

Red Mandela: Contests of Auto-biography and Auto/biography in South Africa

CIRAJ RASSOOL

Department of History, University of the Western Cape

This article examines the case of the red Mercedes-Benz built in 1990 by workers at the Mercedes-Benz plant in East London and presented to Nelson Mandela as a gift shortly after his release from prison. During the 1990s a biographic order marked by a discourse of heroic leaders was growing in South Africa, where biographic narration and self-narration played a noticeable and, at times, substantial part in political transformation and reconstruction. Nelson Mandela's 'long walk to freedom' became the key trope for South Africa's history, narrated as the triumph of reconciliation.

The presentation of the car to Nelson Mandela in 1990 occurred at a time of transition in the life of his auto/biography, from the biography of desire for the absent revolutionary leader to the biography of a statesman and president. This partly explains the ambiguous, double-edged history of the gift, as a labour of love on the part of NUMSA workers and as donation by Mercedes-Benz South Africa (the corporate version of these events emphasised the 'friendship' that was 'sparked' between Nelson Mandela and Mercedes-Benz South Africa).

Inspired by the East London autoworkers' commitment to produce the car for Mandela, as well as by the resilience some of them showed during their nine-week strike and sleep-in in the plant soon afterwards, Simon Gush's installation Red has intervened in how those events should be remembered. By choosing to exhibit the disassembled body panels of a replica car alongside reconstructed displays of sleep-in strike beds made of scaffolding, foam, upholstery and car headrests, with imagined uniforms of striking workers, Gush has chosen to appropriate the history of the events of 1990 from the celebratory frames of the Mandela biographic order. The installation turns into an inquiry into the labour process and the events of the strike that was critical of the reconciliatory and celebratory understanding of the gift as a product of a partnership between the workers and management.

This article examines the link between the biography and history of a Mercedes-Benz motorcar, on the one hand, and the ongoing production and contestation of Nelson Mandela's biography on the other.¹ It is written from the perspective of someone who had spent almost ten years until 1971 as a child passenger in a much-loved pearl-

¹ This article was completed while I was a fellow at the Morphomata Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Cologne. There I benefited from conversations with Michael Bollig, Clemens Greiner, Larissa Förster, Jürgen Salm, Monica van der Haagen-Wulff, Tanja Klemm, Jan Söffner and Katharina Lorenz.

coloured 1959 Mercedes-Benz 190, and cherished his recollections of the aura, smell and special parts of the vehicle. Starting from my own mythic memories, I wish to consider the case of the 'special' red-coloured Mercedes-Benz W126 S-Class (500 SE) that was built in 1990 by workers at the Mercedes-Benz plant in East London, South Africa, and presented to Nelson Mandela as a gift shortly after his release from prison. With motor parts donated by the company, the car had been built by hand by workers 'outside of the normal working hours' and completed in only four days.² The vehicle was presented to Mandela on 22 July 1990 in a special occasion held at Sisa Dukashe Stadium in Mdantsane before 30,000 people.

I am interested in the biography of the motorcar, its creation, engineering and assembly, within the typologies of vehicle manufacture and the individuation of this Mercedes-Benz that was destined for Nelson Mandela from the start of its production. I also wish to understand its relationship with the biographic order of post-apartheid South Africa, where the individual and biography acquired renewed centrality in the public arena as celebratory personal tales were constructed in almost every sphere of public culture and through virtually every medium of historical representation. As a discourse of heroic leaders was consolidated, their stories became a regular part of the forums and structures of political transformation and reconstruction, and also permeated the spaces of civic life as South Africans got used to a discourse of survival, triumph and exemplariness. Nelson Mandela's 'long walk to freedom' became the trope for South Africa's history as the triumph of reconciliation.³

The Mercedes-Benz, with its advanced automotive engineering and design, has also been a significant symbol of masculinity, bearing values of unambiguous authority, pioneering leadership and distinctive quality. Here I examine the red Mercedes-Benz for Mandela being transformed from a symbolic gift into a biographical artefact with heritage value. First placed in the Mercedes-Benz collection and later loaned to the Apartheid Museum, where it has been on display, its significance is pinned to its creation in a moment of supposed industrial and racial reconciliation between Mercedes-Benz bosses and workers, which was also in some ways a moment of convergence of contested masculinities.

Accounts of the 1990 Mandela Mercedes-Benz events and their meaning have differed, and these contests of history have been depicted in two films containing recollections by automotive worker union organisers, Mercedes-Benz management and industrial conflict facilitators. One film, produced in mid-2013 for Mercedes-Benz South Africa as Mandela's health went into decline and his death was thought to be imminent, was celebratory, emphasising the car as a gift of the workers, and presenting the company as a pioneer of reconciliation, the 'first to formally recognise

2 A. Oagana, 'How Nelson Mandela's Mercedes-Benz was built by hand', <<http://www.autoevolution.com/news/how-nelson-mandela-s-mercedes-benz-was-built-by-hand-video-66033.html>>, accessed 12 April 2016.

3 C. Rassool, 'The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2004). Here, following Laura Marcus, I also suggest that it is unhelpful to make a conceptual distinction between biography and autobiography, and more realistic to see the two always interacting and functioning together as 'auto/biography'. See L. Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

a black labour organisation.⁴ Circulated and promoted internationally within the automotive industry and the business press more generally after Mandela's death in December 2013, this short 4'44" film was used to promote a 23-year association between Mercedes-Benz and Mandela, albeit through the labour of the 'community of factory workers'. With the film, the company claimed its commitment to South Africa, its workers and general reconciliation, symbolised as early as 1990 by the agreement between the workers and the company to produce the gift, and personified by Mandela. As the inscription at the end of the film declared: 'South Africa: Together we are better.'⁵

For the workers and other members of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the building of this special car was an opportunity and a method to 'embrace change and unity and to provide unity within the workforce'. This car was not only a gift from the NUMSA members but in spirit from workers in general. For the workers, a car was 'made of many small parts' and it was like South Africa that 'belong[ed] to all who lived in it, black ... and white'. South Africa, for them, was like the 'small parts of the unit that we built' that had been 'brought together by Madiba and [that were] all moving forward today. Mandela's response, as reported in *Labour of Love*, was that the car and its colour would remind him 'not only of NUMSA members' but of the 'blood that [had been] spilt by many South Africans ... for this freedom in South Africa'. The workers' message to Mandela was that the car that had left the plant 'blemish free', as the best ever built in its class, was a 'labour of love'.⁶

Another film, *Red*, was produced a year later by the artist Simon Gush in collaboration with the actor and playwright James Cairns, and shown as part of Gush's installation *Red* that opened at the Goethe Institute Gallery in Johannesburg in 2014 and the next year in East London itself.⁷ In this 81-minute black and white film and the installation as a whole, Gush sought to understand the July 1990 events of producing and presenting the Mercedes-Benz in light of the nine-week illegal strike and plant sleep-in that workers embarked upon only a few weeks later. Inspired by the commitment of the East London autoworkers to produce the car for Mandela, as well as by their resilience during the nine-week strike and occupation of the plant afterwards, Gush was indeed intervening in how those events should be remembered.

Based on interviews with some of the same and other worker leaders, as well as with a manager, management's industrial relations consultant and a dispute facilitator, the film *Red* brought out the same narrative of labour, affect and reconciliation.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Simon Gush in collaboration with James Cairns, *Red* (film), 2014, part of Simon Gush, *Red* (installation), Goethe Institute Gallery, Johannesburg, 2014. See S. O'Toole, 'This Is the Work of a Revolution', <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-04-03-this-is-the-work-of-a-revolution/>, accessed 10 August 2015; G. Phandle, 'Mandela's Red Merc, Strike Become Art', <http://www.dispatchlive.co.za/mandelas-red-merc-strike-become-art/>, accessed 10 August 2015. Before *Red* reached East London in August 2015 it went on show in the Nelson Mandela Metro in March 2015, after which the Mercedes-Benz components and film were displayed as part of *Nine o'Clock* at Fort Selwyn in Grahamstown in the National Arts Festival in July 2015. See B. Maart, 'Nelson Mandela's Red 500 SE Reconstructed at the Grahamstown Festival', <http://www.mblife.co.za/MercedesLove/Mandela-Red-500-SE/>, accessed 10 August 2015.

It also revealed a more complex story than that of an enlightened Mercedes-Benz company and the claim of a 'mutually beneficial relationship' between the company, the union and the workers.⁸ These interviews also revealed a much more divided workforce, some of whom still suffered after being dismissed 23 years previously for their participation in the strike. While there were – in Gush's words – 'no bad guys or good guys' in the narrative, with 'various sides trying to find a way through',⁹ Gush and Cairns nevertheless showed that there was more to the story than the 'warm and fuzzy' celebratory narrative of Mandela-Mercedes-Benz-industrial stability.¹⁰

The edited high-definition footage of interviews and contemporary dockland industrial scenes created a documentary sense of the history of Mercedes-Benz industrial relations, but was presented as a loop of footage in the domain of video art. In addition, its audio track provided a stereo soundscape that permeated the visitor experience of the installation itself. There the disassembled body panels of a replica car, each part in a different tone of red, were exhibited alongside reconstructed displays of sleep-in strike beds made of scaffolding, foam, upholstery and car headrests, and imagined uniforms of striking workers. With the film, Gush has chosen to pose questions about the Mercedes-Benz gift and the world of automotive labour in East London in 1990, and the celebratory frames of the Nelson Mandela biographic order through which the corporate narrative has understood them. Here we are mindful that on receiving a second brand new S Class in 1998, 'the red S500 was retired to take up a proud spot in the Mercedes-Benz collection in East London.' Owned by DaimlerChrysler, it was later loaned to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, where it has been displayed as part of a larger exhibition on Mandela's story,¹¹ which I suggest is part of the biographic order that has seeped into public life.

The installation *Red* can also be appreciated as a revolutionary way of displaying a motor car, not as an object of veneration or symbol of legend, and outside the gendered conventions of the car show or museum that foreground vintage cars, presidential vehicles or automotive engineering and design. Here the Mercedes-Benz replica, stripped down to its parts, was turned into an inquiry into the labour process and the events of the strike that questioned the reconciliatory and celebratory views of the gift as a product of a partnership between the workers and management. This framework of the exhibition as historical enquiry and autopsy also shows how cars could be displayed as artefacts of history and not just as products of design, technological progress and sometimes male desire, as in the typical car display. Indeed, in questioning the biographic order of Mandela, *Red* also challenges the gendered discourse of the motorcar itself.

8 'From Conflict to Cooperation: A True South African Story of Severe Industrial Relations Conflict That Was Moved to Internationally Competitive Employee Relations – A Book by Ian Russell' (Website book announcement), <http://www.rb-africa.co.za/rb-book/>, accessed 5 March 2016. Ian Russell was the consultant brought in by Mercedes-Benz in 1989 to try to resolve an ongoing series of strikes and go-slows shortly before the 'gift'. Russell has developed a consultancy business, also building upon the narrative of the 'labour of love' and the industrial relations successes of Mercedes-Benz.

9 Maart, 'Nelson Mandela's Red 500 SE'.

10 O'Toole, 'This Is the Work'.

11 'Nelson Mandela and His Mercedes-Benz S500', http://www.cars.co.za/motoring_news/nelson_mandela_and_his_mercedes-benz_s500/1395/#.V4t6_qLy3ww, 18 July 2013, accessed 10 August 2015. This article was clearly produced with insider knowledge while *Labour of Love* was in production.

Mercedes Affect and Exhibition

During the 1960s Fazil Rassool, representative at Messaris wholesalers on Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town, on the lower fringes of District Six, owned a spotless pearl-coloured Mercedes-Benz 190. Every weekday he drove it on his rounds, all the way down to Simonstown. He drove it to the racecourses in Milnerton and Kenilworth, where he spent a considerable time. He drove his children to school in District Six, almost always arriving late, urging them to fib on arrival that the car had suffered a puncture. Some weekends, he drove his family to Grey Street, Worcester, in the Boland, where his brother Joe had moved with his family because of his health.

On some evenings he drove his family to the Sunset Ster drive-in cinema, with children hidden under blankets on the floor at the back as they entered because of the age restriction. And then the car proceeded over the mounds and between the poles with their window clip-on audio units until they were halfway to the large screen. There the Mercedes-Benz became an intimate family movie-viewing space, while they drank coffee and ate cheese sandwiches. On weekends he drove his family to Boulders Beach, and when that became impossible because of the application of separate amenities, he drove his fortress Mercedes to the racially undeclared Partridge Point in the reserve on the way to Cape Point, and to Strandfontein, the dangerous rocky beach beyond Muizenberg set aside for coloureds.

This was an executive-style car turned beloved family vehicle rather than a luxury car for the rich and famous and decadent, the associations that Mercedes would later acquire. Produced between 1956 and 1961, the 190 was powered by an M121, 1.9 litre engine and, along with the less powerful 180, was referred to as a 'Ponton'. Together they were the mainstay of the firm. The Mercedes was much loved for its strength, grace and special aura, for its ample unbroken long seats at the back and the front, and its chrome all round and wood panelling, especially on the dashboard, which had a long groove just the right size for the fingers of the boy child in awe of his father and his 190. It had a soft leather black, brown and white mascot dog that hung from its rear view mirror. Its gear was affixed stylishly alongside the large steering wheel. And from the front seat position it was possible to look through the Mercedes-Benz star that stood atop the faux radiator cap in front, fixed by cork, and spring loaded so that it would immediately jump back into position when moved.

Tragically for the family, the father's 190 was sold in 1971 for a meagre sum when he moved on to another job, and the boy's Mercedes youth came to an end. But the look, smell and feel of it, its metal, wooden and synthetic parts, its large crème horn-rim steering wheel with the central emblem, its mirrors, movable star and grooved dashboard, were etched into his memory. This was the car of mythical resilience and family-ness against the odds. At the core of the boy's feeling for the Mercedes was his relationship with his father. Learning to love the car, its sturdy, reliable engineering, its smooth speed, its deep, even sound and its ergonomic design, was part of how he was being taught to become an adult male of integrity. The Mercedes-Benz 190 was one of the means by which he was taught to be strong, resolute and protective in the midst of the tightening grip of everyday apartheid. The strength and majesty of the

car enabled a significant measure of self-assurance and courage in a hardening and fragmenting public sphere of separate amenities, job reservation and the threat of group areas. If the Mercedes-Benz 190 was a bulwark against apartheid, it was also the space and symbol for expressing a manliness of social confidence and dignity against processes of political emasculation that were under way.

While this was also a manliness of engineering, speed and safety, it was worlds away from the masculinity of the BBC programme *Top Gear*, based as it has been on speed, stunts and pioneering the mastery of every possible terrain, overcoming all obstacles along the way while revelling in 'blokey' forms of homosociality. In this sphere the car, with its body and its parts, has sometimes been gendered female – hence the name 'Mercedes' – to be adored and turned on, and made to respond to a man's touch. If not female, the car was like a graceful wild animal, to be tamed and preserved. Later on, as women became more independent, prompting a new market niche, the commercial phenomenon developed of the car 'designed with serious consideration' for the 'needs and tastes' of women.¹² And during all this time, perhaps the most conventional medium for the gendered presentation of the car was the car show, where the car display was often accompanied by a woman's body draped near naked on its bonnet, creating a porno-optical assemblage of sensory desire and risqué pleasure.

But it is the museum that has emerged as the more serious site of exhibiting and contemplating automobiles (and perhaps particularly luxury cars, such as various models of Mercedes-Benz) for their vintage value, their use by statesmen, or their technological and design history. Museums have been developed out of corporate collections, which have often been assimilated into corporate museums as part of the projection of vehicle brands. Rare, vintage or 'classic' models have been collected as artefacts of 'pioneering' motor car production and 'first-hand testimony of our automotive past', sometimes even located at the original site, conceived as a 'memorial to mobility'.¹³ This is the case of the 'lovingly restored' Karl Benz House that pays tribute to the 'creative power' and the 'genius' of Karl Benz, whose career was 'marked by countless automotive milestones'. At Karl Benz House cars have been placed in a display at the very place where they originated, on the origins of automotive mobility and aspects of technological invention such as the 'first two-stroke engine in 1879; the first car in 1886; axle-pivot steering in 1893'. This museum has also been assimilated into the corporate museological system of Mercedes-Benz, as base for the foundation Daimler AG, and site and corporate-themed environment for conferences of 'scientists from all over the world' organised by the Daimler and Benz Foundation.¹⁴

The presentation of the legendary story of the technological and stylistic beginnings of motor vehicle manufacture has seen Karl Benz House joined by two further museums of classic cars within the Mercedes-Benz complex. The Museo Mille Miglia in Brescia, Italy, joined the Mercedes-Benz museum stable as a museum of

12 <http://www.retrowaste.com/1960s/cars-in-the-1960s/>, accessed 10 March 2016.

13 The Dr Karl Benz Museum at Ladenberg is one such museum. See <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/mercedes-benz/classic/community/dr-carl-benz-car-museum/>, accessed 10 March 2016.

14 <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/mercedes-benz/classic/community/karl-benz-house/>, last accessed 3 December 2016.

a 'legendary race of historic automobiles' held between 1927 and 1957, its spaces filled with some of the 'rarest and most significant' classic racing cars.¹⁵ In addition, the Museum of Historical Maybach Vehicles that opened in 2009 in an old factory site in Neumarkt, Bavaria has assembled a private collection of 16 luxury Maybach automobiles manufactured between 1920 and 1941 into a 'veritable treasure trove of exhibits from automobile history.'¹⁶ In 1960 Maybach was acquired by Daimler-Benz, the first step to amassing rare, classic luxury vehicles within the historical narrative of Mercedes-Benz. Mercedes went on to produce an ultra-luxury edition of the Mercedes-Benz S-Class under the Maybach name.

On the African continent, the National Museum of Uganda has a collection of cars displayed in its grounds. It includes two Mercedes-Benz motor vehicles – a mid-size, luxury four-wheel-drive G-Wagen and a luxury sedan – donated by Yoweri Museveni from his first presidential years. The museum also has an older Mercedes Pullman 600 state limousine from the 1960s on display, used by Idi Amin Dada and described in the catalogue as 'Amin's Benzi' used also by 'a bunch of dictatorial sycophants who didn't mind killing other people.'¹⁷ Perhaps the foremost expression of motor vehicle presidentialism comes from the National Historical Commission of the Philippines, which holds the most complete collection of restored presidential limousines, mostly luxury Mercedes-Benzes, now destined for a new Presidential Car Museum to be opened in Quezon City.¹⁸

The museumisation of the luxury motor vehicle has taken its most significant form in the corporate car museum, where the past and future of automotive engineering innovation and revolutionary design are exhibited as part of brand production and projection. In a display of 130 years of automobile history in a 'single continuous timeline', the Mercedes-Benz Museum, which opened in Stuttgart 2006, seeks to show how 'future needs heritage'. Covering a floor space of 16,500 m² on nine levels in a building 'completely without barriers,' the museum presents 160 vehicles (of a full collection of about 700) and more than 1500 objects in a 'place of innovation' through chronological and topical displays that also seek to show how 'history can point the way ahead'. As artefacts of automotive history and corporate heritage, Mercedes-Benz motor vehicles from different times, grouped in 'legend' and 'collection' rooms, have been placed in a narrative of ongoing innovation that culminates in a focus on the future of the automobile and the 'drive technologies of tomorrow'. Various drive systems, including the optimised combustion engine, electric and hybrid systems, and fuel cells, are displayed to show the technological challenges of the present and the future of 'emission-free mobility'. With the Mercedes-Benz E-Class

15 <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/mercedes-benz/classic/community/museo-mille-miglia/>, accessed 10 March 2016. The names of the 'founding fathers' Gottlieb Daimler and Carl Benz, as linked with the creation of the automobile, are an integral part of the corporate history of Daimler AG and its motor vehicle brand Mercedes-Benz. In 1998 Daimler-Benz AG purchased Chrysler, the US manufacturer, and created DaimlerChrysler AG. When the Chrysler unit was subsequently sold in 2007, the name of the parent company was changed to Daimler AG.

16 <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/mercedes-benz/classic/community/museum-of-historical-maybach-vehicles/>, accessed 10 March 2016.

17 National Museum of Uganda, Internal Catalogue. I am grateful to Leslie Witz for sharing his research in the National Museum of Uganda.

18 T. Billones, 'A Look at Presidential Cars in Philippine History', <http://news.abs-cbn.com/life/07/12/16/a-look-at-presidential-cars-in-philippine-history>, accessed 20 July 2016.

increasingly branded as a ‘masterpiece of intelligence’, there is no doubt that the future of ‘intuitive driving’ as well as fully autonomous driverless driving is also canvassed. The exhibition is rounded off with a ‘Fascination of Technology’ display, in which visitors are offered ‘a glimpse into day-to-day work’ at Mercedes-Benz.¹⁹

While the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart may be a corporate one with features of a technological museum of cultural history, the BMW Museum in contrast is more ‘brand-focussed’, with ‘new approaches to intertwining architecture, exhibition design and communicative media.’ Made by the prominent museum design company Atelier Brückner, known widely for their scenographic methods, the focus has shifted from the automobile to the designed museum environment. A ‘continuation of the street in altered space’ has been created, along with ‘automobile-inspired architectural scenery’, with a ramp system resembling a three-dimensional road providing access to exhibition houses.²⁰ Here, ‘driving pleasure’ relayed as ‘spatial experience’ and in media productions is designed to lift the restrictions of space and ‘put exhibits and content in motion’ to create a sense of movement and speed. This exhibition, where ‘architecture, content, statement, and creation’ were made to ‘interlock’ in an ‘aesthetically demanding, consistent space’, is punted as the spirit of the BMW brand.²¹

Mercedes Mandela

The installation *Red* was not only a deliberation on the Mercedes-Benz as artefact of affection and display, it was also an engagement with the cultural production of Nelson Mandela, of the meaning of the man and how he should be remembered. During the 1990s, as histories of resistance morphed into those of national reconciliation, especially with nation building projected as a new imperative, and as political leaders re-entered public life on South African soil, many of advanced age after years in exile or imprisonment, the biographical life of the leader took on a new centrality in the public domain. The ‘miracle’ of the new South Africa and the demise of apartheid – so this new narrative went – had been made possible by the wisdom of heroic leaders, and above all by the special magic of Nelson Mandela. At the centre of all this biographical activity was the life of Mandela, whose ‘long walk’ came to symbolise the new nation’s past. The late 1980s and the early 1990s saw a veritable scramble for his life as biographies were produced in virtually every medium. While Mandela had acquired near-Messianic status during his imprisonment, it was the ‘cultural production of the Messianic Mandela’²² that became a fundamental feature of South Africa after his release.²³ In the process, his life history came to be inscribed into the South Africa’s process of nation making as the seeming embodiment of its heritage

19 <https://www.mercedes-benz.com/en/mercedes-benz/classic/museum/>, accessed 10 March 2016.

20 R. Etherington, ‘BMW Museum by Atelier Brückner’, *Dezeen Magazine*, 28 July 2008, <http://www.dezeen.com/2008/07/28/bmw-museum-munich-by-atelier-bruckner/>, accessed 10 March 2016.

21 Etherington, ‘BMW Museum’.

22 Quoted from the cover of A. Sampson, *Mandela: The Authorised Biography* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1999).

23 This began immediately on his release on 11 February 1990, in spite of his seeming indifference to the assembled international media and his attempts to shake off the redemptive conception of him as prophet. See the excellent essay by R. Nixon, ‘Mandela, Messianism, and the Media’ in his book *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1994), 175–92.

and the immortal guarantor of its future. With modes of biographical narration and concepts of greatness and exemplary lives also incorporated into the rituals of governance, political transformation, economic relations and public policy, Mandela's auto/biography came to stand at the apex of a biographic order in South Africa.

The processes of producing, deploying, contesting and maintaining Mandela's life story have gone through several phases and purposes, as evidence of epic and noble resistance in the face of apartheid's treason charges, as resource for consolidating the movement in exile, as source of unswerving strength and moral authority in the final push against apartheid, and as narrative of confrontation, wisdom, leadership and reconciliation. Yet instead of trying to analyse such a cultural history of Mandela's *biography*, much more has been made of what his life as activist, prisoner, leader, president and retired politician *symbolised* in relation to the narrative of the South African nation and the 'triumph' of its 'human spirit'. The cultural study of Mandela has tended to be limited to attempts to understand Mandela the symbol and how it is put to use as a brand of leadership, and its associated significance. These studies have tended to be preoccupied with understanding Mandela through questions of leadership, 'legacy' and his 'meanings'.

Older studies of him had been driven by the need to discover the origins of his leadership and greatness, arguing for instance that these characteristics had emerged during his imprisonment on Robben Island. Anthony Sampson maintains that it was prison that transformed Mandela 'from "raw revolutionary" into a consummate statesman dedicated to reconciliation.'²⁴ In addition to Nixon's early work on the Messianic Mandela as a cultural production, some of the keenest research has sought to understand what made his personality, style and influence. These qualities, according to Tom Lodge, were shaped by 'the structured world of courtroom procedure', moulded by 'self-consciously planned, scripted' acts of performance, combining 'emotional self-sufficiency', 'social grace', an 'imposing appearance' and 'elite status' to create an 'unusual assurance about his destiny as a leader' and a 'sense of power'. His childhood upbringing in 'highly institutionalised settings' not only made him absorb 'principles of etiquette and chivalry' that were 'reinforced by a sophisticated literary culture that fused heroic African oral traditions with Victorian concepts of honour, propriety, and virtue', but also gave him 'emotional self-control' as well as a 'receptiveness to new ideas'. The consequence was that Mandela 'embod[ied] a glamour and a style that projected *visually* a brave new African world of modernity and freedom.'²⁵

This attention to leadership and style was amplified around the time of Mandela's death, with a range of academic and public projects that sought to appreciate his image, 'meaning' and legacy, from different disciplinary perspectives. Zolani Ngwane has studied a key moment in the history of Mandela's symbolic self-production in his 1962 trial for having left South Africa illegally and having allegedly incited a stay-away. Mandela entered the court in dramatic fashion wearing Thembu royal attire

²⁴ Quoted from the cover of A. Sampson, *Mandela*.

²⁵ T. Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), vii–x.

made of beads and leopard skin. Ngwane argues that, in this moment, Mandela's body became 'the dominant icon, decentering the conventions of South African courts of law with an affected ritual elaboration and providing a mnemonic device for oral reconstructions of that event for many years to come.' In the process, Mandela became 'both the embodiment of the struggle and a vicarious sacrifice for it.'²⁶

Since the African National Congress (ANC) had taken the decision to form Mkhonto weSizwe (MK) in April 1960, Mandela had been operating underground, mostly on his own, even outside the ANC's organisational structure, and also disaffiliating from his family. During this time 'he developed a public image that centred on his body – a corporal icon with phantasmal amplifiers.' While in hiding he would make 'spectacular unannounced appearances at meetings and rallies' and during this period 'the mythology around Mandela's body developed sharply'. At the time he walked into court, he had already acquired 'Christological status as a miracle worker', with 'the stage ... set for the Passion event.'²⁷ By wearing his costume in court, Adam Sitze added, Mandela was 'treating his position as an outlaw, as a rogue whose exteriority from the law was demanded by the law itself, to position himself precisely as the personification of the sovereign power of the excluded African majority.'²⁸

Unlike Anthony Sampson, who had suggested that Mandela was both premodern and modern, for the literary scholar Rita Barnard, Mandela was just 'modern', a product of the twentieth century's 'global complexity as an era of a racially incomplete and uneven modernity'. This, she argues, was why he was able 'to bridge the different worlds he inhabited ... with extraordinary courage and grace.'²⁹ Deborah Posel has analysed the discourse of 'magic' and 'miracle' in the constitution of the 'extraordinary persona and presence' of Mandela. As the Release Mandela Campaign developed in South Africa and internationally to build global solidarity with the struggle against apartheid during the early 1980s, it inaugurated 'an avowedly reverential, redemptive version of Mandela's political and ethical significance' as a man 'of extraordinary and special qualities.' When he walked out of prison in 1990 after 27 years with a willingness to negotiate, he became 'a metonym of the wider national "miracle" of a peaceful transition to democracy, with Mandela acclaimed as the miracle maker.' Thereafter, 'Madiba magic' emerged as part of the vocabulary of South Africa as a 'name for Mandela's singular powers of surprise'. As the Release Mandela Campaign developed in South Africa and internationally to build global solidarity with the struggle against apartheid during the early 1980s, it inaugurated 'an avowedly reverential, redemptive version of Mandela's political and ethical significance' as a man 'of extraordinary and special qualities.' And as a 'master politician' it was Mandela himself who went 'to the extent of managing his iconic image'. He understood 'the prophetic qualities of that persona', whose authority derived from 'his self-presentation as one who served,

26 Z. Ngwane, 'Mandela and Tradition' in R. Barnard (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 126.

27 Ibid, 127.

28 A. Sitze, 'Mandela and the Law' in R. Barnard (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, 152.

29 Barnard, 'Introduction' in Barnard (ed), *Cambridge Companion*, 5.

whose power was popularly mandated' and 'who refused deification as an elevated colossus'. And it was also 'striking', the extent to which the making of 'the mythic Mandela' was the product of a 'national and international consensus'.³⁰

And yet there came a time when the homology between Mandela's iconic image and the politics of democratic citizenship would become undone and his 'painstaking stitching together of African traditional values, Western democratic liberal structures, global capitalism, and pan-African communitarianism' would unravel. According to Lize van Robbroeck, 'harmonious multivocality of Mandela's formulation of citizenship' had begun to deteriorate 'into a cacophony of incoherent voices', especially during Jacob Zuma's presidency. The 'tenuous centre established by Mandela' was not holding, she argued, and things were 'beginning to fall apart'. In addition, she suggested that the 'commodification of nationalism' had also begun to perpetuate 'a banalisation of Mandela's image' that 'threaten[ed] to undo his exemplary potential'. The proliferation of fridge magnets, Madiba shirts and Mandela sportswear reflected the possibility of 'Santa-Clausification' that further threatened 'to subvert his legacy'.³¹

In similar vein, Suren Pillay provided a thoughtful analysis of the contested meanings, legacies and images of Mandela shortly after his death. Pillay had noticed the presence of 'two soundtracks, sometimes in discordant cacophany' at Cape Town Stadium, where people went to mourn Mandela. With the official event governed by the 'restriction of protocol' that sought to project a method of mourning 'devoid of politics', the music from the podium conflicted sharply with the constant singing and 'faint humming' from the stands that expressed itself as 'sometimes rising and bursting through'. At times this crowd singing was 'uncontainable and irrepressible' in the face of 'stern remonstrations' from the podium. The comrades had splintered into 'scattered generations with diverse fates' that now 'include both the beneficiaries and the losers', the 'unemployed and ... the new business elite', 'the party officials, the parliamentarians, the bureaucrats', and also 'the most vocal critical dissidents and leaders of new social movements'. Mandela was being remembered in a way that 'transcends his party affiliation and political history' as well as through rituals of tradition and custom, of being 'head of a clan' who had also been head of state. For Pillay, there was an 'unnamed sense of incompleteness' and 'a ritual of mourning and celebration that many South Africans ... still [needed] to have for Nelson Mandela' – and that was 'the ritual of burying a comrade'. This occasion would be 'a place and time where the songs that were erupting from the crowd' could be 'taken up and [sung] from the podium' and would also restore Mandela 'to his place within a political community'.³²

But aside from these representations of Mandela's leadership and legacy, image and myth, here we also suggest that it is also necessary to appreciate the history of Mandela's *auto/biography*. This requires an analysis of when the narrative began, how

30 D. Posel, "'Madiba Magic.'" Politics as Enchantment' in Barnard (ed), *Cambridge Companion*, 70–91.

31 L. van Robbroeck, 'The Visual Mandela: A Pedagogy of Citizenship' in Barnard (ed), *Cambridge Companion*, 263.

32 S. Pillay, 'Burying Comrade Nelson Mandela', *Africa Is a Country* (web blog post), 14 December 2013. <http://africasacountry.com/2013/12/burying-comrade-nelson-mandela/>, accessed 10 August 2015.

and through what relations it was crafted, when it was deployed and re-narrated, and even how it was contested. There is a longer line of biographical work to consider too, on how Mandela's narrated life came to be inscribed into South Africa's process of nation-making as embodying its heritage and ensuring its prospects. The cultural production of his life through the medium of biography is complex, involving the intervention of experts and assistants, promoters, publicists and image-makers over time and through several media. Some of these narratives were also simultaneously autobiographical as Mandela tried to take part not only in 'managing his iconic image' and 'shaping ... a mantle of godlike leadership'³³ but also in producing and deploying the story. The prime example of this was *Long Walk to Freedom*,³⁴ published under Mandela's name and in his own voice but co-authored by the journalist Richard Stengel.³⁵

In the early 1960s Ruth First (and, to some extent, Mary Benson) did some work in assembling the earliest formal biographies of Mandela that followed on his autobiographical presentations in court.³⁶ These were used to help establish the moral authority and political presence of the ANC in exile. After his 1962 'last stand' in court, Mandela's stirring Rivonia speech from the dock in 1964 had 'resonated throughout the world.'³⁷ The ANC realised that their cause 'would be best served by putting forward a charismatic leader, someone who would capture the imagination and symbolise in his own person the struggle against apartheid.'³⁸ They, with Oliver Tambo, employed the tactic 'to build up Mandela internationally as the charismatic personification of the South African struggle'. This propaganda called for deliberate *biographical* acts, with Mandela's stories put to work to drum up support for a liberation movement in exile and frame the struggle against apartheid just as he disappeared from the public eye. This tactical decision also entailed building and projecting biographical material and images of the imprisoned Nelson Mandela, where he was constructed in heroic terms as the natural-born leader of the South African people who sacrificed and toiled in the face of apartheid repression. From then on, according to Callinicos, 'the image of Mandela grew steadily in stature, and was to become a successful weapon in globalising the struggle against apartheid.'³⁹

Further biographies commemorating milestones of Mandela's imprisonment and celebrating his birthdays were produced later. The ANC ensured that it kept up a heroic story of Mandela's life in its campaigning.⁴⁰ Mandela biographies were also supplied by the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), successor to the Treason

33 Posel, "Madiba Magic," 74.

34 N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994).

35 Rassool, 'Individual, Auto/biography', 259–61.

36 N. Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, edited and with a foreword by Ruth First, (London: Heinemann Educational, 1973 [1965]. See also M. Benson, *A Far Cry: The Making of a South African* (Randburg: Ravan, 1996, first published in 1989 by Penguin) for a discussion of her clandestine meetings and interviews with Mandela in South Africa and London in 1961 and 1962.

37 L. Callinicos, 'Reinventing the ANC: The Shift to Armed Struggle and Oliver Tambo's Role in Exile, 1961–1964' (Unpublished MS), 19.

38 L. Callinicos, *The World That Made Mandela – A Heritage Trail: 70 Sites of Significance* (Johannesburg: STE, 2000), 262–3.

39 Callinicos, 'Reinventing the ANC', 20.

40 See for example the editorial 'Mandela – 60 Years Old' and the article 'Mandela and Our Revolution' in *Sechaba*, 12, 1978.

Trial Defence Fund of the 1950s, which built upon these images and consolidated Mandela's biography of survival, sacrifice and resilience.⁴¹ By the 1980s, as biographies of the unseen Mandela mounted up through growing campaigns in South Africa and abroad for his release, the enduring image of Mandela as leader began to take on Messianic proportions.⁴² Once free, it was believed, Mandela would deliver the South African people from evil. That such deliverance was perceived to take place after Mandela's release was part of the emergence of Mandela as *pater familias*, as public father of the national family. The discursive construction of the biographical narrative of Mandela moved through several phases, from born leader to sacrificial hero to Messiah, culminating in the South African biographic order, with Mandela as symbolic father with paternal authority in the public sphere.⁴³

These phases saw a variety of mediating agencies conduct the work of biographical production and maintenance, so that the narrative of Mandela's greatness and the triumph of reconciliation could be inscribed into the sinews of the new nation. This occurred through new national museums and systems of national heritage, and through the tourist gaze on the rainbow nation which made South Africa knowable for international visitors as well as for South Africans. His 'long walk' came to be installed at the apex of South Africa's heritage landscape through a phalanx of museums, heritage sites, exhibitions and public art projects, with Robben Island set as the birthplace of the new nation and the site of its first national museum. The major work of consolidating and curating this narrative was done initially by the Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture (the successor organisation to IDAF) at the University of the Western Cape, and then the Robben Island Museum (into which Mayibuye staff and collections were incorporated) and later the professionalised agencies created by its former staff.

After Mandela's retirement from formal politics and then from public life, the task of maintaining, reinterpreting and reinscribing Mandela's biography has fallen to the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF). This the NMF has done with quiet dignity in the face of its use in ancestral politics and its crass commercial appropriation by some members of the Mandela family, and of its deployment by the ruling party to uphold an impression of ethical government. With the creation of a Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory, curated as a digital, accessible archive, the NMF has sought to turn Mandela's biography into a project of service, as a legacy and resource for human rights work, dialogue and social advocacy.

41 See for example N. Mandela, *The Struggle Is My Life* (London: IDAF, 1986). During the Treason Trial in the 1950s, the Treason Trial Defence Fund (for which Mary Benson worked) was the central mediating institution in the production of solidarity biography. See Rassool, 'Individual, Auto/biography', 208 and, more generally, G.L. Frieslaar, '(Re)collections in the Archive: Making and Remaking the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) Archival Collection' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2016).

42 This process saw the launch of the Free Mandela Campaign in 1980 in a strategy conceived by Oliver Tambo and the ANC in Lusaka. It included Oliver Tambo unveiling a larger-than-life bust of Mandela on London's South Bank in 1985.

43 Desiree Lewis has argued that, even with Mandela's own literal family disintegrated, he has nonetheless been accorded a 'credible father image without constantly evidencing literal fathering' D. Lewis, 'Winnie Mandela: The Surveillance and Excess of "Black Woman" as Signifier', *Southern African Feminist Review*, 2, 1, 1996, 10. A critical biography, *Young Mandela*, by D.J. Smith (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2010) that sought to study the person and not the icon, depicted Mandela as a traditional African man who expected to be obeyed and a compulsive womaniser unable to show affection for his children, whose uncompromising commitment to create a just society had a destructive impact on his family.

During the 1990s, as the biographic order took root, the Mandela auto/biography of suffering, resilience, overcoming, forgiveness, reconciliation and magic was reworked and consolidated. As the internal and external contradictions of a settler postcolony were temporarily brought into a momentous but unsteady alliance with the new nation, varied national and international constituencies sought inclusion in the story of greatness, or even just an association with the narrative. The red Mercedes-Benz W126 S-Class that was presented to Nelson Mandela in July 1990 was given to him, importantly, at a time of transition in the life of his auto/biography, alongside the shift in his life. This was a changeover from the biography of desire for the absent revolutionary leader to a biography of the statesman and president. It is this turning point that partly explains the ambiguous history of the gift as labour of love on the part of the NUMSA workers and as donation by Mercedes-Benz South Africa.

At the plant in East London and when handing over the gift in Mdantsane in 1990, the workers wished to express their love for their returned leader and *pater familias*. This was also a moment of celebration after a sustained period of labour action at a racist plant of an authoritarian company where supervisors carried real guns while workers brandished wooden replicas of AK47s. But the vehicle was also a gift of the MBSA company, which from 1990 had embarked on a new strategy of 'co-operation and consultation for the benefit of all' as expressed by the then new chairperson Christoph Köpke and the industrial consultant Ian Russell.⁴⁴ Through the gift, the reconciliatory meaning of Mandela enabled the company to draw attention to its enlightened labour regime, with a 'ground-breaking' recognition agreement that 'in many ways, pre-emp[ted] the South Africa's Labour Relations Act of 1995',⁴⁵ and to its commitment to reconciliation.

The Mercedes-Benz given to Mandela may not have been intended as a presidential car but 'sufficient consensus' decided that it should be appropriate for someone who was already a statesman, who would 'sit on the back seat' behind a driver.⁴⁶ As a product of luxury manufacture, it was perhaps also a profound symbol of masculinity, bearing values of unambiguous authority, pioneering leadership and quality. This double-edged instance of a temporary alliance perhaps also told of a gendered consensus about the leader-father and the meaning of Mercedes-Benz. The union leaders were thus ultimately incorporated, maybe co-opted, into a regime of industrial peace and cutting-edge car production as a labour aristocracy in a company governed by 'social democratic capitalism', as predicted by labour analysts in the early 1990s.⁴⁷

Shortly after the gift was handed over, however, some workers at the plant went on an illegal strike and engaged in a 'sleep-in' there, highlighting divisions among

44 K. von Holdt and M. Smithers, 'Mercedes-Benz and NUMSA: No Easy Drive to National Bargaining,' *South African Labour Bulletin*, 15, 4, 1990, 14–44; Gush and Cairns, *Red*. This echoed the Sullivan code of principles from the 1970s, through which American companies were encouraged to do business in South Africa.

45 Russell, 'From Conflict to Cooperation'.

46 Interview with Philip Groom in Gush and Cairns, *Red*.

47 Von Holdt and Smithers, 'Mercedes-Benz and NUMSA', 44.

the workers and shop stewards over centralised bargaining. The history of Mercedes-Benz as a pariah company had been a ‘microcosm of everything that had gone wrong’, and the bargaining, go-slows, strikes and mediation that culminated in the gift also generated a different narrative. This one led to the 1990 strike and a defeat for the hundreds of workers who lost their jobs.⁴⁸

Despite the ambiguities, the corporate take on these events went on to create a harmonious and enlightened version of this history of Mercedes-Benz emphasising the ‘friendship’ that was ‘sparked’ between Nelson Mandela and themselves. In this account, when DaimlerChrysler AG announced its billion-rand investment in the Mercedes-Benz plant in 1998, Nelson Mandela stood alongside the chief executive, Jürgen Schrempp. This was also when the company sought to reinforce the Mercedes–Mandela association by giving him a new S-Class luxury vehicle, with the red S500 ‘retired’ to a position in the Mercedes-Benz collection in East London and later put on display in the Apartheid Museum,⁴⁹ where it was arguably incorporated into the South African biographic order, as part of a hegemonic discourse on democracy and reconciliation.

In 2013, the year the film *Labour of Love* was made by Ginkgo Agency in Cape Town, workers in the automotive sector went on strike, halting production at all seven major car manufacturers. According to Mercedes-Benz’s industrial consultant Ian Russell, this was Mercedes-Benz East London’s ‘first incident of industrial action since 1990’.⁵⁰ Perhaps this is what had prompted Mercedes-Benz to remind the world of the company’s ‘harmonious’ history of labour relations and its association with Nelson Mandela. *Labour of Love* has been widely distributed and made viewable through multiple websites, especially in the automotive industry, and the events of 1990 remain an important aspect of the way Mercedes-Benz narrates its history in South Africa.

Ginkgo Agency had been started in Cape Town around 2013 by the Australian humanitarian photographer and film maker Adrian Steirn, who was also appointed ambassador for Mercedes-Benz in that year. In 2013 Steirn also initiated the ongoing South African portrait photography project ‘21 Icons’, a form of visual biography that began life with the last official portrait of Nelson Mandela. For its first three seasons, Mercedes-Benz has featured prominently among its corporate supporters. In 2014 and 2015, Mercedes-Benz also benefited from the exhibition of the portraits alongside new models of Mercedes-Benz vehicles at Cape Town and O.R. Tambo international airports and in two locations at the V&A Waterfront under the title *Portrait of a Nation*. The company described the displays as ‘activations’, in the language of public art and cultural activism.⁵¹

48 Gush and Cairns, *Red*.

49 ‘Nelson Mandela and His Mercedes-Benz S500’.

50 Russell, ‘From Conflict to Cooperation’.

51 <http://21icons.com>, accessed 10 June 2016.

Alongside *Labour of Love*, Ginkgo Agency also made two 30-second television adverts for Mercedes-Benz using the same footage of the 1990 celebratory labour process on Mandela's car and interviews with workers. Not only did these films end with the Mercedes slogan 'Together we are better', this time it appeared in the company's own font, echoing the visual design of all their digital and analogue media. And finally, both adverts reminded the viewer of Steirn's main project, '21 Icons'.⁵² Put *Labour of Love* alongside these adverts, and it is clear how much of it has the character of a commercial promotion, amounting to a long advertisement itself. Indeed, the Mercedes–Mandela story begun in 1990, confirmed in 1998 and reproduced in 2013 seems part of a long-term business strategy of placing the Mercedes-Benz in the framework of the magic of reconciliation, and more broadly of nation building.

In 1998, at the start of DaimlerChrysler AG and its billion-rand investment in South Africa, its CEO Jürgen Schrempp was awarded the Order of Good Hope by then-President Nelson Mandela in a special ceremony in Baden-Baden for his 'sustained commitment to South Africa'. This award, forerunner of the Order of the Companions of O.R. Tambo, was South Africa's highest civil award for foreign citizens. That same year, Mandela was awarded the German Media Prize, with Schrempp giving the speech of honour soon afterwards in a ceremony held in January 1999, also in Baden-Baden.⁵³ Also in 1999, DaimlerChrysler was one of the major funders of one of the most ambitious Mandela auto/biographical film productions made by *Frontline* for PBS in the United States.⁵⁴

By then, references were being made to the 'friendship' between Schrempp and Mandela, and official Schrempp biographies later referred to him as having 'campaigned for the abolition of apartheid', even 'at an early stage'. After resigning controversially as DaimlerChrysler's CEO in 2005,⁵⁵ Schrempp continued to be involved in South African and southern African affairs as a member of the International Investment Council of South Africa, the Southern African Initiative of German Business, and promoter of conservation and the Peace Parks Foundation, of which Mandela had been a founding patron.⁵⁶ Indeed, considering these networks surrounding Mandela, the 'labour of love' might have been a gift from the NUMSA workers but for the corporation itself the car was certainly part of a long-term promotion. It was thus implicated in the ways that 'relationships and ... relative positions of power are ... not always evenly distributed and themselves reflect the aporias and displacements inherent in the systems and trajectories of global capital, whether cultural, material or epistemological'.⁵⁷

52 <http://www.ginkgoagency.com/case-studies/mercedes-benz-labour-of-love>, accessed 10 June 2016.

53 <http://www.juergen-schrempp.com>, accessed 10 August 2015.

54 *Frontline: The Long Walk of Nelson Mandela*, director, Clifford Bestall; producers, David Fanning and Indra deLanerolle (Unapix Entertainment and WGBH/Frontline in association with PBS and SABC, 1999, released as DVD 2011).

55 D. Hawranek, 'A Failed Masterpiece: The Story behind the Departure of DaimlerChrysler's CEO', *Spiegel Online International*, 1 August 2005, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/a-failed-masterpiece-the-story-behind-the-departure-of-daimlerchrysler-ceo-a-367717.html>, accessed 10 August 2015.

56 <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/docs/reports/annual/2009/full.pdf>, last accessed 3 December 2016; <http://www.juergen-schrempp.com/safri/>, last accessed 3 December 2016.

57 H. Pohlandt-McCormick, G. Minkley, J. Mowitt and L. Witz, 'Introduction – Red Assembly: East London Calling', *parallax*, 22, 2016, 130.

Red Mandela

With *Labour of Love* seemingly produced within a Mandela-Mercedes-conservation nexus of business, development and stewardship, and the red Mercedes-Benz loaned to the Apartheid Museum as part of Mandela's life history, it is significant that Simon Gush chose to take issue with the warm and celebratory interpretations of the gift. Tellingly, the installation *Red* was first shown at the Goethe Institute in Johannesburg, the main site of the cultural arm of German international relations and development cooperation in South Africa. In interview with the institute, Gush seemed to bow to cultural diplomacy. The events of 1990, he said, had ushered in a period that 'allowed workers the stability to negotiate.' There were 'no bad guys or good guys,' just 'various sides trying to find a way through.' He added that Mercedes-Benz was also able 'to make their plant in East London one of the most efficient in the world by investing in the workers, not just through pay but through education and housing.'⁵⁸

Mercedes-Benz South Africa itself engaged the festival artistic committee member Brenton Maart to report on *Red* for their in-house industry newsletter *Mercedes-Benz Life* when the artwork went to the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July 2015, installed at Fort Selwyn (without the upholstery displays of the sleep-in). Here Gush described the 1990 'unprecedented collaboration' between directors and workers of the company as a progressive alliance. Maart's article repeated some of Gush's views expressed to the Goethe Institute about 'bad guys or good guys' and company investment in education and housing. Instead of being a key element of the installation, the film *Red* was shown only once and at another venue. While Maart publicised this screening, his report chose rather to create a link to the corporate film *Labour of Love*, mentioning that it was made by Adrian Steirn.⁵⁹

Inspired by the commitment of the East London autoworkers to produce the car for Mandela as well as by the resilience some of them showed during their nine-week strike and sleep-in later on, Gush has indeed intervened in how those events should be remembered. By exhibiting the disassembled body panels of a replica car alongside reconstructed displays of sleep-in strike beds made of scaffolding, foam, upholstery and car headrests, with imagined uniforms of striking workers, Gush has chosen to disengage the events of 1990 from the celebratory frames of the Mandela biographic order. The video made with James Cairns with surround-sound interviews with workers, union leaders and others about the strike adds to the intention to re-appropriate the car.

This was not the motor car as inert artefact of presidential history or as luxury vehicle of a statesman. *Red* did not aim to collect, conserve or display the motor vehicle, an artefact of Mandela's presidential biography, as a narrative of resistance, forgiveness and reconciliation, as has been the case in with the Mercedes-Benz in the Apartheid Museum. It was not an artefact of automobile history either. Rather,

58 M. Daepf, 'Red Mercedes-Benz: Simon Gush explores democratic South Africa' (March 2014), <https://www.goethe.de/ins/za/en/kul/fok/dem/20806969.html>, accessed 15 April 2016.

59 Maart, 'Mandela's Red 500 SE'.

stripped down to its parts and exhibited almost forensically, the replica was turned into an inquiry into the labour process and the strike that challenged the idea that the gift stemmed from a partnership between the workers and management. Gush focused instead on the affection and spirit of celebration that had marked every step of how the workers built the 500 SE for Mandela with their 'own hands', in their 'own time'. Throughout, there had been an 'official handover' from one station to the next, with the car gloriously placed upon a trolley, delivered by singing and toyi-toying workers. For Phillip Groom, this was a vehicle that the workers built with passion, each part, large and small, lovingly assembled. All workers 'wanted to be part of this, [and] wanted to touch this vehicle.'⁶⁰

I am interested in what Gush did with the replica Mercedes 500 SE when it was taken bit by bit into the Goethe Institute Gallery in 2014 and then into other venues. The doorless, bootless, bonnetless body of the car was placed on a stand and surrounded by mounted doors, boot and bonnet, replete with faux radiator and spring-loaded, movable Mercedes-Benz star. This car was not the special red 500 SE turned into a Mandela monument that would serve a company history or a reconciliation narrative. Now it was an installation of each of its parts, each an element of the 'labour of love' turned into an artwork of inquiry.

The reduced version in Grahamstown notwithstanding, the complete display of simulated strike uniforms and sleep-in beds mounted on scaffolding, and the film with its soundscape both at the Goethe Institute and in East London's Ann Bryant Gallery, enabled Gush to transform the body parts into an audiovisual post mortem on the history of Mandela, the gift and the strike. In recreating the beds he almost certainly worked from a photograph published in the *South African Labour Bulletin* shortly after the strike, with the caption 'expensive beds'.⁶¹ These beds were made up as objects whose suggestive power resided in being 'metaphors of broader historical and social contexts'. He also commissioned the fashion designer Mokotjo Mohulo to make the strike uniforms as 'imaginative props', which were also 'speculative reconstructions'. For Gush, these elements showed how the plant had been 'used in a different kind of way'. The workers had 'repurposed the factory to produce something for themselves'. Even the car itself was 'conceptually different' to the others also made in the plant. The 'repurposing of materials' involved 'a creative act' and was also a means for workers of 'visualising themselves'.⁶²

In *Red*, Simon Gush paid homage to the East London Mercedes-Benz workers, both the strikers and the non-strikers. The display was a tribute to the affect and joy built into the physical fact of the red Mercedes-Benz W126 S-Class. When it was made and handed over to Mandela, this vehicle had been freed from the corporate world and personalised through choice of colour, cultural ceremony and an outpouring of joy on the plant floor. It may have belonged to a particular series of S-Class

60 Mercedes-Benz South Africa, *Labour of Love*. Despite its aims, this corporate film has not been able to diminish the ardour expressed by the workers through their gift.

61 Von Holdt and Smithers, 'Mercedes-Benz and NUMSA', 22.

62 Daepf, 'Red Mercedes-Benz'; O'Toole, 'This Is the Work'.

Mercedes-Benzenes, but it was by far the best one ever made. Assembled with love, it had been individualised in an intimately direct association with Mandela, albeit the absent leader and *pater familias* en route to being a statesman and president. But as much as it represented love, for Gush it also represented labour. Mandela's Mercedes-Benz had become an artefact of labour history. This line of inquiry into the history of labour was also a more appropriate way to understand the significance of Nelson Mandela. The installation, wherever it was displayed, has been a vivid disassembly of the corporate narrative of reconciliation, and an insistence that Mandela's life history is best understood as a resource for critical social inquiry. This was indeed 'the work of a revolution.'⁶³

For the author, whose 1960s childhood was spent in his dad's Mercedes-Benz 1990, the materiality of the Mercedes-Benz body parts and simulated presentations of its upholstery triggered a moment of nostalgia for a beloved motor car associated with family life, work and political education that was nevertheless also a time of tightening social restrictions. For a brief time, the pearl-coloured family vehicle provided a momentary defensive space against intensifying apartheid. This is a meaning of the Mercedes-Benz that we need to appreciate more fully.

63 Ibid.