



RESISTING ARCHIVAL ENDS

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When the hanged man was taken down from the gallows his eyes were still unbroken. The executioner hastened to close them, but the bystanders had noticed and lowered their own eyes in shame.

Paul Celan

1. Das draws on the work of Nina Serematakis to develop her conception of 'bad death' (Das 2007, 48).

2. I am constituting an imagined post-apartheid community in this paper when I refer to 'us' and to 'we'. At the same time I want to acknowledge the fractured nature of such a community and the ways in which race determined, and in many ways continues to determine, our relation to the violence of the past and of the present. In other words, it is necessary to mark the difference between being *responsible* for and *subject* to the violence of apartheid.

'Amnesty Hearings, Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, December 1997'; photograph by Jillian Edelstein.

This essay is concerned with the question of remains, and in particular what remains after we imagine ourselves to have dealt with the trauma of the past in ways that enable us to move on. Since the time of the murder of the anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko in 1977, photographs and artworks depicting his corpse have been in public circulation. This essay takes these images as its focus and reads Biko's murder as an instance of what the anthropologist Veena Das terms 'bad death'.¹ That is, a death that is difficult, complicated and even impossible to mourn. Through my readings of multiple images of Biko's corpse, I consider the relation between mourning, repression and the archive. I argue that because of the ways in which they exceed the narrative of the apartheid state and the dominant post-apartheid narrative of reconciliation and healing, such works prevent Biko's death from being consigned to the archive. In this way these works also lead those who view them to engage with the unresolved, unmourned deaths of others, and to recognise that to which we cannot be reconciled.

In the argument I make here, about and through a series of photographs and artworks that portray Biko's corpse, the archive comes to stand for an immense space of national repression. I argue that by eluding archival capture, and thereby a particular kind of coherence and closure, images of Biko's corpse remind us of what remains unresolved, often also of that which we would rather forget.²

