





PROMISES AND LIES

**THE ANC, EXILE AND
THE PROJECT OF FREEDOM**

11 May to 3 June 2017

FADA Gallery
University of Johannesburg

Curated by Siona O'Connell, in collaboration with the
Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre

MAKUTUPORA JKT
LONG LIVE ANC
MANDELA MUST BE FREE
AMANDLA





Promises and Lies | the ANC, Exile, and the Project of Freedom

Interview with Siona O’Connell by Amie Soudien
12 November 2017

Amie Soudien (AS): Between 2016 and 2017 you presented the exhibition *Promises and Lies – the ANC, Exile, and the Project of Freedom* at Michaelis Galleries at the University of Cape Town, the University of Pretoria (UP), and at the FADA Gallery at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). How did you come across Laurie Sparham’s photographic archive of African National Congress (ANC) members meeting in exile, and what compelled you to exhibit these photographs when you did?

Siona O’Connell (SO): To give you some background as to how I met Laurie, my first entry into filmmaking was *Spring Queen* (2014), my project on the South African clothing industry. I worked on the project with an award-winning director, Paul Yule, who really showed me the ropes. I’ve never studied film. Since then Paul and I have maintained a friendship, and I brought him in as a consultant on all the subsequent films I’ve made. I think it was in 2015 when he said, ‘I’ve got this friend Laurie’. I don’t know if you’ve Googled Laurie, but he works as a still photographer on big films like *The King’s Speech* (2010) and *Les Miserables* (2012). Paul knew that Laurie had this set of photographs from 1989-1990 of ANC leaders in exile, and wanted to know if I would be interested in doing something with them. At the time, nobody seemed too interested in this material, and as Laurie himself says in the documentary I made (entitled *Promises and Lies – the ANC, Exile, and the Project of Freedom*), the photographs become sort of superfluous after the political prisoners were released in South Africa and the return of a number of South Africans who had been in exile. South Africans then got onto the business of –

AS: Nation building –

SO: Yes, nation building in the early 1990s, sorting out the constitution, and the many negotiations that played out between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Nationalist ruling party.

The value of this photographic archive was obvious to me. Of course, I said ‘yes’ immediately, because at that moment in 2015, we were facing the beginning of student protests on South African campuses, which became known as the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements. In 2015, I wrote the article entitled, ‘What UCT’s not telling their first-years’ that was published in the *Cape Argus*, in which I anticipated these movements. At the same time, the talk around corruption in the ANC government was burgeoning. There were a lot of racial incidents that went viral nationally – for example, Penny Sparrow, a realtor from Kwa-Zulu Natal, became the topic of national news following her racist remarks regarding beachgoers in Durban.

But back to this idea of nation and rainbow: all this stuff preoccupies me, as a person first, and as a scholar second. Black, green and gold courses through my veins, and, at that moment in 1994, I couldn’t imagine not voting for Nelson Mandela and the ANC. I was raised with ANC principles and conversations. I had family members who had spent time on Robben Island. All of this was part of the decision to work with Laurie Sparham’s photographic archive, and the value I saw in this material, but my loyalty to the ANC didn’t preclude me from asking some tough questions about this organisation that has played a part – I won’t say the whole part – in the problematic social and political situation South Africa is at right now.



(Front cover)
Laurie Sparham
Supporters at exiles
welcome rally for
release ANC leaders,
Arusha camp
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Inside front cover)
Laurie Sparham
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Previous spread)
Laurie Sparham
Welcome rally
Dodoma, Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Left)
Jan Potgieter
Promises and Lies
exhibition opening
FADA Gallery, University
of Johannesburg
2017



What are the opportunities of 1994 that we, as a nation, missed? What kind of country do we want South Africa to be? What are the fault lines, not only in the path to liberation, but in all of us as South African citizens? And, as in all my other stories, what are the silenced stories? What are the narratives beyond the big ones? Beyond those of the Mandelas, the Sisulus, and the Tambos? What about the ordinary struggle, and those that have been forgotten after the struggle? The *Promises and Lies* exhibition is an extension on my work around remembering and forgetting.

Central to the exhibition, and the motivation to create it, was the growing public investigation around corrupt practices at the South African Revenue Service (SARS), and the principled stands against them taken by former finance minister Pravin Gordhan, SARS official Ivan Pillay, former SARS spokesperson Adrian Lackay, and former Police Commissioner Robert McBride. I felt angry because this corruption was not supposed to be the way it was. There is always a sense of provocation in me. I could well have done an exhibition that showed Laurie Sparham's work for what is: beautiful photographs that viewers can gloss over with nostalgia. But I wanted more than that. For me, history is always in the present. The choices that we make today, how and where we live, what we imagine, are scripted by our past. The exhibition and the documentary was never a project that was anti-Zuma, or anti the ANC. It was a project in which one can re-imagine the ANC as something other than what it has become, which is a caricature in many ways. A caricature of what was outlined in the Freedom Charter (1955), the principles of which are fundamental to the ANC's ideals.

AS: In the *Promises and Lies* documentary, when describing the project as a whole, you talk about a pervasive distrust in the 'Rainbowist', 'Unity in Diversity' rhetoric which came to define the early to mid 1990s in South Africa. Did you exhibit these photographs with the *intention* to bring up these conversations?

SO: For me, the exhibition was always going to ask those questions. It was never going to be only about the photographs. Increasingly over the last couple of years, I've been drawn to the idea of this deeply unequal society in which we, as South Africans, live. Do you know we are one of the most unequal societies on the continent, and the divide is getting even larger? This, coupled with the work I'd done on forced removals, women in the clothing industry, student protest in the 1980s, the realisation of the deaths and injuries that apartheid inflicted ... I don't think we've even begun to fully understand these issues, let alone work on them. I believe that privilege, which in this country is still, in the main, tied to being white, got 'off the hook' with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC, which dealt with gross human rights violations essentially let white South Africans off the hook, given that the majority of them were not directly implicated. If we are to address privilege, we can't just shift resources to a few and maintain economic power the way it is. We need to rethink our education system; we need to rethink questions of power. I don't believe that we have the luxury of going through this nation building process again. We've had over 20 years of the romance of 'Nation Building' and look at what we are left with: gross inequality, endemic violence against women and children, and a fumbling schooling system that is seeping into tertiary education.

For me, South Africa is a country in crisis. But the crisis also begs people who look like me, or behave like me to ask: why did we wait so long? Why didn't we look back at those bonds that were formed in the anti-apartheid struggle, and rely on those connections to drive a kind of a 'rainbowism' that does some justice to those struggles? The issues around the TRC recur. It is always amazing to me that the TRC was shown on



(Previous spread)
Laurie Sparham
Henry Makhosi, Walter
Sisulu and Thabo Mbeki
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Top right)
Laurie Sparham
Walter and Albertina
Sisulu arriving in Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Bottom right)
Laurie Sparham
Henry Makhosi, Walter
Sisulu, Joe Slovo and
Jacob Zuma
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Following spread)
Laurie Sparham
ANC Women's League
representatives
arriving at rally
Dodoma, Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham





(Top left)
Laurie Sparham
Ahmed Kathrada
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham



(Bottom left)
Laurie Sparham
Elias Motsoaledi,
Raymond Mhlaba,
Ahmed Kathrada,
Wilton Mkwayi, Andrew
Mlangeni, Joe Slovo
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Following page
– top left)
Laurie Sparham
Joe Nhlanhla, Jacob
Zuma, Aziz Pahad
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Following page
– bottom left)
Laurie Sparham
Jacob Zuma at welcoming
reception for released
ANC leaders
Tanzania
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Following spread
– right)
Laurie Sparham
Thabo Mbeki
Location unknown
1990
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

television just before the soap operas. The TRC melted into the mode of the soap opera, in a way. Each of us memorialises the past in a particular way: it is closely tied to how we choose to remember, and what we remember.

AS: I'd like to talk about the idea of romanticism and nostalgia in the exhibition, in relation to the ways in which people think and talk about the ANC. In the documentary, Senior Lecturer in Department of Political Studies, UCT, Dr Zwelethu Jolobe says that in the 1980s the 'fault lines' were already beginning to show themselves within the ANC. According to Dr Jolobe, the party had no cohesive political or economic vision, which has resulted in the confusion and the messiness that the country finds itself in now.

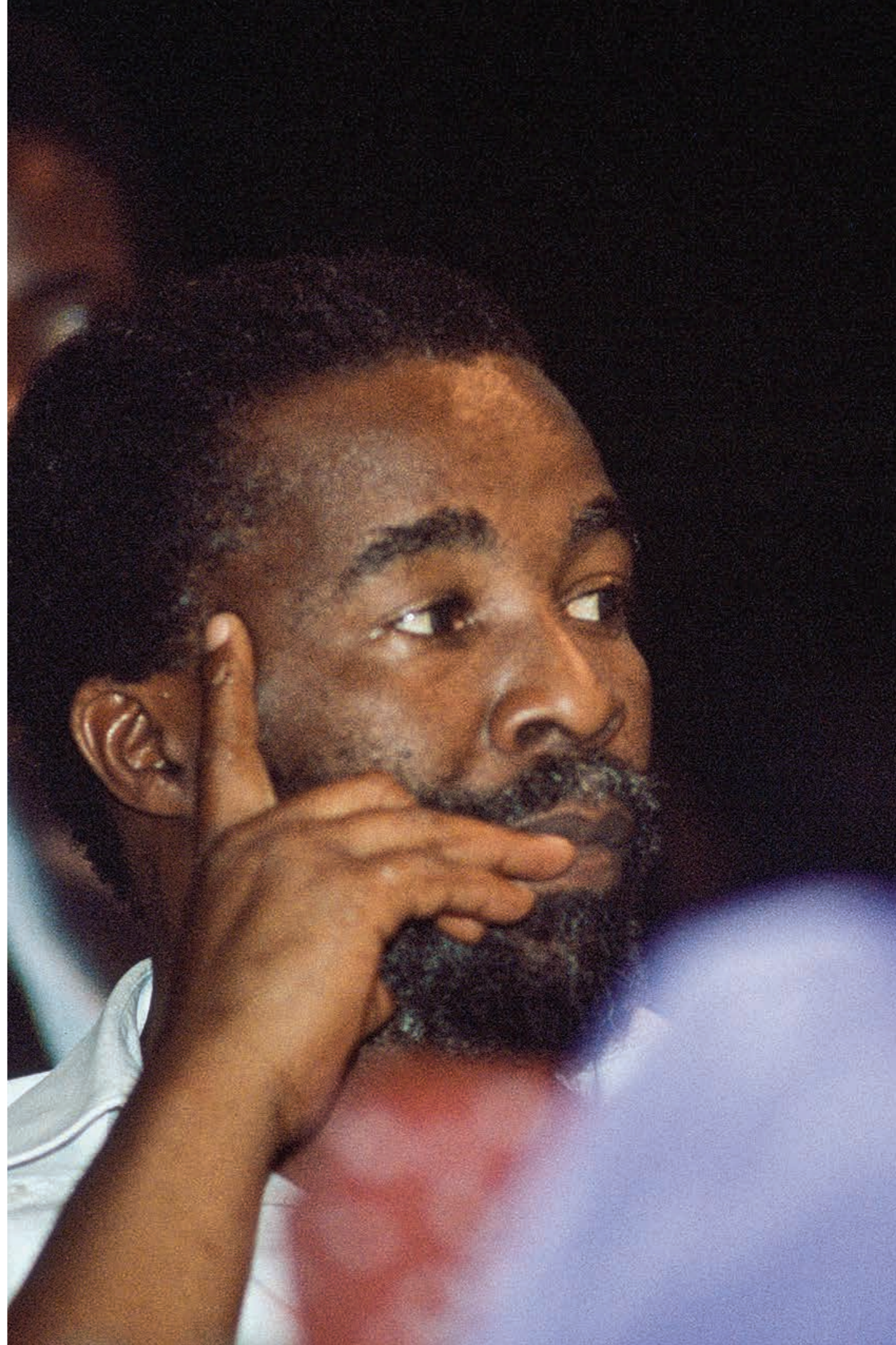
SO: For those of us that remember the ANC as the party of Mandela, the Tambo and the Sisulus, it is important to think of the ANC as a ruling party of the next 20 years – so that it doesn't go the way of other liberation parties elsewhere that fall apart. For those committed to the project of the ANC, this demands a self-criticality that has been absent in the past. It is a matter of survival. It has to be reflexive. Otherwise that script has already been written. Also, as a black South African, I would find it difficult to find an ideological home somewhere else, and I imagine that this would be the same for many South Africans. There's still a sense that this was a great movement. It's not without its flaws, but it's in looking at those flaws, and at history and our roles in it, that we can imagine a different ANC to emerge out of this. I still don't think we're doing it, though. I don't see anyone saying – 'we're at fault, we've done this. Look at how we behaved with XYZ.' Look at what happened at the ANC's convention at Polokwane a few years back where there was major disagreement between members, and a split in the party was confirmed. These actions speak to patterns of behaviour that must come from somewhere, but we're not addressing that yet. In my opinion, the ANC is currently fighting and playing a political game that is not going to lead to greatness.

AS: I was particularly interested in hearing more about women's experiences in exile, because a lot of those experiences, especially those pertaining to sexual violence and misogyny are only now becoming public. An example is the recent book publication *Khwezi – The Remarkable Story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo* (2017) by Redi Thlabi.

SO: Absolutely – these issues are only coming to light now, and this begs the question: why isn't the issue of addressing gender-based violence in exile driven by the ANC Women's League? What is it about that issue, that the Women's League is not prepared to lead the charge? It's convenient that it is coming out now, but it was not a secret amongst those in the camps. They knew the code words. 'It is your turn to cook', for instance, was code that you were going to be somebody's sex object that night. I think about Thlabi's book *Khwezi* and the abuse Khwezi endured in exile as a young girl. Now, Khwezi has come and gone and we still haven't had an in-depth inquiry into what happened in the camps in exile.

We are naïve when issues of sexual violence come up. Once we start thinking about those questions then a picture of the ANC emerges that speaks to patterns of behaviour today. In a country beset by violence, we urgently need to address these issues.

AS: We can see similar acts of misogyny with masculine members of the #FeesMustFall movement saying that gender is a distraction – therefore, we should not be surprised by instances of assault and abuse within the student movement today.



SO: Gender-based violence was sanctioned in the camps, tacitly or not, by the fact that nobody stood up, and nobody said that this is incongruent with the ANC's principles around freedom. I think that they convoluted ideas around freedom and liberation, and sold the idea to South Africans that the one equates to the other.

AS: In the *Promises and Lies* exhibition, you featured extracts from the *Freedom Charter*. Why did you choose to privilege extracts from the *Freedom Charter* in the exhibition, as opposed to the Constitution of 1996?

SO: For me, the Constitution is built on the Freedom Charter. It reminds me that the Constitution is born out of the ANC and in the Freedom Charter (1955). I'm astonished by how many South Africans have no idea what the Freedom Charter is, and have never read it. By using extracts of the Charter at the *Promises and Lies* exhibitions shown at UP and at UJ, I hoped to remind viewers to grant the ANC the absolute credit with which I believe it is due. Activists had the imagination, the resilience and the capacity to create this foundational document for the constitution. Looking at the photographs, set in relation to these extracts affords one the opportunity to ask how did it all go wrong? This is my reminder to the ordinary South African.

AS: Can you speak to the involvement of Pravin Gordhan and others in the launch of the film at Constitution Hill on 4 May 2017?

SO: How lucky was I! You know, Amie. I'm a middle-aged woman from Walmer Estate, Cape Town. I'm a late developer. I didn't do well at school. I am a mother. Sitting at the front row at Constitution Hill and having the former South African president Kgalema Motlanthe and his wife, and the former finance minister Pravin Gordhan, sitting in the front row with me, was, and remains, a highlight of my life. I had contacted people in the ANC a year before for interviews, and didn't get any responses. In order to interview people like Adrian Lackay of SARS, Ivan Pillay and Robert McBride for the documentary, I really had to hustle. There was no money for the production, so I brought Robert down to Cape Town and I interviewed him in my house. Following that, Ivan gave the opening address for *Promises and Lies* at the Michaelis Galleries, and by the time of the documentary premiere at Constitution Hill in 2017, he had already been fired by SARS.

Worker's Day, 1 May 2017, when President Jacob Zuma was booed in Bloemfontein, signalled a shift. Soon after that many people asked, 'Why don't you ask Pravin to open [the launch of the documentary]?' To have Pravin Gordhan and Kgalema Motlanthe there at the premiere, together, was a public statement. It was humbling, and it warned me that my life wasn't going to be the same again – that I was going to be audited to death by SARS! In making this work, I wasn't prepared to sit on the fence: I asked the hard questions, and even though I was challenged on it, I didn't want to change the title of the exhibition. Taking a stand at a place as spectacular and as layered as Constitution Hill is nothing compared to the brave stands taken by Ivan, Adrian, Pravin, and so many others.

(Top right)
Laurie Sparham
*Walter Sisulu arriving
in Tanzania
1990*
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Bottom right)
Jan Potgieter
*Pravin Gordhan and
Siona O'Connell at
the premiere of the
documentary Promises
and Lies, with Kgalema
Motlanthe seated in
the background
Constitution Hill,
Johannesburg
2017*

(Following spread)
Laurie Sparham
*Chris Hani
Tanzania
1990*
Courtesy of Laurie
Sparham

(Last spread – left)
Laurie Sparham
*Umkhontowe'Sizwe
members in the
library at the ANC
headquarters in Lusaka
Lusaka, Zambia
1989*
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham

(Last spread – right)
Laurie Sparham
*Umkhontowe'Sizwe
soldier at the ANC's
Lusaka headquarters
Lusaka, Zambia
1989*
Courtesy of
Laurie Sparham







