portraying a somewhat demeaning external presentation of a slave or not being a part of "civilised world" in a sense. It was to see if among white South Africans there would be any reactions of say guilt...remorse...shame or pity.

The intent of the artist is merely one force bestowing an artwork with meaning - its subsequent dissemination can severely alter the frame through which it is perceived. *Abantu beMendi* exhibition opening, 26 February 2017.

Fezeka High School choir about to perform *Ama-gora e-Mendi* by A.M. Jonas and Tiyo Soga's *Lizalis'indiga lakho*. The latter was reported by S.E.K. Mqhayi to have been sung by Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha during the sinking of the *Mendi*.
Abantu beMendi exhibition opening, 26 February 2017.

The event of art. The three people to the far right are Dr. Lucy Graham, artist Hilary Graham and Dr. Hugh MacMillan.
Abantu beMendi exhibition opening, 26 February 2017.

"Poverty is a commodity that fetches a high price on the luxury market" (Galeano in Strauss 2003:45).
Abantu beMendi exhibition opening, 26 February 2017.

"Since democracy is based on human conversation, especially face-to-face conversation, one of the most direct and effective actions individuals can take is to begin to talk with one another about these things, in person, and to listen as if the answer matter."

– David Levi Strauss (2003:179).

Abantu beMendi, February 2017.

"In his performance, he swallowed their war cries, his heartbeat came from their dance, and his belly was filled by their clan names. He is the thirsty soul in salty waters… He is the mud of the past, ready to be moulded into the future."

– Mandla Mbothwe, artist

Ndabamnye So SS Mendi or 'I became one with SS *Mendi*' performed by Lulamile Bhongo Nikani. *Abantu beMendi* exhibition opening, 26 February 2017.

"These boots were the gifts of war. We took them off, we left them there before we passed to the other side. For where they march nothing flourishes."
Izihlangu Zenkohlakalo or 'The Shoes of Viciousness' by Mandla Mbothwe. *Abantu beMendi*, February 2017.

The People of the *Mendi*

"History is not just a type of knowledge of the past, but a way of being of human beings as agents that introduce themselves in time and constitute modes of articulating the temporal dimensions of the past, the present and the future" (Naishtat 2011:46).

Photographs are limited to the regime of truth in which they are deployed (Tagg 1988), often making the people photographed victims of 'double violence' when the cruelty of the captured situation is reproduced (Berger 1980) and the people become reified and consumed as entertainment (Sontag 2003b). Yet, it is only by making them publicly available that images can be used to raise awareness of the power hierarchy in which they were made, and to weaken the same by democratising access to it. It is through interaction their contemporary framing can be challenged.

It is rather optimistic to believe that a photograph can 'tell a person's story' but it can represent fragments of it, enough to raise awareness that there *is* a situation in need of attention. When words do not carry enough weight, photographs can confirm its existence (Sontag 2003b). Photography is thereby not inevitably a tool for commodifying people and enforcing power relations; photography is promiscuous, applicable to any political project: it challenges and reformulates the objects of the gaze (Knowles 2006). It renders human by removing the anonymity of suffering, and it explores and contextualises the particular.

The viewer becomes a participant, puzzling together order and meaning, making sense of the elements provided by the photographer. Although the interpretation will necessarily be an idiosyncratic one, it is nonetheless prescribed by the content of the photograph and the context provided. Sontag (2003a) is a proponent of this exchange to occur at home, by means of a book, in serenity to mark the solemnness and pay respect to the people in the photographs. However, photographs viewed in a public space in interaction with other people, on large prints which by sheer size will make the viewer engage with and be engulfed by them, will evoke immediate discussions that cannot be postponed and forgotten.

As suggested in the opening discussion of the 'In Memoriam' montage: images offer privileged access to human commonalities (Suhr and Willerslev 2013). The most striking commonality I have observed throughout this project is how viewers react to the photograph from Couzen's collection depicting a group portrait of black troops.

Otherwise preoccupied with the history of the ship, the commotion of the commemoration, or distracted by the enchantment of the art, the exhibition becomes an event in itself and the media overtakes the message. However, the group portrait caused most exhibition visitors and the people viewing photographs and film footage afterwards to experience a sudden moment of arrest whereby they realised that these '*Mendi* men' were *real people*.

Other photographs and artwork require more context to gain the same recognition, and Lulamile's theatre performance attracts attention but without the same affect. The faces in the Couzen's photograph seem to exercise punctum by their own force. Participating artist Buhlebezwe Siwani said to me in a discussion about the varied reactions to *Abantu beMendi* that people appreciate what they can relate to. It seems the reciprocal gaze of the men in the group portrait does exaclty that: it offers a sense of self-recognition in the other.

The photograph allures within the viewer an imagery of it *having* a story and whether known or not, the mere promise renders the photograph arresting and establishes the sentiment of a shared history between the viewer and the portrayed. This has proven true irrespectively of whether they are presented as a digital still photograph, in a film, or on the gallery wall. The reaction has also been the same regardless of nationality or cultural identity of the viewer:

These men were real people.

Unlike the discourses of the *Mendi* men as deceased victims or mythologised heroes, we encounter them here as human beings, alive, and looking back at us. We see them as persons and as agents. A 'civil contract' (Azoulay 2008) is established between the person photographed and the viewer of the photograph, unbounded by time or distance, but founded on a human recognition: on *seeing* the other.

Although the moment of photography has passed, the 'event of photography' (Azoulay 2012) is never over: the photograph lives on for us to encounter in our own time. Quite appropriately for our present project, Azoulay further emphasises that photography and citizenship alike are contingent on recognition, and through the act of seeing facilitated by photographs, the viewer can 'restore' the citizenship denied to the person portrayed.

Despite the legal recognition denied to the men who perished with the Mendi 100 years ago, and is still being denied today, *Abantu beMendi* offers a space where the men can be given justice and recognition that is in Azoulay's term 'civil'. This might even offer a recognition more profound and humane than an ideologically framed political performance.

Thando Mangcu, one of the three young artists performing a theatre play at the *Mendi* conference, summarised the dilemma at the core of the *Mendi* centenary commemoration:

"The student movements that are happening are evidence that we are still attached to history and we are still living that history today. We must honour and remember the past, but how do we honour and remember the past without having experienced it?"

An ongoing process to be explored rather than a question to be answered, the men portrayed in the Couzens' photograph suggest a way forward: by seeing, and by beeing seen.

Or as curator June Bam-Hutchinson phrased it:

"We must listen with the eyes".

"South African blacks were thus drawn into the 'white man's war' and affected by its wider ramifications, essentially they had to fight their own war within a war. […] Africans fought for their livelihood, for the recognition of their dignity and for their rightful place in South African society. That war is still being fought."

– Albert Grundlingh (1987:170-171)

These men joined the South African Native Labour Contingent to serve the British Commonwealth in the First World War. The photograph was taken at Rosebank Military Camp, ca. January 1917. The photographer remains unknown. Courtesy of Tim Couzens/Fred Cornell collection, reprinted with the kind permission of Diana Wall.

Epilogue

You enter through the glass doors but you are immediately halted by a wall blocking the way inside. Its white surface is punctuated only by a time-torn photograph: a group of men are looking back at you from one hundred years ago. Their eyes meet yours.

The caption introduces them as the men of the SS Mendi and tells you that you are standing where they spent their last night of African soil before leaving for Europe and the Great War. You are here enjoying art.

But you are not yet expecting colourful creativity, nor are you expecting the absence of an ending.

The wall is still separating you from what is inside. To proceed, you must walk around it. You must circumvent the men. You turn left and find yourself looking over the shoulder of a woman on a beach. She is defying the ocean a centenary after the men you just encountered perished in it. For a moment, your gaze joins hers towards the horizon. For a moment, you are her. Then you bypass her too, make another turn, and step inside the heart of the gallery.

Your eyes are adjusting to the selective light, illuminating one frame at a time, and you see both the past and present unfolding in front of you, both still and moving, in two and three dimensions, and accompanied by voices and sounds you cannot yet discern. You are invited to a multi-modal conversation unconstrained by time, race or objectivity.

You walk past the debris of a ship bow that is bleeding cold white mist, then past more black and white photographs that accompanied by poems and informative texts tell the story of lost land, of war recruitment and of a ship departing. You meet more of the men about to depart to the Great War. You recognise in one of the photographs the same grand mountain you just left outside.

You still can not anticipate that these men, their lost history now materialising before you, are still not recognised today.

You leave familiar ground and proceed to a painted sea in furious uproar. You follow the men being pulled down under the surface and see a wreck, but the underwater sough is ruptured by the sound of a horn. Next you see oceans transcended by the tapping of ghostly feet. Next you meet the men deceased. Of most of them, only their names remain. You see photographs of memorials raised to their honour.

The space is becoming brighter and the images more colourful as you are returning to your own time. You have almost completed the circle. The Roll of Honour is silently swaying from a breeze seeping in from the entrance.

But there is something missing. Next to a screen showing a grand commemoration ceremony held on the day of the sinking on a ship in the English Channel, curtained by the names of everyone who died with the Mendi, is an empty frame.

You remember the faces of the men you met at the entrance. You remember they were here, where you are now. Yet they died barely recognised as human beings. You wonder if the centenary commotion will give them justice, or if it is as contentless as the frame before you. You read their names out of respect.

Before leaving the past behind you, you see war graves on a screen of cold metal; the remnants of war. With a shiver you step outside, back to the bright sunlight and your own reality.

At least now you know.

Photographs of the past reflected in the present. *Abantu beMendi*, February 2017.

"Through curation you generate a new idea of an archive. The idea of Mendi is evolving. It is negotiated through dialogical processes of curation: negotiating perspectives, balancing politics of past-present.

We are re-playing history in a modern frame"

– Paul Weinberg, curator

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