

# UC Santa Cruz

## Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

### Title

The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting: Afterlife and Memorialization of Imagery Surrounding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8g38v41w>

### Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 4(1)

### Author

Bazil, Madeleine

### Publication Date

2021

### DOI

10.5070/R74155759

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2021 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

**The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting: Afterlife  
and Memorialization of Imagery Surrounding South  
Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

Madeleine Bazil

how long does it take  
for a voice  
to reach another

in this country held bleeding between us

*hoe lang duurt het?  
hoe lang voor een stem  
de ander bereikt*

*in dit land dat zo bloedend tussen ons ligt*

—Antjie Krog, *Country of Grief and Grace*  
(*Land van genade en verdriet*)

I write love poems, too,  
but  
you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,  
as if my mouth were a wound

—Koleka Putuma, “Black Joy”

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

—Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Images form much of the basis of our cultural narratives. Those that strike at the nexus of cultural consciousness and visual memorability can “come to represent large swaths of historical experience . . . [acquiring] their own histories of appropriation and commentary.”<sup>1</sup> These exemplary images, which become embedded in the cultural landscape, loaded with significance of an exponentially greater scale than from whence they originated, can be seen to hold value beyond the documentary—witnesses to issues of humanity that surpass the capability of words. Or, as Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites note, they may not. “Perhaps [these images] are important precisely because they are accessible, undemanding images suited to mass-mediated collective memory,” thereby often operating as manufactured representations that reinforce a dominant narrative.<sup>2</sup> Issues of cultural memory are pertinent to regime changes and their attendant truth and reconciliation initiatives. On both ends of this ideological spectrum, one fact becomes self-evident: that truth commissions are tightly wound up in the social politics of collective memory and the historical perception of events.

South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a cultural and political event associated with state-managed memory, a reversal or redetermination of narratives—and, as a response to this, it has also become a site for artistic reencounter and reappropriation. Heidi Grunebaum points out that the TRC has come to be portrayed in antipodean and reductive ways: either as a moral victory of “good” (the anti-Apartheid struggle) over “evil” (white supremacy), or as a failed neoliberal experiment giving lip service to the notion of reparations.<sup>3</sup> Created by South Africa’s democratically elected Government of National Unity under 1995’s Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the TRC was intended to reckon with the violence of the apartheid era.<sup>4</sup> The commission comprised three branches. First, the Human Rights Violations (HRV) Committee sought to investigate human rights abuses that occurred during the apartheid years and to identify victims. Following this, the Reparation and Rehabilitation (R&R) Committee was established to provide support to victims and encourage the formulation of policy proposals and other reparative measures. Finally, the Amnesty Committee accepted applications for requested amnesty from anyone who had committed a politically motivated crime between 1960 and 1994; amnesty would free perpetrators from prosecution for their actions.<sup>5</sup> The activities of these

committees culminated in an extensive series of hearings throughout the country, presided over by carefully chosen judging panels, in which victims, victims' families, and perpetrators—both of the apartheid regime and of the anti-apartheid struggle—publicly testified on their experiences. Imagery surrounding the hearings, therefore, plays an important role in this memorialization process, participating in and driving conversations surrounding the ambiguities, contradictions, and inadequacies of the TRC.

A number of visual artists produced bodies of work at the end of apartheid and in the transition years in attempts to reckon both with the repercussions of the apartheid state as well as its complicated aftermath and these aforementioned questions of voice, narrative, and dominant paradigms. Many of these works delve into implicit criticism of the TRC's mechanisms and raise concerns about its efficacy and processes. The arts have historically and contemporarily played a central role in reckoning with societal traumas in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> As Hariman, Lucaites, and Grunebaum suggest, imagery surrounding major societal events is susceptible to functioning as ciphers for a dominant and frequently problematic narrative,<sup>7</sup> and the narrative surrounding the TRC itself is often characterized in simplistic terms.<sup>8</sup> It is essential to examine bodies of artistic work that emerged following the hearings, in order to emphasize the work of artists challenging the dominant narrative. There is—as Paul Gready notes—a distinction “between individual truth, which speaks truth to power, and institutional truth, which links truth to power.”<sup>9</sup> Gready places the TRC unequivocally in the latter category and poses questions about the relationship “between speaking truth to reconciliation and to power.”<sup>10</sup> This is the most common criticism of the TRC, that it centers a specific and convenient dominant narrative paradigm that excludes or overwrites personal narratives and lived experiences which do not align with it. From the contrary perspective, the highly contested nature of the TRC's truth-telling process can be seen as a signifier of the inherently democratic nature of the commission.

This essay investigates how imagery from South Africa's TRC hearings has experienced an afterlife—by which I mean a reinvigorated or reimagined purpose or impact, and their potential to unsettle or alter the memorialization of the TRC over time—and how this afterlife may differ from the images' original values and/or purpose. Focusing specifically on bodies of work produced by the artists Sue Williamson, Jo Ractliffe, Penny Siopis, and Berni Searle, which incorporate such archival elements (whether literal or metaphorical), I examine the extended life of said images beyond that of straightforward media representation of the TRC. I look at how these archival elements have been reappropriated and incorporated into fine-art bodies of work by artists and documentarians working in photography in order to respond to the TRC by participating in and driving conversations surrounding the commission's ambiguities, contradictions, and inadequacies. I argue that in

these bodies of work, the reinterpretation of archival imagery—whether literal or metaphorical—becomes, effectively, a radical act of decentralization: a rejection, or at minimum an investigation, of the dominant paradigms and narratives surrounding the commission and all that it entailed. In doing so, the artists broaden and deepen the conversations around the TRC and its questions, contradictions, nuances, and perceived failings. Through a semiotic analysis of the imagery itself, and analysis of the contextual placement and dissemination of the imagery in both its original and subsequent usages, this research therefore seeks to holistically understand the role of visual media in South Africa’s era of transitional justice and reckoning.

Part 1 focuses on Sue Williamson’s *Truth Games* series and links the cultural moment, her earlier work in activism, and her later artistic work. Part 2 focuses on the piece *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-By Shooting)*, by Jo Ractliffe. Her work brings to the forefront questions about trauma and its lingering effects, and how trauma survivors continue to be “haunted” by the past.<sup>11</sup> Part 3 centers on *Three Essays on Shame*, by Penny Siopis, the dichotomy and overlap between the personal/private sphere and the political/public sphere, and Sigmund Freud’s notion of a “second wounding”—a dredging up of a memory fragment from where it has been buried.<sup>12</sup> Part 4 looks at *Discoloured*, by Berni Searle, homing in on the implications of the piece’s physicality and framing her work within the sociological context of the Coloured community’s heritage and history.<sup>13</sup>

## Part 1: Sue Williamson

**Madeleine Bazil:** Even in trying to be unbiased and be a mediator or a vessel for this conversation, do you think there is a role that the artist plays in shaping it in one direction or another? Like, the choice of making that work—do you think that speaks to one particular side of the argument?

**Sue Williamson:** I suppose that it does . . . I was trying to be as neutral as I could be, under the circumstances. But obviously, when a policeman says he is a committed Christian, there is an irony in putting that up [in *Truth Games*] as his reason for why he had to kill somebody.

Williamson’s 1998 *Truth Games* series is a prime example of the repurposing of news media imagery from the TRC into a new and critical context. Williamson worked briefly in advertising and copywriting prior to her transition into fine art and social activism,<sup>14</sup> and much of her work is informed by her experience in the businesses of crafting and spinning news. Equally, though, Williamson’s work as an anti-apartheid activist informs her transitional era work. Williamson

recounts: “I had been involved in quite a few of these cases, or at least known about them, for many years through human rights work and general activism. I was really interested to see what was going to come out of the cases and what was going to be said. And it was clear that the whole process of amnesty was the only way that was going to bring the truth out.”<sup>15</sup> Dominique Pen writes that within South Africa, the rise of democracy was a “liminal phase of rebirth for South Africa,” and for artists in particular—this transformative moment calling them “to think critically about their role in post-apartheid society and ways their art might, or if it should, evolve from the so-called ‘resistance art’ that had been at the forefront of the South African artistic scene since the mid-1970s.”<sup>16</sup> This is certainly true for Williamson, who draws inspiration from the nuances of the transitional justice mechanism with just as much clarity and investigative nature as her earlier work does from her activism.

Williamson’s collage series *Truth Games* highlights her varied experience, incorporating archival images from the TRC’s media coverage and reimagining it with a sharp critical eye on the transitional justice system. *Truth Games*, as per Williamson, was borne out of a compulsion to speak on or investigate TRC cases:

I didn’t know how I was going to tackle it . . . I just kept saving newspapers, piles and piles of newspapers, and I would just—every now and again—periodically go through them and cut out everything . . . I knew that something would emerge.<sup>17</sup>

The series comprises fifteen pieces, each of which follows the same layout and organizational structure, and each of which features collaged images and text pulled from news reports on particularly high-profile cases heard by the TRC. Every panel follows the same format: from left to right, an image of the victim, the “crime scene,” and the perpetrator. Overlaid atop this are fragments of quotes from further news articles; as Pen describes, these excerpts “can be slid across the faces in the panel so as to foreground the shifting, uncertain nature of recollections and evidence out of which the past is constructed.”<sup>18</sup> The body of work is therefore intentionally interactive; the horizontal slats can be angled, like blinds on a window, to reveal or obscure different facets of the same case. Williamson describes her role in this body of work as that of “an editor, or mediator of received information. I didn’t use anything except what was in the press. I didn’t feel it necessary to go to people and ask them, ‘Is it alright if I use your picture?’ because it was already in the public domain.”<sup>19</sup> The viewer is unable to see both the information and the imagery on a case at any given time—notable given the public domain, news-media, origins of the source materials. How comprehensive, nuanced, or accurate, the pieces seem to ask, is media coverage of the TRC after all? This artistic decision exemplifies the

subjectivity and state of flux in which collective memory of the TRC—like memory of any collective historical event—inevitably must inhabit. In an echo “of the televised montage of the broadcast Truth and Reconciliation Commission sessions . . . [the photographs in *Truth Games*] become as heavy as objects, like blackboards magnifying messages, or like windows concealing familial tragedies.”<sup>20</sup> By interacting with the cases, both the artist and the viewer engage in the “circular uncertainty of culpability and injury, fabrications and truth, which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process and participants painfully explored.”<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the series, Williamson’s major preoccupation is the TRC’s focus on “straightforward acts of politically motivated violence rather than broad structural violence” that occurred during the apartheid era.<sup>22</sup> Her attention to the subjectivity and fluidity of memory is tightly interwoven with this—after all, to remember an era via the specific events of which it is composed can create a vastly different composite memory than would have emerged if considering the era holistically and on a larger scale. This variability is something of which *Truth Games* is undeniably aware. The artist herself acknowledges that her use of archival imagery speaks to this point: “I like to make work people feel ready to get engaged with, so they don’t just walk past. Lots of images are quite familiar images so I represent them so viewers are seeing something quite familiar to them in a new or different context. In many ways, I am acting as an archivist. I am presenting material in a serious way.”<sup>23</sup> Yet Williamson does not submit to the dominant narrative of the TRC. Rather, as Erin Mosely posits, she actively and radically decenters it—largely by placing the onus of rememorialization on the viewer:

In addition to simply acting as an archivist, however, and facilitating the cultural entrenchment of the TRC hearings, Williamson manages to subtly question the TRC’s legitimacy. By creating a space in which observers become the “authors” of the truth—and moreover by referring to this process of truth-telling as a game—Williamson complicates the very notion of collective truth, emphasizing instead how the TRC produced multiple, and sometimes incompatible or incommensurable, truths.<sup>24</sup>

Notably, Williamson tends to place the human subjects of the pieces eye-to-eye with each other: pairing the victim (or victim’s relative) of a case alongside—or in some cases facing—the perpetrator. This decentralization of narrative manifests semiotically via the—literally—opposing viewpoints of the artworks’ subjects, and by viewers’ ability to filter or alter their perception of the pieces by manipulating the slats. The effect is adversarial yet intimate—a

tense ballet between individuals who are irrevocably connected—with the human element serving as a stark reminder that these situations are rarely cut-and-dried and never simple. The viewer becomes implicated in the characterization of the cases as represented by the body of work, and forced into being an active participant in the interpretation of events: an act of understanding or contextualizing which is impossible to holistically or objectively conclude.

Even, therefore, as *Truth Games* permits—or even encourages—the viewer to interact with it, the body of work is ultimately inherently unknowable: all sides to the stories being told cannot be simultaneously digested. By disrupting the viewer’s quest for an objective understanding of each case, the series methodically stymies all attempts to draw neat conclusions about an inherently complicated chapter of human nature. Ultimately, *Truth Games* appears to suggest that there exists no objective truth with regard to the TRC and its impact, merely a composite collection of subjective experiences.

## Part 2: Jo Ractliffe

My first visit to Vlakplaas undid me. I was utterly unprepared for what I saw—or rather, didn’t see—that the “Vlakplaas” I was looking for was nowhere to be found.

—Jo Ractliffe

Ractliffe’s piece *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-By Shooting)* was commissioned for the 1999 *Truth Veils* exhibition at the University of the Witwatersrand’s Gertrude Posel Gallery, which was held in collaboration with an academic conference staged at Wits surrounding the TRC’s impact. Within the show, Ractliffe’s series was exhibited in relationship to *Prime Evil*, a 1997 television documentary by Jacques Pauw centered on the notorious farm’s commanding officer Eugene de Kock. Vlakplaas, situated twenty kilometers west of Pretoria, functioned as the headquarters for the apartheid-era South African Police (SAP) counterinsurgency unit; though the unit’s official name was C10 (later changed to C1), it was instead generally known synecdochally as Vlakplaas. Vlakplaas—to a degree not fully revealed to the public until after the end of the apartheid state—operated as a paramilitary hit squad supported by and working under the various knowledge of the apartheid government, and was responsible for the kidnapping and execution of the regime’s political opponents. The farm often acted not merely as the unit’s headquarters but as the location of its assassinations and torture scenarios.<sup>25</sup>

Through an awareness of her own privilege, Ractliffe is well-positioned to leverage her status as a white woman into a self-reflexive commentary about which factions of South African society are, and are not, affected by

institutional injustice and the subsequent transitional justice measures instituted to correct them. She recounts her first trip to Vlakplaas as startling for the dissonance between the horrifying mythology of the farm and the visual reality that she encountered. “There was nothing but a seemingly innocuous farmhouse, surrounded by a country landscape next to the Hennops River,” remembers Ractliffe. “I went back and shot it with my Holga camera, in two continuous strips of black and white film, on the day of the country’s second democratic elections.”<sup>26</sup> Ractliffe then put contact prints of the photographs onto sheets of eight-by-ten-inch photographic paper, with these strips nailed at all four corners into a set of nine black boxes for presentation.<sup>27</sup> In their presentation format, the long, horizontal rows of landscape images have the appearance of panorama. Upon a closer look, however, this is not the case; the perceived panorama is in fact constructed of a full roll of various photos that do not add up to a single contiguous image. In some, the edges of a building are visible, peeking out of the side of the frame; others comprise merely trees, fence, rolling pastoral fields. This disrupted pseudo-panorama effect evokes the sense of visual dissonance that so discomfited the artist on her first visit to the site. “The traumatic past,” Shane Graham posits, “cannot be assimilated into memory and consciousness as other events normally are, because the trauma survivor continues to be haunted by the past and is compelled to relive it literally.”<sup>28</sup> Considered in this regard, Ractliffe’s relationship to the large-scale trauma of Vlakplaas is striking in its ambivalence. Situated within this work is a keen acknowledgment of her own privilege, as exemplified by her decision to self-reflexively build this work around the sense of detachment that she feels at the site. The title of the piece hints yet further at this, with “drive-by” functioning as a pun signifying her fleeting, passing relationship with Vlakplaas as a place as well as evoking the violent connotation of a drive-by shooting, a nod to the executions that took place there.

Notably, it was not until the TRC hearings that Eugene de Kock’s testimony first shed light on the full and horrifying extent of Vlakplaas’s activities—the details of which had, for the most part, previously been highly classified. By visually manifesting the dichotomy between the farm’s idyllic appearance and, via the distorted panorama effect, the dark underbelly of its true nature, Ractliffe acknowledges the disturbing, antipodean disparities of the apartheid era but also delves deeper into questions about the TRC as a response. The body of work harnesses imagery and language around implicit violence, unseen yet present—the suggestive dual meaning of “drive-by”; the invisible specter of SAP violence—and in doing so, evokes a semiotic register of trauma that adds another layer of subjectivity and interpretation to the viewer’s understanding of events and aftermath. The artwork therefore proposes that, similarly, the TRC itself is also a fragmented reality: composed of a vast spectrum of painful, inconvenient truths that have been marshalled

by state institutions into an unnatural attempt at a cohesive narrative of healing and amnesty.

By recontextualizing imagery of this prominent and significant apartheid-era location within the framework of TRC-related criticism, Ractliffe's work raises questions about the efficacy of the TRC as a whole: prompting the viewer to engage with the way that the politics of privilege and whiteness are reflected and embodied in the artwork semiotically—and to examine the viewer's own relationship to Ractliffe's ambivalence or detachment, and how this too is embodied, in ways similar or dissimilar to the artist. The viewer is therefore situated effectively to investigate the impact of shoehorning into a dominant narrative, and whether to do so can be seen as true justice or merely as a facade. If the latter, the question becomes, is it a valid and valuable stab at accomplishing the impossible task of reparations, or is it a state-sponsored dredging up of wounds for the sake of erasing and overwriting them? Ultimately, *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-By Shooting)* puts forth a claim as to whom, exactly, the TRC was built to benefit: implicitly positing that those who benefit most from it in embodied or tangible ways may well be those who were least affected by the traumas that begot it.

### Part 3: Penny Siopis

Not to allow the apartheid state to use our work . . . For me that was straightforward. What was complicated—and it was not unlike things now in some ways—was how art itself figured in that context. It was a strange moment.

—Penny Siopis

Commissioned by London's Freud Museum, Siopis's 2005 multimedia exhibition *Three Essays on Shame* was created to commemorate the centenary of Freud's famous 1905 "Three Essays on Sexuality" by "grafting present-day South African social circumstances onto Freud's work and milieu,"<sup>29</sup> using signifiers from Freud's research and life in order to explore the theme of shame across cultures and contexts. Siopis began her career painting, and by the mid-to late 1990s had begun experimenting with multimedia works and sculptural found-item installations, eventually moving toward the conceptual multimedia pieces that have continued to define her career ever since. Her multimedia works consistently utilize video and audio recordings to engage in juxtaposition of the personal and political, innocent and complicit, private and public; *Three Essays on Shame* further evinces Siopis's interest in the overlap and interplay between these seeming dichotomies. Throughout her career, Siopis's work has consistently held "a tension between materiality and image—[which] coalesces

with her explorations of history, sexuality, race, memory, estrangement, and violence” in her work.<sup>30</sup>

The exhibition, made up of three essays, or “interventions,” was situated within Freud’s house (the location of the museum). First, in Freud’s study, Siopis streamed seven audio recordings made by South African public figures on the subject of shame, including Antjie Krog (eminent writer; former reporter for the TRC), Edwin Cameron (judge; AIDS and LGBT activist), Fatima Meer (sociology professor; former political detainee under apartheid), and Paul Verryn (bishop of the Methodist Church of Johannesburg; activist priest). The second intervention was set up in Freud’s dining room and constituted a series of “objects, artworks, and film combined to orchestrate a chain of cultural and psychological associations reflecting the psych-sexual state of shame in its broader cultural context.”<sup>31</sup> The third intervention was made up of Siopis’s paintings situated amid a collection of found objects and personal items belonging to Freud. In building from, and existing in conversation with, Freud’s life and work, Siopis’s body of work draws on a multiplicity of disciplines and schools of psychological as well as artistic thought, ultimately exploring the intricacies of shame as both a sexual and a political concept.

*Three Essays on Shame* is significant largely for its unflinching engagement with the complexities and horrors of recent South African history; Siopis astutely homes in on the nuance of the TRC and transition era as a time characterized largely, indeed, by shame, stemming from a variety of sources and for a variety of reasons. Siopis’s decision to intersperse archival audio with objects both artistic and historical is a highly intentional visual choice that situates her to raise issues of memory and history: the ways in which they intertwine or are distinct from each other surrounding shame. As she articulates to the *Daily Maverick*, repurposing found film reels allows her to

take what’s in the world and remake something. From something old and obsolete, you make it a new story. . . . I’m not going to film it, it’s already in the world; it already had stories in one form or another. It already comes inscribed with a sort of history and value. Then I find it and I recreate something from its material body.<sup>32</sup>

Claire Pajackowska and Ivan Ward point out that this body of work “generates questions of relating political, social practices to the ‘private’ practice of psychoanalysis”; a relationship which is compounded by the placement of the exhibition within Freud’s house—a house that also functioned as an office, thereby further blurring the distinctions between private and public.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, the audio recordings straddle the line between

personal and political; reminiscent at times of confessionals, private thoughts, or intimate conversations, the recordings place the viewer in a position of intentionally uncomfortable voyeurism: the type that elicits secondhand shame in a visceral, embodied way that—crucially—is difficult to articulate semiotically via solely one medium or in a single objective narrative. The incorporation of these audio snippets, therefore, invites the viewer to consider the inevitability of these disparate spheres of personal/private and political/public intersecting, much like the reality of the TRC itself. Siopis expands on this idea, noting that her works on shame are intended to “reflect on the public and psychological state of shame in our current times. However powerfully shame is recognised as part of our human condition it is difficult to represent. Like love, which may be shame’s antidote, it is often only manifest in clichéd and mannered forms.”<sup>34</sup> In recordings such as that of Krog, for instance, wherein the writer recounts her experiences sitting in on TRC hearings, these spheres spill into one another to the point of inextricability; the voyeuristic shame of Siopis’s audience melts into the bystander’s shame of Krog, which melts into the shame of long-suffering victims and families who have been made to relive their traumas, which melts into the guilt-ridden collective shame driving the commission itself. The distinctions of public and private, political and personal, become collapsed under the weight of a larger, all-encompassing conversation surrounding the many manifestations of shame that the TRC raises and inhabits.

The inclusion of physical items and the centering of a physical geography (i.e., a home environment and the quotidian trappings of it) is therefore significant, implicating meaning with regard to time and space—taking the conversation around shame out of a vacuum and into reality, and taking the political and rendering it intimately personal. Gerrit Olivier notes that Siopis’s installation works tend to heavily involve the tangible physicality and age of the objects that are incorporated:

The residue of time is shown as much through the differentiated surface textures of each object and the physical making the installation as through the historical biography that could be associated with that object . . . In [Siopis’s] work, the personal is not divorced from the political. Instead . . . the personal and the political are irretrievably intertwined.<sup>35</sup>

Just as the personal and political are inextricable in Siopis’s work—and the physical with the historiographical—so too is the relationship between traumatic truth and shame. Siopis’s work therefore raises questions of the trauma that both emerges out of and births shame. To this end, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela argues—paraphrased by Marijke van Vuuren—that

“because trauma shatters one’s life narrative . . . fragments are shored against the ruins of one’s life, and these are the images more easily recalled. ‘Deep memory,’ on the other hand, where unspeakable pain lies buried, cannot be accessed without a second wounding.”<sup>36</sup> Considerable criticism has been made against the TRC for what some see as the unnecessary dredging up of painful memories; for many individuals and families who were called in to testify about the most traumatic and devastating events of their lives, the visceral pain and shame of recounting and reliving these memories of lost loved ones outweighed the intangible impact of amnesty or collective memorialization that the commission intended. The TRC, in the eyes of its detractors, can then be viewed as this “second wounding” exemplified—an exercise, essentially, in shame.

In pairing personal artifacts belonging to Freud with the equally personal and individualized stories of specific South Africans, and by situating both of these within large-scale allusions and references to philosophical tendencies and the failings of human nature, Siopis renders evident the disparities among personal narratives, as well as between personal and governmental, which apartheid fostered—the painful echoes of which reverberated throughout the transitional justice era. Throughout her practice, Siopis consistently places a focus on what she describes as “the poetics of vulnerability”; SFMOMA sums up this tendency succinctly as one in which the artist challenges memory and seeks to promulgate a counternarrative in opposition to the one instituted by the apartheid regime:

In her films, human vulnerability is given form in fragile images and materials that tell stories about anonymous, everyday people, their lives shaped by political violence and domination. These stories speak also to larger political concerns: to histories of migration, exile, colonialism, and apartheid.<sup>37</sup>

Adam Yates in the *Daily Maverick* takes a similar interpretation, understanding Siopis’s use of personalized archival audio and visual materials as a way to

demonstrate how one could rewrite a story with archives from their own lives. . . . The narratives conjure up questions about how historical moments are formed through collective memory, and the music introduces the impact of emotions on story recollection. Taken together, the videos, the text, and the music, one is forced to consider whether it’s objective reality or subjective experiences that constitute what they understand as true stories.<sup>38</sup>

This line of analysis becomes particularly pertinent when considering the decision to include this work in an exhibition centered on the concept, both theoretical and practical, of shame; Siopis's line of questioning and criticism of apartheid can also be applied to the TRC. The disparate elements of the exhibition—these disparities manifested both in content and in form—beg the question: Can South Africans ever agree on a single narrative when it comes to an era or subject matter that is shrouded in such collective shame?

*Three Essays on Shame* seems to suggest that the answer is no: that much as one person's personal narrative differs from that of another, so too one person's amnesty and forgiveness can serve as another person's "second wounding" or experience of shame. Memory in the post-traumatic imaginary, this body of work appears to posit, may well be disparate, individual, and most certainly nonlinear and/or noncohesive. Ultimately, Siopis appears to argue, such a multiplicity of narrative is not just inherent but moreover useful, even essential—that the only path forward toward a truly healed nation is, in fact, not just one path at all. Rather, there are many.

#### **Part 4: Berni Searle**

I think [my work] operates on different levels and reflects different racial and political experiences—but I don't think my pieces are limited by that. I hope they transcend and go beyond that, and provide a space for illusion and fantasy. They reflect a desire to present myself in various ways to counter the image that has been imposed on me. Race is inevitable in South Africa. The self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. The presence and absence of the body in the work points to the idea that one's identity is not static, and constantly in a state of flux.

—Berni Searle

Searle's *Discoloured* is an installation made up of a group of photographs, each named for a part of the body ("The Palms of the Hands," "The Small of the Back," "The Nape of the Neck," "The Soles of the Feet"). It takes a metonymical approach to rememorializing TRC-related imagery. Like Ractliffe, Searle opts not to use literal archival imagery, instead consciously choosing to invoke the personal, filtering themes of societal and historical heft through the lens of her own lived experience. Rather than repurposing existing imagery, Searle, a Capetonian artist, weaves its motifs and narratives into her own reimagined imagery that evokes it on a metaphorical level.

Within each self-portrait, the eponymous part of the body has been dyed using henna to give the appearance of extensive physical bruising; these body parts are then pressed closely up against glass for the photograph. As a woman of mixed-race, Searle was categorized as "Coloured" under the

delineations of apartheid. In this body of work the artist investigates the parameters and semiotics of identity as determined by external, societal forces as compared/contrasted to a more fluid, personally driven understanding of self.

The title of the series is the first hint at this train of analysis; it is a play on words that alludes to the sense of “othering” and subjugation that the Coloured community experienced under apartheid. Indeed, Mohamed Adhikari points out that the conversation of family history and identity is a sensitive one in many Coloured families, who felt pressured under apartheid to assimilate as much as possible to a system that applied a proportional value judgment to skin color.<sup>39</sup> The physicality of the body pressed against glass throughout the photographs, like the title of the piece, alludes to “the idea of deploying pseudo-scientific categorizations to construct identities”;<sup>40</sup> Coombes posits that this is a visual reference to the concept of scientific specimens or medical investigation—in this case, as Brenda Schmahmann writes, speaking to “an apartheid history in which degrees of pigmentation in the skin could . . . position people socially in positions of privilege or lack thereof.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the viewer has not asked to be granted this intimate access, and so the proximity and vulnerability that Searle imposes on the viewer is discomfiting.

Visually, the glass effect not only speaks to the racial and social categorization that apartheid promoted but also evokes the sense of scrutiny that women suffered within TRC courtrooms. Kim Miller writes:

As a body positioned uncomfortably beneath glass, it appears as if this violated body is being manipulated and scrutinised even further, increasing the physical pain and the psychological detachment of the subject. Here, as Searle alludes to the re-victimization that many women experience during courtroom testimony, she makes a reference to the uncomfortable environment of the TRC for survivors of sex crimes.<sup>42</sup>

Gobodo-Madikizela’s notion of the “second wounding” is crucial here: helping us see that *Discoloured* raises the possibility that the intense scrutiny of the TRC ultimately added insult to injury, rather than provided healing, for the surviving—mainly female—family members of victims. Arguably, this second wounding ought also to be understood in Searle’s body of work as a manifestation of compounded violence rather than separate wounds. The second wounding is exponential: layered with both the interlinked traumas of experience and of revisited memory, and additionally with the trauma of oppression as a member of not one but two marginalized groups.

Searle takes her exploration into the implications of gender in identity politics and dehumanization a step further, and this becomes evident when the viewer considers the bruising that is key to the images. Schmahmann explains that not only is the title *Discoloured*, an invocation of the “complexities surrounding the nomenclature ‘Coloured,’ and the bruising therefore suggestive of metaphorical injury or psychic pain, the discolouration of skin may additionally be read ‘as testimony to acts of torture suffered by political detainees.’”<sup>43</sup> It is therefore no coincidence that the body parts on which Searle chooses to focus are ones “most commonly associated with tenderness and intimacy”: the neck, the small of the back, and so on.<sup>44</sup> This intimate glimpse is not sensual, however, but instead seeks to force the viewer’s hand into a voyeuristic and violent gaze when confronted with distorted, discolored bruising. This is a politicized act—one that both alludes to the gender-based physical and ideological violence which women of colour suffered under the apartheid regime but also recalls and honors the “black South African women who . . . have used their bodies to protest aggression, violence, and oppression.”<sup>45</sup> In applying a self-reflexive gaze, and forcing an embodied encounter, *Discoloured* is a reclamation of control over—in the words of Tiffany Lethabo King—“the black body as an object of inquiry” or as a site of desire, discomfort, and/or disembodied interest by white or nonblack viewers.<sup>46</sup>

Searle’s decision to create this work specifically for *Truth Veils* can, then, be interpreted as a commentary on the TRC’s inadequacy in addressing or adequately making reparations for the human rights abuses that women underwent during apartheid. Miller elaborates further on this, arguing that the heavily bruised feet allude to “a crippling torture technique frequently used by the apartheid police: forcing political prisoners to stand for hours, even days at a time on rock-hard surfaces,” and that the bruises and swelling on the lower back and elsewhere imply violent sexual assault, or the physical abuse suffered by pregnant activists during the struggle.<sup>47</sup> On the whole, *Discoloured* puts forth a visceral glimpse of the residual and embodied trauma of apartheid’s institutional violence and subjugation and applies a critical feminist eye to the TRC’s approaches in reckoning with the past. By opting to (literally) zoom in on a site of compounded trauma rather than to offer a path forward, the body of work takes a distinctly radical stance that is both awake to the flaws in the TRC within the post-traumatic paradigm as well as sharply critical of the commission’s dominant narrative of amnesty.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most significant commonality that these bodies of work by Williamson, Ractliffe, Siopis, and Searle share is their keen sense of self-

reflexivity—all four engage in a self-conscious commentary on the TRC and the impacts of the apartheid regime through the lens of their own personal experiences, privileges, oppressions, and situations. In differing ways, their works touch on the same central criticism of the TRC’s functionality: the idea that it revictimized or rewounded those who had already experienced significant trauma, or that the commission’s focus on amnesty was not universally sufficient or beneficial. These pieces of art speak to pertinent questions: whether and how individuals had the space to voice opinions or lived experiences surrounding the TRC without pressure or obligation to align with the dominant state-endorsed paradigm; to what extent the discourse about the TRC’s efficacy is a sign of its democratic nature or of its inadequacy; and whether truth, subjective as it is, can be composed of many layers of kaleidoscopically different and valid perspectives. To these questions, none of the artists offer a conclusive answer, solution, or path—nor can they. Instead, they hold up a self-reflexive mirror to their own lived experiences and interactions with South Africa’s transitional justice mechanism, navigating the gray area of the TRC’s efficacy through the self-aware lens of their own experiences and perceptions.

All four artists, in their differing ways, deal in the knowledge that truth commissions are heavily intertwined with how a collective society or state remembers and historically contextualizes an “event” like the TRC and the apartheid regime before it. As such, the four artists call into question and destabilize the dominant or state-sponsored narratives surrounding the TRC and its impact via the reimagination of archival imagery. Through this, they investigate the impact of eliciting an embodied or semiotic response from viewers, offering an alternative mechanism for acknowledging and processing the nuances, perspectives, and traumas of the past—filling in where the official commission has proved inadequate or incapable of doing so. These bodies of work therefore not only revise the viewer’s perspective on the TRC and its framework for truth but provide and model new ways to relate to this history as well as new, embodied ways to conceive of truth at large.

\* \* \*

Madeleine Bazil is a multidisciplinary artist interested in memory, intimacy, and the ways we navigate worlds—real and imagined. Madeleine holds an MA Hons (First Class) in English literature from the University of St Andrews, Scotland. She is a master’s candidate of Documentary Arts at the University of Cape Town, where her current research and practice investigate the role of the archive in post-traumatic documentary film.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Heidi Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past: Everyday Life in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203785836>.
- <sup>4</sup> “Truth and Reconciliation Commission Website,” Truth and Reconciliation Commission, accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/>.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> Lizelle Bisschoff and Stefanie Van de Peer, *Art and Trauma in Africa: Representations of Reconciliation in Music in Visual Arts, Literature, and Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755604302.0007>.
- <sup>7</sup> Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Grunebaum, *Memorializing the Past*, 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Paul Gready, *The Era of Transitional Justice: The Aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2012), 162.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 162, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203841938>.
- <sup>11</sup> Shane Graham, “The Truth Commission and Post-Apartheid Literature in South Africa,” *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 1 (2003): 13, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821094>.
- <sup>12</sup> Marijke Van Vuuren, “‘The Truth of Wounded Memories’: The Question of Forgiveness in Selected Post-Apartheid Texts” (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2010), 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Mohamed Adhikari, “Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: Continuity and Change in the Expression of Coloured Identity in White Supremacist South Africa, 1910–1994,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006): 467–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070600829542>.
- <sup>14</sup> “South African Past Is Present in Sue Williamson’s New Show at Goodman Gallery,” Artsy, February 22, 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-south-african-past-is-present-in-sue-williamson-s-new-show-at-goodman-gallery>.
- <sup>15</sup> Sue Williamson, interview by the author, All Star Studio, Salt River, Cape Town, April 2, 2019.
- <sup>16</sup> Dominique Pen, “Truth Games: Negotiating Power, Identity, and the Spirit of Resistance in Contemporary South African Art,” 2–3, *Africana Studies Student Research Conference*, February 13, 2015, Bowling Green State University,

[https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1041&context=africana\\_studies\\_conf](https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1041&context=africana_studies_conf)

<sup>17</sup> Williamson, interview.

<sup>18</sup> “South African Past Is Present.”

<sup>19</sup> Williamson, interview.

<sup>20</sup> “Sue Williamson,” Brodsky Center, accessed May 2019, [https://brodskycenter.com/\\_pages/ARTISTS/williamson.html](https://brodskycenter.com/_pages/ARTISTS/williamson.html).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Erin Mosely, “Visualizing Apartheid: Contemporary Art and Collective Memory during South Africa’s Transition to Democracy,” *Antipoda: Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, no. 5 (July–December 2007): 111, <https://doi.org/10.7440/antipoda5.2007.05>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ran Greenstein, *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa’s Democratisation* (Johannesburg: Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> “1999, Jo Ractliffe, Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (Drive-by Shooting),” Stevenson, accessed May 2019, [http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/ractliffe/index\\_vlakplaas.html](http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/ractliffe/index_vlakplaas.html).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Graham, “Truth Commission,” 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Three Essays on Shame*, Freud Museum London, October 30, 2018, <https://www.freud.org.uk/exhibitions/penny-siopis-three-essays-on-shame/>.

<sup>30</sup> Penny Siopis, “*A Painting Looks*,” Stevenson Gallery, Frieze London, 2016, <https://www.stevenson.info/sites/default/files/Penny%20Siopis%20A%20Painting%20Looks%20-%20Frieze%20London%20-%202016%20-%202016%20September%202016.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> *Three Essays on Shame*.

<sup>32</sup> Adam Yates, “In New Exhibit Penny Siopis Rescues Lost Histories,” *Daily Maverick*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-05-10-in-new-exhibit-penny-siopis-rescues-lost-histories/>.

<sup>33</sup> Claire Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward, eds., *Shame and Sexuality: Psychoanalysis and Visual Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315787626>.

<sup>34</sup> Derek Hook, Critique of “*Truth Veils*” at the Gertrude Posel and Market Theatre Galleries, ArtThrob, 2019, <https://artthrob.co.za/99july/listings2.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> Gerrit Olivier, *Penny Siopis: Time and Again* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014), 29, <https://doi.org/10.18772/22014126956>.

<sup>36</sup> Van Vuuren, “Truth of Wounded Memories,” 51.

<sup>37</sup> *This Is a True Story: Short Films by Penny Siopis*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2013, <https://www.sfmoma.org/event/this-is-a-true-story-short-films-by-penny-siopis/>.

<sup>38</sup> Yates, "In New Exhibit Penny Siopis Rescues Lost Histories."

<sup>39</sup> Adhikari, "Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration."

<sup>40</sup> Brenda Schmahmann, "Bodily Issues as Subject Matter: Abjection in the Works of Penny Siopis and Berni Searle," in *Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image*, edited by C. Baker (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 114.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>42</sup> Kim Miller, "Trauma, Testimony, and Truth: Contemporary South African Artists Speak," *African Arts* 38, no. 3 (2005): 49, <https://www.jstor.org/oca.ucsc.edu/stable/3345922>.

<sup>43</sup> Schmahmann, "Bodily Issues as Subject Matter," 112.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Tiffany Lethabo King, "Off Littorality (Shoal 1.0): Black Study Off the Shores of 'the Black Body,'" *Propter Nos* 3 (2019): 42.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, "Trauma, Testimony, and Truth," 49.