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ARTICLE

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The 1927 Mapleton Train Disaster, Memorialisation, and the Media's Role in Narrating the Dead

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Abstract

On 27 July 1927, a passenger train collided with a goods train near the town of Mapleton in South Africa. Twenty-seven black passengers and four white train staff died and scores more were injured in one of the largest train disasters in the country's history. Injured black passengers were transported to hospital in disused coal trucks and those killed were buried in "one large grave" near the scene of the accident, while the white train staff were quickly treated and those who died had individual funerals. This article uses the case of the Mapleton disaster to illustrate the media's role in narrating death and the relationship between history, journalism, and memorialisation. The study draws on archival documents and newspapers for two purposes: First to construct a history and second to conduct a thematic content analysis of newspaper articles that covered the tragedy. Using the concept of bearing witness, the study attempts to understand the role played by the media in preserving the memory of those who have died tragically, been buried, and are now forgotten. The study argues that although journalists play a vital role as servants of history, their privilege in creating narrative results in a historical construction and collective memory that quiets some voices while elevating others. This impacts the capacity for recognition and memorialisation. In addition, the case illustrates how, in the context of tragedy and mass suffering, the media can facilitate public agency and responses that are counter to the hegemonic structures in society.

Keywords

bearing witness; history; Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union; journalism; Mapleton train disaster; memorialisation

1. Introduction

At 16h30 on 27 July 1927, a "passenger train known as the 'Kaffir Mail,' collided with a goods train" near the small Transvaal town of Mapleton "in which twenty-[seven] Natives and four Europeans lost their lives" (*Workers' Herald* [hereafter WH], 1927a). Many of the passengers were migrant workers, travelling from Natal through Mapleton to Johannesburg. Though in the days and months that followed several newspapers reported on the accident, today the memorial commemorating those who died, and the broader memory of the accident, is almost entirely forgotten.

While it is not the primary role of the media to preserve memory, news articles from the time of the accident play a crucial role in helping uncover this history and expose the media's role in creating a narrative and repository for the event. The study uses archival documents and newspapers to reconstruct the history of the accident and analyses it in relation to journalistic roles of framing, bearing witness, and memorialising history. The article presents this in two ways: Firstly, a history of the accident is told. Secondly, a content analysis of newspaper articles is conducted to understand how different newspapers shaped the story of the disaster.

The study argues that although journalists play a vital role, their privilege in framing and creating narrative results in a historical construction and collective memory that quiets some voices while elevating others. This impacts the capacity for recognition and memorialisation which in turn illustrates the interplay between journalism and history. In addition, the accident and its reportage illustrate how, in the context of tragedy and mass suffering, the media can facilitate public agency and responses that are counter to the hegemonic structures in society. This article attempts to evince the voices of those killed and injured in the disaster, and whose commemoration has been inadequate and forgotten.

2. Journalists, History, and the Construction of Collective Memory

Lavoinne and Motlow (1994) propose the idea that journalists are servants of history, a "figure who is conscious of producing raw material for future historians to work on" (p. 209). Journalism is therefore a "vital and critical" agent of memory (Cieslik-Miskimen & Robinson, 2022, p. 157) and plays a role in constructing memory across time and place (Zelizer, 2008, p. 80). Through this role, journalists are often privileged with the means to construct historical narrative, choose preferred sources, and wield "control over the portrayal of the past" (Cieslik-Miskimen & Robinson, 2022, p. 157).

Carlson (2007) suggests that "not everyone is in a position to do memory work" and that the power to do this is afforded according to "varying levels of cultural authority" that "legitimate some voices while excluding others" (p. 168). In the process of capturing events and reporting on them, journalists give meaning and establish social order through "marking [a] difference" (Hall, 1997, pp. 236–237; Thomas, 2016, p. 478). Through news construction, journalists present narratives that "reify dominant structures by emphasising acceptable interpretations of events" (Cieslik-Miskimen & Robinson, 2022, p. 158) and indicate to audiences "those who belong and those who do not" (Thomas, 2016, p. 478).

Historians engaging with public tragedy benefit from news accounts because these accounts perform four important roles that assist in the process of remembering such tragedies. Firstly, newspapers are able to present an initial draft of the history (Zelizer, 1992) and share the events as they took place. Secondly, they

play the role of media witness in which they systematically report "the experiences and realities" of those affected by the accident "to mass audiences" (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009, p. 1). Thirdly, journalists facilitate public action by creating space for voices of dissent and critique to emerge in response to the tragedy (Chouliaraki, 2010). And finally, they play a pre-eminent role in constructing the "collective memory" of the tragedy by providing the "first records" of a disaster and creating a lasting "version of the events that [can now] be used by historians" (Lavoinne & Motlow, 1994, p. 220).

These historian-frameworks share quite noticeable similarities with theories on media framing and framing effects. One interpretation of media framing understands the journalist as a constructor of meaning and interpreter of events through both individual frames and media frames (Scheufele, 1999). Framing, according to Entman (1993), "essentially involves selection and salience" to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). The "individual frames," which are the "information processing schemata" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 106) of the journalist, shape how they construct the media frames which later work as a "central organising idea…that provides [collective] meaning" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143) to an unfolding story. Through framing and constructing tragedy and death, journalists practise their power in "defining how [the event is] presented to society" and the meanings that are constructed to later shape the collective memory of the event. Collective memory is what "connects the present with the past to reinforce beliefs and a shared historical narrative" (Carlson, 2007, p. 168). How the stories of the injured and dead are represented and framed play a crucial role in how they are memorialised and remembered today.

3. Research Methodologies

The most important accounts of the Mapleton disaster are found in newspapers. It was through reading ICU's newspaper, the WH (in the author's possession), that evidence of the accident became known. Additional articles were found in the online archives of the now-defunct *Rand Daily Mail* (hereafter RDM), through the National Library of South Africa and Wits Historical Papers Research Archive.

The newspaper sample period includes articles published between 27 July 1927 (when the accident occurred) and 4 October 1927 (a month after the memorial was laid). In the case of RDM, commemorative references to the Mapleton accident were made in the newspaper one, two, and 50 years (i.e., July 1977) after the accident. Other newspapers included in the study are the Chamber of Mines-funded *Umteteli wa Bantu* (hereafter UWB), daily newspaper *Eastern Province Herald*, and the liberal newspaper *The Star* (hereafter TS). An attempt to access *Abantu Batho*, the mouthpiece of the African National Congress, was made to no avail. Black owned newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* had missing archives for the sample period. Newspapers including *Ilanga Lase Natal* and *Ikwezi Lase Transkei* (based in areas where many of the migrant workers came from) were not in print during the sample period. The sample includes articles that were written in English, Sesotho, and isiZulu. No Afrikaans language newspapers were accessed.

In addition to newspaper articles, Government Native Labour Bureau and Justice Department archives were accessed. These archives are housed at the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria. The government-appointed commission of inquiry into the accident, which was held on 8–10 August 1927, is included in the Justice Department archives. The authors also visited the site of the Mapleton memorial.

Because the process of archiving is inherently political and exclusionary (Peterson, 2002), the interpretation of the archives and newspapers follows a process of both reading "along the archival grain" as well as "against it" to find "omissions" and "consistencies" and to reveal the contradictions, manipulations, and intentions within (Stoler, 2002, p. 100). An in-depth content analysis was conducted to determine how different newspapers framed and represented the accident. This was done in three stages. In the first stage of analysis, each article was read and tabled into a dataset detailing the date of publication, newspaper title, headline, key features of the article, quotes, and key codes. Articles that were not written in English were translated and added to the table. Secondly, key elements of the articles were coded and highlighted according to the identified codes. A crucial goal of this stage of analysis and coding was to develop "a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual and theoretical organisation" (Saldaña, 2014, p. 207). In the third stage, the codes were reorganised to develop a list of the themes that were present in the reportage; these are anylysed in Section 5.

4. A History of the Mapleton Disaster

On 27 July 1927, train driver Pieter De Vries prepared to depart from Germiston heading to Natal on special goods train No. 729, with 30 empty trucks. He checked the notice board detailing new information about the route and didn't notice anything remarkable. De Vries reported that he had felt "rushed" and left 12–13 minutes late. The guard on the train, A. J. Coetzer, whose duty it was to keep the train safe and timely, equally lamented his unsubstantial rest after a 12-hour shift the day before (Archives of the Justice Department [hereafter AJD], 1927b, p. 49, pp. 38–40). Despite this, the train left without much drama from Germiston. At around 16:26 the train entered the Mapleton–Glenroy section, which was "already occupied" by an opposing passenger train. The train, No. 196, with nine passenger coaches mostly transporting migrant workers from Natal, had entered the final stages of its journey to Johannesburg having left Glenroy station a few minutes prior.

The weather was poor on that day. Passengers and railway employees on both trains experienced low-hanging clouds and misty rain that inhibited visibility (AJD, 1927b, p. 16, p. 53; TS, 1927a). Wading through the mist and rain, 16-year-old Willem Early walked from his railway cottage and looked toward the track where he saw that the trains were on the same line and, sensing the disaster, put up his hands. The staff on the goods train had thought he was a poor white asking for coal, and the fireman told the driver, "bugger him, mate, he wants coal" (AJD, 1927b, p. 27).

Then, seeing that they were approaching another train, the gravity of the situation dawned on the driver. De Vries pushed the fireman out of the train before jumping out himself. At 16:35, the two trains collided. Unharmed, De Vries attempted to assist the injured, after which he galloped away on a grey horse to get help. Despite being in excruciating pain from a broken leg, the driver of the passenger train, Milton, saw that the engine had been damaged and heroically manoeuvred to open the safety valve. This released the built-up steam which averted a further loss of life. Milton then succumbed to his injuries (AJD, 1927b, p. 51; TS, 1927f, 1927w).

The Johannesburg district inspector for South African Railways (SAR) was one of the first at the scene. His report began: "dead-on collision…with serious results to life and property" (AJD, 1927b, p. 5). Mechanical superintendent, Cecil Lawson, visited the scene on the evening of the accident and found a "considerable amount of wreckage" with the two engines locked together (AJD, 1927b, p. 13). This wreckage

to train engines, coaches, and trucks is shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3. After the accident, operations to begin removing debris were started, and it was hoped that "within a few days little trace of the accident will be left" (TS, 1927g).

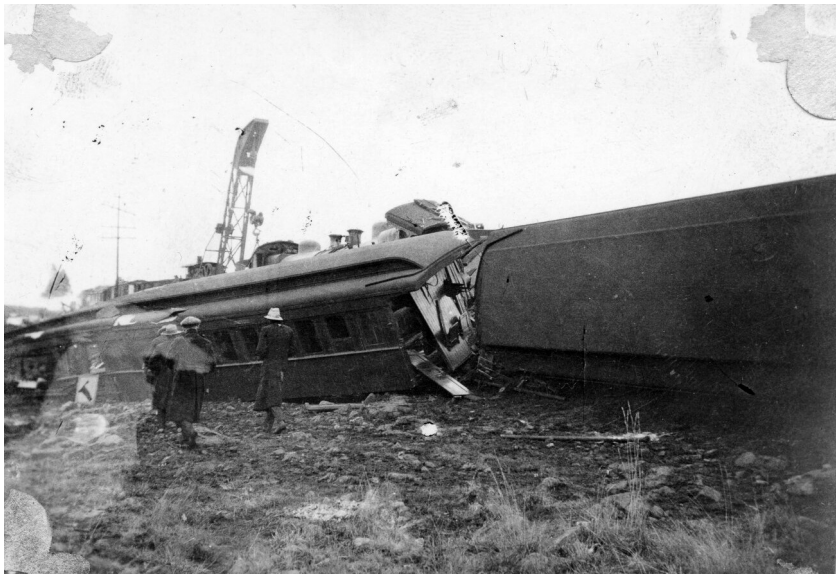


Figure 1. The wreckage of the passenger train. Source: SAR Publicity and Travel Department (1927a).

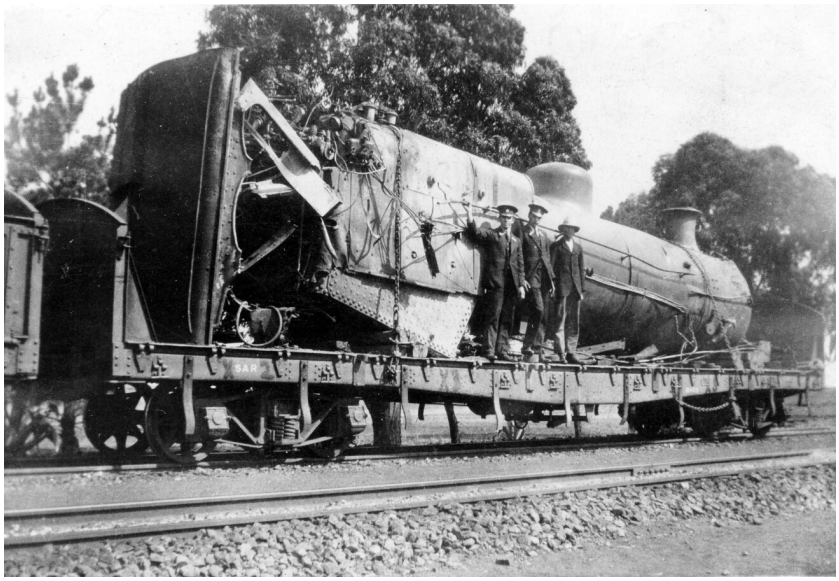


Figure 2. Clearing away the wreckage. Source: SAR Publicity and Travel Department (1927b).

On the passenger train, 21 black migrant workers, mostly men who were travelling from what today is the Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal, and one black convict were killed on impact. Two white train staff died immediately. After the accident, the white driver and warder on the passenger train died from their injuries, as did five further black migrant workers, including one woman. In total, 31 people were killed in the accident. On the passenger train, over 50 people, including convicts, a black policeman, migrant workers, and nurses were injured in the crash. On the goods train, it was only the fireman who was injured (AJD, 1927b, pp. 1–3).

Apart from the drivers and train staff stationed at the front of the trains, it was black passengers who were at greatest risk in the event of a collision. It was standard practice that coaches carrying black people would be placed behind the engine to avoid the increased risk of white passengers being injured (TS, 1927g). TS reported that the first two coaches where black migrant workers were seated "were telescoped and the wood and splinters brought death and agony to most of the passengers in these coaches" (TS, 1927b; TS, 1927d; see Figure 1). In contrast, a white passenger, who was sitting at the back of the passenger train, told a reporter that "the luggage was not even thrown out of the racks" (TS, 1927g). When questioned, a SAR official admitted that the coaches for black travellers were "not built as strongly" as the corridor coaches. This meant that "in practically every accident…natives have been the principal sufferers" (TS, 1927h).

When the collision happened, black passengers were "hurled left and right" which resulted in countless injuries and numerous deaths. Maimed and dead bodies lay in the veld and the landscape, sodden with winter rain, was "tinged with blood" (RDM, 1927a). For those who were lucky enough to survive, they waited in the cold for help to arrive (RDM, 1927a). Surviving passengers were taken to multiple hospitals across the Witwatersrand, owing to the large number of those injured and the severity of the injuries.

Nine convicts had been travelling on the train, supervised by policeman N. C. Njinga. On the day of the accident, rumours had spread that these convicts had escaped custody. The reality was far grimmer: Eight of the convicts and the policeman were taken to hospital along with the other passengers. John Macuba, Vrede Schclekela, and Busa Sikota endured serious injuries and, along with the others, were detained in a prison hospital. When rescuers searched the debris, they found a "handcuffed corpse" on the train. This was the body of a convict named Jan, with no further details provided (AJD, 1927c; TS, 1927g).

A doctor who arrived on scene looked for splints among the wooden debris of the passenger coach for passengers with broken bones, though few were large enough for that purpose. People suffered from "multiple injuries" to their legs, arms, backs, and heads. Migrant worker Manaze Gebang from Pondoland suffered from a fractured femur (UWB, 1927a). Both UWB and the WH published the details of these

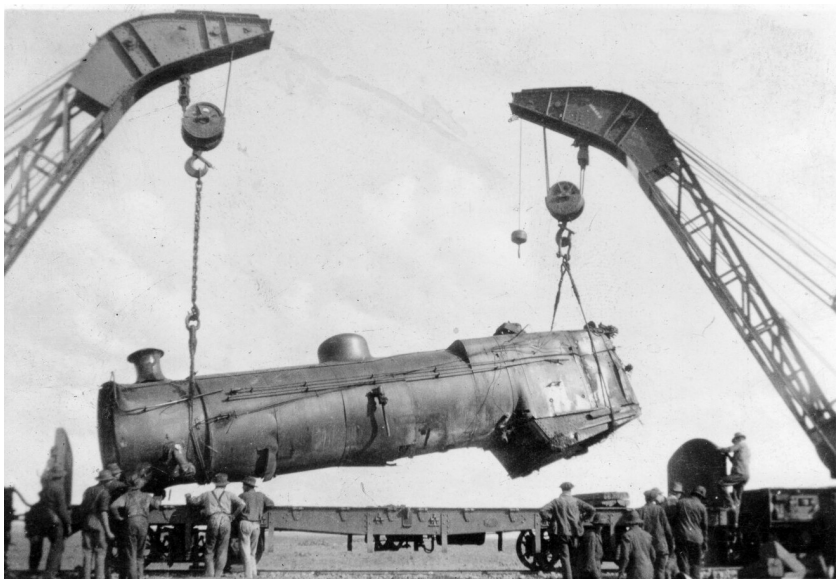


Figure 3. Clearing away after derailment. Source: SAR Publicity and Travel Department (1927c).

horrific injuries (UWB, 1927a; WH, 1927b). Unable to make usable splints, medical personnel decided that the debris would better serve as a large bonfire which helped to keep the injured warm. The injured waited in this way until members of the Red Cross arrived and several people were escorted to Heidelberg hospital. It later emerged that the Red Cross could have contributed more personnel had they been timeously called by the SAR administration (TS, 1927b, 1927i).

With the slow pace of state assistance, some railway medical staff, uninjured passengers, and those with medical qualifications helped (TS, 1927e). One traveller made bandages by ripping the fabric off of the train seats. Others used the bedsheets and linen for the same purpose (RDM, 1927b). The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), the principal movement for liberation in South Africa during the 1920s and 1930s, held a protest meeting in which they expressed "high appreciation of the heroic and humane assistance rendered…to the native passengers by the Europeans on board" on behalf of the 80,000 members of the ICU (RDM, 1927f).

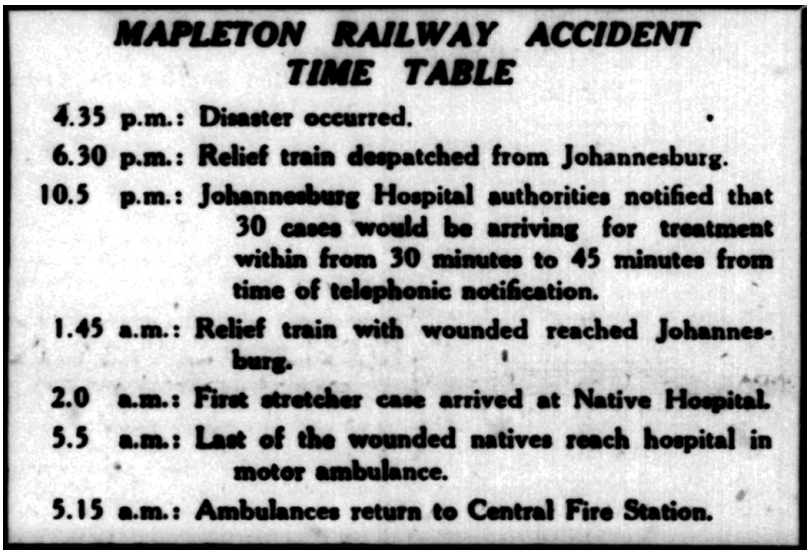
When SAR Superintendent Cecil Lawson visited the scene at 20:30 on the day of the accident, he told the Board he had endeavoured to find passengers and staff who were injured; but, blinded by his colour prejudice, he saw the fireman of the passenger train and stated, "that was the only body I could see at all," despite many black people who were injured and dead around him (AJD, 1927b, p. 14). When TS reported on the accident, they expressed relief that "fortunately, the European section of the train escaped without severe shaking" (TS, 1927b). Such statements highlight the prevailing racism of the time. The accident also highlighted the double standards of the segregationist state, particularly with how the victims of the train crash were treated. The injured, strapped up with make-shift bandages, were marooned in the "bitterly cold" veld and thereafter subject to a "slow and agonising journey" to Johannesburg (TS, 1927k, 1927n, 1927p). One of the passengers who was taken to Vrededorp hospital summarised the treatment of black passengers:

> The white men were taking our dead friends and placing them in a row beside us. It was terrible cold, and we cried out for blankets. The white men took pity on us and gave us blankets, but the rain continued to come down and the wind was very cold. After a while we were put into a truck that generally carries coal and the rainstorm came down….Our blankets were wet and there was no roof above us. We went…[to Germiston] then we were carried into trucks that had roofs and brought to Johannesburg. (TS, 1927q, p. 14)

The ICU called out the "callousness and brutality" of the railway department and demanded a commission of enquiry. The ICU questioned whether such a horrific condition had "been heard of before"—where "gravely injured people lying like sticks at the bottom of an iron coal-truck, exposed to rigorous weather conditions for 1 ½ hours" were transported at "snails' pace" to hospital (RDM, 1927f). In the WH, the ICU accused the government of lacking Ubuntu, with reference to how black passengers were treated, arguing that "the most disquieting aspect of the whole affair, however, was the manner in which the Railway Department conveyed the wounded Natives" (WH, 1927a).

Officials maintained that doctors had "approved" carrying the injured in trucks, where they were laid "on cushions taken from the passenger trains and covered with blankets" (TS, 1927m). The general manager of the SAR, Sir William Hoy, argued that placing the injured in closed trucks was impractical and dismissed reports that black passengers were cold and wet, saying that "they were all handled very gently" (TS, 1927o).

Yet questions from TS continued to probe the dearth of medical supplies and personnel, which should have been better considering that the accident happened during the day (TS, 1927e, 1927i, 1927j). Remarking on the lack of transport available to the injured, a WH writer suggested "what silly talk! Why could not one of the many suburban trains have been held up at Germiston and diverted to the scene of the disaster!" (WH, 1927a). TS similarly questioned why more suitable carriages, or ambulance trains, were not transported to the scene (TS, 1927l). Despite authorities insisting that sufficient medical personnel had been sent to the scene within an hour of the accident, the injured were only conveyed to the hospital after five hours (see Figure 4; TS, 1927m, 1927o).



MAPLETON RAILWAY ACCIDENT
TIME TABLE

4.35 p.m.: Disaster occurred.
6.30 p.m.: Relief train despatched from Johannesburg.
10.5 p.m.: Johannesburg Hospital authorities notified that 30 cases would be arriving for treatment within from 30 minutes to 45 minutes from time of telephonic notification.
1.45 a.m.: Relief train with wounded reached Johannesburg.
2.0 a.m.: First stretcher case arrived at Native Hospital.
5.5 a.m.: Last of the wounded natives reach hospital in motor ambulance.
5.15 a.m.: Ambulances return to Central Fire Station.

Figure 4. A chronology of the accident. Source: RDM (1927z).

TS highlighted that the accident happened in the middle of winter "in one of the coldest districts in the country" and stated: "Had they been Europeans, South Africa would today be ringing with indignation at an apparently uncontradicted assertion that a number of these injured passengers died, not from their wounds, but from exposure to rain and cold" (TS, 1927e, p. 12).

An article published in Sesotho in the ICU newspaper decried the racially unequal treatment of victims: "The carriages were staffed with healthy white people, and the trucks housed injured and displaced blacks" (WH, 1927a). A white passenger, Mrs Scott, spoke against this treatment of black passengers saying, "I cannot understand why they were not put into the second-class carriages beside the engine, which were quite empty" (TS, 1927g). According to the WH, upon arriving in Johannesburg, the trucks carrying the injured "halted opposite the luggage offices, but no attempt was made to get them under cover, as the doors of the trucks were kept locked….These natives had lain in the open for nearly twelve hours, and it rained!" (WH, 1927a, p. 2). One of the injured stated: "I felt so very cold during the night. There were too many of us…we had no food or drink until we arrived in the hospital. If we wanted anything, we had to buy it ourselves" (TS, 1927n).

Other injured migrants were taken to Modder B Central Native Hospital near Benoni. When interviewed by TS, they complained about being made to travel in open iron trucks (see Figure 5) and that they had lost their belongings and blankets. They were given wet blankets and complained about the exposure of their wounds

in the cold. They received milk but had no solid food until they arrived at Modder B Hospital 24 hours later (TS, 1927r). Some with minor injuries were taken to a municipal medical institution in Vrededorp (TS, 1927q). For the injured who were taken to Johannesburg hospital, their grievance was the length of time that they were exposed to the cold before treatment and the fact that their first sustenance was given at 6 a.m. (TS, 1927n, 1927r).

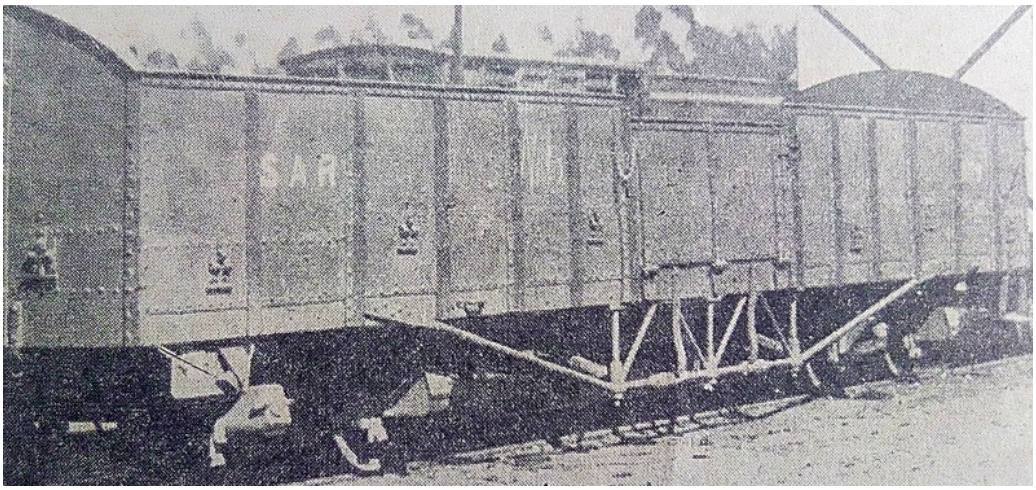


Figure 5. Image of the coal trucks that transported injured black people. Source: TS (1927aa).

While many of the injured were operated on at the scene, one migrant worker, "Slako," did not have his fractured collarbone addressed until the next morning. Another passenger was given splints for his broken arms and then was made to sit on the balcony of the carriage with wet blankets while suffering acute pain until Johannesburg (TS, 1927r).

On the morning after the accident, a local farmer complained to the Minister of Justice Tielman Roos that by 10h00 there were still bodies "lying beside the railway line" (AJD, 1927a). Later in the day, the 21 dead black passengers were buried in "one large grave" at the scene of the accident. By Friday 29 July, George Sokele's body still lay in the veld. He was an employee at Johannesburg General Hospital. Sokele wasn't buried in the mass grave like the other passengers because his "brother arrived and explained that he was making his own arrangements" for a funeral (TS, 1927g). Historian Charles Van Onselen notes a similar practice of burying black train victims in mass graves after a 1949 accident in Waterval Boven (Van Onselen, 2019, p. 180).

In contrast to the "collective burial" of migrant workers, white passengers had adorned, individual funerals. Multiple memorial services were held for the deceased. For example, driver Milton was buried shortly after the accident in Johannesburg's Brixton cemetery surrounded by family and dignitaries (TS, 1927v, 1927f, 1927x, 1927t, 1927u, 1927g).

On Saturday 31 July 1927, the ICU held a protest at its headquarters in Johannesburg. The meeting began solemnly, as a first resolution was passed "expressing sympathy with the relatives of the deceased" who were thought of as "like ourselves, workers." The chairman of the meeting, H. D. Tyamzashe, then on the WH editorial team, stated: "We are assembled under the shadow of a terrible calamity" (TS, 1927s). The ICU vociferously criticised the railway department and demanded that, in addition to the commission of enquiry

into the causes of the accident, a public commission of enquiry be established regarding the treatment of the injured. He continued, "I am at a loss as to why the most obvious necessities were overlooked" and expressed "humanitarian motives alone call for the fullest investigation" and for reasonable compensation to be given to the families of the deceased (RDM, 1927f; TS, 1927s).

Attempting to garner more support for the victims, it was suggested by local ICU members that Clements Kadalie, the general secretary of the ICU who had travelled abroad, raise the issue of the accident overseas (RDM, 1927k). This plea was made as the ICU sent a letter to Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog demanding adequate compensation. The letter presented the accounts of four victims, highlighting their mistreatment. The ICU had made arrangements for evidence to be submitted and for legal representations (TS, 1927y; WH, 1927a). The issue of compensation would be raised with the minister of justice. Fifteen months later, the three widows of the slain white train staff were collectively given £5,100 compensation for the loss of their husbands. For black migrant workers, there is no record of any compensation (RDM, 1927o, 1928).

On the same Saturday the ICU held its protest, government officials established a public commission of enquiry into the causes of the accident. The commission into the treatment of the injured victims, initially proposed by the ICU, was blatantly left out of proceedings (RDM, 1927o). UWB explained that an inquiry would be the only way to determine "on whose shoulders the blame rests" (UWB, 1927b; see also RDM, 1927p). The newspaper positively affirmed the frustration cast towards the railway department by both white and black people (UWB, 1927b). With similar sentiments to those expressed by the ICU, a flurry of letters appeared in RDM expressing shock at the cruelty experienced by black passengers (RDM, 1927e). Further condemnation was expressed over the competence of railway officials and the department (RDM, 1927l, 1927m).

The commission into the causes of the crash was held two weeks after the accident, on 8–10 August, and gathered the testimonies of those involved (AJD, 1927b). The driver and the guard both blamed poor visibility for the accident, and both complained about being rushed. Coetzer expressed that railway officials disincentivised taking extra rest by being put on laborious jobs like shunting duty. De Vries argued that he had not seen the notice of Mapleton being declared a station on the notice board. The fireman corroborated that they "hadn't an idea to stop at Mapleton" and hadn't been on the line for at least a year, during which Mapleton was upgraded from a railway siding to a station. Fellow railway officials shot down these excuses. They maintained that, though the weather was "very dull," there was sufficient visibility and further suggested that no matter what the status of a station was, drivers were obliged to approach cautiously (AJD, 1927b, pp. 1–7, 14, 23–30, 38–52).

The inquiry blamed the driver, the fireman, and the guard of the goods train. The commission stated that the accident "was due to the negligence of engine driver P. De Vries…in that he failed to stop at Mapleton station," where he only had staff authority to proceed to and where he had been told to cross passenger train No. 196. The fireman, a 22-year-old graduate named Norton, was blamed for not reminding the driver that the train's "staff authority only carried them as far as Mapleton" (AJD, 1927b, pp. 2–4). Finally, Coetzer had not looked for a "warning order," which indicated whether the train should have proceeded or not (AJD, 1927b, pp. 2–4). De Vries was suspended and Coetzer was placed on injured duty (TS, 1927g). Charges of homicide were brought against the train staff (RDM, 1927t). The court eventually acquitted driver De Vries and fireman Norton, while the guard Coetzer was found guilty of homicide (RDM, 1927x, 1927y).

With the causes of the accident ascertained, newspapers published an anonymous letter which drew attention to a "hidden enquiry"—that investigated the treatment of the injured—which the SAR had determined would be held in private (RDM, 1927q, 1927r). One anonymous passenger "deplored" the secrecy of the railway department, saying that people, like himself, knew how the injured were treated (RDM, 1927s).

Over a month after the accident, it was declared that a memorial stone would be consecrated in memory of those killed (RDM, 1927u; UWB, 1927c). The stone was consecrated on the afternoon of Sunday 4 September 1927 (see Figures 6 and 7). The ceremony was well-attended and emotional, as captured by the RDM (1927w, p. 7): "It was while the sun was setting late yesterday afternoon, opposite the stone in that saucer of veld, that some 3,500 white and native people were emotionally stirred at the dedication of the memorial."

Figure 6. Dedication of the grave by Bishop Kearney. Source: UWB (1927e).

Figure 7. A 1927 photo of the grave and memorial stone. Source: TS (1927ab).

People arrived to visit the "veld grave" where the memorial stone was erected. They came from far and wide on three special trains, bicycles, cars, and ox-wagons (RDM, 1927w; WH, 1927c). In spite of their complicity in the treatment of the injured, both the manager of SAR and the Director of Native Labour, Major H. S. Cooke, attended. Members of other government departments were present as were an extensive collection of church representatives and political groups including those of the ICU and the African National Congress (RDM, 1927w; UWB, 1927d). Bishop of Johannesburg Dr Arthur Kearney consecrated the burial ground after which the crowd broke into singing a hymn *Rock of the Ages*. The state representatives then placed wreaths on the memorial stone in remembrance of those killed. Heads of the Gaza-Zimbabwe Ethiopian Church of Rhodesia and other black church leaders then came forward to sprinkle soil on top of the wreaths, after which a large crowd broke into Enoch Sontonga's hymn *Nkosi Sikelel i'Afrika* (God Bless Africa) and spontaneously joined the process of putting soil on the grave. People broke the police barriers and "swamped on and around the graves" (RDM, 1927w; TS, 1927z).

In an article published in the WH (1927d, p. 4) after the memorial, the ICU called out the hypocrisy of officials:

> What upset most of the working class, however, was that the business was dominated by the Predikants and Bishops, whereas in the first instance when the accident took place these people took very little or no public interest in protesting against the treatment of the injured.

Although nameless, it was noted that the memorial stone atop the grave would serve as a reminder of the accident to "generations unborn" (UWB, 1927d). Today, the monument stands at Mapleton relatively forgotten. The areas surrounding Mapleton provide little evidence of the accident. When attempting to find the memorial in April 2022, we spoke to workers, cattle herders, waste pickers, residents, and old farmers who had traversed the area for generations. Nobody knew that the train accident had happened, never mind the site of this disaster. The monument, eventually located, sits below several Australian Beefwood trees, which shade the burial ground and memorial. Themselves a product of migration, they signpost the memorial in the hundreds of kilometres of barren veld alongside the railway line. Yet, it is journalists who first signposted the complexity of this disaster.

5. Media Frames and Representation of the Accident

"Bearing witness," "critique," "racial solidarity," "naming," "recognition," and "othering" were key codes and thematic categories in the news framing of the disaster. Journalists who covered the accident fulfilled their role as servants of history by bearing witness and creating an accountable public. This process was significant enough to incite public action and facilitate a moment of communal grieving and racial solidarity. There were, however, contradictions in the coverage. Although the suffering of African passengers was foregrounded and acknowledged, their names and individual details were only published in black and black working-class newspapers. This indicates a crucial shortcoming that has had an impact on the collective memory surrounding the train crash.

5.1. Bearing Witness and Inciting Action

When it comes to mass mediation, journalists are seen as being able to appeal "to an audience to share responsibility for the suffering of others" (Tait, 2011, p. 1233). Journalistic reporting transcends normatively

based eye-witnessing and becomes *bearing witness* when it "involves an attempt to change the witnessed reality by eliciting an affective experience that incites the audience's action" (Pantti, 2019, p. 5). This kind of journalism is driven "by a moral purpose" and is not only focused on the facts of an event (Pantti, 2019, p. 5).

All the newspapers were instrumental in providing emotive accounts of the event and inciting their audiences' action. This was done using stirring or provocative headlines in the reportage, the use of survivors' testimonies, and publishing protest and critique of the SAR administration. Audience response to the reporting was to write in—to complain about the suffering that the surviving passengers had endured—and attend the memorial service of those who died and were buried at the scene of the accident.

As daily newspapers, TS, RDM, and *Eastern Province Herald* were the first newspapers to report on the accident. They had multiple reports that relayed information about the crash. All three newspapers lamented the deaths of "European" passengers but only TS and RDM mentioned the deaths and treatment of surviving African passengers. These newspapers published the names and positions of the injured and dead white passengers while providing only the numbers of injured and dead black passengers.

The ICU pressed the government to release the list of those injured and killed soon after the accident. While the organisation secured the release of the list, the WH was not yet in print and weekly newspaper UWB published a list of all African passengers who were killed and injured 10 days after the accident on 6 August 1927. The article "Mapleton Railway Disaster: List of the Killed" (UWB, 1927a) provided information including the names, surnames, pass numbers, hometowns, and hospitals that the injured were taken to after the accident. This was the first time in the coverage that black passengers were named and given recognition. Monthly newspaper WH is the only other newspaper that published and publicised the specific details of the black passengers. This newspaper published articles that bore witness to the suffering of the passengers by acting as a mouthpiece of the ICU. The ICU was vocal and present in all of the other newspaper coverage and their work, critique, and protest informed the WH's framing of the disaster, without which "the event might have drifted into the limbo of things forgotten" (WH, 1927d, p. 4). The WH was also unique in that they directly critiqued the railway administration in their articles as opposed to the other newspapers which quoted and published the ICU's critique but never spoke against the administration themselves.

On 28 July 1927, TS published an article in which it expressed deep regret and sympathy to the families of those who were killed in the accident. A day later, TS published articles that indicated that more could have been done to help the African passengers and limit their suffering. The newspaper revealed that coaches for white passengers were built more strongly than those that black passengers travelled in. Some of the subheadings of the reports include "deaths from exposure," and "dying natives in the rain" (1927g). On 1 August 1927, the reportage included a section that detailed the strongly worded protest from the ICU about the conditions that African passengers were exposed to after the accident. TS (1927s, p. 8) published a telegram from the ICU's headquarters that read: "This Union strongly protests against the callousness and brutality displayed by the railway department in conveying wounded natives in the Mapleton disaster, and demands rigid inquiry and that those responsible are dealt with."

A similar process takes place with regards to RDM's reportage of the accident. The newspaper's first article appeared on 28 July. In this report, the newspaper used subheadings that include "grim rows of bodies in the

veld," and "Natives hurled left and right" (RDM, 1927a). The newspaper also published a reader's letter which expressed concern over the way African passengers were transported to hospitals. By 1 August, RDM had published more readers' letters which were concerned about the cruelty experienced by African passengers and prisoners who "should not have been handcuffed during the journey" (RDM, 1927e).

The data shows that by 1 August 1927 an intricate and involved process of bearing witness had taken place. Tait (2011, p. 1233) explains that bearing witness involves journalists eliciting affect, "to move the body to participation." This includes "hearing the appeal, being affected by it, and translating that affectedness into emotions that moralise public action" (Tait, 2011, p. 1233). The interaction between the audience and the journalists covering the story highlights a complex process of witnessing that took place. This process is underpinned by the prevalence of a public that responds. In their initial reports, the newspapers interviewed victims of the accident to relay information about their treatment. TS explained how the African passengers were not given food until they got to the hospital—12 hours after the accident—and how the journey was long and harsh. TS (1927q, p. 14) wrote:

> The natives…told The Star representative that…it was raining fairly hard, and all the clothes they had on were those they were wearing at the time of the collision…what little they had on was wet and a cold, harsh wind chilled them.

The account serves as a good example of what Pantti (2019, p. 6) explains as "reconstituting and communicating other people's experience of pain…in ways that encourage the receivers of the message to take action in response to situational or structural violence." Such structural violence, highlighted by the reportage, was symbolic of the racism present on the railways. Van Onselen argues that railways were a site of "unacknowledged racism" which could be traced from "the functioning of the system as a whole—which gave preference to white passengers" (Van Onselen, 2019, pp. 173–174). Mbem (2018, p. 112) reflects that "railway entities cemented who belonged and who was alien to the infrastructure," which was most visibly demonstrated through the unequal treatment of passengers but also included the use of railway employment to appease Afrikaner patronage networks (Freund, 2019). The travel experiences of the African working classes into industrial areas were characterised by "unsanitary carriages that were far below human standards," in which railway officials viewed black migrants not as passengers but as "goods, or 'human freight' " (Mbem, 2018, p. 112; Pirie, 1993, p. 729; Van Onselen, 2019, p. 7).

The publication of the experiences of African passengers, the protest from the ICU, and the subsequent criticism of the SAR illustrate the suffering of African passengers at the hands of a racist railway service. The process of bearing witness is not only in relation to the train disaster but also to the racism on the railways. The reportage of the treatment allowed the suffering to "gain entry into public knowledge and collective memory" because the journalists had "judged [it] worthy of knowing, caring [about] and remembering" (Pantti, 2019, p. 6).

This reportage played a crucial role in moving those responsible into action. By 30 July 1927, both TS and RDM had published a response by the general manager of SAR. The manager replied to criticisms on the treatment of African passengers as well as all the critiques that had been published in earlier reports. This journalistic work was so significant that by 24 August, RDM published an article in which the minister of transport said that criticisms of his department symbolised the "very worst traditions of journalism" and alleged a "misuse

of journalistic privilege" (RDM, 1927v, p. 9). The minister's rebuttal speaks to the power that the newspapers have "of selecting and highlighting some aspects of a perceived reality" to frame the accident and provide guidance on how to interpret the event (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The framing of the accident as not just a tragic event but rather as the racialised inhumane treatment of African passengers forced public officials to account for their actions and to answer to the public.

This framing of the problem also suggests a remedy for the public to deal with the aftermath of the accident. This remedy is presented as a call to look beyond the racism of the time and acknowledge the suffering of African passengers.

5.2. Non-Racial Solidarity as a Public Response

The accident occurred in a time of burgeoning state and citizen racism, which included stringent segregation laws (see e.g., Breckenridge, 2007; Dee, 2020). For a brief moment, however, the tragedy stimulated non-racial opinion and thought pieces in newspapers and in the speeches of public officials. The newspapers played a critical role in representing the accident in a way that moved citizens to action (Chouliaraki, 2010) and elevated ideas of non-racial solidarity in the public discursive space.

Literature on catastrophic events like natural disasters or war indicates that such events can engender cooperation, while at the same time being laden with racial and class prejudice (Anthony Oliver-Smith, 2020; Zack, 2009). The "aesthetic quality of representation" of the Mapleton disaster was "inextricably linked to the moral stance toward suffering" that pushed the public towards writing letters to the editor (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 612). The media, therefore, cannot only be understood through the racist "habitus" or segregationist "hegemony" prevailing at the time. Rather, the media must be understood through the options it makes available for moral action (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 612).

Newspapers across the political and racial spectrum elevated such alternative ideas. The newspapers illustrated that African lives should be recognised as "fully human and grieveable" (Pantti, 2019, p. 6). Their representations of suffering incited a moral stance among their readers and subsequently facilitated the public's "moral agency" through publishing the readers' letters (Chouliaraki, 2010). While it remains unclear whether these responses were superficial or a genuine moral response, it is clear that the newspapers played an essential role in facilitating this process of reflection.

On the back of the horrendous treatment of the injured, the ICU published an article in the WH which brought the racism of the administration into sharp focus. The newspaper noted: "It is these kinds of brutal and unchristian acts of a certain class of white man of this country that have widened the breach of friendship and respect between white and black" (WH, 1927a, p. 2).

Although racism was widely exhibited and instrumentalised on the railways, the accident evinced a startling wave of co-operation. In the same article that the ICU criticised the government, they expressed thanks on behalf of the relatives of the victims: "To those European passengers and staff of the dining saloon who tendered such humane assistance, and the heroic act of the deceased driver, Milton,…we tender our sincerest thanks" (WH, 1927a, p. 2).

At Milton's funeral, he was remembered for his "self-sacrificing spirit" for averting further injury (TS, 1927w). At the ICU's protest meeting on 1 August 1927, they remarked that it was the "conduct of the European passengers that was the most consoling aspect of this catastrophe" (TS, 1927s, p. 8). Appreciation from other quarters was also cast to the "station officials and labourers," both white and black, who managed to free the injured from the train and clear the accident (RDM, 1927i).

There were numerous expressions of sympathy highlighted in the newspapers and readers' letters. In a letter to RDM (1927c, p. 10), a white Johannesburg resident wrote that "I am no native worshipper, but I do believe in common humanity." He continued that "surely a state department that can squander millions on electrification and elevators" could have provided better relief to the injured, "be they white or black" (RDM, 1927c, p. 10). Similarly, a Pretoria resident said that "my heart bleeds" for the victims of the accident and the apparent silence on the treatment of the injured was telling, given that "an ignorant native gets three months for ill-treating a horse, whereas nothing more is said in this case" (RDM, 1927d, p. 8).

RDM published a collection of readers' criticisms (RDM, 1927d, 1927g, 1927h, 1927j, 1927n) aiming to gauge public outcry over the treatment of victims. One railway worker criticised the general manager of the SAR saying he showed a "lamentable lack of knowledge of the character of the ordinary South African traveller" (RDM, 1927g, p. 8). The manager had said that it was a "moot point" to suggest that uninjured white passengers ought to prolong their own journey by allowing the injured black passengers to go first. Another resident from Johannesburg felt that "surely they could have been removed to the warmth of the waiting and tea rooms at Johannesburg station" (RDM, 1927j, p. 8). Others bemoaned that hot drinks and food were not provided to the survivors. These statements sought to undermine the prevailing segregationist logic, if only briefly. Reverend Kidwell, a Johannesburg priest, felt that the treatment of the injured reflected "great discredit on our country," and the ICU called into question the government's "reproach to civilisation" and lack of Ubuntu (TS, 1927s; WH, 1927c).

The praise of inter-racial cooperation was highlighted by WH as well as UWB. UWB published that though the blame was difficult to apportion, it was "gratifying to observe the spirit of indignation manifested by European and Native communities in the unfortunate plight of the native victims" (UWB, 1927b, p. 2). The newspaper quoted Tyamzashe, who had expressed that "death is the great leveller" (UWB, 1927b). This sentiment was the overarching feeling expressed by mourners at the consecration of the grave.

Reverend A. B. Jack of the Church Council of Johannesburg expressed that "although the people of the earth are different as to colour of skin, we have one common heart and one common need" (TS, 1927z, p. 12). The special correspondent of UWB (1927d, p. 3) wrote:

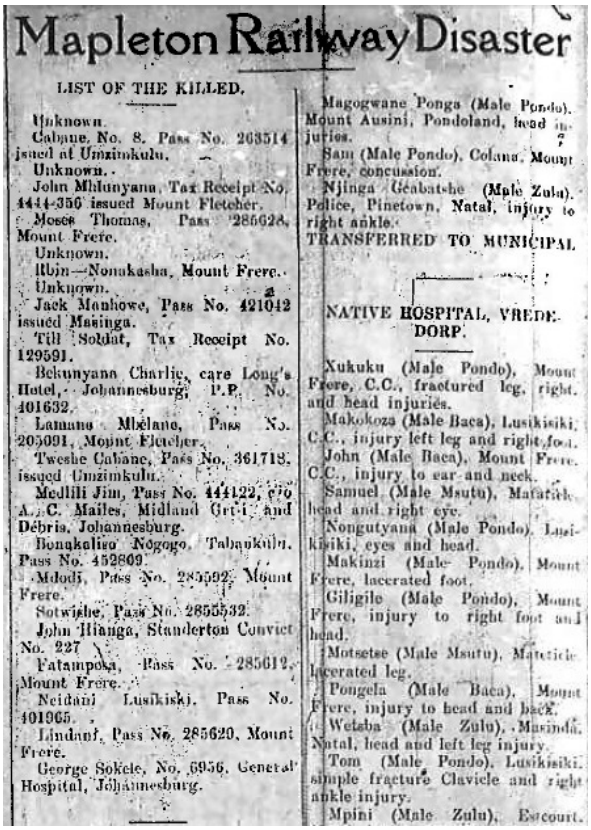
> But here in the Valley of the Shadow of Death our souls were stirred, not so much by the sight of that grave of sorrow as by the humanity of those Europeans who came to pay their last tribute to our dead.

The correspondent was struck by white and black, women and children, who were standing "side by side." They felt the lonely grave would stand as an indelible "monument to the goodwill between the races" and would one day be discovered as a symbol of cooperation (UWB, 1927d, p. 3).

5.3. Naming, Recognition, and Othering in the News

Chouliaraki (2010) argues that it is important to interrogate power where media representations prioritise "certain sufferers" while "leaving others outside the scope of such engagement and action" (p. 612). According to Scott and Peña (2023), naming in journalism is a "shorthand code for differentiating between people who are worthy of personhood…and those who are viewed simply as bodies, illustrations, props, or stand-ins for a story unfolding" (pp. 209). When journalists write the first drafts of history, the choices they make when naming sources have implications about how historians understand the events and who is remembered as being important to the story. Scott and Peña (2023, pp. 209) point to the hegemonic power such exclusions may indicate, especially if such inclusions and exclusions are based on "axes of social difference." These choices tend to signify who is part of "an ingroup, worthy of identification and who is part of an outgroup, or other" (Scott & Peña, 2023, p. 209). The act of naming, therefore, is an exercise of power.

On 29 July 1927, TS published a list of casualties, listing each of the white passengers killed and injured by name and referring to the killed and injured black passengers simply as "natives," a collective unidentifiable mass (see Figures 8 and 9; TS, 1927c). A similar inclusion and exclusion practice is seen in RDM and *Eastern Province Herald*. They do not provide the names of the African passengers, even when quoting them in an article. Here, stark divisions appear between the liberal press and the working-class, black press over the value placed on the lives of the victims. The WH and UWB provided dignity to the black passengers by listing every single passenger killed or injured in the accident (UWB, 1927a; WH, 1927b).



Mapleton Railway Disaster

LIST OF THE KILLED.

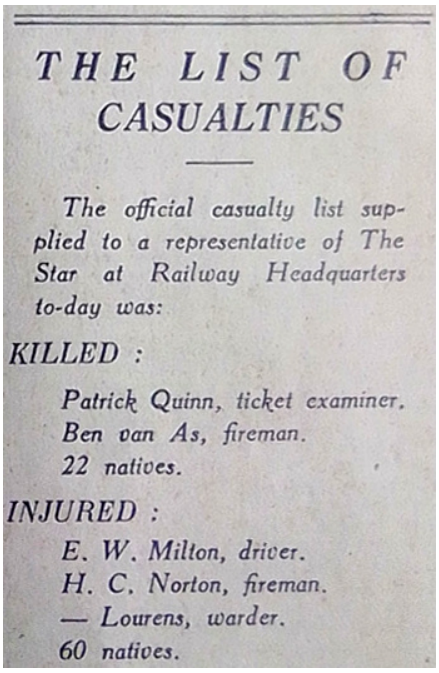
Unknown.
Cabane, No. 8, Pass No. 263514 issued at Umzimkulu.
Unknown.
John Mhlunyana, Tax Receipt No. 4414-350 issued Mount Fletcher.
Moses Thomas, Pass 285628, Mount Frere.
Unknown.
Ubin—Nonukasha, Mount Frere.
Unknown.
Jack Manhowe, Pass No. 421042 issued Masinga.
Till Soldat, Tax Receipt No. 129591.
Bekunyana Charlie, care Long's Hotel, Johannesburg, P.P. No. 401632.
Lamana Mkelane, Pass No. 205091, Mount Fletcher.
Tweshe Cabane, Pass No. 361719, issued Umzimkulu.
Medlili Jim, Pass No. 444122, c/o A. C. Mailes, Midland Grit and Débris, Johannesburg.
Bonakalisa Ngogo, Tabankulu, Pass No. 452809.
Mdodi, Pass No. 285592, Mount Frere.
Sotwishe, Pass No. 2855532.
John Hlanga, Standerton Convict No. 227.
Fatampoka, Pass No. 285612, Mount Frere.
Neidani Lusikiski, Pass No. 401965.
Lindani, Pass No. 285620, Mount Frere.
George Sokele, No. 6956, General Hospital, Johannesburg.

Magogwane Ponga (Male Pondo), Mount Ausini, Pondoland, head injuries.
Sam (Male Pondo), Colana, Mount Frere, concussion.
Njinga Gcabatshe (Male Zulu), Police, Pinetown, Natal, injury to right ankle.

TRANSFERRED TO MUNICIPAL NATIVE HOSPITAL, VREDEDORP.

Xukuku (Male Pondo), Mount Frere, C.C., fractured leg, right, and head injuries.
Makokoza (Male Baca), Lusikisiki, C.C., injury left leg and right foot.
John (Male Baca), Mount Frere, C.C., injury to ear and neck.
Samuel (Male Msutu), Matatiele, head and right eye.
Nongutyana (Male Pondo), Lusikisiki, eyes and head.
Makinzi (Male Pondo), Mount Frere, lacerated foot.
Giligile (Male Pondo), Mount Frere, injury to right foot and head.
Motsetse (Male Msutu), Matatiele, lacerated leg.
Pongela (Male Baca), Mount Frere, injury to head and back.
Wetsba (Male Zulu), Masinda, Natal, head and left leg injury.
Tom (Male Pondo), Lusikisiki, simple fracture Clavicle and right ankle injury.
Mpini (Male Zulu), Escourt.

Figure 8. List of the killed and injured in WH. Source: WH (1927f).



THE LIST OF CASUALTIES

The official casualty list supplied to a representative of The Star at Railway Headquarters to-day was:

KILLED :

Patrick Quinn, ticket examiner.
Ben van As, fireman.
22 natives.

INJURED :

E. W. Milton, driver.
H. C. Norton, fireman.
— Lourens, warder.
60 natives.

Figure 9. List of the killed and injured in TS. Source: TS (1927c).

Names alone cannot be equated to complex personhood, but they work toward enabling that construction. When they are left out of news reports and replaced with fillers such as a man or, in this case, "natives," it obscures the audience from engaging with the person as fully human. Names are important to allow the audience to "develop symbolic and perhaps, even interpersonal relationships" (Scott & Peña, 2023, p. 210).

Such exclusions have implications for how the accident was memorialised. On the memorial stone (see Figure 10), not a single passenger has been listed, nor have any of the train operators been mentioned. In an isiZulu article in the WH, this was criticised: "Shame on you, really. The stone does not even have the names of its people" (WH, 1927e, p. 8). On the list of the dead published by the WH, there is one person listed as "unknown" who, although acknowledged, cannot truly be part of the collective memory (Hartman, 2008, p. 2). In the case of the 1949 train accident in Waterval Boven, Van Onselen (2019, p. 180) notes that "six of the victims could not be identified and, to this day, are listed simply as unknown." He laments how such omissions construct incomplete, "more often imagined, versions of the past" (Van Onselen, 2019, p. 13). At risk of the names being forgotten and lost by unattentive government bureaucrats, it was the ICU's WH and UWB that made public the list of those killed, those known and unknown, and allows us today to know by name those killed and injured (see the Supplementary File). Beyond simply naming those who were killed, UWB also published a poem in Isizulu entiled "Imbub'o Yase Mapleton" (The Mapleton Tragedy) in October 1927 (UWB, 1927f).

Figure 10. The memorial stone today.

6. Conclusion

This research sought to investigate the role played by the media in preserving the memory of the 1927 Mapleton train accident which took 31 lives. After consulting archival documents and conducting a content analysis of the coverage of the accident, this research was able to present a chronological history and findings related to the framing and representation of the accident and its victims. The research found that all the newspapers that covered the accident played a key role in bearing witness to the dead, the suffering of the surviving victims, and creating moral witnesses of their readers. This process enabled public criticism and outrage levelled towards the railway administration. While both white and black newspapers promoted non-racial solidarity as a public response to the treatment of the black victims, only the black and working-class press gave recognition to the personhood and human dignity of the African passengers through publishing their names and personal details. The work of the union-cum-protest movement, the ICU, played an important role in highlighting the injustice faced by black passengers through demanding an inquiry, writing editorials and publicising their identities. This research has shown that it is useful to engage with how past events have been depicted by the media. This process allows us to fill the gaps in history where records are often insufficient and memorials tell partial stories. Building histories through journalistic accounts and critically reflecting on these histories enables researchers to understand events, their social dynamics and the role journalism plays in capturing—accurately or inaccurately—those narratives. This reciprocity between journalism and history is an important part of building collective memory. We hope that this article feeds into a renewed collective memory of the disaster, as we approach 100 years since it

happened, and that it inspires thorough and conscientious journalistic work that understands its role as servants of history.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The majority of the data is freely accessible in the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria, at the Pretoria campus of the National Library of South Africa, and at the Wits Historical Papers Research Archive. Secondary sources, including books and journal articles, are available online and in libraries. The *Workers' Herald* is not available in any of the above. It is in the authors' possession in digital format.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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